

Greenwire

By

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Like a buildup of psychic waves, the low hum of whirring metal grew loud as the sheer, glossy sphere drew close to the polished, blurred invader. I sighed as the cool air from the fan blew across my head until, at last, the snap of a turned doorknob cut the moment short.

“Christ, Russ, would it kill you to show a little professionalism?”

I exhaled, feeling myself tense again as I sat up in my chair: the Director’s buzzing fan didn’t do much to help me cope with the dull heat of a New Mexican summer. Fixing me with a withering look, the big man himself took up his executive seat, letting it groan beneath him as fifty years of experience, exhaustion, and excess set its weight down behind a beautiful mahogany desk bearing the desk plaque ‘Charles Heines’. Fingers fat as cigars knotted themselves together. It was like sitting before a judge in a court. And here I was, sitting before that mass like a shrinking violet, just trying to get my story straight.

“Figure you’ve got half an idea why you’re here, Russ. Heard you were asking around Lucille’s last night about the shareholders.”

I leaned forward in my seat. Teeth tight. Hat already crushed from anxiety in my lap. I’d practiced for this moment over and over.

“Yes, sir. I know things are starting to slow down. The company’s getting desperate, but I’ve run the numbers.” My fingers fell into the suitcase at my side. The folder was already prepared, in easy reach. I was pretty tidy that way. “We don’t have to take such serious measures, there are other options that-“

“Thoroughly considered,” interrupted Heines, tearing the folder out of my fingers and promptly sliding it off the side of the desk, into the trash bin beside it. With it went my confidence. “The shareholders aren’t interested in patience if it’s going to hurt profits. Things are

only slowing down because the governments are getting off their asses and forming agencies of their own to deal with the Guests, think that federal oversight is the best way to benefit off what they've got. What a crock..."

The seat groaned even louder as the Director rose from his seat, moving to the window. He raised one fat finger...for my benefit, I guess. The start of an imminent lecture.

"Don't think I'm not on your side, Russ. I don't like the Guests any more than you do. They're weird, they're nosy, they're a goddamn affront to humanity if you ask me. But Greenwire only exists because of 'em. The advances we make off of their technology, I mean- you're the numbers guy here, you tell me how profitable it's been. The atom was a dead end, but this bioelectric stuff, these repulsors of theirs, it's- it's great shit, Russ!"

Heines moved back towards the desk, gripping the back of his seat with both hands, fixing me with a look of unwithheld greed. But a note of desperation, too...should've figured he needed his top accountant on board, more than anyone else.

"You know how far we've come since the end of the war. Four years later and we're sitting here with these little green fucks, soaking it up like a sponge. You think that would've happened if we didn't play nice? If Greenwire didn't take that plunge into god-knows-what? We're dead in the water without their tech, and nobody outside of 'Guest Services' appreciates that anymore. We need something big. Something- something to remind people that *we're* why things are as good as they are."

Well, I wasn't going to interrupt his monologue. It was clear enough to me there wasn't going to be any talking him out of this, resistance was just a waste of my time. I leaned back, letting my head loll off the headrest of my seat. From upside-down, the fan had an even stranger

buzz. My head was sweating, Heines knew it. That kind of resignation isn't something I hide easily. But, still...it was worth trying, one more time.

“I just don't...think that's necessary, Director. I don't see what putting a few salarymen on the Moon gets us. What, are we carving the company logo up there? Or- or are we hoping to flood the market with cheese? Do people even care about the Moon anymore, I mean- there's two or three hundred space ships parked in the Arctic.”

“All of them belonging to our Guests. Come on, Russ. You don't want to see humanity make one of their own?” The Director grinned, and that's when the decanter and glasses came out from under his desk. “Greenwire could be in space before Dewey gives the Dems another spanking. Before the Reds even figure out how to spell neuromodulation. It all rests on you. You're the only guy that can run the numbers with one of their computers...and it doesn't hurt that your old lady's been learning the lingo.”

I gaped. The Director only smiled at my shock, sliding a glass of scotch in my direction.

“The company can't talk to the Guests about spaceflight directly. The U.N. would throw a fit- but who's to say one accountant can't make nice with one of their engineers?”

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I could feel the brake squealing beneath as normal, the tolling bell of my arrival home, a few hours after the meeting. The beige wagon drove shuddered into silence as I felt all the usual signs of panic settling in. My finger tapped out a meaningless beat on the steering wheel, knuckles of my hand whitening around it. Took some effort to drag my other off the ignition and onto the rolled-up back of takeout at my side. Like a typewriter a few years out of date or a composer a few years past his prime...well, it took me a minute to think.

I'd spent the entire day working on the numbers that were so damn important to the Director; and emptying them out of mind was never my strong suit. Still, it beat trying to put together an argument against this Moon nonsense. I knew damn well my words left something to be desired, but practice perfected everything. Or, at least...I hoped they did. I was more than a little out of it as I dug around for my burger, blindly, uselessly.

Didn't see or hear the door, or the gentle but unhidden footsteps that crunched manicured grass underfoot. Would've recognized 'em right away, otherwise. By the time she got to me, I was so out of it that her knock on the window nearly seen me jumping into the roof of my dad's old beater. The unmistakable curls of her hair poked into the car like they'd been spring-loaded. The dark, dulcet smile that greeted me was about as nonplussed as ever.

“Looking a little forlorn, hon- forget the shakes again?”

“Sorry, Max.”

I never did manage to catch a break practicing ahead of time with her.

“Meeting didn't, uh...didn't go as planned. And now that you mention it...yeah, damn. Things have just been real, well...”

She held a narrow finger to my lips, and vacated the window. A moment later, she climbed into the passenger seat, smoothing out the skirt of her dress as she did.

“I get it. You've been on-edge about this Moon thing all week. Did you get to talk with the shareholders?”

“No, I didn't get that far. Heines called me into his office, and-“

“Say no more,” she interrupted, frowning and leaning back in the car’s seat. I tried to explain myself, maybe apologize for blowing it, but...I just sat. And the weight of being unable to do anything sat like a thousand pounds on my shoulder. And the silence sat for a long while, before, as she always did, Maxine seemed happy to fill it, this time with the crinkling of greasy paper as she dove into the bag, unwrapped my burger, took my wrist, and slapped the thing right into my hand.

“I’ll assume you were too nervous for lunch. Eat a bit. It’ll help.”

I couldn’t help himself. No matter how bad a day it’s been, she makes me smile. So we sat, and we dug into our greasy, delightful dinner. Between Max and the burger, it was pretty nice not to have to think about things for a few minutes. But that reality wouldn’t abate forever, and eventually Max had to inquire further as she lit up two of the cigarettes from the glovebox and passed one.

“Well, what does he want you to do, exactly? It’s all just numbers, right?”

I took a drag long enough to calm me down.

“Half of it. The other half...you know the U.N.’s been cracking down on ‘Guest Services’, right? Making things more difficult for us, trying to encourage federal agencies instead...?”

“Yeah. The Reds at play, right?”

“Well, a little bit of everyone. People are scared of companies like Greenwire being the only link between us and, you know...the Guests. So, they’ve been making it harder for us to talk with them as a company. Harder for us to buy their technology.”

Maxine let out a short puff of smoke and fixed her full attention on me, so I elaborated.

“...Heines is having me audit one of our Guest affiliates. The facility that cranks out repulsors, like on those new Plymouths they keep talking about, the, uh...”

“The Ion Flux?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that one.”

“Becky says Frank’s thinking about getting this year’s model.”

“You’re kidding! Frank was always-”

“I know! But his mother got in another accident with a combustion, and she says he’s still pretty upset about it. Guy nearly knocked her into a telephone pole.”

“Unbelievable...”

We let out two billowing trails of smoke. Then I continued.

“Anyway...he wants me to cozy up to their engineers. See if, uh...there’s anything we can do under-the-table to get our hands on better repulsors, or however it is they fly those space ships. At the least, the shareholders want to know if it’s viable or not. They think putting the company on the Moon is the best plan to boost our reputation, so...that’s what I’ve gotta do,” he admits, rolling his shoulders as if the fate of Greenwire now weighed down on them.

Maxine eyes me for a few more seconds, then twists the end of her cigarette into the car’s ashtray.

“That why his assistant followed me back from my auralinguistics class?”

It was that, more than anything, that got my attention.

“He- that’s how he knew? He- he had- are you-?”

“Relax, hon. I clocked him pretty quick. Guess stalking isn’t in your employee handbook. Suppose he wanted to make sure I was who he thought he was?”

I put out my cigarette too, its taste having soured now.

“Yeah. Guess he thinks you learning their language gives me an edge. I didn’t- had no idea any of that would end up involving you, too...I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. It’ll make getting in practice easier, won’t it?”

“You don’t...actually think I should try doing this, should I? They’re Guests, Max. I don’t know the first thing about space men.”

“Said something a lot like that when we first met.”

At that, I very nearly choked on the cold fry I was working on.

“H-Hey, I-“

“*Learned how* to talk to me, didn’t you?”

“...Got your point.”

She winked at my smile, awkward as ever, and popped open her door.

“Well, we’re all at our best when we’re being challenged, aren’t we?”

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Another moment passed when she shut the door behind her. But it didn't take me long to work up the nerve to climb out, too, and face the sudden chill of the night around us. "...relations...the...business..."

The droning of our corporate translator may as well have been that of an overgrown bumblebee. I could not parse a single word of what he was saying. What he looked like was completely lost on me, and I couldn't even begin to describe what the Guest affiliate facility was like on the inside, except that it was very, very colorful. The rest of the world may not even have existed, because at this moment in time, I was staring into the mandibles of an arthropod one and a half Russels tall, on the other side of a meeting room table.

"...your...culturally...relationship..."

I could feel my head tilting, but I couldn't stop it. I was too bizarrely fascinated with trying to see if this thing had a mouth behind those mandibles.

"...accountant...Russ? You with me, Russ?"

The translator nudged me, and I thought I'd jump out of my suit.

"You had something you wanted to ask...right?"

He raised an eyebrow in my direction. I swallowed...hard. When I turned back to the Guest...its entire head had been lowered. I wasn't staring into its mandibles any longer...but into half a dozen pupil-less green eyes.

"Uh...yeah. I was...er. Ahem."

I adjusted my tie. Fondled it, really, as I rolled the words Heines had given me around in my head.

“I am...very interested in getting to know our Guests. So, I was thinking, perhaps...you’d like to...have dinner with my wife and I.”