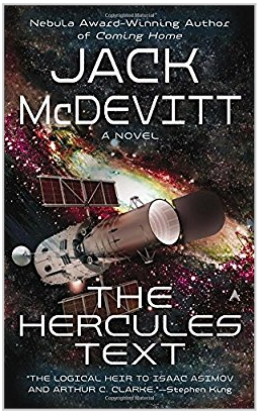

The Hercules Text

By Jack McDevitt

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The classic first-contact science fiction novel that launched the career of Jack McDevitt, the national bestselling author of *Coming Home*—now revised from the original edition, and featuring a new foreword.

From a remote corner of the galaxy a message is being sent. The continuous beats of a pulsar have become odd, irregular…artificial. It can only be a code.

Frantically, a research team struggles to decipher the alien communication. And what the scientists discover is destined to shake the foundations of empires around this world—from Wall Street to the Vatican…

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The Hercules Text By Jack McDevitt Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
“The logical heir to Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke.”—Stephen King

“*The Hercules Text* is much more than a knowledgeable scientific mystery; it is simply the most thoughtful and engaging first-contact story I have ever read.”—Paul Preuss, author of *Secret Passages*

“A good read…Delightful.”—Gregory Benford, Nebula Award–winning coauthor of *Shipstar*

About the Author
Jack McDevitt is a former naval officer, taxi driver, English teacher, customs officer, and motivational trainer, and is now a full-time writer. His novel *Seeker* won a Nebula Award, and he is a multiple Nebula Award finalist. He lives in Georgia with his wife, Maureen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

| | | FOREWORD | | |

When we first talked about reissuing *The Hercules Text*, I knew immediately that I’d have to update the original novel. Its computer technology was out-of-date. The Cold War, which fueled much of the narrative, was long over. Not only in the sense that the superpower confrontation has, if not ended, at least substantially cooled. But our national mind-set has also changed. Who today would believe that a major power might seriously consider launching a preemptive strike over a question of weapons development, a scenario that was front and center in the original *Hercules Text*? Somehow it seemed not entirely implausible in 1986.

It’s possible that my original perspective was simply deranged. But it didn’t feel that way then. I can still recall the nuclear-attack drills in high school, during which we descended, in an orderly manner, down to the basement cafeteria and sat under tables, which would presumably protect us when the bomb dropped. At home, left over from my father’s days as a WWII air-raid warden, we had a bucket of sand for tossing on fires. For some reason we never threw it out. It served as a reminder that terrible things were possible.

In 1962, at the height of the Berlin Crisis, I was driving home on the Baltimore–Washington Parkway, headed for Philadelphia. At the time there was major construction going on, crews building overpasses and widening highways, but catastrophe seemed so imminent it was difficult not to wonder why we were bothering. The night was thick with the conviction that it was all going to get knocked down in the near future.

It didn’t happen, of course, a reality for which we can be grateful to a series of U.S. presidents and Russian premiers who kept their heads. Had they not been there, today’s world might have been little more than a pile of smoldering ash.

But the current reading public has a different perspective, and so it seemed prudent to go back and reframe

The Hercules Text in the light of these happier times. I've done that, and the experience has left me, as the original effort did in 1986, with the suspicion that we do not really want to hear from the stars. No matter how hard we root for SETI. And no matter what the outsiders may have to say to us. No news is good news.

| | | ONE | | |

Harry Carmichael sneezed. His eyes were red, his nose was running, and his head ached. It was mid-September, and the air was full of pollen from ragweed, goosefoot, and thistle. He'd already taken his medication for the day, the latest antiallergen. It seemed to accomplish little other than to make him drowsy.

Through the beveled stained-glass windows of the William Tell, he watched the Ramsay Comet. It was now little more than a bright smudge, wedged in the bare, hard branches of the elms lining the parking lot. Its cool, unfocused light was not unlike the cool glow of Julie's green eyes, which seemed preoccupied with the long, graceful stem of her wineglass. She'd abandoned all attempts to keep the conversation going and sat frozen in a desperate solitude. She felt sorry for Harry. He could see it in the set of her jaw, in her tendency to gaze *past* him, as though a third person hovered behind his right shoulder. Years from now, he suspected, he would look back on this evening, remember this moment, recall the eyes and the comet and the packed shelves of old textbooks that, in the gloomily illuminated interior, were intended to create atmosphere. He would remember his anger and the terrible sense of impending loss and the numbing conviction that he was helpless. That nothing he could do would change anything. But most of all, it would be her sympathy that would sear his soul.

Comets and bad luck: It was an appropriate sky. Ramsay would be back in twenty-two hundred years, but it was coming apart. The analysts were predicting that on its next visit, or the one after that, it would be only a shower of rock and ice. Like Harry.

"I'm sorry." She shrugged. "It's not anything you've done, Harry."

Of course not. What accusation could she bring against faithful old Harry, dull Harry, who'd taken his vows seriously, who could always be counted on to do the decent thing, and who'd been a reliable provider? Other than perhaps that he'd loved her too deeply.

He'd known it was coming. The change in her attitude had been gradual but constant. The things they'd once laughed over had become minor irritants, and the irritants scraped at their lives until she came to resent even his presence.

So it had come to this, two strangers carefully keeping a small round table between them while she used a shining knife and fork to slice methodically into beef that was cooked a little more than she would have preferred.

"I just need some time to myself, Harry. To think things over a bit. I'm tired of doing the same things, in the same way, every day." I'm tired of *you*, she was saying, finally, with the oblique words and the compassion that peeled away his protective anger like the skin on a baked potato. She put the glass down and looked at him, for the first time, it might have been, during the entire evening. And she smiled. It was the puckish, good-natured grin that she traditionally used when she'd run the car into a ditch or bounced a check. My God, he wondered, how could he ever manage without her?

"The show wasn't so good either, was it?" he asked drily. The William Tell was a dinner theater, and they'd just suffered through a dreary mystery-comedy. Although Harry could hardly be accused of having made an

effort to follow the proceedings. Fearful of what was coming later, he'd spent the time trying to foresee and prepare for all eventualities, rehearsing responses, defenses, explanations. He'd have done better to watch the performance.

The final irony was that there were season tickets in his pocket.

"No," she said. "I didn't really care much for it." She didn't add anything that might have given him comfort, that she was distracted, that it was a difficult evening, that it was hard to keep her mind on anything so trivial while her marriage was disintegrating. Instead, she surprised him by reaching across the table to take his hand.

His love for her was unique, the only truly compelling passion he had ever known, the single element that fueled his days, that gave purpose to everything he did. The passing years had not dimmed it; had in fact seeded it with the shared experience of almost a decade, had so entwined their lives that no emotional separation would be possible, now or ever. Harry would not be able to leave her behind.

He took off his glasses, folded them deliberately, and pushed them down into their plastic case. His vision was poor without them. It was an act she could not misinterpret.

Bits and pieces of talk drifted from the next table, where two people, slightly drunk, whispered angrily at each other about money and relatives. Harry and Julie had never done anything like that. Relations between them had always been cordially correct. Even when, at last, the knife had come out.

A handsome young waiter, a college kid probably, hovered in the background, his red sash insolently snug round a trim waist. His name was Frank. It was odd that Harry, who usually forgot incidental names immediately, should remember that, as though the detail were important. Frank arrived every few minutes, refilling their coffee cups, asking whether he could get anything else for them. Near the end, he inquired whether the meal had been satisfactory.

It was hard now to remember when things had been different, before the laughter had ended and the silent invitations, which had once passed so easily between them, stopped. "I just don't think," she said abruptly, "we're a good match anymore. We always seem to be angry with each other. We don't talk—" She looked squarely at him now. Harry stared back at her with an expression that he hoped suggested his sense of dignified outrage. "Did you know that Tommy wrote an essay about you and that idiot comet last week? No?

"Harry," she continued, "I don't exactly know how to say this. But do you think, do you really believe, that if anything happened to Tommy, or to me, that it would have any real impact on you? That you'd even notice we were gone?" Her voice caught and she pushed the plate away and stared down into her lap. "Please pay the bill, and let's get out of here."

"It isn't true," he said, looking for Frank the waiter, not wanting to endure a scene in the restaurant. But Frank was preoccupied. Harry counted out some twenties, dropped them on the table, and stood up. Julie slowly pulled her jacket around her shoulders and, with Harry in her wake, strode between the tables and out the door.

Tommy's comet hung over the parking lot, splotchy in the September sky, its long tail splayed across a dozen constellations. Last time through, it might have been seen by Socrates. The data banks at Goddard were loaded with the details of its composition, the ratios of methane to cyanogen and mass to velocity, of orbital inclination and eccentricity. Nothing exciting that he had been able to see, but Harry was only a layman, not easily aroused by cold gas. Donner and the others, however, had greeted the incoming telemetry with near ecstasy.

There was a premature chill in the air, not immediately evident perhaps because no wind blew. She stood on the gravel, waiting for him to unlock the car. “Julie,” he said, “ten years is a long time to just throw away.”

She watched a van pull into the lot. “I know,” she said.

—

Harry took Farragut Road home. Usually, he would have used Route 214, and they’d have stopped at Muncie’s for a drink, or possibly even gone over to the Red Limit in Greenbelt. But not tonight. Painfully, groping for words that would not come, he guided the Chrysler down the two-lane blacktop, through forests of elm and littleleaf linden. The road curved and dipped past shadowy barns and ancient farmhouses. It was the kind of highway Harry liked. Julie preferred expressways, and maybe therein lay the difference between them.

A tractor-trailer moved up behind, watched its chance, and hammered by in a spasm of dust and leaves. When it had gone, its red lights faded to dim stars against dark forest, Harry hunched forward, almost resting his chin on the steering wheel. Moon and comet rode high over the trees to his left. They would set at about the same time. (Last night, at Goddard, the Ramsay team had celebrated, Donner buying, but Harry, his thoughts locked on Julie, had gone home early. She seemed not to have noticed.)

“What did Tommy say about the comet?” he asked.

“That you’d sent a rocket out there and were bringing a piece of it back. He promised to take the piece in to show everybody.” She smiled. He guessed it took an effort.

“It wasn’t our responsibility,” he said. “Houston ran the rendezvous program.”

He felt the sudden stillness and sneezed into it. “Do you think,” she asked, “he cares about the administrative details?”

The old Kindlebride farm lay cold and abandoned in the moonlight. Three or four pickups and a battered Ford were scattered across its overgrown front yard. “So where do we go from here?”

There was a long silence that neither of them knew quite how to handle. “Probably,” she said, “it would be a good idea if I went to live with Ellen for a while.”

“What about Tommy?”

She was looking in her bag for something. A Kleenex. She snapped the bag shut and dabbed at her eyes. “Do you think you could find time for him, Harry?”

The highway went into a long S-curve, bounced across two sets of railroad tracks, and dipped into a tangled forest. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

She started to reply but her voice betrayed her, and she only shook her head and stared stonily through the windshield.

They passed through Hopkinsville, barely more than a few houses and a hardware store. “Is there somebody else?” he asked. “Someone I don’t know about?”

Her eyelids squeezed shut. “There’s nobody else. I just don’t want to be married anymore.” Her purse slid off her lap onto the floor, and when she retrieved it, Harry saw that her knuckles were white.

—

Bolingbrook Road was thick with leaves. He rolled over them with a vague sense of satisfaction. McGorman's garage, third in from the corner, was brightly lit, and the loud rasp of his power saw split the night air. It was a ritual for McGorman, the Saturday night woodworking. And for Harry it was an energetic island of familiarity in a world grown slippery.

He pulled into his driveway. Julie opened her door, climbed smoothly out, but hesitated. She was tall, a six-footer, maybe two inches more in heels. They made a hell of a couple, people had said. A mating of giants. But Harry was painfully aware of the contrast between his wife's well-oiled coordination and his own general clumsiness.

"Harry," she said, with a hint of steel in her voice, "I've never cheated on you."

"Good." He walked by her and rammed his key into the lock. "Glad to hear it."

The babysitter was Julie's cousin, Ellen Crossway. She was propped comfortably in front of a flickering TV, a novel open on her lap, a cup of coffee near her right hand. "How was the show?" she asked, with the same smile Julie had shown him at the William Tell.

"A disaster," said Harry. He didn't trust his voice sufficiently to elaborate.

Julie hung her cardigan in the closet. "They did all the obvious gags. And the mystery wasn't exactly a puzzle."

Harry liked Ellen. She might have been a second attempt to create a Julie: not quite so tall, not quite so lovely, not nearly so intense. The result was by no means unsatisfactory. Harry occasionally wondered how things might have gone had he met Ellen first; but he had no doubt that he would in time have betrayed her for her spectacular cousin.

"Well," she said, "it was a slow night on the tube, too." She laid aside the book. The strained silence was settling into the room. She looked from one to the other. "It's getting late," she said. "Gotta go, guys. Tommy's fine. We spent most of the evening with Sherlock Holmes." That was a reference to a role-playing game. Tommy enjoyed being Watson and loved prowling the tobacco shops and taverns of 1895 London in the company of the great detective.

Harry could see that Ellen knew about their problem. It figured that Julie would have confided in her. Had she known that her cousin intended to end it tonight?

Ellen kissed him and held him a degree tighter than usual. Then she was out the door, Julie strolling casually behind, and he heard them talking in hushed tones on the walkway. Harry shut off the television, went upstairs, and looked into his son's room.

Tommy was asleep, one arm thrown over the side of the bed, the other lost beneath a swirl of pillows. As usual, he'd kicked off the spread, which Harry adjusted. A couple of *Peanuts* books lay on the floor. And his basketball uniform hung proudly on the closet door.

He looked like a normal kid. But the upper right-hand drawer of the bureau contained a syringe and a vial of insulin. Tommy was a diabetic.

The wind had picked up somewhat. It whispered through the trees and the curtains. Light notched by a venetian blind fell across the photo of the Arecibo dish his son had bought a few weeks before on a visit to

Goddard. Harry stood a long time without moving.

He'd read extensively over the last year about juvenile-onset diabetes, which is the most virulent form of the disease. In an earlier age, Tommy would have faced a high probability of blindness, or an army of other debilities, and a drastically shortened life expectancy. Maybe not now. Research was moving ahead, and everyone was hopeful. The breakthrough could come at any time.

No one knew how it had happened. There was no history of the disease in either of their families. But there it was. Sometimes, the doctors had said, it just shows up.

Son of a bitch.

He would *not* give up the child.

But before he got to his bedroom, he knew he would have no choice.

—

It began to rain about 2:00 A.M. Lightning quivered outside the windows, and the wind beat against the side of the house. Harry lay on his back, staring straight up, listening to the rhythmic breathing of his wife. After a while, when he could stand it no more, he pulled on a robe and went downstairs and out onto the porch. Water rattled out of a partially blocked drainpipe. The sound had a frivolous quality, counterpointing the deep-throated storm. He sat down on one of the rockers and watched the big drops splash into the street. A brace had fallen off, or blown off, the corner streetlight. Now the lamp danced fitfully in gusts of wind and water.

Headlights turned off Maple and came slowly down the street. It was Hal Esterhazy's Plymouth. It pulled into his driveway, paused while the garage door rolled open, and vanished inside. Lights blinked on in Hal's house.

Sue Esterhazy was Hal's third wife. There were two exes wandering around out there somewhere, and five or six kids. Hal had explained to Harry that he remained on good terms with his former wives and visited them when he could though he admitted it wasn't very often. He paid alimony and child support to both. Despite all that, he seemed perfectly content with his life. And he owned a new van and a vacation home in Vermont.

Harry wondered how he did it.

Inside, the telephone was ringing.

Julie picked it up in the bedroom before he got to it. She came to the head of the stairs and looked down. "It's Goddard," she said.

Harry nodded and put the handset to his ear. "Carmichael."

"Harry, this is Charlie. I hate to bother you at this hour, but the Hercules signal changed tonight. I just got off the line with Ed. He's pretty excited."

"So are you," said Harry. Charlie was the duty officer at the Research Projects Lab. "Why? What's going on?"

"You've been following the operation, right?"

“A little.” Harry was assistant director for administration, a personnel specialist in a world of theoretical physicists, astronomers, and mathematicians. He tried hard to stay on top of Goddard’s various initiatives in an effort to retain some credibility, but the effort was pointless. Cosmologists tended to sneer at particle physicists, and both groups found it hard to credit astronomers, perceived as restricted to confirming the notions of theorists. Harry’s M.B.A. was, at best, an embarrassment.

His job was to ensure that NASA hired the right people, or contracted out to the right people, to see that everyone got paid, and to keep track of vacation time and insurance programs. He negotiated with unions, tried to prevent NASA’s technically oriented managers from alienating too many subordinates, and, when necessary, lent a hand to the public-relations director. He’d stayed close to Donner and the comet but had paid little attention to any of Goddard’s other activities over the past few weeks. “What sort of change?”

At the other end, Charlie was speaking to someone in the background. Then he got back on the line. “Harry, it stopped.”

Julie had come halfway down the staircase, watching him curiously. He almost never got calls at night.

“I thought you’d want to know,” Charlie said.

Harry’s physics wasn’t very good. Ed Gambini and his people had been observing an X-ray pulsar in the Hercules constellation since early spring. They thought the system consisted of a red giant and a neutron star. But the last few months had been a difficult period for them because most of Goddard’s facilities had been directed toward the comet. “Charlie, that’s not all that unusual, is it? I mean, the goddam thing rotates behind the big star every few days, right? Is that what happened?”

“It’s not due to eclipse again until Tuesday, Harry. And even when it does, we don’t really lose the signal. There’s an envelope of some sort out there that reflects it, so the pulse just gets weaker. This is a complete shutdown. Ed insists something must be wrong with the equipment.”

“And you can’t find a problem?”

“The Net’s fine. NASCOM has run every check it can think of. Harry, Ed’s in New York and won’t get back for a few hours. He doesn’t want to fly into Reagan. We thought it might be simplest if we just sent the chopper.”

“Do it. Who’s in the operations center?”

“Majeski.”

Harry squeezed the phone. “Okay,” he said. And, as if it mattered: “I’m on my way.”

“What is it?” asked Julie. Ordinarily, she would have been impatient with a late call from Goddard. But tonight, she only sounded subdued.

Harry explained about Hercules while he dressed. “It’s an X-ray pulsar,” he said. “Ed’s been watching it on and off for several months.” He grinned at his own joke. “Charlie says they aren’t picking it up anymore.”

“Why’s that important?”

“Apparently because there’s no easy explanation for it.” He climbed the stairs, walked past her, and went into the bedroom.

She followed him in, shrugged off her nightshirt, and slipped into bed. “Maybe it’s just some dust between here and the source.”

He grabbed an armful of clothes. “Skynet isn’t affected by dust. At least not the X-ray telescopes. No, whatever it is, it’s enough to bring Gambini back from New York in the middle of the night.”

She watched him dress. “You know,” she said, striving for a casual tone but unable to keep the emotion entirely out of her voice, “this is what we’ve been talking about all evening. The Hercules Project is Gambini’s responsibility. Why do *you* have to go running down there? I bet he doesn’t head for your shop when some labor-relations crisis breaks out.”

Harry sighed. He hadn’t got where he was by staying home in bed when major events were happening. It was true he didn’t have direct responsibility for Hercules, but one never knew where these things might lead, and a rising bureaucrat needed nothing so much as visibility. He resisted the impulse to suggest she was no longer entitled to an opinion anyway and simply told her he’d lock the door on the way out.

—

The X-ray pulsar in Hercules was somewhat unusual. It was believed to be a completely independent system, unattached to any other body of stars. More than a million and a half light-years from Goddard, it was adrift in the immense void between the galaxies.

It was also unusual in that neither of the components was a blue giant. Alpha Altheis, the visible star, was brick red, considerably cooler than Sol, but approximately eighty times larger. If it were placed at the center of our solar system, it would engulf Mercury.

The Alpha component was well along in its helium-burning cycle. Left to itself, it would continue to expand for no more than ten million years before erupting into a supernova.

But the star would not survive that long. The other object in the system, Beta Altheis, was a dead sun, a thing more massive than its huge companion, yet so crushed by its own weight that its diameter probably measured less than thirty kilometers, the distance between the Holland Tunnel and Long Island Sound. Two minutes by jet, maybe a day on foot. But Beta was a malignancy in a tight orbit, barely fifteen million miles from the giant’s edge, so close that it literally rolled through its companion’s upper atmosphere, spinning violently, dragging an enormous wave of superheated gas, dragging perhaps the giant’s vitals.

It was the engine that drove the pulsar. There was a constant flow of supercharged particles from Alpha to the companion, hurtling toward it at relativistic velocities.

But the collision points were not distributed randomly across Beta. Rather, they were concentrated at the magnetic poles, which were quite small, a kilometer or so in diameter and, like Earth’s, not aligned with the axis. Consequently, they also were spinning, approximately thirty times per second. Incoming high-energy particles striking this impossibly dense and slippery surface tended to carom off as X-rays. The result was a lighthouse whose beams swept the nearby cosmos.

Harry wondered, as his Chrysler plowed through a sudden burst of rain, what kind of power would be required to shut down such an engine.

The guards waved him through the gatehouse. He made an immediate left and headed for Building 2, the Research Projects Laboratory. Eight or nine cars were parked under the security lights, unusual for this time of night. Harry pulled in alongside Cord Majeski’s sleek gray Honda and hurried under dripping trees into

the entrance at the rear of the long, utilitarian building.

The Hercules Project had originally been assigned a communication center with an adjoining operations area. But Gambini was politically astute, and his responsibilities and staff had kept growing. He'd acquired two workrooms, additional computer space, and four offices. The project itself had begun as a general-purpose investigation of several dozen pulsars. But it had quickly focused on the anomaly in the group, which was located five degrees northeast of the globular cluster NGC6341.

Harry strolled into the operations center. Several technicians sat in the green glow of monitors. Two or three, headphones pushed off their ears, drank Cokes and talked quietly. Cord Majeski leaned frowning against a worktable, scribbling on a clipboard. He was more linebacker than mathematician, all sinew and shoulder, with piercing blue eyes and a dark beard intended to add maturity to his distressingly boyish features. He was a grim and taciturn young man who nevertheless, to Harry's bewilderment, seemed inordinately successful with women. "Hello, Harry," he said. "What brings you in at this hour?"

"I hear the pulsar's doing strange things. What's going on?"

"Damned if I know."

"Maybe," said Harry, "it ran out of gas. That happens, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes. But not like this. If Beta were losing its power source, we'd have detected a gradual decline. This thing just stopped. I don't know what to think. Maybe Alpha went nova." He dropped the clipboard onto the table. "Harry," he said, "we need access to Optical. Can you pry Donner loose for a few hours? He's been looking at that goddam comet for three months."

"Submit the paper, Cord," said Harry.

Majeski tugged at his beard and favored Harry with a growl. "That takes time. We're supposed to be able to observe a target of opportunity."

"And you shall," said Harry. "Take a few minutes from your schedule and complete the form."

—

Harry told him he'd be in his office if needed and went back out to the car.

He had no serious interest in pulsars. In fact, on this night, nothing short of a black hole bearing down on Maryland could have engaged his attention. But it was an opportunity to get away from the situation at home. To give it a rest and hope maybe it would all go away.

The rain slackened to a cold drizzle. He drove north on Road 3 and eased into the lot outside Building 18, the Business Operations Section. His office was on the second floor. It was a relatively spartan place, with battered chairs and bilious green walls and government wall hangings, mostly cheap art deco that GSA had picked up at a cut-rate price from one of its bargain-basement suppliers. Photos of Julie and Tommy stood atop his desk, between a Rolodex and a small, framed reproduction of a lobby card from *The Maltese Falcon*. Tommy was in a little-league uniform, *Pirates* scripted across his chest. Julie stood in profile, thoughtful against a gray New England sky. It was from their honeymoon.

He lit the desk lamp, turned off the overhead lights, and lowered himself onto a plastic sofa that was a little too short for him. Maybe it *was* time to quit. Find a deserted lighthouse somewhere along the coast of Maine. He'd seen one advertised in Providence once for a buck, but you had to move it. Maybe he could get a job in

the local general store, change his name, and spend the rest of his life playing bridge.

His years with Julie were over. And in the terrible unfairness of things, he knew he'd lost not only his wife but Tommy as well. And a sizable portion of his income. He felt a sudden twinge of sympathy for Alpha, burdened with the neutron star it couldn't get rid of. He was forty-seven, his marriage was a wreck, and he suddenly realized he hated his job. People who didn't know what it was like envied him. He was, after all, part of the Great Adventure, directing the assault on the planets, working closely with all those big-shot physicists and astronomers. But the investigators, though few were as blunt, or as young, as Majeski, did not count him as one of them.

He was a compiler of schedules, the guy who answered questions about hospitalization and retirement benefits and other subjects so unutterably boring that Gambini and his associates could barely bring themselves to discuss them. He was, in the official terminology, a layman. Worse, he was a layman with a substantial amount of control over operational procedures at Goddard.

He drifted off to a fitful sleep. The wind died and the rain stopped. The only sound in the building was the occasional hum of the blowers in the basement.

When the phone rang, the office was full of daylight. Harry looked at his watch. It was just after eight. My God, had he slept that long?

"Harry." It was Charlie again. "The pulsar's kicked back in."

"Okay," said Harry. "Sounds like the equipment. Make sure you haven't overlooked anything. I'll get maintenance to run some checks later." This was a Sunday. He'd wait until tomorrow unless someone pressed him. "Ed get here yet?"

"We expect him anytime."

"Tell him where I am," said Harry. He hung up, convinced that the night's events would unquestionably be traced to a defective circuit board.

The Space Flight Center was peaceful Sunday mornings. And the truth was that, although he tried not to examine his motives too closely, he was always happy for sufficient reason to sleep in his office. It was odd. Despite his passion for Julie, there was something in the surrounding hills, in the mists that rose with the sun, in the solitude of this place that was usually so busy, that drew him. Even now. Maybe especially now.

MONITOR

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PROUD PARENTHOOD SUES TO QUELL WEB PORNOGRAPHY, VIOLENCE

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If Edward Gambini had been awake all night, it didn't show. He scurried around the operations center, driven by restless energy, a thin, birdlike man with a sparrow's quick eyes. He possessed a kind of avian dignity, a strong sense of his position in life, and the quality that politicians call charisma, and actors, presence. It was this characteristic, combined with a superb sense of timing in political matters, that had resulted in his appointment the previous February, over more seasoned candidates, to manage the pulsar project. Although Harry was considerably the taller of the two men, he always felt dwarfed in Gambini's presence.

Unlike most of his colleagues, who reluctantly recognized the advantage of befriending administrators, Gambini genuinely liked Harry Carmichael. When Carmichael occasionally lamented his career choice—he'd begun life as a physics major at Ohio State but quickly decided that quantum mechanics would be forever beyond his grasp—Gambini assured him he was better off. Although, of course, he never explained why, Harry understood his meaning: Only a mind of the first water, like Gambini's own, could prosper in that abstract discipline. Harry's dry sense of humor and cautious personality would never have emerged intact from detailed study of the Hilbert-Schmidt method or Bernoulli's Theorem.

Gambini cheerfully conceded that persons in Harry's line of work had a valid place in the world. Somebody has to write the checks, Harry, he had said. And he'd added that rational bureaucrats were hard to come by.

It was just after nine when Harry arrived at the lab, carrying a cinnamon roll for Gambini who, he knew, would not yet have eaten.

Cord Majeski sat in front of a monitor, his jaw pushed into one palm, while lines of numbers moved down the screen. His eyes did not move with them. The others, computer operators, systems analysts, communications technicians, seemed more absorbed in their jobs than usual. Even Angela Dellasandro, the project heartthrob, tall, lean, dark-eyed, stared intently at a console. Gambini picked out a spot well away from everybody and took a substantial bite out of the cinnamon roll. "Harry, can you get full optical for us tonight?"

Harry could. "I've already made arrangements. All I need is a written request from you or Cord."

"Good." Gambini rubbed his hands. "By the way, you might want to stick around for a while."

"Why?"

"Harry, that is a *very* strange object out there. In fact, I'm not sure it should exist at all." He leaned against a worktable piled high with printouts and Coke cans. Behind him, centered on a wall covered with photos of satellites, shuttles, and star clusters, was an Amtrak calendar depicting a switcher in a crowded freight yard. "In any case, it certainly shouldn't be where it is, way the hell out in the middle of nowhere."

"Why's that? Don't stars get ejected from galaxies?"

"It's not that it got booted from wherever it formed. It's that the binary didn't come unglued. Alpha and Beta are still orbiting one another. Whatever tossed them into the outer darkness should have ripped them apart in the process." He shook his head. "There's another mystery: It appears to have come from the general direction of the Virgo Cluster."

"And—?"

"The Virgo Cluster is sixty-five million light-years away from where Altheis is now. The system is moving away from it at about thirty-five kilometers per second. That's slow, but the point is that the vectors don't converge. That means it didn't originate in Virgo, but the stars aren't old enough to have got where they are from anywhere else. And I say that despite the fact that Alpha, the red giant, is *old*." Gambini leaned toward Harry, and his voice took on a conspiratorial tone. "There's something else you should know."

Harry waited, but Gambini only sat quietly for a few moments, then slid off the table. "My office," he said.

It was paneled in red cedar, decorated with awards the physicist had received over the years: the 2002 Nobel for his work in high-energy plasmas; the Man of the Year in 2003 from Georgetown; Beloit College's appreciation of his contributions to the development of the Faint Object Spectrograph; and a dozen or so others.

Before transferring to NASA from his former position with the Treasury Department, Harry had indulged in the bureaucratic tradition of hanging plaques and scrolls on his walls, but his stuff had looked pathetic by contrast. He'd owned the Treasury Department's Exceptional Achievement Award, a diploma from a three-day executive development program, a statement of appreciation from a D.C. high school for which he'd done an assembly on Careers in the Federal Government. So Harry's eyewash now rested in a box in his

garage, and the wall behind his desk boasted a mountain landscape and nothing else.

Gambini's office was located behind a broad glass panel that overlooked the forward section of the L-shaped operating spaces. A thick, woven carpet covered the floor. Every flat surface was awash with paper and books, and several yards of printout had been draped over a chair back. Gambini snapped on a CD player set in a bookcase, and the room filled immediately with Bach.

He waved Harry to a seat but seemed unable to settle into one himself. "Beta," he said, crossing the room to close the door, "has been transmitting bursts of X-rays in an exceedingly regular pattern during the entire time we've been observing it. The details don't matter, but the intervals between peaks have been remarkably constant. At least, that was the situation until last night. I understand Charlie informed you that the signal stopped altogether somewhat after midnight."

"Yes. That's why I came in."

"It was down for precisely four hours, seventeen minutes, forty-three seconds."

"Is that significant?"

Gambini smiled. "Multiply it by sixteen, and you get Beta's orbital period." He watched Harry expectantly and was clearly disappointed at his lack of response. "Harry," he said, "that *can't* be a coincidence. The shutdown was designed to attract attention. *Designed*, Harry. And the duration of the shutdown was intended to demonstrate *intelligent* control." Gambini's eyes glittered, and his lips rolled back to reveal sharp white teeth. "Harry," he said, "it's the LGM signal. It's happened!"

Harry shifted his weight uncomfortably. LGM meant *Little Green Man*. It was shorthand for the long-sought transmission from another world. It was the signal for which the SETI people had been listening without success for more than sixty years. When Skynet had gone online two years earlier, its first task had been to survey extrasolar terrestrial planets in an effort to find one whose spectranalysis suggested a high oxygen content. Evidence of *life*. The results had been disappointing. "Ed," he said carefully, "I don't think we should jump to conclusions."

"Goddammit, Harry, I'm not jumping to conclusions!" He started to say something else, caught himself, and sat down. "There *is* no other explanation for what we've seen. Listen—" He grew suddenly calm. "I know what you're thinking. But it doesn't matter what *anybody* thinks. There's no question about it!" He looked defiantly at Harry, daring him to object.

"*That's* the evidence?" asked Harry. "That's all there is? Hell, maybe something got in the way."

"It would be a spectacular coincidence, Harry." Gambini smiled tolerantly. "But yes, there's more." His jaws worked, and an expression that was a mixture of smugness and impatience worked its way into his leathery features.

"What?"

"The consistency of the pattern is on the record. With minor variations, in intensity and pulse width and so on, the basic sequence of events never changed during the last few months. There were almost always fifty-six pulses in a series, and the series repeats every three and a half seconds. Slightly less, actually." He got up, came around the desk, and held out his arms toward the ceiling. "Son of a bitch, I can't believe it yet. Anyhow, after we recovered the signal this morning, we could still recognize the pattern. But there was an odd difference. Some of the pulses were missing, but only from alternate series. And always the same pulses.

It was as if you took, say, Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto and played it straight through, then played it again, with some notes removed but substituting rests rather than shortening the composition. And you continued to do so, first complete, then truncated, with the truncated version always the same." He took a notepad out of the top drawer and wrote *56* at the top. "The number of pulses in the normal series," he said. "But in the abbreviated series, there are only forty-eight."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ed. I'm lost."

"All right, forget all that. It's only a method for creating a recurring pattern. What's particularly interesting is the arrangement of the missing pulses." He printed the series: 3, 6, 11, 15, 19, 29, 34, 39, 56. His gray eyes rose to meet Harry's. "When it's finished, we get fifty-six pulses without the deletions, then the series runs again."

Harry nodded as if he understood. "Say it in English, Ed."

Gambini looked like a man who'd won a lottery. "It's a code," he said.

When Skynet had first gone operational, Gambini had talked as if he expected to solve the basic riddles of the universe. Life in other places, the creation event, the dark-matter issue, were all going to give way to modern technology. But it hadn't happened that way, of course. Those questions were as far from solution as ever. He had been particularly interested, for philosophical reasons, in the role of life in the cosmos. And Skynet had allowed them to examine directly, for the first time, terrestrial worlds circling distant stars. Gambini and Majeski, Wheeler at Princeton, Rimford at Cal Tech, and a thousand others had looked at the surveys and congratulated one another. Planets floated everywhere! Few suns seemed so poor, so sterile, as to be destitute of orbiting bodies. Even multiple star systems had somehow produced, and held on to, families of worlds. Often they fluttered in eccentric orbits, precluding the kind of stable environment believed necessary to support life, but they were there. Planetary-system-formation theory acquired renewed energy. And Gambini had offered Harry his opinion one Sunday afternoon this past April, the day after opening day, that he no longer had any doubts: The universe was rich with life.

That optimism had all changed in the long shadow thrown by the Faint Object Spectrograph. Light analysis showed that planets of terrestrial mass located within the biozone of a star—at a distance from their primary that would allow liquid water to exist—tended to be like Venus rather than Earth. The data had, in fact, revealed the nearby universe as an unremittingly hostile place, and the Saganesque vision of a Milky Way populated with hundreds of thousands of life-bearing worlds had given way to the dark suspicion that humans might be, after all, alone. Gambini's dream faded, and, ironically, it was his own work with the Faint Object Spectrograph that had driven it offstage.

It was a grim time, traumatic for the Agency and its investigators. If, after all, there was nothing out there but rock and gas, why were taxpayers being asked to pump money into long-range projects? So there had been talk of cutbacks, and in fact the cash flow to the Agency for special projects, like Skynet, had slowed considerably. During the next fiscal year, it was expected to go down again. Harry had no inclination to get anyone's hopes up, then take another beating. "I think we need better evidence," he said, as gently as he could.

"Do you?" Gambini's tongue flicked across his lips. "Harry, I don't think you've looked closely at the transmissions." He picked up the pad on which he'd scrawled the numbers and held it out. While Harry pretended to study them, he gazed down at his phone and punched in a code. "We'd better tell Quint," he said.

Harry frowned. "I wouldn't be in a hurry to get the director out here." Quinton Rosenbloom was NASA's

operations chief, now also wearing the hat of director at Goddard. An automobile accident a few weeks before had left the position unexpectedly empty. The change in leadership at this time was unfortunate. The old director had known Gambini well and would have been tolerant of this latest aberration. But Rosenbloom was an old-line conservative, utterly dedicated to hardheaded good sense.

Harry continued to examine the numbers, but he still saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Gambini frowned at the handset. “I’m getting his answering machine,” he said. Rosenbloom did not carry a cell phone on weekends, and he did not particularly like to be disturbed. Gambini’s correct course would have been to leave some indication of the nature of the emergency with the recorder. That would have resulted in a response within a few hours.

But Harry liked to annoy Rosenbloom, and here he could do it indirectly. “Tell the machine he needs to call as soon as he gets in. Don’t tell him why.”

Gambini shrugged and complied.

“I assume there’s some sort of sequence,” Harry said.

The physicist nodded. “Of the most basic sort. At the start of the series, there are two pulses, marked off by the pulse that does not appear. Then two more, then four. An exponential group. Followed by the three that appear between sites eleven and fifteen, another three between fifteen and nineteen, and nine between nineteen and twenty-nine. Two-two-four. Three-three-nine. Four-four-sixteen. Could anything be clearer?”

—

Quint Rosenbloom was overweight, rumpled, and short-tempered. He had a talent for alienating the help and operated on the management theory that his primary responsibility was to throw up roadblocks against every initiative he didn’t think of personally. He needed his glasses adjusted and could have used a competent tailor. Nevertheless, he was a bureaucrat with some technical talent and could be counted on to maintain an efficient, if not very productive, organization. He’d come to NASA from COSMIC, the Computer Software Management and Information Center at the University of Georgia. His initial assignments had encompassed systems integration for the Ground Spaceflight Tracking and Data Network. But the application of bureaucratic pressure appealed to his mathematical instincts. He enjoyed wielding power.

He did not generally approve of theorists. They tended to get confused easily, and their hold on everyday reality, uncertain in the best of times, inevitably made them unreliable. He recognized their value, much, perhaps, as the theorists recognized the value of the signature on their paychecks. But he preferred to stay at least one level of management above them. Thus, Harry became the contact with the operational people.

Ed Gambini was a classic example of the type. Gambini was addicted to asking the sort of ultimate questions about which one could speculate endlessly with no fear of ever arriving at a solution. Rosenbloom did not see that as a problem in itself, of course, but it biased one’s judgment sufficiently to render it, in his view, unreliable.

He had vigorously opposed Gambini’s appointment, but his own superiors, whose scientific backgrounds were limited, were impressed by the physicist’s Nobel Prize. Moreover, in an action that Rosenbloom could not bring himself to forgive, Gambini had gone over his head. “The little bastard knew I wouldn’t have given him the job,” he once told Harry. There’d been a food fight, and, in the end, Rosenbloom had been overruled.

If Rosenbloom doubted Gambini’s results when he saw them that Sunday morning, it wasn’t because he felt

such a thing wasn't possible, but rather that it simply did not happen in well-run government agencies. He also sensed that, if events were permitted to take their course, he would shortly face one of those fortunately rare situations in which there would be considerable career risk, with little corresponding opportunity for advantage. If it were eventually proved inaccurate, Rosenbloom would be blamed for not having used more discretion. If it was correct, on the other hand, Gambini would get all the credit.

The director's irritation was obvious from the moment he arrived at the operations center. "I guess he doesn't like coming in on a Sunday," Gambini remarked, while both men watched him stride stiffly through the whitewashed door. But Harry suspected it went deeper than that. Rosenbloom just flat out didn't like waves, and a Sunday call always suggested problems with which he'd as soon not deal.

It was warm. He had slung a worn green blazer over one shoulder, and his knit shirt was stuffed into his pants. Someone at home had reached him at the golf course, and after a short conversation with Gambini, he'd come directly in. "I don't have an explanation for your dots and dashes, Ed," he said. "But I'm sure someone else will. What's Majeski's opinion?"

"He can't offer any alternative."

"—To little green men. How about you, Harry?"

"It's not his field," observed Gambini.

"I thought I asked *him*."

"I have no idea," said Harry, his own temper rising.

Rosenbloom exhaled and stared for a long moment at the ceiling. "The Agency," he said reasonably, "has a few problems just now. The rest of the moon operation's going to hell. The administration is unhappy with our foot-dragging over the military's pet projects. The Bible thumpers are still after us. And I don't need to remind you that there's a presidential election next year."

That had been another embarrassment for the Agency. The year before, a NASA investigator had shown pictures of a quasar to the media and jokingly remarked it might be the Big Bang. That got translated quickly to claims NASA had seen the creation event, and there'd been outrage from the religious right. "We spend a lot of money, and the taxpayers are asking why. It wouldn't take much for Hurley to just cut off the flow. To take us by our collective throats and hang us out to dry. If we start talking about little green men, and we're wrong, we're going to hand him the rope." He was sitting on a reversed wooden chair, which he now tilted forward. "Maybe," he added, "even if we're right."

"We don't have to make any statement at all," objected Gambini. "Just release the transmissions. They'll speak for themselves."

"They sure as hell will." Rosenbloom was the only person in the organization who would have taken that tone to Ed Gambini. There was much about the director's methods for handling subordinates that reminded Harry of a tractor-trailer with a loose housing. "Ed, people are already jittery. We had that terrorist scare in Chicago last week, the economy's a mess, Pakistan and India are threatening each other again. The President is not going to want to hear about Martians."

Harry's eyes were beginning to water. Pollen was getting down into his throat, and he sneezed. He felt slightly feverish and began to wish he could take the day off and go to bed.

“Why not?” asked Gambini. “What has an LGM signal got to do with Pakistan?”

Rosenbloom took a deep breath, and his expression suggested he was addressing a child. “It upsets the status quo. With an election coming up, the last thing the White House wants is another bump in the road.”

“Quinton.” Gambini twisted the name slightly, drawing out the second consonant. But he kept a straight face. “Whoever is on the other end of that transmission is far away. *Far* away. There were cavemen here when that signal left Altheis.”

“It is my earnest desire,” Rosenbloom continued, as if no one else had spoken, “that this entire issue just go away.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Then let someone *else* find the LGMs. If they’re really there, surely that won’t be so difficult.”

“Quint.” Gambini’s tone hardened. “You can’t just ignore a discovery like this and hope someone else finds it. That’s crazy.”

Rosenbloom nodded. “I suppose you’re right.” His chair creaked as he adjusted his position. “Harry, you didn’t answer my question. Would *you* be willing to stand up there and tell three hundred million Americans that you’ve been talking to Martians?”

Harry gazed back into those intense eyes. He didn’t like to be perceived as opposing Gambini on Gambini’s grounds. Still, it was hard to believe the entire thing wouldn’t turn out to be a defective flywheel somewhere. “It’s like UFOs,” he said, trying to be diplomatically noncommittal, but realizing too late he was saying the wrong thing. “You can’t really take them seriously until somebody parks one in your front yard.”

Rosenbloom’s features reflected a sense of serenity. “Carmichael,” he said reasonably, “has been here longer than any of us. He has an instinct for survival that I admire—” He smiled reassuringly at Harry. I am not exaggerating, he seemed to be suggesting. *This is really the way I feel.* Harry was embarrassed. “And,” he continued, “he has the best interests of the Agency at heart. Ed, I suggest you listen to him.”

Gambini, stationed behind his cluttered desk, ignored Harry. “What admin thinks is irrelevant. The fact is that nothing in nature creates exponential sequences.”

Rosenbloom lowered his head into his hands and pressed his fingertips against his temples. “You’re wrong, Ed,” he said in a tone that suggested he was being patient. “You spend too much time in observatories. But Harry understands the realities here. Don’t you, Harry?”

Harry squirmed. “I think Ed has a point.”

Rosenbloom charged through the remark. “How badly do you want to see Skynet finished? How important are the Mare Ingenii telescopes?”

Gambini’s cheeks were reddening. He was visibly angry, but he said nothing.

“Okay.” Rosenbloom held his hands out to indicate he was speaking pure truth, down off the mountain. “You push this business with the pulsar, create another stir, and I guarantee you it’ll be the end. The Senate would love to be able to kill off the whole batch of appropriations. Keep in mind, all you’ve got is a goddam series of beeps. They might be decisive for you, but to the Congress, they’re just beeps.”

“Quint, what we have is hard evidence of intelligent control of a pulsar.”

“All right, I’ll buy that. You’ve got *evidence*.” He got ponderously to his feet and pushed his hands into his jacket pockets. “And that’s it. Evidence is a long way from proof. Harry’s right: If you’re going to talk about little green men, you better be prepared to march them into a press conference. This stuff is *your* specialty, not mine. But I looked up pulsars before I came down here this morning. If I understand my sources, they’re what’s left after a supernova blows a star apart. Isn’t that correct?”

Gambini nodded. “More or less.”

“Just so you can reassure me,” he continued, “what’s your answer going to be when someone asks how an alien world could have survived the explosion?”

“There’s no way we could know that,” objected Gambini.

“Well, you’ll want to have a plausible story ready for Cass Woodbury. She’s a cobra, Ed. She’ll probably also want to know how anyone could control the kind of energy a pulsar puts out.” He drew a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it with deliberate ease, and adjusted his glasses. “It says here that the power generated by your basic X-ray pulsar could go to around ten thousand times the luminosity of the sun. Could that be right? How could anyone control *that*? *How*, Ed? How could it be done?”

Gambini sighed. “We may be talking about a technology a million years beyond ours,” he said. “Who knows what they might be capable of?”

“Yeah, well, you’ll have to excuse my skepticism, but that’s a poor answer. We’d better be ready with something a little more convincing.”

Harry sneezed his way into the conversation. “Look,” he said, wiping his nose, “I probably shouldn’t be part of this at all. But I can tell you how I’d use the pulsar if I wanted to signal with it.”

Rosenbloom rubbed his flat nose with fat short fingers. “How?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t try to do *anything* with the pulsar itself.” Harry got up, crossed the room, and looked down, not at the director, but at Gambini. “I’d set up a blinker. Just put something in front of it.”

A beatific smile lit up Rosenbloom’s languid features. “Good, Harry,” he said. “It must come as something of a surprise to some of us that there’s imagination outside the operations group.” He turned back toward Gambini. “Okay, Ed, I’m willing to concede the possibility. It *might* be artificial, or it might be something else entirely. I suggest we keep our minds open. And our mouths shut. At least until we know what we’re dealing with. In the meantime, any public statements will come from my office.”

“Which means there’ll be none.”

“For the moment, yes. There’ll be none. And if the signal changes again, you notify *me* first. Clear?”

Gambini nodded.

Rosenbloom looked at his watch. “It’s what, about ten and a half hours now since it started. I take it you’re assuming this is an acquisition signal of some sort.”

“Yes,” said Gambini. “They’d want to attract our attention first. Somewhere down the line, when they think we’ve had enough time, they should switch to a textual transmission.”

“If they do, what are the chances we’ll be able to read it?”

“Hard to say. Surely they’ll understand their audience will need some help. Presumably, they’ll supply that.”

“That sounds like a lot of presuming.” The director’s eyes fell on Harry. “Harry, you get in touch with everybody who was in here last night. Tell them not a word of this to anyone. Any of this gets out, I’ll have somebody’s head. Ed, if there are any special people you want to bring in, clear it with my office first.”

Gambini frowned. “Quint, aren’t we losing sight of our charter here a little? Goddard isn’t a defense installation.”

“It also isn’t an installation that’s going to have people laughing at it for the next twenty years because you can’t wait a few days—”

“I have no problem with keeping it away from the media,” Gambini said, his temper visibly rising. “But a lot of people have worked on different aspects of this problem for a long time. They deserve to know what happened last night.”

“Not yet.” Rosenbloom appeared maddeningly unconcerned. “I’ll tell you when.”

—

The director’s aura lingered oppressively in the office. Gambini’s exaltation was gone, and even Harry, who had long since learned the advantage of maintaining a clinical attitude in these squabbles, felt unnerved.

“Damn fool,” Gambini said. “He means well, he wants to protect the Agency, but he’s a walking grenade.” He flipped through the Rolodex, found a number, and punched it into his phone. “Last night, Harry,” he said quietly, “you and I lived through the most significant moment in the history of the world. I suggest you record everything you can remember. You’ll be able to write a book on the subject soon, and people will read it a thousand years from now.” He leaned into the phone. “Is Father Wheeler there? This is Ed Gambini at Goddard.”

Harry shook his head. He hated turf wars; they caused ill will, rancor, and inefficiency, and he habitually regarded people who engaged in them with contempt. Although he’d caught himself indulging on occasion. But this one was particularly irritating.

The walls in Gambini’s office were lined with books, not the reassuring personnel manuals and federal regulations in black binders that filled Harry’s shelves, but arcane volumes with abstruse titles: Kip Thorne’s *Black Holes and Time Warps*, Stephen Hawking’s *The Grand Design*, Baines Rimford’s *Molecular Foundations of Temporal Asymmetry*, Gunter Epstein’s *The Quantum Core*. Other volumes lay open on tables, and well-thumbed copies of *Physics Today*, *Physics Review*, *Cosmology*, and other magazines were scattered about.

The casual disarray upset Harry’s sense of propriety. The first requisite of a government office is order. He was surprised that Rosenbloom had not commented, had not even seemed to notice. Probably it suggested that there was not, after all, so wide a difference between Gambini and the director.

“I’d appreciate it if you could reach him and ask him to call me right away,” Gambini was saying into the phone. “It’s important.” He broke the connection. “Wheeler’s in D.C., Harry, lecturing at Georgetown. With luck, we can have him here this afternoon.”

Harry made a face.

“What? What is it, Harry?”

“You’re playing games with your career. I thought Rosenbloom made himself reasonably clear. He wants approval before anyone is called in.”

“He can’t do anything to me,” said Gambini. “I could walk out of here tomorrow and call a press conference, and he knows it. And he can’t touch you, either. Hell, nobody else knows how to run the place. Anyway, if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll see that his office gets informed. But if we have to wait for Quinton’s okay, we might as well close up shop.”

Harry didn’t like the hostility. “He’ll have no objection to your bringing Pete Wheeler in.” Wheeler was a Norbertine cosmologist who shared Gambini’s intense interest in the possibilities of extraterrestrial life. He’d written extensively on the subject and predicted long before Skynet that living worlds would be exceedingly rare. He also had a direct connection with Rosenbloom, who had been his partner in a number of area bridge tournaments. “Who else do you want?”

“Let’s go outside,” suggested Gambini. Reluctantly, because the pollen would be worse, Harry acquiesced. “When things begin to happen, we’re going to need Baines Rimford. And I’d like to have Leslie Davies on hand. Eventually, if a textual message *does* come through, we should also get Cyrus Hakluyt. If you could get the paperwork started, I’d appreciate it.”

Rimford was probably the world’s best-known cosmologist. He’d become a public figure in recent years, appearing on television specials and writing books on the architecture of the universe that were always described as “lucid accounts for the general reader,” but which Harry could never understand. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Gambini maintained, Rimford’s only peer was Barbara Hasting. His name was attached to assorted topological theorems and temporal deviations and cosmological models. Yet he, too, like so many physicists, found time to play bridge. He was a ranking expert. And he had something of a reputation as an amateur actor. Harry had once watched him perform, with remarkable energy, as Liza Doolittle’s father.

But who were Davies and Hakluyt?

They came out through the front doors into a bright, sunlit afternoon, cool with the smell of mid-September. Gambini’s enthusiasm was returning. “Cyrus is a microbiologist from Johns Hopkins. He’s a Renaissance man, of sorts, whose specialties include evolutionary mechanics, genetics, several branches of morphology, and assorted other subdisciplines. He also writes essays.”

“What sort of essays?” asked Harry, assuming that Gambini meant technical papers.

“They’re more or less philosophical commentaries on natural history. He’s been published by both the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s*, and a volume of his collected work came out last year. I think it was called *The Reluctant Brontosaur*. There’s a copy of it down in my office somewhere. It got a favorable review in the *Times*.”

“And Davies?”

“A theoretical psychologist. A *working* theoretical psychologist. Maybe she can do something for Rosenbloom.”

“Ed—?”

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