

THE KING'S COIN

“Trying out for ‘The Red Badge of Courage?’” Darrell joked as he sat down on the edge of Stuart’s hospital bed.

“Not funny.” Stuart touched a hand, gently, to the bandage around his scalp. His head was still ringing, and he had no memory of the explosion itself. “You didn’t just have your doctoral thesis destroyed.” The reality of the explosion was still reaching into Stuart’s mind. His data were backed up, but it would take years and millions of dollars to rebuild the test apparatus. Millions, he was sure. Richardson Oil would not pony up this time.

“No, I didn’t.” Darrell spoke seriously, as he so rarely did. “But you are alive everyone, from the fire department to the docs, all agree that makes you the luckiest man on the planet.”

“Yeah, I’m so lucky.” Stuart tore his eyesight away from Darrell and stared at the bed sheets. “I destroy a wing of the physics department, I trash my doctoral thesis, and I have no job. Tell me how lucky I am.”

“It could be worse. You could be a Republican.” Darrell got up from the bed and walked over to the television. It was an ancient model, complete with a cathode-ray tube. He flipped through several channels, then switched the set back off. He turned around to face Stuart.

“You’re not dead. That is lucky! Everything else can be rebuilt.” Darrell’s face was set in a rigid mask. Stuart felt guilt and ashamed at himself.

“I’m sorry Darrell. I should be grateful, but it’s hard when I lost so much.”

“I thought you were too much of a pure scientist to be so enchanted by material possessions.” Professor Wheeler was standing in the door to the private room. He was dressed as he always did, jeans and a tee-shirt. His hair, balding on the top, stretched past his shoulders. In one hand he carried a gift basket of fruit, in the other was the latest issues of *Rolling Stone*. “I thought I taught you better than that.” His eyes laughing as much as his smile, Wheeler crossed to the room Stuart’s bed.

“Your brilliant mind is what cannot be replaced, Stuart. Everything else is just things.” Wheeler set the gift basket and the magazine down on the bed next to Stuart. “Am I right, Mr. Abbot?”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I’m selling my stock either, Prof.” Darrell dodged the implicit attack on capitalism as the deft political student he was.

“Still a running dog for the rapist of the Earth.” Wheeler tisked and smiled, but his infliction was not entirely jovial.

“I intend to be holding that leash.” Darrell mimed whipping a set of imaginary sled dogs, grinning ear to ear.

“I expect no better from you, Mr. Abbot.” Wheeler turned and faced Stuart again. “You, I know I will get better from.”

“But I’ll have to rebuild the test chamber from scratch. And I won’t be able to do that until they repair the wing. With the University’s budget who knows when that will be?” Stuart was trying, he was really trying, to find a silver lining, but the damn cloud seemed to reach to the horizon.

“The test room was pretty much destroyed, but the rest of the wing was hardly touched.” Wheeler peeled open the fruit basket and bit into an apple. “So that’s not really going to be a problem.”

“That can’t be.” Stuart sat up, steadying himself with one hand. “If there was enough force to destroy the test chamber, there should be a lot more damage than that.”

“Nope.” Darrell added. “You didn’t even blow out windows next door. You know, if you were going to blow up something, Stuart you should have made it the Che Cafe. That would have improved the campus.”

“There has to be more damage than that! There just has to be.”

“Are you unhappy now that you haven’t made a bunch of pointy head types homeless?” Darrell shook his head. “There is no making you happy.”

“You can worry about your lack of destructiveness while you recover. Once you get back, I expect to see you hard at work rebuilding the test.” Wheeler stood up, and snatched another apple from the basket.

“I’ll be out in the morning. They’re only keeping me for observation.”

“And you don’t see how lucky you are. Are you sure you’re a genius?”

“Don’t badger him, Mr. Abbot.”

“It’s what friends are for.” Darrell shot at Wheeler’s back as the professor left the room.

“I’ll see you soon, Stuart.” Wheeler tossed over his shoulder, between bites of his apple.

“He’s a pretty good guy for an eco-freak liberal.” Darrell sat back down on the edge of Stuart's bed, pulling an orange from the basket.

“And you’re almost tolerable for a politician.”

“We pols are all that stand between you and...”

“A sane ecological policy?” Stuart pulled a banana from the basket and peeled it absent mindedly. “I should be dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“An explosion with enough force to destroy the test chamber, should have killed me and ripped the end of the wing. Something’s not right here.” Stuart bit into the banana. His eyes not focused on anything in the room.

“You were banged a little too hard on the head. Let me explain it to you in words even a liberal could understand. You, alive, good.” Darrel got up and tossed the peel from the orange into the trash. “Me, find girl, get laid. See you around.”

“See you.” But Stuart’s eyes didn’t see Darrell. In his mind was a metal sphere, four meters across. What could destroy that, yet leave him alive and the walls standing?

#

Stuart's hybrid electric car sped down interstate 805 to his home just south of Mission Valley. On the radio, the news was not good. Another sea bottom oil rig had failed and the well was surging millions of barrels of crude into an already overtaxed ocean system. Environmentally minded people, such as Stuart, almost missed the days of supertanker accidents, but only almost.

Stuart shook his head unconsciously as he sped across the span over the valley. Fifty years ago this had been a vibrant part of growing city, now it was useless to people and animal alike.

Even before global warming had drastically altered the area's climate, this had been a flood plain. Just a few inches of rain would close roads and cause havoc. Now San Diego got more rain in a single day than it had in an entire year. The old systems shattered under the weight. Now, where there had once been hotels, shopping centers, homes and businesses there was only the ruins of the buildings. A swamp was eating the abandoned buildings, there was no money to clean and of this up. Man had spoiled another environment.

Stuart left the devastation behind him, and exited the interstate above the south side of the valley. Within minutes, he was home in the house his parents had left him.

He was lost in the data from his experiment, a half-eaten pizza beside home, when the door buzzed loudly. He tapped the security system and saw Darrell's round face distorted on the screen.

"Have you forgotten how to answer your phone?" Darrell shouted into the microphone. Darrell grinned when he heard the lock disengaged. Holding up a

six pack of Elephant beer to the camera, he pulled the door open and hurried in.

“I turned it off for a reason.” Stuart threw a bit of sausage from the pizza at Darrell. Darrell grabbed it expertly out of the air and popped it into his mouth.

“Not a good one I’ll wager.” Darrell pulled up a chair, spun it around backward, and sat down. He pulled one bottle of the beer for himself, and then set another in front of Stuart. “It’s time to celebrate; they’ll be time enough to get back to work later.”

Stuart twisted off the cap, and poured a generous amount of the heavy dark lager down his throat.

“Thanks.” Stuart picked up a slice of the pizza and took a hearty bite. “I mean that.”

“Look at that.” Stuart pointed to a bent and twisted piece of metal on his desk between the pizza and his computer. Darrell picked up the sliver of wreckage, turning it over in his hands and peering closely at it.

“What is it?”

“A bit of the test chamber. Do you see any signs of burn or scorching?”

“That’s redundant. A burn is a scorch.” Darrell brought the slice closer to his eyes. “No, can’t say I do. But this metal seems pretty heavy, I can’t imagine it burns too well.”

“Look here.” Stuart pointed to the inside of the curved piece. “This is some of the electronic substrate. It does burn.”

“Okay, it’s not burned. What’s the big deal?”

“You can’t generate the pressure to shatter the chamber without generating enough heat for a sizable fireball. Where’s the fireball?” Stuart took another swig from his bottle of beer.

“If I play this game with you, can we then put it to rest for a least a few hours?” Darrell bite down on a slice of the pizza, chewing through the congealing cheese. “Maybe, whatever you had in the chamber didn’t burn that hot.”

“Two things,” Stuart starting speaking faster, finally having someone to discuss his day’s work with. “anything at those pressures will be that hot. Pressure is heat, that’s all there is to it. Two, the chamber was a vacuum, there was nothing to generate the pressure with.”

“Start from the top, I wouldn’t toss you into an election reform debate without at least telling you what a vote was.”

“The chamber is nothing but a four meter sphere, all the atmosphere evacuated out, plus the lasers and there detectors. There was nothing to explode in there, nothing!”

“The lasers could have caused it. If they can down fighters, I think they can blow up your experiment.”

“Not even in the same power class. These are shooting a stream of photons across the chamber so I can detect, hopefully, deformations in space/time. They couldn’t ignite a match.” Stuart pulled another beer from the six

pack. He got up and tossed the empty one into his recycling bin. He held out his hands and Darrell tossed his empty over.

“So did you deform space/time? Maybe that was the big bang?” Darrell joined Stuart in another lager.

“Oh yeah, the lasers registered deformation, but that couldn’t be the source. You can’t get more energy out than you put into a system. You can’t even break even, it’s always a loss. I didn’t put in enough to pop a soap bubble.” Stuart sat back down at his desk. “What happened shouldn’t have happened.” Stuart stared glumly at his computer screen.

“You’re messing with things ‘man was not meant to know’. Leave well enough alone, and stop deforming space/time, it hurts its feelings.”

“Manipulating the Higgs field is going to get us off Earth, and then we can stop raping our mother for resources. Look at what we’ve done so far, and the worse hasn’t even hit yet.”

“Oh please, no more environmental disaster scenarios. I’ve heard that before.”

“And no one is listening, no one has listen since we started figuring out just what were doing to the planet.” Stuart stood up and paced across the room. “We could have done something about global warming, but now the low countries are flooding and baja is getting scrubbed by hurricanes. I think it’s about time you listened. It was you political types who refused to listen to start with.”

“I am not going to get into that fight again. I’m too tipsy for it.” Darrell stood and walked over to Stuart. “Let’s go for a walk, clear our heads, and talk about women.” Flinging an arm around Stuart’s shoulders, the two friends walked out of the house.

“Damn, I’ve been an idiot!” Stuart shouted suddenly as he and Darrell stood looking out over the Mission Valley swamp.

“I’ve been telling you that for years.” Darrell was several feet away, swatting misquitos as he sat on a picnic table. “But what about this time?”

“The chamber was destroyed by something new! Oh geeze, I was crying over my lost thesis and I’m sitting on a break through, and real big break through.” Stuart turned his back toward the valley, and leaned against the fence that ran along the edge of the ravine. “I was tweaking around the edges of the Higgs field, I must have found something like a transistor effect.”

“I went to a public school, remember? Use little words.”

“Higgs is a little word.” Stuart crossed over to the picnic table and sat next to Darrell. “The Higgs Field is a force, like electromagnetism, but it’s the field that gives matter its mass. We proved the Higgs field about twenty-five years ago, and we’ve been manipulating it, in tiny ways, for about five. Darrell do you know what it would mean to really control the Higgs field, the way we control an electric field?”

“We could stop obsessing about our weights?” Darrell killed another blood sucker as he quipped.

“Space, shithead! Mass is everything when it comes to getting off planet. If we can start getting off planet cheaply, we can stop trashing out home! Cheap power-sats that don’t foul our air, metals enough for ten thousand civilizations without strip mining a single hill.” Stuart stood back up again and started pacing back and forth, each pass a little quicker than the one before. “I’m not talking about just getting to the moon, or some of the apollo asteroids. The whole damn solar system could be opening up because of this!”

“So how did the Higgs field explode your test thingy?”

“I haven’t a clue.” Stuart grinned with excitement as he admitted his ignorance. “But I will. That explosion was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Great, Have we fed the environment enough for one night?” Darrell flicked a dead mosquito in Stuart’s general direction.

“Sure.” Stuart headed out of the park as a brisk walk. “I want to get back to my data. There so much to do, I hardly know where to start.”

Darrell hopped off the table and hurried to catch up, leaving behind a cloud of hungry insects.

“Shit” The word, the concept was all that echoed in Stuart's mind. The front door to his home was wide open, standing from the threshold he could see that his computer and all its hardware were gone. So was his large flat screen television and state-of-the-art stereo system, but these losses were meaningless compared to the computer and its data.

“Crap.” Darrell agreed, looking over Stuart's shoulder. Darrell laid a hand on Stuart's shoulder and pulled him back from the door.

“Don't go in.” He said quietly. Darrell pulled Stuart with him as they retreated away from the house. “One, they might still be in the house. You can't make any breakthroughs if you're dead. Two, don't disturb anything, it will make the police's job easier.”

“My data. I don't care about the computer, I need that data!”

“You did have backups? Right?” Darrell flipped out his phone and started dialing the police.

“Yeah, at Dr. Wheelers. But, I wanted to get to work tonight.”

“Well I wanted to get laid. We're both out of luck. Hold I'll get them on their way here.”

The police were certain it was the work of drug addicted thieves. Or teenagers looking for easily to sell possessions. They took all the information that Stuart could provide. Took high quality digital pictures, said they would be in touch, and then were gone. It had taken them more than two hours to arrive, and they were gone in less than thirty minutes. Darrell patted Stuart on the shoulder, and then left. There didn't seem to be anything left to say.

An hour later Stuart was still at his desk, staring at the space where his computer used to be. Now only a faint outline in the dust was any evidence that it had ever been there. Stuart, absent mindedly, reached over and took one of the remaining beers from the six pack. He was about to twist of the top when he stopped and stared at the bottle as though it were an alien artifact.

What kind of cheap thief ignores beer? At that moment Stuart was certain that forces were beginning to align against him.

#

“Yes, I do have your backups. They’re quite safe.” Wheeler took a long sip from his iced tea. He was seated in the comfortable living of his La Jolla living room, giving Stuart the same look he gave students when he was about to point out that they had lost track of their units. “But you’re being paranoid. No one is out to destroy your data.”

“I can’t prove it, doctor, but they are. I’m onto something big, and someone doesn’t want me to make that discovery.” Stuart paced back and forth in front of Wheeler, his hands moving animatedly in the air as he spoke. “That break in was just too convenient.”

“Listen to yourself Stuart. You’re starting to sound like Mr. Abbot.” Wheeler set his iced tea down and leaned forward. The intentness of his posture stopped Stuart in his pacing. “There are more important things for you to be working on than chasing phantoms and ratty data. I’ve spoken with your thesis committee. They are willing to look at a thesis based on what you’ve done so far. But you’re going to have to write it right now. If you go chasing after spies and ghosts, they will, quite rightly, knock you back a couple years work.”

“My thesis isn’t ready. And I can’t get it ready with the experimental data. What I have would never fly.”

“Let me be a judge of what the committee will accept. Your job is to get writing. You don’t have a moment to waste.”

Stuart sat down on an ottoman near the center of the room. Wheeler was going out on a limb for him. It would almost be a betrayal to throw this back in his face.

“Your data will be waiting for you when you finish. If you insist on wasting time, why not do it after you have your doctorate? When you’ll have the time to waste.”

“But whoever stole my data will come here looking for the backups. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out.”

“If I can convince you, or at least give you reasonable doubt, that someone is after your data, will you put it aside and work on your thesis?” Stuart nodded his agreement. Wheeler took another long sip from his drink and leaned back in his seat. “First things first, what is it you think you’ve found that is worth all this trouble?”

Stuart launched in his explanation and hopes for his near discovery. Wheeler let him ramble and wander excitedly until Stuart had wound down on his own.

“And who stole your data? A government that is desperate to get ahead of the Chinese in space? They’d make you rich. So would any launch company. Stuart, you haven’t found cheap access to space. In all likelihood you haven’t found anything at all.” Wheeler got up from his seat and took his empty tumbler into the kitchen, with Stuart following. “You have a great imagination

Stuart, and a brilliant mind. But, the worse sin in science is seeing what you want to see, instead of what is there.”

“I don’t know what is there! That’s what I have to get started on that data!”

“If you don’t happened, how do you know it’s so valuable?”

“I can feel it, Doctor!”

“Science isn’t about feeling, you know that.” Wheeler turned and put a fatherly hand on Stuart’s shoulder. “Stuart, it will be waiting for you. I won’t let anything happen to it, but you’ve got to get your priorities straight.”

Stuart was quiet for quite a while. Wheeler turned away and flipped on the television. On the small screen the twenty-four-hour news channel began talking about Hurricane Ramona, moving up the coast of Baja California.

“Looks like we’re in for quite a storm.” Wheeler commented. “Thanks to mankind, California now has to worry about hurricanes as well as earthquakes.”

“Okay, I’ll get to work on it right away. I’ll need to buy a new computer, damn it.” Stuart’s mood had fallen further than pressure in the hurricane’s eye.

“Come on, I have an old notebook you can use. We’ll get all your files transferred, and you can be off.”

Several hours passed as they transferred files and conjoled an older computer system to work for Stuart.

“You could always transferred the raw data from that last run.” Stuart suggested as they neared the end.

“And you would spend all your time on that. I know you too well Stuart. First your thesis, then you can go chasing phantoms.” Wheeler switched off the wireless network and handed Stuart the notebook.

“Off you go, it’s late and an old man like me needs his sleep. I partied way too hard in the eighties.” Turning Stuart bodily around, Wheeler lead his student to the door.

“And I thought you were too liberal to be sneaky.” Darrell sat back in appreciation as Stuart slipped the memory sticks into the notebook and brought up the data from his last run.

“It’s not like I’m stealing, it’s my data.” Stuart said absently as he paged through screens of data and graphs.

“Legally it isn’t.” Darrell got up and walked over to look over Stuart’s shoulder. “Richardson Oil and the University paid for it, its theirs pumpkin.”

“It’s my work, so it’s my data.” Stuart hunched down and started at the graphs intently. Darrell leaned and look closely with him.

“Ann Ryand would be proud of you. We'll make you a conservative, yet.”

“Not in this lifetime.” Stuart turned his head to see Darrell’s face hovering next to his. “Why do you do that? It won’t make any sense to you.”

“I can act like I understand, can’t I?” Darrell straightened up and steps a few steps away from Stuart. “Anyway, if you take the King’s gold you are the King’s man.”

“This is American, Darrell, we don’t have Kings.”

“There are *always* Kings, you may not call them that, but they are always there.” Darrell sat on the edge of the desk and looked down on Stuart. “The problem with you physics types, is that you think power is something you describe in equations. It isn’t. Real power has always been the same things, wealth and arms. Power is about buying people or killing people, always has been always will.”

“Just look at that deflection!” Stuart pointed at a peak on the graph. “It’s incredible!”

“Were you listening to me?” Darrell crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall behind the desk.

“No.” Stuart’s eyes glazed over as he tried to picture the laser deflection that had been measured just before the explosion. It was magnitudes and magnitudes greater than anything he had expected to see!

“Okay spill it, what do you have there?”

“It looks like bouncing.” Stuart sorted and rearranged the data as he spoke. “It’s definitely bouncing.”

Darrell jumped off the table and came back around to behind Stuart’s chair.

“Nope,” He said. “Nothing’s bouncing on that screen.”

“Look at that.” Stuart pointed to a column of number on the screen. “Laser H537a is deflecting to the negative on the Y-axis, but laser H748a is deflecting positive!”

“Which one is wrong?”

“Neither. Darrell I’ve got a lot of spreading lasers here. Something was pushing those lasers out from the center of the experimental chamber.” Stuart bent over the keyboard and set to graphing the data. “It didn’t happen just once either. It happened again and again, each time the lasers were deflected more, and the one firing across the center was deflected the most.”

“I’m lost, Stuart. Remember I’m a moron?”

“No you’re not. I don’t have morons for friends.” Stuart turned around to face Darrell while the computer rendered a graph of the experiment. “Think of the lasers like this piece of paper.” Stuart grabbed up a sheet and rolled it into a tube. “This tube is all the lasers coming at their detectors.” Stuart closed one hand with his fingers forming a leading point. He stuck the finger into the rolled tube and started to slowly expand them. “Something was doing this to the lasers. Instead of coming straight at their detectors, they were spreading out.” He closed his fingers again, the paper collapsed back into a straight tube. “Then it did it again, but more than the first.” He flexed his fingers more widely apart than his earlier demonstration. “Of course it wasn’t this slow. It was happening millions of times a second.”

“And what was doing it?”

“I’m going to find out.” The computer chimed that it was finished with the graph, and Stuart spun about to read it. His face fell after only a few moments. He slammed his fist down on the desk and stood cursing.

“God damn it! It is not ratty data!” Stuart kicked the waste basket next to his desk, sending it flying out into his living room.

“Something didn’t add up?” Darrell spoke softly, he knew that Stuart was not a violent man, but dashed dreams are dangerous.

“The transit times are screwed up! The lasers are taking too long to cross the chamber. Now I am totally confused!” Stuart stalked into the living room and kicked the waste can again. It smashed into the wall with a resounding plastic whump, but it didn’t make him feel any better.

The phone beeped softly several times before Stuart became aware of it. Darrell sat silently by while Stuart stomped across the living to the wall unit. Wheeler face, livid with anger, appeared on the screen.

“You duplicated the data!”

“It’s mine!” Stuart shouted back.

“Like hell it is! You have the right to use that data for your thesis, but it’s not yours. It is the property of the University and Richardson Oil, not you.”

“Since when were you on Big Oil’s side Professor?”

Wheeler inhaled deeply and visibly fought to calm himself.

“This isn’t about sides, Stuart. I’m trying to look out for your best interests. Now, *please*, bring those data sticks back before you get into serious trouble.” Wheeler ran his hands through his long thinning hair. “It’s not too late.”

“Not too late for what?” Stuart leaned into the video pickup. “What’s going on?”

“Trust me, Stuart. That’s all I can say right now, just trust me.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Stuart could see Darrell violently shaking his head.

“I’m all out of trust.” Stuart reached up and switched the phone off.

“You should have told him you’d think out it. It would have bought us time.” Darrell said as he shut down the notebook computer. “Now we’ll have to hurry.”

“Have you gone crazy too? Am I the only sane one left?” Stuart hurried of to Darrell and tried to stop him as he pack up the notebook and memory sticks.

“Who know what the data said? Not even you knew.” Darrell pushed Stuart hands out of the way and continued his hurried actions. “Wake up and smell the bullshit, Wheeler’s in on it.”

Stuart started to argue, but then closed his mouth without speaking. It made sense, he hated to admit it, but it made perfect sense.

“So now what?”

“Now, lover, we hide something where they won’t look for us.”

Thirty minutes later Stuart and Darrell were parked in Darrell’s car in a park just off the northeast corner of Balboa Park. It was dark here, with few working street lights. Here and there in the darkness Stuart could just make out men standing and walking about. The men formed brief couples and then vanished into bushes or vehicles.

“You wanna tell me why we are here?” Stuart asked.

“Are you gay?” Darrell retorted, his face close to Stuart’s. Like a lover.

“No.”

“Then no one’s going to look for you here.” Darrel lay down on the seat, resting his head in Stuart's lap.

“Stay still!” Darrell hissed. “Or if you are going to move about act like you’re having some fun.”

“How do you know about this place?” Stuart fought to settle down. He had known Darrell for years, but Stuart was totally unprepared for this.

“There are things about your friends you just don’t need to know.” Darrell whispered. “Don’t worry, I’m not about to try anything.”

“So what now?”

“Well if we had a six pack, I’d find out how many it would take. Ouch! I was joking!”

“Give me the notebook, I was going to work on that data.”

“Not a chance! Men do not come here to work on the computers. We have to find somewhere safe, and that rules out your place and my place.”

“A motel? I assume you know one that wouldn’t blow our cover.”

“Blow? I like the way you think Stuart.”

“I wasn’t thinking that way!”

“I know, you brilliant but a little too far fresh. A motel is no good, I don’t have cash and unless you do, that’s a no go. Our cards leave too bright of a trail.”

“Are you being a little too paranoid?”

“No such animal.” Darrell rolled over onto his back and looked Stuart in the eye. “Wheeler was feeding your data to someone else. Someone who didn’t mind busting into your place to steal it. I don’t know what would have happened if we had been there when they broke in, and I don’t want to find out.”

“We can’t go to a motel, and I can’t work on the data here, what are we supposed to do?” Desperation was starting to edge Stuart’s voice. “Anyone we know will be watched, right?”

“So we go to someone’s we don’t know. I should have thought of that right away.” Darrell sat up and started the engine of the car. “How’s your wireless connection on that?”

“Great, why?”

Stuart was driving the car while Darrell typed hurriedly on the keyboard.

“Try not to hit the potholes, you’re making my typing like shit.” Darrell said absently as he stared at the screen.

“Try finding a road south of La Jolla without a potholes.” Stuart gripped the wheel tightly, his heart beating quickly. He thought adrenaline was supposed to fade quickly. it didn’t seem to be doing so now.

“Okay I think I found someone we can crash with for a night or two. As long as you are open-minded about it.” Darrell shut the top on the notebook and gave Stuart a cautionary look.

“Darrell...” Stuart paused, far too long for an innocent question.

“Spit it out or swallow it, Stuart.”

“Are you gay?” Stuart blurted it out, like a round from a pistol.

“Nope.” Darrell rolled down the window of the car and let warm humid air inside. “I’m too open-minded for that.”

“So you’re bisexual?”

“You’re too much of a scientist, always trying to label things.” Darrell looked out at the dark clouds obscuring the sky. “Looks like a storm moving in. I’m attracted to people, sometimes those people are female, sometimes males, sometimes both.”

“Okay.” Stuart was silent for a long time. “How come you never told me?”

“Never any reason too.”

#

Kellie kicked her feet up as she sat down next to Stuart. Her silk robe making the faintest of sound as folds slid across folds of fabric.

“How’s it coming, sweetie?”

“I think I’m getting somewhere.” Stuart had grown relaxed enough to forget that Kellie didn’t start life as a woman. “Whatever is here can’t be too difficult to work out. It’s got to be something that was obvious to Professor Wheeler.”

“Well Darrell called, he said he’s on his way back.” Kellie stood and moved smoothly towards her room of the two bedroom apartment.

Stuart was still bent in intense concentration when Darrell strutted into the apartment.

“Stuart my man, when you make enemies you don’t waste time with the punks.”

“I wasn’t trying to make enemies, all I wanted was to get my doctorate.” Stuart leaned back on the couch and rubbed his temples. “Who’s after my data?”

“Richardson Oil. It looks like Wheeler’s been their playmate for quite awhile.” Darrell shook his head as Stuart still refused to believe that Wheeler could be anything but a supporting mentor. “It’s all there in black and white, for anyone who really wanted to look.” Darrell tossed a sheet of smart paper into Stuart’s lap. As Stuart tapped the corner, scanning page after page, Darrell stood and grabbed himself a beer from the kitchen.

“He’s gotten millions from them.” Stuart’s shoulder sagged as he spoke with Darrell on his return. “I can’t believe it.”

“Yup. Everyone has their price, looks like Wheeler’s wasn’t that high.” Darrell handed Stuart a beer. “Any clue yet what set them off about your experiment?”

“I’ve got some ideas, but they’re pretty far out there.”

“Oh like you have normal ideas, Stuart.”

“Don’t pick on Stuart.” Kellie said as she entered the room. She settled on the edge of the couch, folding her legs catlike underneath herself. “His kind change the world, and heaven knows it needs changing.”

“Kellie, you’re a dreamer. A sweet, sexy dreamer, but if Richardson Oil can buy off an old nineties eco-freak like Wheeler, they can buy off anyone.”

Stuart found himself growing increasingly angry with Darrell’s cynicism.

“They can’t buy off everybody! It’s that kind of attitude that got us in this mess to begin with! Don’t fight city hall, you can’t win the multinationals have got it all, just shut and get your own! Take a look out there Darrell, the world was trashed by people accepting that crap!” Stuart bolted up and started pacing around the room. “I thought I knew you, but it turns out I didn't know the first thing about you! But, I do know why you’ve kept it quiet and isn’t about privacy. You were afraid that if you lived your life openly, you wouldn’t get ahead. You wouldn’t get you share of the booty. So you didn’t sell out, but you kept mum, and denied yourself the right to live as you want. For what? Dollars?”

“You tell him, Stuart.” Kellie cheered from the sidelines.

“Darrell, you’re my friend, my best friend, but look at what you’ve done to yourself. You’ve let the businessmen and conservatives shut you up. I thought no one could shut you up, for God sake!”

“What do you expect me to do about it?” Darrell shouted as he threw his empty bottle of beer into the garbage. “Things are the way they are, and we can’t change it!”

“We can change it! We live as we want, we speak as we want that where it starts.” Stuart bent down and picked up the memory sticks from the coffee table. “And we make this public, after we pay a visit to Wheeler.”

Kellie leaped up from the couch and clapped enthusiastically. Stuart stepped over to her, took her by the shoulder and kissed her on the lips.

“Thanks. Everyone is going to owe you.” Stuart turned to head for the door out.

“You’re welcome anytime.” Kellie offered.

Stuart turned around and approached Kellie carefully.

“You’re a great person, Kellie. Sweet and brave...”

“I don’t know about brave.” She complained.

“You knew you needed to be a woman, and then you went and did it. That took courage, a lot of it.” Stuart reached down and took her hands in his. “But you’re not my type. And we both know it. I’d be happy to come back, as a friend.”

“And that’s what I’ll expect.”

He kissed her again, but this time on the cheek. “Now I have one last thing to do before I can get my life back. Come on, Darrell. We’re off to settle this.”

“Genius boy, there’s a hurricane headed this way, remember?”

“We’ll get there well ahead of it. I’m tired of waiting and I’m tired of hiding.” Stuart hurried out the door, he didn’t pause to see whether Darrell would follow him or not.

“The Richardson Oil connection puts everything in place. It all makes sense now.” Stuart said as they sped up highway 805 towards La Jolla.

Raindrops pregnant and heavy fell from the dark clouds building over San Diego.

“Well I’m Glad it makes sense to you, now do you want to let me in on the secret?”

“The laser weren’t diverging. They were being bent. A bubble of space/time was being inflated, and collapsed in the chamber. Each inflation was bigger than the one before it. Each released more energy than the previous.”

“But you said you weren’t pumping energy into the chamber, well not much anyway.”

“I didn’t put that energy there. It came from the space/time itself.”

“Okay, I’m lost again.”

“My new method for manipulating the Higgs field was working directly on space/time itself. I was inflating a bubble and the vacuum energy along with it.”

“I think I’ll wait and see if Wheeler can put in words I can understand. I wont trust’em, but I will understand them.” Darrell turned and saw that the rain was coming down hard and nearly at a forty-five-degree angle. “It’s getting pretty bad out there.”

“It’s going to get worse.” Stuart agreed. “Vacuum energy is not that tough of a concept to understand.”

Darrell sighed, nothing would break Stuart out of explaining something once he had figured it out.

“Any given volume of space/time, even total vacuum has energy in it. This energy is real and exerts pressure. It’s what is expanding the universe faster and faster as more, and more vacuum energy is created.”

“I thought you couldn’t make energy. You know, there all there's every going to be and all you could do was move it around.”

“If you create more space/time,” Stuart saw Darrell starting to get a quizzical look on his face. “Vacuum, if you make more vacuum you make more vacuum energy.” Stuart could see that his friend was still not following his explanation. “Say you have a one liter container, and inside there is one barr of pressure. If you double the volume to two liters, the pressure is now one half of a barr, right?”

“That’s make sense.” Darrell agreed.

“Okay, if you have one liter of vacuum, and double it to two liters, you don’t have half the amount of vacuum energy, you have twice as much.”

“Seems like you’re getting something for nothing. There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch”

“Universe does it everyday, light-years at a time. Every day the universe is a little bigger than it was the day before. Every day there is more pressure from the vacuum energy pushing at the edge of the universe, stretch it out faster and faster, making more vacuum energy and more pressure as it goes.”

“And that’s what was going on in you experiment.”

“That’s half of it.” Stuart exited the north bound freeway and started heading west. The wind buffeted his car, rocking it back and forth as the drove.

“Take that two liters of vacuum and push it back down to one liter. What happens to the one liter’s worth of vacuum energy that was created?”

“Nothing?”

“Exactly. Presto, you’ve made an energy pump. Some of the vacuum energy was being bled off to power the process, but I was showing positive energy growth in my closed system.”

“And eventually, there was enough energy to make it explode.” Darrell ventured.

“No, the expanding bubble reached the walls of the chamber.” Stuart switched on the headlights as the storm closed in and cut off most of the light from the sun. “When the wave of expanding space/time reached the wall of the sphere, it stretched it out and shattered it. But, the moment the wall started to give the system was ruptured. The expansion ceased, no excessive pressure or temperature. Everything explained, and it was all right there in front of me!”

“So why did we have to come up here?” Darrell asked as Stuart brought the car to a stop in front of Wheeler La Jolla cliffs home.

“What I have isn’t enough, we have to get what Wheeler’s got.” Stuart climbed out the car and ignoring the biting rain, stomped up to Wheeler’s door.

Stuart pounded angrily on the door. When Wheeler opened the door, Stuart shoved him aside and stormed into the house.

“I think you’re about to reap the whirlwind, doc.” Darrell sniped as he walked in behind Stuart.

“Couldn’t this have waited until after the hurricane?” Wheeler demanded as he followed into the living room.

“You knew what was going on, long before the chamber was fractured, didn’t you?” Stuart stood in the center of the room, his arms akimbo.

“Stuart, you are playing with things you have no concept of. I’m on your side, and you need me there!”

“You got a dictionary Wheeler?” Darrell crossed over to a floor to ceiling bookcase. “Cause I seem to be hazy on ally.”

“Shut up, Abbot!” Wheeler turned his back to Darrell and focused all his attention on Stuart. “I could have killed the project at the start, Stuart. You would have followed any path I set, all you cared about was getting your doctorate.”

“So why did you let me run the Higgs field setup then? Certainly, your buddies at Richardson Oil would have preferred something else.”

“They aren’t my buddies.” Wheeler's sneer would have wilted a street cop.

“The kind of money you’re making from them hardly makes them enemies.” Darrell sat down in largest chair in the room. Outside the storm raged and grew.

Wheeler continued to ignore Darrell. He stepped closer to Stuart, but Stuart stepped around him, keeping several feet between himself and his professor.

“They’re the one who ruined this place,” Stuart shouted. “and you’re in bed with them!”

“I’m using them, you should help me, not stand their accusing me.”

“Just how are you ‘using’ them, professor? I don’t see it! All I see is you standing in the way of putting an end to this fuel based power!”

“Oh Stuart, grow up!” Wheeler turned away from Stuart and stalked across the room. The, in tempo, screamed with each step. “Do you know what would happen if this got out? It wouldn’t be the salvation of what left of our ecology, it would be the ruin of it. The undeveloped countries would suddenly be able to grow the way the west did for the whole twentieth century.

Consumerism would turn half the world into a mall and the other half into a landfill. We’d only trade one poison for another!” Wheeler voice softened until it almost impossible for Stuart to hear him above the roar of the wind. “But if we wait, then we can fashion a new society, but it can’t happen until after the old one has crashed.”

“The old economy is oil based, if you replace oil now, it continues to live; it will thrive. But, when the oil runs out, and it will, the whole thing crashes taking everything with it. Only then will the world be ready for your new power system Stuart, not before.”

“But we’re not running out of oil,” Stuart pleaded. “They’ve been predicting the bottom of the barrel for almost a century now.”

“He’s lying to you, Stuart, and to himself.” Darrell kicked his feet up on Wheeler expensive coffee table. “This place doesn’t come cheap.”

“Mr. Abbott, you more than anyone else, have nothing of value to add here, so please be quiet.”

“Not on your life, as worthless as it is.” Darrell crossed his feet contemptuously. “You can talk about the evils of consumerism and capitalism, but they’ve bought you doc. You’ve taken the king’s coin, and now you’re the king’s man.”

“That’s not true!” Wheeler spun about to face Stuart. “The time just isn’t right. It would be foolish to move without considering all the consequences.”

“Especially if those consequences include losing a fine La Jolla house with a grand view.” Darrell waved a hand toward a large picture window, the storm tossed sea beyond.

“He’s right professor,” Stuart said solidly. “You would have died waiting for the right time.” Stuart turned his back on Wheeler and started back deeper into the house.

“You can’t just walk in here and take over.” Wheeler started after Stuart, but found that Darrell was suddenly holding him by the shoulder, quite firmly.

“Let me go,” Wheeler ordered.

“Give me a reason to hit you.”

Wheeler sighed and dropped on the sofa. Stuart looked to Darrell, saw his friend nod, then went on to the professor’s home network.

It didn’t take long for Stuart to find what he was looking for. Wheeler had acted confident that no one would be searching his personal files. Within thirty minutes, Stuart was back in the living room.

“It was all there,” He said as he entered. “He had most of it worked out. He saw the application of my design long before I did.”

“But it was your design, right?” Darrell asked.

“Oh yeah, I wasn’t covering old ground. I just wasn’t looking at the full implications of what I was doing.”

“Stuart old buddy, we are talking on hell of a patent.”

“Richardson Oil will tie it up for decades,” Wheeler interjected. “He’ll be lucky if all they do is come after him legally.”

“It’s too late.” The edge in Stuart’s voice grabbed their attention as surely as if he had grabbed their lapels.

“There won’t be any patent, Darrell.” Stuart sat down in the large over stuffed chair. “I knew that if I tried to get this out legally, it would never see the light of day. They would make the research and me just another urban legend.”

“What did you do?” Wheeler asked softly. He seemed to already know the answer.

“All the data has been sent of one hundred and seventy universities and research centers. Several in countries that don’t recognize U.S. copyright and digital copyright laws.”

“You threw away a fortune.” Darrell was in shock as much as the first time he found himself attracted to a man.

“I don’t care. This isn’t about me. It’s about doing the right thing. I’ve broken enough laws to send me to jail for a long time.” Stuart sighed at the cost he was prepared to pay. “But it always is about what one person does. Either you live up to what you believe in, or you take the payoff.” Stuart turned toward Wheeler. Stuart’s eyes were hard and cold. “I’m not for sale.”

Wheeler locked eyes with Stuart, but only for a moment, then turned his head violently away. Stuart looked up over Wheeler to the hurricane outside.

“Now we watch the storm.”