

Icarus' Wing

The Great anti-American Novel

for Bruce, who knows
we learn from failure more
than from success

*I'll keep this novel about real people
I'll not get lost in ivory towers
I'll remember those who do the hard work
I'll thank them for being so kind to me
God I pray inspire this work
Man I warn of its errors
These are not real people
This is a work of fiction*

Requirements for The Great anti-American Novel

crime must pay
drugs must be promoted
religion must look like a waste of time
curiosity must kill
youth must be corrupted
friendship must be given away
the media must expose themselves
it must be sly
friendship must be paid for
hitchhikers must be crazed
hitchhikers must be dangerous
it must be funny
long political rants must be interspersed throughout
America must be run by fools
sanity must (briefly) appear
nobody must have to work
there must be a sex scene
madness must prevail
somebody must die
everything must seem hopeless
suicide must be contemplated
suicide must occur
pacifism must be encouraged
communism must be preached
everyone must be let off the hook
fear must strike the hearts of men
some anti-government plot must be hatched
the ending must seem predictable
some dastardly blow must strike America
it must be rabidly anti-democracy
it must be racist and anti-Semitic
some sick "freedom" must win in the end

It was a brilliant hack. It topped the one in college, when the net-news server was configured to refuse the student lab. They'd recompiled the server, altered so that after printing ACCESS 5 DENIED the program would accept posts anyway, went in as "root", dropped the raw binary straight to the drive, and used it daily for six months until the system staff updated the whole install. But then they were just kids.

Burns parked in the employee lot, behind the water fountain's dancing white froth display and meter-high "Chesapeake," the k's back cast like a sailboat's mast, and its whole visage that of whitecaps breaking on the bay. Chesapeake Computer Corporation: world's largest router manufacturer, A-list stock darling of the dot-com-ers, high priesthood of the Internet who built sleek metal semaphores humming away on backroom metal racks of ISPs around the world, that same one-word logo emblazoned on the case of every one.

He strolled into the lobby like a favorite son into his father's restaurant, breezed past the rock garden and the potted palms, blew off the break room, its Phillie cream cheese bagels and stocked 'fridge, jogged right at the conference rooms and entered a two-story cave partitioned by a hundred cubicles — his life, ten hours a day the last six months. These steel and fabric walls held Chesapeake's true wealth, the coddled technocrats who built the company's flagship products from caffeine and white-board markers. Wisely management consigned itself across the street.

The key card was real; Burns was totally legit. A roaring economic boom kept restaurants, book stores, golf courses and concert halls jam packed with twenty-somethings who had never flown economy in their lives. Every other car on College Avenue was a Mercedes, or a BMW, or a Land Rover. Chic restaurateurs provided their patrons colored Crayons and blank paper place-mats to brainstorm slick new proprietary server architectures while waiting for twenty dollar lunches. Programmers were hot, and Burns' qualifications made him a genuine find. A white board talk was his job interview; the background check, his resume. He quickly got the run of Chesapeake, concerned far more with the

next million-dollar order than deploying any real security against an inside hack.

Today, the cubicles were largely deserted. As he slipped into his, an attractive femme in 'business casual' race-walked past. A product specialist skilled in trade show acronyms, Samantha Pride was always ready to remind 'her' programmers of the obvious. When Burns had quit this job, he would not miss *Big talk today, Burns*, or *Cable's loose, Burns*, or

"System goes down today, Burns!"

"Wouldn't miss it for judgement day," he muttered back without turning around, propelled his chair against the terminal stand, bit back his anxiety and logged in. The main development computer, scheduled for a hardware upgrade, would be shut down in less than an hour. His e-mails, mostly notes from various employees turning the day's outage into an excuse for a holiday weekend, offered no reason to change plans. He logged out, shouldered his laptop case and headed for the server room.

Back in the nineteen seventies, those halcyon days when spam came in cans and porn sites were on Gay Street, Brian Kernighan, inventor of the UNIX system, demonstrated that a compiler — the program which converts source code into the bits and bytes that actually run the machine — could covertly alter the programs it compiled. What's more, if the compiler is itself compiled (and who would write a compiler from scratch?), a virus is born, propagating from one compiler version to the next, altering programs at will and effectively disappearing into the billions of bits on a hard drive. A Kernighan virus is particularly effective on closed, heavily customized systems, like those of a router manufacture wanting custom, proprietary software to take advantage of custom, proprietary hardware.

Burns slid his key card through the slotted box. A light turned green; a bolt clicked back; a line printer rattled. Above an elevated floor that covered a halon fire extinguisher system were floor-to-ceiling arrays loaded with switch hubs, firewalls, RAID arrays, and, in the corner, a massive air conditioner plant to dissipate the heat. A brand new multi-processor system sat, unpowered and silent, while several workers chatted leisurely amongst themselves, including one sporting a shock of red hair.

"Hey, Burns, what's up?"

'Red' Rimdew specialized in diving into stalled projects and finishing them by pounding out code. Burns, really more a designer than a programmer, respected Red for his staying power with the boring tedium that the finicky machines imposed on their masters. Yet today no deadlines loomed...

"Want to hit the bay?"

An afternoon of sailing on Red's thirty-six-foot Catalan was an enticing idea. So were the weeks spent designing and writing his laptop's "screensaver"; the hours spent drilling dozens of variants on a thirty-second procedure; the flowcharted contingency plans on an encrypted hard drive; his roommate waiting at the apartment with a network link and two phone lines.

"No, thanks," Burns replied without a hint of deceit. "I gotta get this done."

He crossed to the other side of the room, where he was working on a tricky install in one of the test machines. Somehow, he just couldn't seem to get the settings right. Once up, he emailed his roommate, *How about lunch? Sounds fine*, came Mercuriou's reply.

Forty five minutes later, with the main system shut down and two of the three techs out of the room, Burns sent another email, *Let's try Bogart's*. Back in the apartment, Mercuriou skimmed down a list of local restaurants and the names they translated into, then picked up the phone. A minute later, the third tech was called out to answer a phone call. Burns had contemplated taking a shot of J.D. that morning to steal himself for this moment, but decided that he had to be absolutely sober in case *anything* went wrong.

He dashed across the room as the door closed. It was one of the scenarios he had drilled for. He connected two cables, hit a three-key sequence on the laptop, and ventured a glance at the door. Nobody. The laptop beeped. He disconnected both cables and dashed back across the room. It would become one of the world's most infamous hacks. It had taken less than 15 seconds.

Forget Bogart's; let's hit Vacarro's! he emailed Mercuriou, who read the message with a wry smile that soon broke into a broad grin as he began spinning in his chair and cackling like a demon.

Buoyed by adrenaline, Burns floated back out to the parking lot, tossed the laptop in the back seat, fired up a sneak-a-toke designed to look like a cigarette, cranked the tunes and floored the rag-top all the way home.

T - 370 days

drugs must be promoted

“The routers run the network; hell the routers *are* the network. You control the routers, you control the network. You’re God. I’m telling you, this thing’s like super-hack.”

A silence fell, sharp and sudden, split by a single word from the kitchen.

“Burns.”

From his perch on the couch, Mercuriou nodded in assent. In his early thirties and an inch under six feet, he was indifferently clad. What differentiated him more was his refusal to allow a television into the apartment; an hour each day, timed on a stopwatch, devoted to reading Latin; a framed letter of rejection from the University of Chicago. Vic, waiting for the teakettle to boil, was nearly ten years older, heavy set with a bristling mustache that often covered a mischevious smile.

“So what’s the point? Why?”

“We’re going to Mars.”

Antonov furled his brows and looked at him like he had just claimed to have discovered extraterrestrial life. Mercuriou stared back impassively, his heart racing. No, he was serious. Walking into the living room, Vic had to return to the kitchen for teabags, as the mugs contained nothing but hot water. Meanwhile, Mercuriou had launched into a prepared speech.

“Burns’ got a plan, and I think it’ll work. Spaceflight is perfectly doable; that’s been demonstrated over and over for fifty years. The problem is money; the problem is always money! You can’t fly without money, you can’t ride without money; no money means no electricity, no house, no food; they sell bottled water now for a dollar a pop and half the planet can’t drink the crap that comes out of the tap; next thing’ll be bottled air, you won’t be able to breath without money!”

“Well, now we’ve got money,” he concluded his cynical tirade, produced a pack of fifty-dollar bills and fanned them on the table, a deck of power. Vic stood in the doorway holding something forgotten.

“Let’s just say that there are some Keno systems out there that are no longer completely random.”

“Marc, this isn’t like you, you’re not a thief.”

“Well, maybe I’ve changed.”

Vic looked straight into his eyes. He had changed, as all men do. Yet now he switched his tone of voice to that of a teenager stammering to explain a 2 A.M. party to his parents.

“I’m going to Mars, Vic! I need the money!”

Vic sighed, handed one of the mugs to his young friend and sat down.

“They’re gonna catch me, Vic. It’s just a matter of time. I’m into too much money. I gotta be gone... like *really* gone!”

“Mars, huh... Did you steal the money to go or are you going because you stole the money?”

Mercuriou didn’t answer. Couldn’t answer.

“Why are you doing this, Marc? What’s it all about... really?”

Finally, they went for a walk, out into the high summer of the New Mexico mountains, hot and dry, a day that made the Latin scholar wish for a convertible, a surf board, and the PCH before Southern California had turned into a giant game of Sim City. They were at the end of a long driveway that wound between a fifty-foot cliff rising to the left and a dry riverbed on the right. He paused and inhaled deeply, saving the aroma of desert flora.

Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air

Vic lead him around the back of the trailer, down a dirt path through the scrub to the door of a second trailer some distance away. It looked much like the first one, except that all of the window curtains were drawn. Closer inspection revealed that white drywall backed the curtains, making it impossible to see in or out. Vic unlocked a padlock and led the way in.

An overwealming smell hit Mercuriou – skunk. Inside, the trailer had been stripped of its original furniture and fixtures. The main room, some thirty feet long, was lined on both sides with plastic tubs raised about a foot off the floor. Inside the tubs were perhaps a hundred potted canibis (marijuana) plants, each sporting a bushy top of their distinctively branching five-part leaves. Two rows of grow lights hung down from the ceiling on chain links that could be adjusted in length as the plants grew upward. A child's toy pool half full of liquid fertilizer ran off the same timer as the lights and also caught the runoff as the liquid percolated back down from the plants. An air conditioner hummed in the window, and a dehumidifier discharged into the pool the water it condensed from the air.

Another hour of small talk found them back out in front of the cars, intoxicated with a full-body high that they were just beginning to experience.

“I’ll play their money game... I’ll get out there and ‘hustle’, I’ll ‘compete’, I’ll rip and claw my way to the top, and when I get there, I’ll turn around and ram their global capitalist system right back down their throats.” [CA]

Vic bowed his head and struggled with conflicting emotions.

“How often do you pray, Marc?”

“Right now, my only prayer is that Burns can get us into orbit somehow!”

“I’ll need some time to think about this,” Vic concluded after several minutes.

Mercuriou nodded his assent and left. Vic stood standing in the shade, watching the driveway down which Mercuriou’s car had disappeared. The dust settled, and nothing disturbed the scene except the buzzing of insects.

“This will require a vision quest.”

The entire eastern sky was lit a brilliant red hue, as if a pane of clear red glass had been slipped in behind the mountains and lit from below. Eyes closed, wrapped in a light Indian blanket, Vic awaited the dawn. A bright yellow light pierced out from a gap in the mountains and began to widen into the orb of the sun. Though conscious of the light, Vic put off opening his eyes.

One of his favorite prayer spots, the desert canyon looked like a giant had slashed through the brown hills with a knife and the desert had bleed a river. Pristine granite boulders blanketed the slopes fifty feet on either side of the water. Cactus and scrub brush covered the surrounding land. Amid patches of sandy beach, swirling pools and murmuring cascades were two-foot diameter logs wedged between boulders twenty feet above the water line, mute witnesses to the tropical cyclones that, two or three times a century, settled over the canyon and filled the arroyo with the raging waters that had carved it out over the ages. The water was drinkable, and a gentle breeze often discouraged insects. There were flat rocks to lie out on in the sun, and shady crevices to evade the heat during the peak of the day, not to mention ample bathing spots in the cool river.

Vic had put this off for weeks, inventing one excuse after another why he couldn't do it just yet. He had to let his clients know he'd be gone for several days. He had to find someone to take care of the cat. There was something on TV he wanted to see. The moon wasn't the right phase. He wanted to finish the book he was reading. It was already too late today. It was still pretty early, he could putter around for another hour or so before leaving.

The truth was, though Vic had decided to undertake a vision quest, and knew intellectually that this was the course he wanted to follow, neither was he looking forward to spending days in silence and solitude. He had done this before, and knew what he was getting into.

He opened his eyes, turned around and looked east. The sun was the distance of a man's fist over the horizon. The doctor rearranged his blanket so he could contemplate its orb, then spread his arms apart and closed his eyes again, basking

in the gentle warmth of a new born day. *Another day among days. Uncountable as our breaths of air*

Marc Mercuriou wants to fly to Mars. Vic turned the thought over in his mind for the hundredth-odd time. He drifted back over the years, the college parties, the mathematical discussions and philosophical debates, the night Burns drove home on three hits of acid, the program, the lawsuit, the expulsion. His head snapped back up. Had he been sleeping? He wasn't sure. The sun hadn't moved, or had it? Perhaps it was infinitesimally higher in the sky.

Marc Mercuriou's flying to Mars. Vic laughed out loud, softly. What really were the chances? Yet Burns was involved, so who could say? A pair to draw to, those two were. And they say they've got some kind of super-hack, no, that he could believe. If Burns wrote it, they probably did control half the Internet.

Burns had always led the mathematical discussions, and rarely cared about the philosophical debates.

The sun crept higher and the desert began to heat. Vic unfurled himself from his blanket and spread it out as a ground cloth. He thought of all the stuff he could be *accomplishing* right now. He needed to transplant those seedlings, and take more cuttings. The fence along the riverbed still needed to be repaired after the storm. He could be making lasanga for lunch, ahhh, lasanga, he could go back now and at least have it for dinner. Drive into town for the noodles, tomatoes from the garden, cheese, he had Ricota but needed Parmasean.

Vic physically shook himself. *What are your priorities?* Is it the perfect baked lasanga or discerning the will of God, or the Great Spirit, as Vic preferred to call him? *Some people go through life for the lasanga.*

Had the sun moved? He wasn't sure. *We waste so much time*, he almost cried. Of course, after a while, you know that you'd be filling the hours with all the *distractions* - television, food, drugs, games, books, sex, talking, walking, driving, cleaning. Out here, alone, you realize that this is what you waste seven times a week.

And then we throw it all away and die.

Vic stood up and stretched. The strict Indian vision quest required not only fasting and sleep deprivation, but was also done naked and confined to an area no bigger than a patio. Of course, the strict Benedictine monk arose at three in the morning [CHECK] to pray, and the strict Buddhist drank no water after sunset. Vic fasted and prayed, but was clothed and allowed himself a somewhat wider leash. He climbed down to the water, hopping from boulder to boulder, then striped naked and bathed. The stream was still cool, and the morning breeze imparted a definite chill that turned it downright cold, but in this place, the rushing arroyo was a luxury Vic indulged. He plunged his head under a ten-foot waterfall and whooped out loud, then stretched out and floated on his back in the pool at the waterfall's base. Emerging from the stream after a time, he laid naked on one of the boulders, waiting for his skin to dry.

If you go, you might never come back, his own voice practically spoke in his head. *Well, no*, he answered, *one day I won't come back*. One day he might be driving down the highway, or walking to the store, and in the next moment meet the Great Spirit. Maybe he would pick the day and time himself, Lord knew he had contemplated it enough. Or perhaps he would go like some of his patients, lingering, faltering, fighting death every step of the way. *Just not like my father*, please God, *not like my father*, not witless and lost in his own home, surrounded by the family he couldn't tell from strangers.

We're all going to die. It's how we live that defines us.

The sun was now halfway to its zenith. Slowly, Vic dressed, then returned to his blanket. Perhaps later he would indulge in another bath. Hunger was present, but by the third day it manifested itself more as fantasy than as any physical need. A piña colada. That's what he wanted – a piña colada, made fresh from coconuts and pineapples, pureed in a blender with only a flavoring of rum.

Mars! He can't be serious. Yet he was. Vic had known Mercuriou too long to suppose that he was joking, too well to suspect that he was incompetent, and too dear to imagine that he was insane.

Or not. Their encounter had been shocking. How much he had changed! They were like children who had grown up in a nursery, with cartoon wallpaper and colorful mobiles, and only occasional flickers of a distant fire glimpsed through the window. *Men with guns on a cruise ship. An angry speech in a foreign*

tongue. Soldiers patrolling a street. Protest marchers burning a flag.

Then they emerged from the nursery to find the house engulfed in flames, and no way out. Many gave themselves to the fire, toyed with the fire, learned to play with the fire; many assumed that houses were meant to burn, as they were made of wood. Some had cowered in the basement, or taken refuge in the game room. Some tried to fight the fire. Some jumped.

Where'd you hide, Vic? The smoking parlor? While your best friends became thieves?

Without moving, Vic looked to where an iguana had just scampered across one of the boulders and darted into a crevice. Life! The great mystery! All around him, the plants, the animals, the birds in the sky, the algae on the rocks along the riverbed, all alive! All part of some greater consciousness! What would an iguana know of Mars? Yet both were here, the iguana and the red planet, somewhere there in the sky. *We know as much about life as the iguana knows about Mars.*

Was it noon yet? He wasn't sure. He certainly hadn't brought a watch. No, the morning sun still faltered the zenith.

What else am I going to do? Take my stolen millions and retire on a beach?

It was hopeless to talk him out of it. Maybe before, maybe when Vic hadn't been there...

What else am I going to do? Live in a trailer and grow pot in the mountains?

Vic sighed. His own life certainly hadn't turned out the way he had expected it.

I wanted to be a doctor! The thought burst upon him with a flash of anger that was gone as fast as it had come.

Did the fish want to live in water? Did the cow want to be a steak?

Once in his life he had been in a slaughterhouse. Hundreds of cattle passing through a shoot to be stunned and butchered. An assembly-line of death. *We*

don't always get to be what we want.

What did he want? Did it come down to that? Maybe it wasn't about the Great Spirit after all, maybe it was about Victor Antonov...

Herasy! Herasy! the voice shouted in his head. *We don't choice for ourselves; we must DO THE WILL OF GOD!*

He awoke with a start. The sun was visibly into the western sky. How long had he slept? At first he felt rage at himself for sleeping, then disappointment, then resignation. *I'm sorry, father, he prayed, I'm not a kid anymore.* He lay back down on the blanket and slept.

The sun was deep in the sky when he awoke. He sat and watched it slip down behind the mountains, until shade came to the arroyo, then watched the light retreat up the slopes until only the summits were in direct sun.

If I was up there, I could still see the sun.

Finally the sunlight was gone, leaving only a blue sky that deepened into purple, then black. Crickets and frogs trumpeted the arrival of night. A rattlesnake slithered silently across the still warm sand. Here, away from the city lights, stars began to emerge, first a dozen, then uncountable thousands.

The stars! Could there be life out there, too? How could there not be, in such vast reaches? Was the Great Spirit only for this world? Was there a different Great Spirit for every world, every sun? And the Greatest Spirit that transcended all?

Who knows? This is dogma.

Dogma. The bastard son of religion raped by logic. The psuedo-science of devising laws that govern a game we do not understand. For all the paucity of science, at least the physicists demanded that their equations predict something real.

Space. Vic gazed up at the sky. Blackness filled with light. Thousands of ragging fires, tiny lights in their various shapes and patterns, subtly hued and interspersed

with dim nebulas. Orion loomed overhead. Nor was the sky still. Not only did the stars shift through the night, but the lights of airplanes high above passed slowly through the constellations and the occasional unannounced meteor would flash past in a fraction of a second. A satellite transited overhead, still illuminated by the sun.

So what now? Vic didn't expect a booming voice from the heavens, or a dramatic vision, though such things had been known to happen to others. At best, these quests ended in a quiet determination, a clarification of purpose, a sense of a direction forward. At worst, a torrent of tears, disillusionment, and doubt that only time and prayer could peer through.

It's how we live that defines us. How was he going to live? Growing pot in the mountains? Twenty years in the big house with Mercuriou? Blown to bits in some goof-ball launch attempt?

What if it works? It was almost impossible. How could something this *crazy* actually *work*? *Crazy*. Yes, *crazy*. Maybe he was ready for something crazy! He grinned, closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind, tried to open himself to the Great Spirit.

I'm sick of being sane! Vic practically lept to his feet at the thought. Why be sane? Why not do something *crazy*? What's the worst that could happen - death? No, jail would be a fate worse than death. Death he could handle. Death meant meeting God.

Vic chuckled, this time aloud. *Look at yourself*. A trailer full of marijuana plants and you're worried about *jail*? Well, yes, acutally, he was. *Ahh, to hell with it*.

If he went with Mercuriou, it might be a long, long time before he returned to this place. *Or ever*. He looked around - the rushing water in the arroyo could now be heard but no longer seen. Dim outlines of rocks and scrub bush surrounded him. This land was beautiful. Did he really want to part with it? Locked in an airconditioned tube for who knows how long? *Some people go through life for the lasanga*.

Orion had crept into the western sky. To the south, a jet airplane crossed to the east. Vic cast his mind to it. Most of the passengers would be asleep, or trying to

catch what sleep they could in the jet-lag abbreviated night. In a dimly lit cockpit, the pilots guided the plane along a jetway, marked by radio beacons and GPS coordinates, colorful radar displays to show what was in front of them. Would they peer down into the darkness below? To wonder if anyone was looking back up?

Once, long ago, a monk had prayed for guidance. An angel appeared in a vision to say that God's will was to serve men and in serving them, to reconcile them to him. Serve men? The monk was incredulous. Three times the angle repeated the command, then disappeared.

He was a trial judge. The murder defendant had been convicted by the jury, but Vic wasn't convinced. He wrestled with his conscience. Dare he overturn the verdict? Dare he let an innocent man die? In the courtroom, spectators laughed, ate, talked on their cell phones. Angry, Vic called for order, pounded on his gavel. Didn't they understand that the issue was life or death? He struggled to deliver the verdict, started, stammered, started again, and then the prosecutor spoke. There was new evidence. The defendant was innocent. The charges were dropped.

Vic awoke. Was there light? Yes, the eastern sky was beginning to brighten and he could just make out the ridge line of the mountains. What did the dream mean? That he was off the hook? That he had made the right decision?. Do they mean anything? He lay on the cool earth, wrapped in his blanket, watching the stars fade out above. *Sometimes the searching can get in the way of the finding.*

Another day had past, another had come. He would not fear death; he would not fear jail. Nor would he keep living in a house trailer, puttering back and forth to his hydroponic garden. He stood up and stretched, then sat still until it was light enough to see, though not yet dawn. Slowly he rolled his blanket, then started down the trail as the sun peaked over a ridgeline. Halfway to the car, he looked back toward the arroyo, regretting that he hadn't returned to bathe.

T - 239 days

curiosity must kill

In 1998, John Pople became the first man in history to win a Nobel Prize for writing a computer program. It was called *Gaussian*, and it numerically simulated Schrödinger's equation, the crucial formula for explaining the complex interactions that formed atoms and molecules. *Gaussian*, and programs like it, made it possible to analyze atomic structures in much the same way as numerical simulations of Newton's equations made possible the analysis of planetary movement in solar systems. For hundreds of years, scientists had sought the master formulae of a purely mathematical Theory Of Everything. Like two teams drilling a tunnel from opposite directions, physicists and chemists had pursued a crucial thread of this common quest, the physicists digging deep into the mysteries of the atom while the chemists measured and categorized the myriad array of substances. Then, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the physicists broke through the tunnel. Quantum mechanics, the most spectacularly successful physics theory of all time, came with one slight/minor caveat - nobody knew how to solve its equations.

Everybody says this'll lead you to doom

Stereo cranked, the windows reverberated with the hard rock beat as the guitar lick arched to its climax.

But that don't help you in the...

“Bed-rooom!” Alister bobbed his head and sang the refrain out loud.

The office was actually the living room of a large plantation house that Mercuriou and Burns had converted into an office for a team of a half-dozen young programmers. The parquet floors and picture windows overlooked a sandstone cliff dropping to an expansive ocean beach fringed by coral. Waves crashed against a nearby point, surfboards were stacked lazily [IMPROVE] near the beach trail, and broad overhead fans circulated the sea breeze. In a pair of curtain-side semis hummed a parallel-processing system of more than a thousand processors.

They were looking for a new type of rocket fuel, liquid at room temperature and with better performance than the solids. The bosses were out of town and the other guys had taken off, so Alister had the place to himself. Twenty years old, with matted blond hair, he had left South Africa to study abroad, finished a double major in chemistry and physics, then stayed after graduating. TenTech was his first job [after college].

Yet Alister fancied himself a hacker, and Burns had carelessly allowed the young chemist to watch him login to 'genie'. Alister now used that password to enter the system and look around. Its accounting records showed one program used more than any other, so he ran it.

A new window appeared on his screen. On it, brightly colored graphics portrayed a cue stick deflecting billard balls into a neat square. Each ball contained a number - sixteen, then thirty-five, then four. Alister recognized it immediately. It was a Keno game of the type you might find in a casino. *What's all this secrecy about a game*, the young man wondered. Then the bottom of the screen caught his eye, where the machine displayed the current date and time. *Bloody hell!?!*

T - 237 days

youth must be corrupted

“What did he see?”

Mercuriou asked the question without emotion. Behind him, the ocean frothed and seethed gray-green under a steady rain, reflecting the chaotic smear of light patterns that radar engineers dubbed “sea scatter”, then morphed into an indistinct horizon where rain met cloud met ocean.

“He ran the program.”

“Did he understand what he saw?”

“Probably. He’s pretty sharp.”

“So he knows we’re thieves.”

Mercuriou folded his hands in front on him on the desk. He sniffed, then chuckled, then finally broke out in a loud guffaw.

“You think this is funny?”

“I think it’s hilarious! Our whole operation is made possible by Burns’ super-hack, and now along comes this twenty-year-old kid who hacks *your* system! How’s the project going?”

“The older engines work with the new fuel. We’ve got a synthesis pathway, but it can be improved. We still need an airplane, spacesuits, launch towers, tanks and just about everything that goes in them. And, of course, we don’t have enough fuel.”

“Plus we need another big hack.”

“I’m swamped.”

“But we’ve found a hacker!”

Burns screwed his eyebrows and thought for a moment.

“He’s sharp, real sharp. One of the best kids I’ve got, and it looks like he can hack. I guess... will he hack... for *us*?”

Mercuriou raised a finger in the air and rose out of his chair, an adrenaline rush surging within him, like he was asking a stranger out on a date.

“Let me take care of that. Go get Alister.”

As soon as Burns was out the door, Mercuriou leapt to action, erasing the whiteboard then rearranging the chairs. By the time Burns returned with Alister, Mercuriou was back in his own chair, had swung it around, and was leaning back against the desk, watching the rain pelt against the executive suite’s plate glass windows. Vic directed Alister to sit in front of the desk, and Burns closed the door. The pelting rain and the breaking surf were the only sounds as Mercuriou watched the streaks of water sliding down the glass and gazed on toward the reef break beyond.

“There was an unauthorized connection to ‘genie’ from your workstation Saturday night at 9:43 PM. It was encrypted, of course, but it lasted about an hour, and, of course, there are accounting records.”

He turned as he spoke and Alister’s face flushed red. There seemed little point in denying the obvious, but it was curiosity that had driven him; Alister was neither a natural liar nor thief.

“I saw Burns type that password.”

“You’ve seen me type the password?”

“I read it over your shoulder.”

Mercuriou almost snickered again, then covered his mouth with his hand, recovered, and pressed on.

“...and what did you see?”

Alister shrugged. An awkward silence followed, then he answered.

“It’s tomorrow’s lottery numbers today.”

Mercuriou now got up out of his chair and walked to the window. A deep calm overcame him. He visualized himself as an ace closer walking to the mound in the bottom of the ninth, digging in on the rubber, then turning to deal.

“OK, you figured that out, but it’s a lot bigger than that. This is a *heist*.”

“You’re robbing a bank?”

“We’ve already cleaned out one, and we’re thinking about taking down another. We’ve got to get away, though; we’ve stolen too much already. That’s why we need a new rocket fuel.”

“So, you’re going... into space?”

“Mars.”

Alister looked around. He had entered the room expecting to be fired.

“Yeah, and I’m Nelson Mandela.”

“This is no joke.”

“What I saw on that computer screen was no space shuttle.”

“There will be! Not exactly like NASA’s; we’ve got a different design. But I’m no petty thief! We’ve stolen because we *need* the money, need it to do something that’ll make a difference for the whole world. We’ve got push space technology forward!”

“Is the future here on Earth, Alister? What do our leaders want? To drive technology forward? Really? Promote innovation? Promote freedom? Is that why they’ve outlawed on-line libraries? Is that why they want a wall across our south-

ern border? Liberty? Is that what they call the drug war?"

"They want to sell you gasoline, or video games, or stadium tickets at prices people will grumble about and then pay while they eat out every night and take their vacations on Maui. We could have video-on-demand, right now, I'm telling you! We could take every T.V. show aired in the last week and have it right there at the push of a button! We could take every book in the Library of Congress and put it online for anyone in the world; we've *got* that technology! And people in Cambodia could be building their own computers, but we keep the designs secret while they sew us shirts. The only innovation our leaders want is innovation that they can control!"

"So we need a revolution, and it's not going to happen in this world; the establishment is too strong. But out there..."

"Think about it, Alister! Grow your own food! Make your own power! The asteroids are practically pre-mined! If we find something like a pure vein of gold or paladium, everyone will be copying this design to build their own spaceships and race after us. If not, we can still mine the minerals we need to build more ships. Silicon chip production should actually be easier in a vacuum!"

"Six billion people on this people! Think about it! *Six billion* of us! How many of them make a difference, really? How many of them get out of their easy chairs and change the world? If the human race is going into space, it won't happen seven colonels at a time in a space shuttle! We've got jump start it and show that ordinary people can do it, not just a bunch of prima donas. And *to hell* with what our great leaders here on Earth think about it!"

Mercuriou walked to the window, folded his hands behind his back, and gazed out over the ocean.

"...but it all sounds so wild... too wild to be true!"

He turned and looked Alister straight in the eye.

"I think you're intrigued, Alister! So check out our launch complex, and *then* tell me what you think!"

T - 112 days friendship must be given away

“So what’d you think?”

The car zoomed down Interstate 45 toward the Johnson Spaceflight Center. The morning rush hour had passed, and an electronic sign over the roadway advised, ‘NASA Road 1 - 5 minutes’.

“When I heard the learn’d astronomer...”

“Oh, come on, Andrea! They’re publishing the whole sythesis pathway! ...and disclaiming all the patent rights! I thought you’d love it!”

She thought over yesterday’s press conference. Some new rocket fuel, no *revolutionary* new rocket fuel, truly revolutionary. What were they calling the company? TenTech?

“Kyle, I just get sick of all these guys who act real cool, and wear blue jeans to work, and call everybody ‘dude’, and deep down inside they’re a bunch of bastards. Just you wait - I’ll bet you they’ve got some kind of angle on this. The engineer seemed to really know his stuff, but the CEO was a con artist.”

“Well, 1033’s no con, Andrea! TenTech’s ramping up to full production! Terry and Steve are working on a new design; they’re talking single stage to lunar orbit! Maybe a shuttle without SRBs! I thought you’d be excited about this, I mean, this could really mean people living in space!”

“Kyle, we’ve got airplanes flying between all of our major cities every day, and for most of the six billion people on this planet, they might as well *be* space shuttles. Our problems are here on Earth.”

“Well, I thought you’d be excited about this.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, if you want to do it... I just know that *my* problems are here on Earth. I’m not going back into space again.”

“OK, well... OK.”

“Thanks for inviting me down, though; it’s been too long since we’ve seen each other.”

“Next time take a plane, I’ll pay for it; you give me such a fright hitchhiking!”

“You put your faith in God, Kyle... and you tie your hair up under a cap and and lose the miniskirt!”

“A space suit, yes; a mini-skirt, never!”

They laughed as Kyle pulled off the Interstate and stopped at a city bus stop. Andrea got out and pulled her bag out of the trunk.

“Sweatheart, you sure you don’t want a plane?” She shook her head as he pulled out five twenty-dollar bills and handed them to her. “Just this once take the Greyhound!”

“Thanks, Kyle,” Andrea said, giving him a hug. “I love you.”

Kyle nodded and got back in the car before quietly answering, “I love you too, girl,” and then cried out “Call me when you get home!” as he drove away.

It was ten o’clock in the morning. Andrea climbed on a half empty downtown local and gazed out the window as the controlled access highway gave way to mid-market chain restaurants, landscaped malls, downtown streets and finally the transfer station. *What’s wrong with me*, she wondered. Wasn’t Kyle right? Wasn’t it good of these men to disclaim the patent rights on their invention instead of trying to monopolize it? *Give to all who beg of you*. Wasn’t it the Christian thing to do? *Maybe I’m just being cynical*.

At the transfer station, instead of walking the three blocks to the Greyhound station, she spent five minutes decyphering a wall of posted bus schedules, then climbed onto another local headed into one of the older sections of town, walking the last quarter mile to a hundred-year-old Catholic church that occupied an entire city block. Built of stone, glass, and metal bars, it could have been mistaken for a prison except for the broad entrance stairs and the cross mounted on

its steeple. Walking around back, she found a rear entrance sporting a colorful sign that read, ‘The Franciscan Fryer’.

Entering, she found herself in a white tiled dining room set with white plastic tables and metal chairs. Three men were preparing for lunch. Hanging against the far wall was a rood icon cross, painted in Byzantine style, with a red background and a bevy of saints behind the figure of the crucified Messiah. Andrea recognized it immediately — the San Damiano Cross, replica of the crucifix which, eight hundred years earlier, had spoken in a vision to the young man who knelt before it in prayer.

“Now go hence, Francis, and build up my house, for it is nearly falling down!”

Francis of Assisi had looked about him at the crumbling chapel he knelt in and set out to do as the vision commanded. Returning to his father’s shop, he took several rolls of fine cloth (without permission), rode to a nearby market town, sold both cloth and horse, and returned to the chapel, where he tried to press the money into the hands of the reluctant priest. Andrea had always felt that it was a typical message from God: simple, powerful, and very easy to misunderstand.

“We don’t serve until eleven.”

“I’m looking for Brother Dunstan.”

“Oh, he’s probably in the kitchen.”

She walked to the rear of the room, separated from the kitchen by a long serving counter. A pot-bellied man in his late forties, with balding hair and a worn apron covering the brown habit of the Franciscan order, muttered to himself as he stirred a steaming kettle on the commercial stove that dominated the rear of the kitchen. [FIX]

“Andrea!”

“Hello, Dunstan!”

“Oh, Andrea! What a joy it is to see you!”

“Thanks, hey this place looks great!”

“Well, you know, I had somewhat different expectations for it. I’d wanted something more like a restaurant, you know, that would also serve as a soup kitchen if people couldn’t pay, but Andrea, we just couldn’t pay the rent downtown!”

“That was the place on Travis Street?”

“Right! I mean, a lot of people did pay, but usually only just enough for their own food, you know, and then with those who didn’t pay or couldn’t pay, well, we just couldn’t afford to stay there. It was a nice location, but we just had to leave. I prayed a lot, well I worried a lot, and then this place turned up! The rector here said we could use the church’s kitchen for free, and Andrea, you know, it’s been a real blessing, because I try to keep the place open seven days a week, you know, and on Sundays now so many people stay after church for lunch that it’s really helped the congregation, you know, their social life, and I get regular donations now from them, and well, I just don’t know what I would have done without it!”

Andrea sat down as the workers finished setting up the room, and Dunstan put the finishing touches on lunch, which they shared just as the first customers, mostly homeless, came in. The food, especially considering its meager pretensions, was excellent. There was fresh baked bread, coffee and orange Tang (“the drink of astronauts!”, Dunstan toasted), a thick lentil soup with just enough tomatoes and onions to give it depth, and tuna salad, replete with chopped Granny Smith apples and stuffed into the fresh bread, one of Dunstan’s signature dishes.

“Can you stay until Sunday, I’m making stuffed peppers, you know, I always like to do a nice lunch for the congregation?”

“No, thanks, I’m heading back to my mom’s place in Iowa today. I just came down to visit Kyle Lankier, he has a new project, some people have developed a new rocket fuel.”

“You know, I heard about that! They say it’s quite revolutionary, is that true?”

“Yes, it seems to be. I know Kyle’s quite excited about it.”

“Well maybe we’ll have one of our oblates flying back into space, eh?”

Andrea shook her head vigorously.

“No way, not a chance; I’ve made my last shuttle landing.”

As she was leaving, she quietly took one of the envelopes from the holders on each table. It was blank, except for a quote from the Gospel of Matthew:

“When I was hungry, you fed me.”

She fished the transfer slip out of her pocket and inspected it closely. It was still valid. She put the rest of her money into the envelope, sealed it, and slipped it into the drop box on her way out the door. Using the transfer to take a city bus to the northern extremities of Houston, she walked another quarter mile to the Interstate, sat down her duffle bag beside the ramp, and began thumbing for a ride.

More than a hundred cars passed in about an hour before a cab stopped. Andrea had almost not bothered to raise her thumb when she had seen the distinctive yellow car. *Judge not by appearances...*

“I’m only going about twenty miles to pick up a fare.”

Those miles conveniently ended at an exit with a truck stop. She didn’t want to go into the restaurant, because she didn’t want to harass the truckers for a ride while they were eating, nor did she want trouble with the management. Instead, she fashioned a cardboard sign reading “Iowa” and sat down with it between the parking area and the on-ramp, making sure she could be seen from both. Trucking companies didn’t like truckers giving out rides, but one of drivers gave her a lift anyway. He was going right through her state.

They talked through the afternoon as the miles drifted away. He was an aspiring writer who wanted to hear everything she could tell him about NASA. He was also a convicted hacker and was wearing a monitoring bracelet on his ankle. As dinner time approached, Andrea explained a bit more about her religious order.

“I appreciate the ride, and don’t expect you to feed me just because I gave all my

money away. I can fast until I get home. Seriously.”

“But you get everything by begging, right?”

Darren bought dinner at a diner in Oklahoma, during which Andrea showed him a small plywood replica she kept of the San Daimano cross and told him the story of St. Francis.

“So why did he give everything away?”

“He was inspired by a Gospel quotation during mass: Do not possess gold, nor silver, nor money in your purses. This was two years after the vision.”

“How on earth did he live?”

“Well, when he was rebuilding the church, he actually sang in the marketplace and then asked his audience to donate stones. The old priest there would feed him dinner every night, but Francis didn’t want to impose on him, so he started taking a bowl and begging door-to-door at dinner time. By the time he ended his circuit through Assisi, his bowl would be full, and that would be his dinner.”

“So you go around the dining room with a bowl!?”

“No, I’m not as good a Franciscan as Francis. Nobody is. What’s happened to me is that I’ve found good friends and family to be my surest supporters. I don’t travel as much as I should. Maybe I’m becoming a Benedictine.”

...and then they talked on about that as they drove on into the night. Darren began squawking into his C.B. radio as they approached the Nebraska line.

“Got a rider here looking for a ride to Iowa Springs... Any drivers out there heading towards Iowa Springs?...”

After nearly an hour of intermittent radio calls, driving closer to Iowa all the time, he finally raised a truck delivering a load only twenty miles from her mom’s farm. Andrea helped that trucker navigate the back roads, called her mom for a ride, and was home in bed by three o’clock in the morning.

T - 100 days the media must expose themselves

NEW YORK (AP) - Keystone Securities (NYSE: KEY) declared bankruptcy today in the wake of a computer malfunction that triggered an automated series of losing trades.

Keystone, a leading global investment, securities trading, and banking firm, relied heavily on automated trading programs to manage a multi-billion dollar portfolio that was then sold off at fire sale prices by the same programs.

According to published company reports, Keystone's market capitalization was over \$50 billion. The trades triggered losses that exceeded the firm's available trading capital by nearly \$20 billion. Auditors declared the firm insolvent over the weekend.

"What's surprising isn't that there was a bug in some trading program," says Abruce Scowl, a consultant with Toro and Oso, "but rather that there weren't sufficient controls and safeguards in place to prevent a disastrous loss."

Both the SEC and the FDIC have launched investigations into the incident.

"Keystone does not have the capital resources it needs to be a viable competitor," the company's president, Art Tocsin, said in a statement. Keystone "should emerge from bankruptcy a stronger and more competitive company".

Although no criminal charges have been filed, legal experts have speculated that Keystone could become a test case for corporate liability in the face of a major computer malfunction.

T - 93 days it must be sly

“Any suggestions?”

“*Technical Sketch Four?*”

Mercuriou put his hands on his hips and stared at Burns.

“Well, that’s how I think of it...”

They stood at the base of a 767, its engines replaced with rockets, its doors welded shut, a hydraulic mating adapter on its nose. It sat in a hanger adjacent to their private runway, on a cliff overlooking the ocean.

“*The Royal Way?*”

“But this isn’t the Royal Way, Marc, it’s all stolen!”

Mercuriou’s stare was cold, but there seemed a strange smile behind it.

“*Manifesto of the Secessionist Party?*”

Mercuriou rolled his eyes.

“*Baccala’s Manifesto?*” and they *all* looked at Alister like he had just ruined the punchline to a great joke. “...or maybe just *Manifesto?*”

“How about *On The Evil of Capitalism and The Danger of Democracy?*”

Mercuriou now shook. “You want me to put *that... there!*” and waved toward the ship’s cockpit. Vic studied the spot thoughtfully.

“Perhaps something shorter would be better.”

“*The Great Hawaiian...*”

“Icarus’ Wing!”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Mercuriou stared at the Afrikaner in disbelief.

“You know who Icarus was?”

“Yeah.”

“Like hell we’re naming it *Icarus’ Wing*! We’re naming it *Xplorer One*!”

T - 7 days

friendship must be paid for

"I'm inclined to say the thing looks like a front operation, but that doesn't make any sense, either."

Sitting in the shade of her mother's porch, with a pitcher of iced limeade on the table and two glasses half consumed, Andrea read in silence.

"You were right about Mercuriou, too. I don't believe a word that comes out of the man's mouth. I just can't figure out his angle."

"There's no question that this stuff works."

"None! That's what doesn't make sense! They're always having production problems; they need more time."

"No way. Not with the quantities of nitric acid they're consuming. They've already been shipped enough to fuel about three conventional shuttle launches."

"Why are they doing all this in Hawaii... why?"

Andrea pushed the papers away. "Sounds like you need a detective, Kyle."

"I need somebody who can't get blown off by a bunch of techno-babble!"

Andrea laughed anxiously. "What are you getting me roped into?"

He looked deflated. Andrea sighed. *Give to all those who beg of you...* especially your best friend!

"All right," she visibly collapsed. "I'll go."

"Great! Listen, I've got everything set up; I'll pay for the plane ticket and advance you a thousand dollars. Their main facility is at a place called South Point..."

T - 2 days

hitchhikers must be crazed

Twenty thousand feet over the Pacific Ocean, the inter-island jet darted across 'Alenuihāhā Channel, swept down Hawaii's leeward coast, grazed Keahole Point at two thousand feet and touched down at Kona International Airport amid a broken jumble of blackened lava flows. Unlike Honolulu's congested and dilapidated air hub, Kona was more a collection of stone huts than anything bearing the grandiose title "International Airport". As the ground crew pushed a ramp up to the plane (there was no jetway), the passenger in window seat 8A stared morosely at an ATM card.

What am I supposed to do with this thing? "Just stick it in the machine and don't worry about it." ...*in no manner are they to receive coins or money ...*

She cut it in half and threw it in the trash almost as soon as she got off the plane. *It has to be done The Royal Way.*

"Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to South Point?"

"You can catch the Hele-On there in front of the space center."

The space center? Indeed. After the Challenger disaster, Hawaii had built the Astronaut Ellison S. Onizuka Space Center to commemorate the life and loss of one of her most prominent citizens. The small white building was closed when Andrea walked up to it, so she merely peered through its windows and set down her backpack to wait for the bus. Experience told her that bus drivers would sometimes give free rides to the destitute, and that other passengers might assist when drivers were unwilling.

No such finagling was necessary. The Hele-On was a free service operated by Hawaii county, so Andrea took a seat, cracked open a window, and enjoyed the ride as the bus meandered through shopping malls, past more broken lava, seaside villages, beach parks, a high school campus, a elevated tennis court and over every rise and around every corner, the ocean, the ocean, the ocean. The empty bus soon filled with an assortment of locals heading home, and the driver

even waited for one passenger to mount a bicycle on a rack before boarding. An intermittent drizzle began to fall as Kona's rich volcanic soil gave way to the rolling forested hills on Mauna Loa's southern flank.

Dusk was falling two hours later when Andrea disembarked at the road leading to South Point. Few riders were left on the departing bus; most had gotten off at a park-and-ride a few miles back. There was little to remark upon except a road sign and an abandoned building, which Andrea immediately seized upon as a Godsend. A quick investigation of its contents revealed a detachable bench seat that would serve as a small but usable bed, and several scraps of carpet that could be passably used as blankets. Weeds were growing up through the floorboards, while liquor bottles and graffiti bore mute witness to the transients that, like her, occasionally livened the old building for a few hours.

Yet was this The Royal Way? It hardly seemed fit for a queen, but then neither had Christ's crown, nor had his throne. Andrea took one of the carpets, walked back across the road, wrapped it around her, and sat down to see if anyone would take pity. Several cars passed, but none stopped. After half an hour, the rain began to fall again, so Andrea returned to the old building and settled in for the night.

Perhaps here, in this world, this *was* The Royal Way.

T - 1 day hitchhikers must be dangerous

It had rained off and on throughout the night, but the old building's roof was solid and the carpets had cut enough of the chill to allow at least a few hours of sleep. Now, shortly after dawn, she packed her bag, straightened up the ramshackle furniture, and walked out to the road, where a young couple was waiting for the bus.

"Do you know what time it is?"

She fished her cellphone out of her pack long enough to check.

"Seven-thirty."

They reacted with disappointment. The Hele-On was a free service, but ran only once or twice a day, and they were waiting for a 7 AM bus. Andrea wished them luck and set off on the last leg of her journey.

Edged by low stone walls on either side, the lonely asphalt road meandered south though a forest interspersed with orchards and citrus farms. After an hour of walking, fatigue and doubt began to conspire against her.

This is stupid; I can't function in this society. How long is this road? What do I tell Kyle? How much money have I lost? Just the airfare. If I go back now, he can turn the card off, not too much damage done. He might have to come out to Hawaii to get me, maybe he can hold my hand through this...

You need him to hold your hand?

As the tears rolled down her face, she turned her face skyward and implored God, "Why have you done this me?" No answer came back from the heavens, only the midmorning sun blazing down from the sky. The silence encouraged her to speak loadly and openly to the diety, something she rarely did in the crowded city. "Wasn't I supposed to be blessed? Weren't you going to take care of us like the birds in the field? All these people want is money!"

Physically and emotionally exhausted, she sat down in the middle of the roadway, cried steadily for several minutes, then took stock of her situation. Her jeans were ripped from where they had snagged on a nail, her right side was covered in dirt from the carpets, her hair was matted with dried sweat, and she had slept in her clothes.

This is stupid. I am NOT OK. I'm filthy and exhausted, and I can't show up looking like this. No dumb fuel problem is worth this.

She was so tired. If she could just sleep...

She was awake before the car stopped.

Two men were seated in the car, both dressed for the endless Hawaiian summer in shorts, T-shirts, and sunglasses. The man in the passenger seat was talking on a cellphone and completely ignored her. The driver, a friendly fellow in his early twenties, asked her if she needed help, and she mumbled something about heading back into town. He offered her a ride, and she climbed into the back seat as he started driving again. The driver spoke with a distinct foreign accent that she couldn't quite place. Australian, perhaps? He started talking to her, but the passenger waved him quiet, as he was obviously having problems hearing the phone conversation over the engine noise. Andrea lapsed into silence as they continued back towards the highway.

"No, no, no, we've got plenty of 1033. We've got tanks and tanks full of it. You can come see that for yourself. We just have to get the export paperwork taken care of. It's a delay."

"Of course it works! You have the samples, don't you?"

"Well, then make it yourself! We can pay for the spacesuits in cash."

"I'll need time to find another buyer."

"You said we could pay in fuel..."

"Just let me handle it. I know how my own government works."

“Cpacebo. Cpacebo. Do cbidaniy.”

The passenger clicked the cellphone off, then punched some more buttons on it. While Andrea slowly digested what she had heard, he made another call.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Well, if he doesn’t show, he doesn’t show.”

“A woman?”

Without disconnecting or even lowering the cell phone, he slowly turned around in his seat, looking at her almost as if seeing her now for the first time.

“I’m sorry, ummm, we weren’t really introduced...”

“Andrea Yeats,” she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “I’m with NASA.”

At various times, Andrea had seen people red-faced with excitement, hysteria, and embarrassment, but now, for the first time in her life, she actually watched someone’s face as it turned red. The flush began just above Mercuriou’s cheekbones, then, in a split second, spread to his cheeks, his forehead, and then ran across his entire face. He clenched his teeth and turned back around in his chair.

“I’ll get back to you,” he told Vic in a clipped voice, severed the connection without waiting for an answer, took the earpiece out of his ear, wound its cord around the telephone and put it down on the dashboard. For a moment they drove on in silence.

“Turn around,” Mercuriou quietly told Alister.

“Look, I’m heading into town, I can just walk back...”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Mercuriou interrupted as he unclipped his seatbelt, turned fully around in his chair, and revealed the handgun he had covertly retrieved from its holster under his seat.

Alister brought the car to a stop, then looked back and forth between his two

passengers with a pained expression on his face. Meanwhile, it slowly dawned on Andrea that she was being kidnapped.

“Turn around,” Mercuriou repeated, “Go back.”

Within sight of the highway, Alister executed a three-point turn and they headed back down the road again. Past the stone walls, past the orchards and farms, past her break-down spot, they drove on as the forest gave way to broad meadows framed on three sides by hundred foot cliffs and the Pacific Ocean beyond. They passed through an automatic gate, crossed a runway that stretched fully from one side of the point to the other, and drove into a complex of hangers and low buildings.

They walked into a large room whose walls were lined with whiteboards hung over cluttered office tables amid a jumble of cardboard boxes and packing material. Andrea walked willingly, partly out of curiosity, partly because there was simply no other place else to go. She never thought of running. Burns was there, sporting a black T-shirt that read simply “CAPITALISM SUCKS”, as was Vic, who looked up from a notepad as they came in.

“The man who called was named Kyle Lankier...”

His voice drifted off and an awkward pause ensued. Mercuriou turned around.

“Doctor Yeats,” he began slowly, pausing and measuring his words, “during the ride here... I was trying to decide, umm... exactly...”

“What you’re going to do with me?” she speculatively completed his sentence.

“Precisely.”

“What’s going on? What happened?” Vic asked, the second question addressed to Alister as if expecting an explanation from him.

The young man opened his mouth as if to speak, but couldn’t quite explain how he had picked up a woman seated in the middle of the road, or how Mercuriou had continued his imprudent cellphone conversation, or how they had discovered the true identity of their passenger. Finally, after a second or two, he just

shrugged his shoulders and closed his mouth without saying a word.

“I believe the colloquial expression is that I ‘know too much’.”

“Um-hum,” Mercuriou responded, nodding in agreement before turning towards Burns.

“The old server room, can you rig the door so it can’t be opened from the inside without a card key?”

The engineer leaned back in his chair and nodded slowly.

“What are you thinking, Marc?” Vic asked with concern in his voice. The only reply was a raised palm.

“Yeah,” Burns began slowly, “the locking mechanism is in the wall, so I could weld the door handle in place, along with the bolt. You couldn’t open it at all from the inside...”

“Fine. Do it.”

“Now, wait a minute, Marc, you’re talking about kidnapping now.”

“Vic, we will have this discussion later.”

“No, we won’t have it later...”

“Vic! We will have this discussion later! We will have this discussion *when Dr. Yeats is not in this room*. OK? Now, *please*, let’s just get all the loose stuff out of that room while I stay here with the doctor.”

The other three men looked slowly at one another. None of them liked what they were being asked, no, told to do, but Burns got up and lead Alister down a hallway, leaving Andrea, Marc and Vic to eye each other in silence, she sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, the captain perched on a tabletop with his pistol in his belt, and Vic still seated in his chair. Twenty minutes later, the concierge returned to announce that the room was ready. Mercuriou escorted the NASA engineer down a hallway and around a corner to a windowless forty-by-

one-hundred-foot room populated solely by a rectangular grid of floor-to-ceiling black steel frames. Upon entering, Andrea turned back to face Mercuriou.

“Isn’t this where I get some fancy explanation of what you’re up to?”

“No,” he answered, then closed the door behind him, insured that it was locked, and began to walk away.

“Mr. Mercuriou,” she called through the wall, “I’m sure we can discuss...”

The card key flashed through the lock with such a swoosh that Andrea took an involuntary step back from the door, then another as it was pushed open.

“Captain Mercuriou, it’s *Captain* Mercuriou!”

...and he was gone.

“No, Marc, no, absolutely NO!”

“Three days, Vic, that’s all we need – three days! Burns wants a week, but I’m compromising on three days!”

“You’re not compromising on a damn thing, Marc! You’re talking about holding someone prisoner – an innocent person – for days! You’ve already held her captive for a night!”

“It has to done, Vic! It just has to be done, and we’re not arguing about it! Alister!”

“Yes, we are arguing about it, Marc!”

“Alister! Get an MRE and a bottle of water and give it to Dr. Yates! Dammit, Vic, don’t fight me on this!”

“Marc, you can’t do this, you just can’t!”

Andrea had woken early in the darkened room. She had no watch, and there were no windows, but it had *felt* like morning. At least she seemed rested. She sat up against the wall and began to pray, starting with the Lord’s Prayer. Softly, just barely audibly, she repeated it three times, each more slowly than the last, contemplating the words more deeply each time.

Thy will be done. Am I here for a reason, Lord? For your reason?

...as we forgive those who trespass against us... I forgive these people here, Lord, they’re almost comical

As she did so often, she returned to Christ’s prayer in the garden, “not my will, Father, but thine.” *Not my will, Lord, if you have some reason for me to be here, and you must, thy will be done, Lord, thy will, not mine, thine.*

She sat still, practicing a Buddhist exercise that she had learned at a class and adopted for Christian use. She focused on her breath, in and out through her nostrils. She tried to clear her mind of her own thought and cast it upward, trying to enter a calm state where she could, just maybe, like Elisha in the cave, hear the still, quiet voice of God. When she got caught up in her own imagination, she re-focused on her breath and tried to calm her mind again.

She didn't do a very good job. In fact, she never did a very good job. Meditation was the hardest thing she had ever attempted, far more difficult than executing some suited procedure that she had practiced a hundred times in a water tank on the ground. Her mind kept racing back to her present situation, all the craziness of the last two days, *why didn't she run?*, *what do they want with spacesuits?*, *breath in, breath out, breath in, breath out.*

At least she resolved upon a plan, if you could call it that. She waited quietly until the electronic lock clicked and the door was cautiously pushed open. It was the blond-haired youth with the foreign accent.

"Sorry... I brought you some breakfast!" he announced as cheerily as he could muster, putting a bottle of water and a military ration down on the floor next to the door.

"Do you think I could use the bathroom?" Andrea asked, standing up and pushing her hair back. He seemed indecisive, and didn't answer at first.

"Look, I'm covered in dirt; I haven't bathed in... two days; I've slept in my clothes for two nights; I'd like to at least splash some water on my face and go to the toilet."

There was no need to lie. It was all true.

"OK... uh, sure, it's right down the hall," he answered, before leading the way about a hundred feet to a restroom.

"I'll wait here," he mumbled.

She turned on the water faucet, and immediately started searching for a way out. The room had no windows but was covered with a ceiling of drop panels.

Climbing onto the back of a toilet, she could reach the ceiling and push one of the ceiling panels aside. She started to scramble up, but saw that the wall continued straight up to another ceiling several feet above the panels.

“Shoots!” she muttered to herself, then climbed down and went to the other side of the room. The sinks might be strong enough to support her weight. Returning to the toilet, she realized that she could just reach a large, circular pipe above the panel ceiling. Climbing up again and grabbing it, she pulled herself up to it and found herself crouched in a dark, dusty space between the two ceilings. In the dim light, she could make out the course of the wall down to where it met the hallway. In the other direction, the crawl space seemed to extend beyond the bathroom, so she clambered along the pipe in that direction. Once past the bathroom, she opened one of the ceiling panels below, swung her legs down into it, and dropped down into the sunlit room below, slipping, grabbing the ceiling, and bringing part of it crashing down with her.

There were chairs, a desk, books, a drafting table covered with papers. She picked up the telephone handset on the desk, then stopped to look at the books on celestial mechanics, materials science and rocket propulsion. She put down the phone and walked over to the drafting table. *Spain never designed a rocket engine. They aren't selling fuel; they're hoarding it. They need spacesuits, too.*

“Vic, we are not arguing about this! This is a command decision!”

“I will not accept this. I will not accept this.”

“I am in command of this mission! I am giving an order!”

“Give your order, Marc, I'll go to police right now! I'll pick up that phone myself! I mean it!”

“Vic, if you pick up that phone, I'll... I'll... I'll... What!!!?”

“It's Dr. Yates, she's still in the bathroom...”

Mercuriou marched down the hallway and announced his presence.

“Coming in, professor, pull up your pants!”

Broken from her reverie, Andrea snatched up the phone once more and dialed Kyle, listening to the noises in the next room as it rang.

“Kyle, it’s Andrea!”

“My God, girl, where are you?”

“I’m at TenTech; they’re holding me prisoner here!”

“What?!”

“Look, they’ve got a launch on!”

“What kind of launch?”

“Manned. They have spacesuits... and forget three shuttle launches; they’ve got enough fuel here for three hundred!”

The door’s electronic lock clicked and Andrea dropped the phone, threw the chair through the window as Mercuriou dashed in and jumped out. Running up the road, she began to calm down as she reached the runway. *What if they have guns?* She slowed down as she reached the first horse farm. *What if they do?* Finally she stopped completely and looked around. *Where are they?*

They were glued to a webcam of the highway junction, which showed police squad cars peeling off to the south in response to a kidnapping report.

“OK, our launch clock is at zero... Let’s get to the ship!”

They dashed up the road to the hanger, where they found Yeats.

“This is quite a rocketship you’ve got here.”

Mercuriou motioned his crew towards the access platform.

“You have some kind of launch planned?”

“You could say that.”

Mercuriou climbed the metal staircase while Andrea followed him silently. A *private manned launch*. For the first time since Kyle had talked her into this, she actually wanted to laugh. *THIS I have GOT to see.*

Mercuriou had reached the hatch, climbed inside, and turned around. “Well, Doctor, you can go now. Sorry for your detention, but it was necessary at the time...” he began, but never finished, because Andrea grabbed the rim of the hatch, swung her feet up, and kicked him squarely on his shoulders.

“Captain Mercuriou! *Captain Mercuriou!*” she hollered, clambering in behind.

“What’s going on?” Vic called from the cabin.

“It’s Captain Mercuriou! He fell!”

Mercuriou flew to his feet, so enraged that he half-hallucinated four men with red shirts and black pants, already moving to seize the intruder and awaiting only his order to throw her out. He blinked and they were gone.

“Do you want the hatch closed now? Is that your next order... *sir?*”

“You don’t what you getting into, lady.”

“Then clue me in.”

They locked eyes for a moment, then Mercuriou pressed his face within six inches of hers and hissed “Mars!”

She broke into a wide grin.

“That’s great; I’ve always wanted to go to Mars! Now, you might need an experienced astronaut; I’ve had three weeks on orbit. You’ve got suits; I hope you’ve got motion sickness drugs...”

He tried to interrupt, but she shushed him.

“...but first, you’ve got to *get* into orbit, and that I’ve *got* to see!”

“Here come the coppers!”

“Burns, start the engines!” Mercuriou yelled, then turned back to Andrea. “OK, this is it, this is it, I’m not kidnapping you – Vic you are my witness! – I’m not forcing you, but you get out now, I’m telling you we’re not coming back for a long long time, I say get out right now, or you’re in this for good, and I mean FOR GOOD!”

Andrea felt like she had when she picked up Dunstan in the rain, when she wrote ‘math class’ on the auction form, when she decided to quit NASA. She nodded her head.

“Fine.”

Xplorer One sped down the runway as police cars swarmed the complex. Some of the policemen watched with their mouths agape, deafened by the roaring rocket engines and stunned by the sight of a jumbo jet belching rocket exhaust as it lurched off South Point, dipped perilously close to the ocean a hundred feet below the cliff, then climbed to ten thousand.

“Launch cargo!”

Alister keyed a command sequence on his computer. From camouflaged launchers in the forest below, first one rocket thundered aloft, then another, and another.

“Three all-green; four launching!” Alister called out from his computer monitor, while Vic and Mercuriou were arguing again.

“She doesn’t really need a spacesuit,” Mercuriou tried.

“She most certainly does need a spacesuit, Marc. We have spares in cargo, but what if we lose cabin pressure before then?”

Mercuriou was silent for a moment. Only Alister’s voice was heard.

“Seventeen’s up; sixteen just went inertial; eighteen launching!”

A panic seized the nearby towns as missile after missile streaked skyward; many

thought the nation had gone to war with Libya.

“We have to abort the mission.”

“We are not aborting this mission!”

“I’m fine; I’ll take the chance.”

“No, you are not fine! I’m the ship’s doctor, and telling you, Marc, we have to abort this mission because *she could get killed* if we lose cabin pressure.”

“Nine just acquired LEO; thirty-four launching.”

“Then let her take mine.”

“No, she can’t take yours, because then *you* won’t have a spacesuit.”

“OK, so then I’ll die and you’ll be rid of me and you can do whatever you want! Look, Vic, we can’t go back! If we go back, we go to jail! I’ll take my chances with death!”

Vic relented. Death over jail, that he understood. Andrea got the spacesuit.

“How do we look, Burns?”

“We’ve got clean launches on the first fifty-one rockets... make that fifty-two; everything’s fine.”

As soon as Andrea was suited and seated, Burns put the plane into a near vertical climb. It wasn’t the most optimal launch profile, but the aircraft wasn’t designed for supersonic flight, so Burns made sure that he climbed above the atmosphere before beginning a true orbital insertion. As they passed fifty miles in altitude, he nudged forward on the joystick, the engines pivoted, and the giant blue ball of the Pacific Ocean swung up below them. They were now above most of the atmosphere, and Burns began their insertion burn proper, firing the engines continuously for nearly ten minutes, then cutting them off and letting the ship coast. Finally, he fired the engines again for several minutes to stabilize their orbit.

On Earth, confusion reigned. CNN reported the last several launches live, and speculation was rampant that the missiles contained some kind of chemical or biological agent. Around the world, TV networks began interrupting their regular programming to cover the event, showing graphical ground tracks of the orbiting cargo modules and warning people as they drifted above. The U.S. State Department was fielding a barrage of queries from foreign embassies anxious to know what was happening. The President abandoned a trip to Europe and turned Air Force One back towards the capital. Once there, he held a hurried meeting of his national security team, finally blowing up in frustration at their inability to provide any concrete answers, throwing a briefing folder and sending Top Secret papers flying.

“Why the hell do I have find out from CNN when 170 missiles get fired off in Naale-Naale-...whatever-the-hell!”

That evening, the President addressed a rapt but unshaken nation, refining the news that the networks had been reporting for hours. A renegade group of entrepreneurs, under investigation for wire fraud and kidnapping, had somehow managed to execute the first private manned space launch. After reassuring the public that the government was carefully tracking the situation, the President correctly identified the four principle suspects, then took three questions. When asked if he was pursuing a diplomatic solution to the crisis, the President replied only that attempts were being made to contact the perpetrators. When asked if a military response was being considered, the President replied that the military always stood ready to defend the nation, but it was not yet clear if an attack was imminent. When asked if the U.S. military was capable of striking a target in orbit, the President had no comment on U.S. military capabilities.

In Houston, Kyle Lankier watched the press conference alone and in silence.

Andrea Yeats was never mentioned.

T + 1 day long political rants must be interspersed throughout

“Excuse me? What are you doing?”

Mercuriou had hollered since launch to get lined up with the cargo modules. They assembled them together by matching orbits, docking their nose, then re-positioning them into a higher orbit, connecting them together as they went. They collected first Module A-1 Captain’s Quarters and then attached Module A-1-1 Captain’s Storage. Mercuriou then halted the entire operation to dock with A-1 Captain’s Quarters, equalize pressure, and disappear.

“I’m working on my speech for this evening, Dr. Yates. It must be delivered live in American prime time. I wish I had longer to prepare, but your stunt disrupted my timing. Now please leave me alone.”

Andrea mumbled a reply into the closing hatch.

“You know, there’s really a lot of work to be done with the cargo modules...”

The hatch flew back open.

“Dr. Yeats, my speeches are the most important cargo this vessel carries!”

He shushed her out the door and didn’t appear again for another hour.

The news of the rocket launch had galvanized the world, or at least everyone in the world, or at least everyone in the Most Important Country In The World. Now came live pictures of a man floating in zero-g, in a manner quite unprecedented.

Red banners festooned A-1’s rear wall, and hid the access hatch to A-1-1 behind them. Two vertical Roman lances impaled with globes of Mars rose on either side of a desk, behind which Mercuriou now appeared seated with a tablet computer in front of him, dressed in a crisp white uniform as might be worn by a cruise ship captain. The rest of the crew watched from behind the camera.

“Good evening. My name is Marcellius Mercuriou, and I am the captain of the spaceship *Xplorer One*. Most people call me Marc. Some people call me Sir.”

“I and my compatriots have today launched a bold new venture. We intend nothing less than to begin the colonization of our Solar System. We do this not so much because we wish to, but because we must! We can not wait around and let our planet be destroyed while some cynical bunch of global manipulators push everyone to ‘compete’! We much protect our freedom; we must safeguard our independence! Like the pioneers who set out across America’s wilderness 400 years ago, we know that the path forward into uncharted lands is fraught with danger and discomfort, yet it is the only way forward.”

“Furthermore, I have been told repeatedly to Love It or Leave It, and I have decided to Get The Hell Out. Why not? We know what kind of leadership America has. It’s not going to change. Why would it? It’s what The People want. It’s just not what *I* want.”

“So I am declaring tonight the Republic of Mars. I shall inculcate many of its principles over the coming days, but for now I wish to focus on only one – freedom of speech. Unlike capitalists, who, like communists, see information as something to be locked down and controlled, we are determined to construct on-line public libraries, available free of charge to everyone on this planet. I raise this issue now because I will begin transmitting the books in this library to anyone with a satellite dish. We do this both as a moral duty to provide mankind with this knowledge, and also as a legal right, because as a sovereign nation the Republic of Mars can operate these transmitters, much like the United States operates the Voice of America.”

“In the coming days, I will explain my views more fully, and perhaps you will join us. Not literally, at least not yet, but perhaps spiritually? We have a website, when it is not blocked by the government. We have our own satellite equipment, when it is not jammed. What skills can you offer? Let us know! Write a biography of yourself! Upload it to our website! Join our movement and help build a new tomorrow! Onward Martians! Onward to Mars!”

Mercuriou had agreed to be interviewed after his speech, but had rejected the major networks and instead reserved the right to choose an obscure small market anchor.

“Captain,” the interview started on schedule. “There have been serious questions asked in the last 24 hours about your financial status. May I ask how you funded your space launch?”

“We stole it!” he replied, right on script. “Every dollar of it, and we needed billions!”

“Are you saying that you stole a billion dollars?”

Mercuriou laughed.

“We stole more money than Bernie Madoff ever saw!”

“I don’t understand; couldn’t you have gotten venture capital funding?”

“Venture capital funding – how do you get it? I’ll tell you how. You sell your soul to these capitalists. You convince them, and I mean really convince them, that you’re one of them, that you believe in their nightmare philosophy of greed, you bring them on your management team, you sign off on some ‘business plan’ that tells how you’re going to patent and control this technology once it’s developed, because their whole philosophy is to stand behind a counter and do nothing for anyone unless they’re getting something out of it for themselves, and then you fight like hell just to keep 51 percent. Or you toil away in your garage for ten years of nights and weekends while working some stupid job just to pay for the stupid garage, and I’m not much of a garage guy. So we developed, let’s just say, an original source of financing.”

“Did you rob a bank?”

Mercuriou started laughing again.

“Something like that. Ever hear of Keystone Securities?”

The news anchor paused for effect and then continued.

“Why not just steal the money and retire on a beach in Aruba?”

“Well, that’s a good question. I guess, basically, I’m 33 years old and not ready

to lounge on a beach just yet. Spaceflight has always fascinated me.”

“Now in a capitalist society the only way to get anything done is to have some kind of money-making scheme, some kind of ‘business plan’, like I was saying, and we’ve got no business plan of any kind for how you recoup this many billions of dollars. So the only way to do it was to either be rich, or steal it, or be the government and do both. We stole it. Spaceflight *can* be done, but we live in a society hell-bent on forcing people to work for a System, and telling them constantly that they have freedom.”

“You don’t think we have freedom?”

“Why don’t you ask all those ‘people’? Ask them if they’d rather be flying into space or doing whatever mindless job they’ve got now, and see what they say? And be sure to point out to them that our great capitalist leaders could be mass producing spacecraft by the thousands. Ask yourselves, ‘if they needed them for a war...’?”

“And the investors in Keystone Securities?”

“People with money to burn, dumping cash into a high-risk mutual fund. I’ll bet not one of them would buy a hamburger at McDonalds. Let’s apply their own rational. I’m ‘helping them compete’. If some of them go out of business, so what? Throw it into a chapter! It’s nothing personal; businesses fail every day. I’m developing technology to fly to Mars, so the whole society benefits. I made a great deal; I just needed to restructure my debt!”

“I think people would say that we play according to the rules, and that you’ve broken those rules.”

“Yeah, who makes the rules?”

“Well, the rules are made through a democratic process.”

“In other words, the majority makes the rules, right?”

“That’s right... the majority.”

“Well, I’m not part of the majority.”

He started to chew a piece of gum.

“I’m not part of the majority... I’m a druggie! I’m a socialist! I’m an anarchist! I’m farther left than Jane Fonda! I’m more anti-American than Eagle Six! I’m against everything ‘the people’ believe in, and they’re against everything I’m for! I’m not part of the majority, and I don’t like democracy.”

“But if it’s what the people want...”

“‘The People’. You make it sound like it’s what *all* the people want. Then why do people blow up federal buildings; why do they bomb our embassies, why do they burn the country’s flag? Obviously, there’s a lot of people who don’t agree with these rules, and I’m one of them. The majority makes up these rules, and then expects everyone else to obey them just because they’re made ‘through a democratic process’. People obey the rules because they’re afraid of what will happen to them if don’t. The only thing that’s different about democracy is that it’s a different group of people making the rules. In Russia it was the proletariat; in Germany it was the Arian race; here it’s the majority. It’s always the same. Some big bunch of people that think that because they’re more advanced, or because they’re the workers, or because there’s more of them than anybody else, that they have the right to rule and build some big prison system for those who just won’t do what they’re told.”

“Now I feel as bad about ripping off capitalists as I would about ripping off communists or fascists, because to me they’re the same. Just another bunch of men with some nightmare system to be jammed down everyone’s throats.”

“But aren’t capitalism and democracy the best we’ve got?”

“No, there are alternatives! Not many left on Earth, mind you. Earth is civilized, which means it’s been conquered, colonized, and commercialized. No matter where you go, there’s some established government, be it democracy or dictatorship, and you’re just a little cog that better turn when its supposed to and not need too much oil. Out here, though, an entire solar system is waiting to be tamed!”

“The first thing we’re going to do is land on Mars, and plant our flag there,

because that is where our capital will be! Then we'll explore the asteroid belts. If we find almost anything valuable, gold or silver, platinum or pure silicon, it'll be 1849 all over again! And when you think that there's a whole planet out there, all broken up into pieces already..."

"Then we'll have something Earth wants! Then we'll trade with them on equal terms! Then we'll have freedom!"

He looked at his watch.

"Listen, we've got a lot of work to do with the cargo modules. I'll contact you... I'll be in touch."

...and he was gone.

T + 5 days

America must be run by fools

Perhaps because of his attitude, perhaps because of his altitude, perhaps because of his impunity, completely beyond the reach of any terrestrial authority, or perhaps simply because of what he said and how he said it, Marc Mercuriou seemed to incite the ire of nearly every American political leader, regardless of party affiliation or personal background.

“Get the hell out of the left lane, fifty-five!”

Congressman Richard Ecks leaned on his horn and zoomed around the slower car, passing it on the right. His radio and TV show had been on the air longer than he had been in Congress, and this harried commute from his office on Capital Hill to his studio in Fairfax had become a daily ritual. He pulled into his reserved parking spot and hustled inside, skipping the elevator and instead jogging up three flights of stairs.

“What did I miss?” he gasped as he reached the top, where his producer met him with a blank stare.

“Nothing. We’re still on with the space captain at nine.”

Ecks gulped down one of the steamed broccoli and banana seed milkshakes that he relied on to keep his 300 pound bulk under control. He changed, put on his makeup, drank half of another milkshake at his desk on the set, then set it out of view as the cameras came on.

“Good evening, and welcome to ‘Outside the Beltway’.”

“Capitalism has produced a society with the highest standard of living that has ever been seen on this planet. People are well-fed, well-housed, generally content with their jobs, with a surplus of leisure time and disposable income. Yet our opponents slam us at every turn because they can’t stand the idea of people working hard and getting rewarded for that work. Now this thief comes along, this criminal who has taken advantage of our society, stolen from our businesses

and our government, lied, cheated; he comes along with the nerve to blame capitalism for what? For letting him take advantage of our freedom? For giving him the opportunity to pull off one of the greatest con jobs in history – the 'Republic of Mars'? Let me start by asking you, *Captain* – how do you justify your theft?"

"Same way they justified Hiroshima – it had to be done."

"Hiroshima? We were at war, a war Japan started!"

"*Japan?! What Japan? The women and children, the innocent civilians that died, they started the war? They attacked us? We did what we had to do to win, and there was some 'collateral damage'. Same thing here.*"

"And how... what war... again, how do you justify your theft?"

"It had to be done! To stop capitalism! To stop democracy! It had to be done!"

Ecks stared bewildered at the screen while Mercuriou droned on.

"The communists loved to spout off about how they had put the first man in space, and how they had brought tractors and steel factories to this backwards, feudal country, and how everyone was guaranteed an education, and health care, and retirement, and how wonderful communism was. And the fascists loved to gush about their Zeppelin airships, and their autobahns, and how they had pulled Germany out of a worldwide recession, and how they were rebuilding their Reich and how great fascism was. It's all true!"

"At some point, though, you see a bigger, a more objective truth. Every one of these societies was built on the most vicious traits of mankind, and capitalism is no exception. 'Conflict and competition drive human progress forward,' they say. We've seen human progress driven by class conflict, we've seen human progress driven by racial conflict, and now we've got human progress driven by economic conflict. So if you want Zeppelins, or Sputniks, or Microsoft Windows, and these things are more important to you than your freedom, then pick whichever one of these brutal philosophies most appeal to you and go sign up."

"...and all this justifies theft how?"

“It has to be stopped! Just like facism! Just like communism! Now, I did what I had to do. I’ve answered your question, so move on.”

There was a pause, and then another.

“...and this ‘Republic of Mars’... how is its government structured?” “I’m the acting chief executive” “of course”

“...should we call you President?” “Captain”

Mercuriou reached dramatically for a prominently positioned switch.

“Alright, *Captain*, capitalism may not be perfect, and this society may not be perfect, but what sets us apart from communism and fascism is our commitment to freedom.”

“Freedom? What freedom? You have the freedom to be a capitalist, or to work for the capitalists, or to be put homeless on the streets!”

“Well, I guess freedom *is* limited for people who don’t want to work...”

“Let’s shortcut this debate. ‘Work’ is a propaganda term that means ‘making money’, right?”

“No, ‘work’ means ‘work’!”

“For the capitalist system! Work *for the capitalist system*! You always like to leave that part out! You carry on like everyone who opposes this society is a lazy bum who sits around drinking beer and watching Jerry Springer all day!”

“They are what they are! We reward people who work, not people who don’t!”

“What’s ‘work’? Does a stay-at-home mom ‘work’? Does someone running a soup kitchen ‘work’? And do they get the same reward as someone running a restaurant? If I write software and put it up on the Internet for free, is that ‘work’? Where’s my reward?”

“Well, that’s a hobby.”

“A hobby?”

“Something you do in your spare time. A job is what you do to put food on the table. We have to work in order to eat, Captain. We have to work to have houses, cars, clothes, computers, all of it. We have to sustain ourselves!”

“How do you sustain yourself? By refusing to do for people unless they pay you? How does that sustain anyone? But you dodged my question, Congressman. Are you defining work as making money, or doing something productive?”

“There’s no difference! That’s the beauty of capitalism; people get rewarded for hard work!”

“No difference! Some kid makes millions throwing a baseball, and father of five make pennies pushing a hot dog cart! Did Mother Teresa work?”

“She solicited donations; she was paid!”

“Capitalists do not solicit donations; capitalism is a restaurant that refuses to serve people unless they pay.”

“It is capitalism, because we have *freedom*! You can be a businessman if you choose, you can be social worker if you choose, you can be an author, you can be a doctor; it’s nothing imposed by the government; it’s your choice! You can be Mother Teresa! And you don’t like to hear this, Captain, but most people want is to better themselves through hard work, not charity handouts!”

“Then at least admit that capitalism rewards people who *do for themselves*! Sure seems like the only way to get rewarded for hard work is to slap a credit card form on everything!”

“Because in the real world, if you just give everything away, you’ll be out of business!”

“That’s right! That’s the ‘freedom’ of capitalism – you become a capitalist or you’ll be put out of business! We pay pitchers millions a year, support video game, music and film industries that each rake in more than ten billion a year, blow half a trillion a year on the military, but we can’t afford to feed people in

restaurants? Your 'capitalist democracy' is depraved! Your leaders are trash! Your entire society is built on forced labor for these creeps!"

"Freedom, Captain, Freedom!! Who the hell are you to tell someone else what they can and can't do with their property?!! How dare you, you socialist crook, you shameless thief, how dare you tell someone who's sweated tears and blood that they have to give everything away for free?! I've let you rant on because I felt like listening to your bombast! You're like a blind man screaming 'You Blinked!' How are you so much better than all these terrible capitalists? You're the worst kind of capitalist – you've stolen millions, billions of dollars to build your own dream! You needed money – that's why most people go to work in the morning! That's why all these evil capitalists don't just publish all their books on the Internet – because the authors need money to write them, money to print them, money to put food on the table in front of their children! You've got a problem with *authority*, *Captain*! Let's take a break now and I'll introduce our next guest when we return."

Senator Patricia Wye had been a fixture on the Washington scene for decades, first as a dutiful wife and more recently as a power broker in her own right. Seated comfortably by the fireplace in the Senate Reading Room, she looked about her as the commercial break ran. The chair was positioned precisely; the coffee cup was filled to exactly the correct level; an edge of the ornate rug could just be seen on the video monitor. She waited until the light came on before smiling, to make this act seem more spontaneous. As she fell easily into a familiar patter with Ecks, the cameraman noted that her frosted blond coiffure hadn't changed in twenty years.

"Senator, what do you say to Captain Mercuriou?"

"Only that this country is run by its people, through their elected representatives, and the capitalists do not own everything. If anything, it's the other way around – capitalism is chosen by the people and regulated by the government."

"Oh, it's regulated, all right. You've got laws to regulate factories, you've got laws to regulate fisheries, you've got laws to regulate farmers. If you chose decent leaders to begin with, you wouldn't need all those laws!"

"Well, we have to have laws, Captain."

“Why? I’ll tell you why. Because otherwise you’ll have two factory owners build on the same river. One will be clean and safe; the other one will just dump his waste into the nearest pond. The first one will go out of business in a year, and the second one will retire at forty laughing ‘Ha ha ha, you can’t *com - pe - te!*’”

“And we don’t allow that, captain! We allow free markets and free enterprise because they are beneficial to society, but we also need laws to protect the environment and ensure a level playing field, so that good corporate citizens are not victimized by abusers. Would you have us abandon the Clean Air Act, or the Clear Water Act? We have food stamps because we’re not willing to let people starve! We have social security and Medicare because we’re not willing to put the elderly out on the streets!”

“And who pays for it all? More taxes? Or just run it all up on the national credit card? How about a magician pulling a kerchief out of his fist – can he do it with cash?”

“We must control spending, but not by getting rid of programs that serve the truly needy.”

“Bottom line – if America is so great and so wonderful, why do we need all these government programs?”

“Because these government programs help make our society great! We allow free enterprise, we allow competition, we allow people to earn a reward from their labor, but we also have programs in place to achieve a clean environment, a safe food supply, reliable transportation, a minimal social support system. Women and minorities need protection against discriminatory labor practices, and children deserve a quality education. These decisions are made through a cooperative political process.”

“Your decisions are made on a TV game show, vastly elaborate, with stages all over the country, and Oh My God so expensive! You’ve got to be flying everywhere, giving speeches, buses, banners, ballons, all kinds of buttons and bumper stickers! It costs huuuuge amounts of money to play, the judges watch everything on TV, and they have an average IQ of 100! This is what your government has been since the invention of television! It’s got troops all over God’s creation,

enough national debt to last a half century, the biggest prison state in the world, a wall across its southern border, and now it's out to enslave the world under globalization! I call it a Game Show Government, and it's a disaster of truly Biblical proportions!"

"We're governed by the Constitution..."

"You're governed by a TV Game Show!"

Wye firmly grabbed her head, re-adjusted her hair, then laughed.

"So now you're against democracy..."

"You're damn right I'm against democracy! It's one of the most tyrannical political philosophies ever! Its premise is that one group of people are somehow entitled to rule over everyone else just because there's more of them!"

"The people choose their own own leaders!"

Mercuriou laughed, then sneered.

"Which people, Senator, surely not all the people!"

"Yes, The People!"

"What about the two million people you've got locked up in your jail cells, the largest prison system in the world? Do they choose their own leaders?"

"We have a participatory democracy, Captain! The people can petition their government to change the laws, and if enough people support them, the laws *will* change!"

"You didn't say the people could *participate*! You said the people could *choose their own leaders*, but in fact only the majority get to *choose their own leaders*; they do it on a TV Game Show; everyone else participates, and loses! Hell, I'll take 'participatory government' any day! You participate, and I'll make all the decisions! I'll even have my own TV Game Show! What do you say?"

“Well, that would be a dictatorship, Captain, but I suppose that’s what you’ve had in mind all along. The bottom line is that people of this planet have decided on democracy, captain, we’re not going back!”

“I don’t care. It’s not the bottom line; not for me. I won’t accept it. None of us should. The majority care about three getting rich, getting tough, and getting laid! They aren’t entitled to rule everyone else’s lives! Nobody has that right!”

“Democracy is *responsive* to its people; we have the ability to change!”

“Oh, the communists talked about change too, senator. The dictatorship of the proletariat was just going to wither away and leave us with some utopian socialist future. I’ll bet it came as one hell of a shock to a whole lot of people in Russia when it finally dawned on them that communism was going to remembered for *exactly what it was* and not some fantasy future that never happened! You can talk change all you want; democracy is going to be remembered for *exactly what we live in today*... no fantasy futures allowed!”

Ecks’ final guest on the program was the Reverend Caiaphas Zee, a prominent Southern Baptist minister who had formed a mega church empire after a failed presidential bid, and now seemed content to advise the politicians he could not supplant. Standing in his pulpit, clad in his black cassock and starched white collar, with a simple wooden cross hanging from a cord around his neck, he seemed the very personification of a prophet of God.

“Captain, you are a liar and a thief.”

“I’ve said everything I intend to say on that issue.”

“Then let me say more! We have laws not because they are made by man, but because they are commanded by God! We are told ’thou shall not steal’!”

“If that’s all you want to debate...”

Mercuriou reached again for the switch, but Zee thundered on.

“Throw the switch, Captain, go ahead! That’s all I want to debate! ’Thou Shall Not Steal’! ’Thou Shall Not Steal’!”

Mercuriou paused, then threw the switch. Nothing happened. He grinned.

“OK, Reverend, so maybe I won’t switch you off just yet.”

“Thou Shall Not Steal, Captain, *Thou Shall Not Steal!* God *commands* capitalism, because the civil magistrate is not to go beyond his authority to enforce God’s laws!”

“God’s laws or man’s laws?”

“God’s laws, Captain, and the United States has adhered to them! It’s not perfect, mind you, we still have a million unborn babies slaughtered every year, music and movies that hype drugs and drunkenness, and all manner of sexual debauchery imaginable!”

“Yet capitalism is moral... *why?*”

“Because God does not allow the government to steal! We tithe to the church to support it, including its charities, and the government is to tax a small portion more, primarily for law enforcement. And many people give quite a bit more than ten percent to the church, let me assure you. We have some *very* generous members in our congregation.”

“You’ve got this nightmare of capitalism that’s another slavery all over again...”

“Capitalism is not another slavery! We don’t bind men in chains to force them to work!”

“It is another slavery, Reverend! It’s another depraved philosophy that has become entrenched in our society; many people do not choose to work; they are forced to. The chains are poverty and homelessness, hopelessness and despair! Your majority today, just like in the 1800s, can see nothing wrong with it, and democracy, again, is completely incapable of making the basic moral value judgements necessary to govern a society!”

“We did and do make those value judgements, captain! Slavery was against God’s will! Those who rejected freedom fought against it, but freedom ultimately prevailed!”

“Freedom ultimately prevailed! Where were the checks and balances? Where was the Bill of Rights? Where were the noble statesmen, deliberating together in a free and cooperative government to advance the great banner of liberty? It took the bloodiest war in U.S. history to end slavery, so what can democracy really be worth? And if it takes the same thing to end capitalism? How many more ‘successes’ like the Civil War can this country afford?”

“The Civil War was a success, captain, however bloody it may have been; sometimes you have to fight for freedom! The abolitionists tried for many years to work within that system; but it was too badly flawed. Finally, one of the greatest Presidents this country ever produced took a stand for liberty and freed the slaves!”

“Reverend, if we had gone to war with Russia over Cuban missiles, or the Suez Canal, or any other stupid thing, there’d be people to this day touring the radioactive ruins of Washington, and New York, and Los Angeles saying it was all worth it; communism had to be stopped; freedom had to prevail. People love war; your own Bible has enough of it. People are greedy, too. Find those saints of yours and put *them* in charge of the government, we know where the majority will lead us!”

“What’s your solution, overthrow any government whose laws you don’t like?”

“You look somberly at the laws, and look somberly at the men who make the laws, and come to a conclusion that the men are self-serving materialists consumed with their economic and political theories of capitalism and democracy, and that their laws are convoluted, misguided, and unjust.”

“Many people would agree with those criticisms, captain; perhaps you should have become a politician instead of a thief! Nobody will listen to you now!”

Ecks interrupted before Mercuriou could fire back.

“Well, our time is growing short, captain, and it looks like our prison system is going to remain a little short, too. I don’t think it’s worth the expense to apprehend you right now.”

Mercuriou now broke out into a long, genuine laugh. Ecks paused for a moment,

then kept talking.

“I suppose there’s no harm in leaving you be. You’ll eventually have to come back down. In the meantime, when you make it Mars, if you make it to Mars, do us a favor. Have the dignity to plant an American flag there. It’s the least you can do for the country that footed the bill.”

T + 10 days sanity must (briefly) appear

“Look, there are certainly plenty of people who would love to quit their jobs, throw off their leaders and fly away into space, but how are they supposed to get up here? The simple fact is that you had to steal billions of dollars just to launch five people into orbit, and that’s fairly consistent with NASA’s cost budget. What you’re suggesting is completely impractical.”

“OK, I’ll concede that they’re not going to make it up here exactly the way we did, but what’s the alternative? There’s nothing left on Earth. It’s a failed planet turning into one big global hegemony.”

“You can’t rationalize a decision just by saying that the alternatives are unacceptable.”

“Why not?”

“Because the solution to missing the school bus is not to invent a time machine! Sometimes *all* of your options are unacceptable. Then it becomes very easy to pick the most attractive one and gloss over its manifest defects. That’s why we have planning meetings and project cost estimates, Gantt charts and Capability Maturity Models. If *none* of your options are capable of hitting your target, then you need to know that *before* you push the little red button in the launch tower!”

Mercuriou paused and studied her.

“Andrea, I have studied these options. The one I’ve chosen certainly has a lot of defects, but I really am convinced that it might work. Mars, I admit, is a bit of a publicity stunt, but after we’ve landed there we’ve got to take a close look at the asteroid belt. There are probably more minable mineral resources there than on the entire Earth. With the automation we’ve got, if we can set up a manufacturing plant there, we can build more ships like this one. We’ve already built one, so we know how to do it. We can set up hydroponics to grow food, establish a colony there and send ships back to Earth to bring more people.”

“We’re not going to need the hydroponics, Marc.”

All eyes turned to the hatch. Though the crew, gathered together in the 767, had not specifically excluded Vic, they had grown used to his absence. His first appearance outside his quarters in a week now stunned everyone. While Mercuriou silently assimilated his statement, Andrea was the first to respond.

“So how was the meditation, Vic?”

“Andrea, the meditation was... great. I’ve always struggled to achieve really deep meditation; my mind’s always going a million different places at once. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but up here... floating... weightless... up here it was *easy*! But I suppose you already knew that!”

“Actually, I’ve never been much into meditation.”

“Oh, come on. Prayer, meditation, listening to God... call it what you will. Don’t tell me you’ve never sat for an hour in silence in some quiet chapel somewhere.”

Slowly, Andrea nodded.

“Have you never tried it up here?”

“I can... well, no, truthfully one of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life came during a spacewalk. But usually my time on orbit is so stressed out and hectic, not to mention cramped and noisy, that, no, I don’t really see space as a time for prayer and contemplation. Maybe I should.”

“What did you mean... that we don’t need the hydroponics?”

“I’m not sure, Marc. It’s just real clear to me now that you’re not going to need a doctor, and you’re not going to need the hydroponics.”

“So...what? We’re just going to give up after a year and go home?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“What then? You’re saying we’re going to die up here?”

“No, I didn’t say that, either. I can’t really explain it, Marc, except to tell you that I wrestled mightily trying to decide whether to come along with you on this. I know now that it was totally worth it, I’m thrilled to be here, I don’t question it now for a minute, but I also know that... I’ve gotten *centered*, Marc, I don’t know how else to explain it, I’ve gotten centered, and I understand now that my presence here is totally superfluous. You don’t need me... as a friend, yes, as a spiritual adviser too, but not for anything else.”

“And what happens... when our food runs out?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve just got... one of your ‘feelings’?”

“More like a certainty.”

There was another long pause.

“Can I say something?”

“Sure, say whatever you want.”

“Well, if we move out of orbit, I mean, that’s what we’re taking about, right? That puts us out of range of the space shuttle!?”

“That’s a real good point, Alister. Look, you’ve made your point. Now we’ve got to test this craft. Let’s start looking at re-entry scenarios...”

“We’re going to Mars, Dr. Yeats, that’s not going to change.”

“Fine, you can go to Mars, but first you’ve got to test this spacecraft in a controlled environment where there are rescue options both in orbit and on the ground.”

Again there was silence, a longer one.

“She’s got a good point, Marc.”

Merceriou guffawed.

“First Vic, now you going turn traitor on me too, Burns?”

Burns answered with a laugh of his own.

“Hey, I’m just saying what she says makes a lot of sense!”

“Burns, the minute, nay, the second these wheels touch the ground, we’re just five little nobodies at the mercy of those governments.”

“We could contact a neutral country... Switzerland might let us land.”

“Sorry, Doc. Burns, take us out of orbit.”

Over the next several days, the crew focused their energies on the ship. After assembling the rest of the cargo modules into a long chain, they mated the 767 to the rear and drove the entire assembly into interplanetary orbit. Meanwhile, almost imperceptibly, they passed from Breaking News to Established Fact, and promptly vanished from the media news coverage.

T + 54 days

nobody must have to work

“Whoo-hoo!”

Alister barrelled down the module at the speed of a racehorse, his arms flailing wildly. He pulled them in to his sides and made his body rigid as he sailed through a mating node into the next module. Now he waved his arms in front of his face.

“Ahhhhh!”

Again he pulled his arms in to his sides, passed another mating node and began gyrating wildly.

“waHHHH!”

He tucked, grabbed a handlebar as he flew into the 767, and spun around into a pullup that he released with just enough backward momentum to let him glide into the cabin. Droplets of sweat from his forehead kept going, spraying out over the rest of the crew.

“What’s that smell?”

“Soy beans... from the garden!”

“Soy beans?”

Alister imagined the pressed blocks of tofu he passed by in the supermarket.

“I rather like them steamed.”

“I don’t know about this... I’ll eat them, though!”

“Ever been to a sushi restaurant?”

“Sure, I love sushi! Where’s the tuna hand roll?”

“Ever had those green beans they serve as appetizers?”

Alister raised an eyebrow and the doctor nodded affirmatively as the microwave beeped. Removing the steamer, Vic opened it and let some of the cooked soy beans float out, along with an ample quantity of steam. The aroma of fresh vegetables permeated the air.

“What have we got here?” the captain asked as he floated up with Burns from the rear of the aircraft.

“Are these from the garden? Great!”

“Did you see this?”

The latest news updates from Earth had brought word of an explosion in Nigeria that had killed hundreds scavenging gasoline from an illegally tapped pipeline.

Mercuriou was grinning.

“Lycurgus would have approved.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? The African capitalists want to pump oil and ship it to America while their own people starve. What’s wrong with a little ‘competition’?”

“Who was Lycurgus?” Alister asked as Andrea shook her head in disgust.

“He was the founder of Sparta, maybe the greatest socialist success story ever.”

“Were they Communists?”

“Not exactly. Or maybe they were, depending on how you look at it. The parents didn’t raise their children, for example, the children were raised by the state. And their ‘education’, if you can call it that, consisted of leaving them to starve unless they could steal food to eat.”

“That’s insane!” the youth replied. “Why on Earth wouldn’t they feed their own children?”

“Lycurgus wanted a nation of warriors... and he got it. We want a nation of bastards, and we’ve got that!”

“Mankind’s determination to train children to evil *is* amazing.”

“Well, maybe you can be our twentieth-first-century Lycurgus, Doctor,” Vic speculated with a mischevious grin. “Maybe you can prescribe a set of rules for us to raise our children to be Christians instead of warriors.”

“I think Jesus already gave us those rules far better than I could.”

“The problem is that people don’t live by those rules. Just because the teachings are transmitted, doesn’t mean they’re understood. Just because they’re understood, doesn’t mean they’re practiced. They’re talked about all the time, but mostly it’s just talk.”

“I don’t know about that, Vic; it’s not just talk. Edward Gibbon thought that Christianity was a major factor in the destruction of the Roman Empire. At first the Romans were Pagans, they gloried in the martial arts, taught their children the virtues of war, worshiped gods like Mars and Jupiter. Then came along the Christians, everybody started turning the other cheek and forgiving their enemies, before long, no more Roman Empire.”

“A large part of medieval Christianity was about propping up the Roman Empire, and then the Popes, and all the monarchs who got their scepters from the Popes. Christianity certainly got bastardized in the process. What amazes me about Western civilization is how pervasive is this notion that the individual somehow owes something to the state, or at least to the society. In ancient times it was obedience to the King, now it’s obedience to democracy. And of course people are obligated to work, too. That’s all gotten embedded into the religion. It’s all part of propping up a society.”

“But people have to work to live, right? I mean, people have always had to eat!”

“Yes and no. It’s true that people have always had to work to eat, but this notion

that people have to work *for the society* is what Marc's talking about. Take the Native Americans, for example. If anything, they believed that society had a responsibility to the individual to raise him to be independent. They taught their children from a young age to build fires by rubbing sticks together, to recognize wild plants as edible or poisonous, to build a shelter or a bow and arrow just from the natural materials you'd find lying about in a forest. The net result was that by the time they were fifteen years old, they could literally walk out into the forest and take care of themselves. Their society was more voluntary. If anyone didn't want to be there, they could just get up and leave. Murders, robberies, the violent crimes that we're so familiar with, were almost unknown. I think it was because they raised their children to be truly independent, while Western society for generations has raised people to be dependant. Most people wouldn't have the slightest idea how to feed themselves if they couldn't walk into the supermarket with a twenty dollar bill in their hands."

"So we should give up our technology and go back to living like Indians?"

"It might not be a bad idea. The human race might be too primitive for all this technology. You'd definitely be healthier living in the woods; maybe happier, too. What I'm trying to say is that industrialization had radically transformed human society, and the shock waves are still being felt. In the last hundred years, well, two or three hundred years in Europe, but a hundred years in the U.S. and the rest of the civilized world, we've gone from a primarily agrarian society to a primarily industrial one; we've gone from people living on farms to people living in cities. That means people are dependent on each other to an extent never seen before, not in all of human history, and that exasperates the problems. Most human societies are based on coercion, on greed, on the domination of man over man, of the strong over the weak. The more industrialized society becomes, the more dependent people are on it and each other, and the more oppressive society can become. There's just no way around this, unless millions of people are going to decide to change their human nature, to abandon greed for generosity, force for persuasion, and rights for responsibilities."

"So the philosophers have turned to politics to try and find their freedom there. Their latest dopey idea is democracy; they keep trying to convince us that freedom is to be found in that dumb vote, and don't you dare try to tell these people otherwise. They'll scream you down as a Communist until the work bell rings. Go to church on Sunday to hear how you need to work hard so you can give more

when they pass the collection plate around.”

“Marc, do you still need me to distinguish true Christianity from bastardized Christianity? Jesus didn’t teach us to work to eat, in fact, just the opposite. He taught us not to worry about food, or clothing, or housing. He said to put your faith in God for those things. He pointed out that the birds in the air don’t sow the field, or reap the harvest, yet God provides them with all the seed they need to survive. Jesus taught us to put God first, love and generosity second, and let your faith take care of the rest.”

“That sounds good, Andrea, but faith in God didn’t get any of us here. None of the companies that sold us this equipment did it for love or generosity. They did it because they thought they would get something out of it for themselves. We got here because we were willing to take it.”

“That’s funny, Marc, because I don’t remember taking anything from anyone. Faith in God got *me* here.”

T + 107 days there must be a sex scene

The club was packed. Colored beams of light flirted with the twenty-something revelers on the dance floor as strobes pumped with the beat and lasers scanned above the fog that filled the room. By the bar and in the alcoves, older men flirted with the youth. The crowd, high on liquor and pot, sweat and sex, moved and vibed with the latest rock/rap hit.

games are addictive
games are insane

Alister weaved and bobbed with a twenty-year-old brunette wearing a tight white top and blue slacks. She brushed against him as they twirled and then pressed her head against his chest. Breathing deep, he inhaled her fragrance and squeezed her tight.

games waste your time
games waste your brain

“You know what?” she whispered in his ear, “I want to see you in your underwear!” They kissed, hard, lost in the crowd, the beat pounding.

books are the ticket
books are the tool

“Let’s take a shower!” he yelled over the music. She shot him a coy look. “You want to have sex?” she asked. “No, no, I mean, maybe, I don’t know, I just mean, probably, but I just want to take a shower with you, I think it’d just be fun!”

books ain’t for nerds
books ain’t for fools

“What the hell are you doing!?” Mercuriou shouted, “You’re supposed to be looking for Andrea Yeats!”

“Wha... what?” Alister blubbered as he jolted awake.

He was alone in his darkened compartment, wearing a pair of headphones connected to the laptop floating nearby. Yanking them off, his heart pounding, he listened intently for the captain’s voice, but heard nothing other than the constant hum of the air conditioner and the tinny noise squeaking out from the headphones. He unplugged them from the laptop. Silence.

Calming, he stretched and exhaled. Grabbing hold of a pillow floating nearby and squeezing it in a tight embrace, he dozed back to sleep. *Man, she was HOT.*

T + 124 days madness must prevail

“We *have* to land.”

“Why? Why do you have to land? Why can’t you just go back to Earth? You’ve already accomplished more than any other space mission to date. *Xplorer One* will go down along with with Vostok 1 and Apollo 7. So what that we didn’t land...”

“We have to land! People don’t remember Apollo 7; they remember Apollo 11! If we don’t land, they’ll say we failed. Then they’ll come back a few years from now and make the first landing on Mars; hell, they’ll use our technology to do it, and everyone will remember Captain so-and-so or Major such-and-such saluting the first American flag on Mars!”

He now swung his face close to Andrea’s and lowered his voice.

“But they’ll be too late! I’m planting the first American flag on Mars — face-down in the Martian dirt!”

More than a hundred million people were watching the crew conference on television. Now settled into Mars orbit, and with a landing attempt only days away, most terrestrial cable TV systems devoted a channel full-time to the *Xplorer One* video feed, which now featured the main cabin of the 767. During the crew’s sleep cycle, a scrolling orbital panorama of the red planet’s surface had become a standard fixture on many a TV screen, highlighted by a small colored box labeled “LIVE – Mars Orbit”.

“So let them! Why do you have to risk everything just to win your private little war? Or do you seriously think you can survive down there?”

“Well, maybe you find this hard to understand from your cushy NASA perch, but there’s a lot of people back home rooting for us to show the world that you don’t have to become one of these ruthless bums to get something done in life.”

“Oh, please! Don’t you? Haven’t you? How many billions did *you* steal, Marc? How many toes did you step on? Don’t tell me you haven’t become ruthless!”

They locked eyes. Mercuriou fell into his slow-and-firm, no-sensense tone of “command”.

“We are landing on Mars. That has been a primary mission objective since day one. We take the risks as they come. If you learn to live with disappointment, she’ll never leave you for another man.”

T + 150 days somebody must die

“We’re getting a lot of vibration,” Burns reported.

He was seated next to Vic in the 767’s cockpit, descending backwards through the Martian atmosphere with the plane’s nose aimed at the sky. Light engine thrust was being used as a brake. This was just a reconnaissance flight; the rest of the crew was in the cargo modules.

“Is that unexpected?” Vic asked.

“It didn’t happen on Earth; I’m slowing down more.”

Burns pushed the throttles forward. They were still more than ten kilometers high, and he expected the vibration to ease as the rockets slowed the vehicle.

“Burns, you, uh, you’ve got a lot of atmospheric turbulence developing around you,” Mercuriou reported from orbit.

“What’s going on here?” the engineer wondered. “This should be dampening as we slow down; instead, it’s getting worse.”

The ship was definitely beginning to vibrate. The vibration somehow spread outward from the ship and coupled into the atmosphere, which responded by swirling around and buffeting the ship with wind.

“I’m aborting,” Burns declared as he pushed the throttles forward, and the entire ship began to shake like a washing machine.

The 767 was now in a full-fledged Martian cyclone, with itself at the center. The engines strained at full throttle. The ship slowed, stopped, and then began to climb. In the cockpit, the two men heard a loud pop as the rudder tore away from the fuselage and went careening away towards the red planet below.

“What was that?”

A wailing alarm and a dozen red lights on the instrument panel answered his question. The spaceplane lost its equilibrium, pitched back and began to yaw, overwealmed by the aerodynamic forces of the maelstrom, a raging hurricane with no eye. The left wing snapped off the fuselage, and slammed into the battered tail.

In the cockpit, Vic watched the mad swirl of the artificial horizon like a exposed tank commander watching an armor piercing round headed straight for his turret. He glanced over at Burns, fighting madly against the controls, and a calm peace enveloped his soul.

Now I get the answer key.

Mercuriou looked at him closely. “Is that a cliché?”

“What?”

“nevermind”

“I saw an angel, mommy!”

“Burns? Burns?”

T + 151 days everything must seem hopeless

“This is what Alister recorded on the high-speed film.”

Kyle’s face disappeared and the video transmission changed into a high definition image of the doomed 767, seen from almost directly above, buffeted in slow motion by hurricane wind gusts.

“We’ve been able to enhance it to clearly show the eddies.”

Indeed, the monitor now showed strong vortices coming off the running engines, enlarging and growing, twisting and coalescing into a massive storm. Then Kyle was sitting in his usual place in the control room.

Andrea squirmed. She wanted to see the final breakup in slow motion, wanted to track what had happened to the cockpit, wanted to see the storm that had then disappeared like a phantom conjured by a voodoo priestess. More than anything else, she wanted to ask a question, but the radio time lag prevented it.

“We just don’t know what happened. It looks the engines created some kind of storm, but nothing in any of our Martian models predicts it. I’m genuinely sorry for your loss of your crewmates, Andrea. I don’t know what else to say. Houston out.”

The transmission ended and was replaced by the usual screen cluster on the projector.

The Captain was silent. Then he left.

T + 162 days suicide must be contemplated

The Captain stopped working. Alister and Andrea did all the work, or more precisely all the work on the spaceship, because Kyle's 'mission control' facility in Houston was now constantly on one of the monitors. Sometimes Andrea would just stop and watch it for several minutes, unable to directly participate because of the nearly hour-long round-trip radio time lag. [CHECK] They arranged an elaborate system of communications, transmitting each other a summary of their progress every hour, then pausing an hour later to listen to the other's summary, which had been transmitted half an hour earlier, and then transmitting another. They also arranged for an audible alarm to sound if they wanted to interrupt the other's proceedings.

"Oh, and thought you might want to see this," Kyle announced towards the end of his 0800 transmission, the first of the morning.

He held a popular American newsstand tabloid to the camera. A photograph of their spaceship was overlaid with a drawing of a wild-eyed seer with deep, penetrating eyes staring directly out at the reader.

"Apparently some of Nostradomes's quatrains referred to the *Xplorer One* — something about 'the great bird crippled in the sky' — looks like the death of your chief engineer is only the first of many woes to befall you guys, let's see, the first death was by fire, the last will be by ice, and, oh yeah — none of you will ever make it back to Earth alive!"

"Thanks a lot, Kyle," Andrea told the video screen as his voice droned on. "When I get home, remind me to read you *your* obituary over coffee in the morning!"

After finishing her coffee, she knocked on Mercuriou's hatch, entered without waiting, and closed it behind her. He turned away from the tiny portal window and faced his first officer as she read from a tablet.

"We've got OMS-27 coming up. It's a 37.42 mega-newton burn at 374 by 1 solar starting at 13:42 on T + 698. It has a tapered entry and step cut-off, is 3 hours,

17 minutes and 13 seconds in duration, and put us on course for Earth.”

“A three hour OMS burn?”

Secretly, Andrea was glad to see this reaction, much more so than quiet resignation, but this she tried not to show.

“We don’t have the 767 anymore, Marc. We’ve taken a spare engine out of storage just to get any propulsion at all. It’s going to take forever just to get out of Mars orbit. And our transfer orbit will be a year and half long.” [CHECK THIS]

Mercuriou nodded assent, then announced “I’m going to sickbay.”

Sickbay had not been opened since Vic’s death. The captain keyed the lock, opened the hatch and pulled himself through. Andrea followed behind, then stopped and looked around while Mercuriou retrieved his pills.

The room was immaculate. Everything had been either cleanly stowed or repacked into its original box and stowed. Even Vic’s laptop, normally floating free at the end of its tether, was neatly packaged away.

“What are you thinking?”

“You don’t want to know what I’m thinking.”

“Yes, I do. I really want to know what you’re thinking.”

He looked back down at the capsules in his hand, dry swallowed two and shoved a third back into the container before stowing it. Then he floated still and was silent for a while. Encompassing sickbay with a wave of his arm, he answered.

“I knew this thing was dangerous. I guess I just always figured if somebody was going to die, it was going to be me, so... so what, right? I didn’t think it would be my best friends.”

“We all knew it was dangerous...”

“No. You were right. I’ve cut so many corners on this thing, I might as well have reached out and killed them myself. I... I just don’t... I should never have done all of this.”

Mercuriou deflated visibly with this last admission, the first time he had verbalized any such sentiment.

“Why even bother to go on... What’s the point?”

Andrea lowered her voice, moved closer, and took him by the arm.

“Look, let me tell you something. I’ve been on two space shuttle launches, and watched two dozen more. And every time, I mean *every time* they say ‘Go at throttle up’...”

Her voice drifted off and she choked back tears.

“You know why we lost *Challenger*? The engineers knew it was too cold to launch, but the managers thought, well, maybe we can let it slide a bit this time, it’s always worked before, no big deal.”

“Look, I don’t what you’re trying to tell me...”

“People cut corners driving their cars — ‘oh, I’m not that tired, I’ll be OK to drive’ — people cut corners at work — ‘fix it later, we just need to get it out by the deadline’ — people cut corners at home — ‘Johnny’ll have another ball game next week’. People cut corners all the time; it’s a fact of life.”

“So they died because you cut corners; because you weren’t perfect! Your plan wasn’t perfect, your ship wasn’t perfect, and you weren’t perfect. But *I* knew your plan wasn’t perfect, and I came anyway. And *they* knew it wasn’t perfect, and they still followed you. It’s over. It may take you a long time to forgive yourself; actually, you’ll *never* forgive yourself, but it’s over. You made a mistake and people died, but now it’s time to go on. It’s a bit easier since we’ve only got one place to go.”

T + 189 days

suicide must occur

With cork puller still attached, the cork went flying unheaded across the cabin as the Captain grabbed for the plastic cover and slapped it over the top of the wine bottle. Even so, several gobs of the red alcohol went floating into the air, the liquid's surface tension forming them into perfectly round spheres. Andrea laughed, but Mercuriou remained morose and somber. The picnic had not been his idea.

"You'd think that after half a year in space, you'd have learned how to open a wine bottle without spilling it everywhere!"

"What I've learned," Mercuriou answered, as he spun across the compartment and swallowed one of the larger floating drops, "is that wine's a lot easier to clean up here!"

"Alister, the picnic's starting!"

"I'll be there in a minute," came the reply from the next module.

Mercurio spilt only a few more drops as he 'poured' the wine into two wine glasses, each one quickly covered with a flat plastic square. Drinking from straws was much easier, but an hour earlier, after Andrea suggested a picnic lunch, Marc had dug into the ship's stores and produced the glasses alongside the bottle, and they had stood on tradition, at least for the moment.

"Cheers!"

They clinked glasses and both laughed as Mercuriou spilled wine all over his face trying to drink it. Andrea grabbed a towel.

"You guys should come in here!" Alister yelled, then got up and propelled himself through the hatchway.

"Well, m-maybe you want to come in here," he stammered as he watched Andrea

trying to clean Mercuriou's face.

"What's up?" the grinning Captain asked.

"An airplane just crashed into the World Trade Center!"

"Well, hopefully, nobody was hurt."

"I'm sure the pilot didn't make it!"

"We'll keep him in our prayers."

They gathered around the picnic basket to pray. Andrea was about to bless the pilot, but at the last minute reconsidered and blessed the *people* in the plane. Soon Alister was back at the console.

"Another one! Another one!"

Burns once told Mercuriou that there are no great men, only great ideas, and that genius is the ability to retrieve those rare gems, that energy and mass are the same thing, related by the square of the speed of light. Why the speed of light? Why it's *square*? That was the fine-cut diamond Albert Einstein pulled from the rough. Tom Clancy was such a genius. Khalid Shaikh Mohammed was another. Both men had discovered the same fiery sapphire, that unbenonst to the masses of mortal men, a passenger jet can be used as a *guided missile*. One genius buried his discovery in the pages of a novel. The other held its blazing red light up for the world to see one terrible September morning.

"Another Timothy McVeigh or something," Mercuriou was saying. "The country is so hated; hell, you can say a lot about me, Andrea, but I never did anything like this."

The picnic was forgotten. At 1431 GMT, September 11, 2001, after first the event on Earth and then a radio lag of 3 minutes 17 seconds, the silent *Xplorer One* crew watched the second tower collapse. In the days ahead, it would be revealed that Islamic terrorists had hijacked four American airlines. Two had slammed, full throttle, into the twin towers of World Trade Center, at one time the tallest buildings in the world, and headquarters to dozens of major companies;

a third hit the Pentagon; the fourth crashed in Pennsylvania. Burns would have suggested imagining the pictures you've seen of jet crash scenes, then trying to project it 100 stories above you onto a skyscraper in lower Manhattan. Later, Burns would have made a quick calculation based on the published mass and height of the skyscrapers to estimate the energy released by their collapse - ten kilotons of TNT - the size of a small atomic bomb. Bankers, mail men, fire fighters, brokers, CEOs, bus boys - all lost their lives on 9/11. A pair of glasses, a morning cold, an early meeting - these became the difference between stumbling away covered in the white dirt of pulverized concrete or having your picture appear on a wall of sorrows over the caption - "97th floor, One World Trade, any information please call..."

Within hours, the nation mobilized. Medical teams sprung into action, fire fighters dove into the wreckage alongside men who walked up on the street and volunteered, desperate to find anything or anyone still alive in the tons of rubble. Yet the medics remained largely idle, and the anticipated stream of casualties into trauma wards only materialized near the Pentagon.

Within days, the world reacted. NATO invoked its mutual-defense clause; a French newspaper declared "Today, we are all Americans"; the British prime minister flew to America.

Within weeks, President Bush figured Al-Qaeda as the culprit, declared "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists", then bombed and soon invaded Afghanistan.

In America, a dissident's dream had prophesied disaster for the United States and war in the Middle East. In Afghanistan, an Islamic militant dreamed that his nation defeated the United States in a soccer match and all of their players were dressed as pilots. In Afghanistan, in Pakistan, or perhaps in Khartoum, Osama bin Laden was smiling.

T + 233 days

pacifism must be encouraged

“Maybe you shouldn’t go on TV right now.”

Mercuriou said nothing. He was busy preparing the video equipment for a transmission to Earth. He had already begun objecting to the government’s behavior, stating that an orderly extradition procedure should be followed rather than an invasion. The radio time lag prevented a debate, so he had to settle for making a speech.

“Maybe it’s not the best time.”

“Why? Because the country’s been hurt too bad to hear the truth?”

“What truth? That these jihadists took advantage of our freedom...”

“Took advantage of freedom!? You make it sound like anybody can just walk up to one of these training companies, ‘hey, I’d like to learn to fly a 767’... ‘sure, no problem’. You’ve got to have *money* to fly! How many people would love to fly but it’s too *expensive*... They took advantage of *capitalism*! They had the one thing that will make people say ‘yes’ in a society that says ‘no’, ‘No’, ‘NO’! They took advantage of the fact that Osama bin Laden is a *multimillionaire*!”

“...and attacked a civilian target!”

“Well, who you gonna attack? The political leaders, the President? They’ll just elect a new one and keep going, all hot to avenge him! Who really is responsible? Isn’t it The People, themselves? Isn’t that what they keep screaming, that it’s The People that run the government? The majority that elects these guys? Since it’s *The People* who run democracy, shouldn’t we hold *The People* responsible? And who was in the World Trade Center? Those people were the true believers! They were the *capitalists*!”

“I’m sure there were window washers there, too.”

“OK, fine. A lot of innocent people died, and a lot of firefighters trying to save lives. But *the majority* of the people in those towers were *The Majority*, and they didn’t come to work that morning to help make the world a better place, they were *in it for themselves* because that’s what runs democracy. Why attack the thing, anyway? It’s a *symbol* of capitalism, just like the Pentagon is a symbol of *militarism*!”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“And on God’s earth, why, woman, why?”

“Because you *forgive your enemies*, as we’re told in about a hundred parables! You don’t steal ‘more money than Bernie Madolf ever saw’ because they won’t let you fly to Mars, you don’t smash airplanes into their skyscrapers because they imposed some global capitalist system on you and you don’t invade foreign countries because they won’t obey your dictats!”

“Exactly! After we steamroll Afghanistan with the military, then we’ll impose The Greatest System of Government Ever. The majority will support it, at least at first, but the losers won’t just roll over and play dead like back home, if only because they’ve been invaded and conquered, not to mention their religion of jihad! No, they’ll fight, and you’ll get a civil war. It’s the inevitable result of any foreign attempt to impose a government there!”

“I just think you should wait a while longer.”

“Andrea, it’s like claxons going off in a cockpit! Brrrmpf! Brrrmpf! Brrrmpf! Whoop, whoop, pull up! And if the co-pilot just stays meek and silent, then the plane’s going to crash! You said it yourself, Andrea. The Word! The Word! It has to be heard!”

“You act like people have never heard this criticism. Don’t you think it’s been heard over and over, and rejected, time and again? They’re all off on the warpath now; they’re not going to listen to anything you have to say; you may as well just save it until we get home.”

T + 499 days

communism must be preached

[Make sure this is a Sunday!]

Andrea had by now received a special dispensation to celebrate Mass without a priest, and her televised Sunday services, often highlighted by direct dialog with her congregation of two, had earned her an unlikely reputation as a space-bourne televangelist. Today's Gospel lesson featured Matthew 7:21: "Not every one that said to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven."

"This is one of my favorite parts of the Gospel, because it affects one of the deepest rifts in Christianity - the split between Catholics and Protestants. Five hundred years ago, the Catholic church had gotten into the practice of selling indulgences; essentially telling people that through charitable donations to the church they could buy their way into heaven. We have since repudiated that practice. Before that occurred, however, Martin Luther spoke out decisively against indulgences, among other things, and when he would not retract his statements was expelled from the Catholic church. He initiated the Protestant Reformation, founded the Lutheran Church, and adopted the doctrine of Justification by Faith, which teaches that salvation is achieved solely through accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. In one form or another, this doctrine is accepted by most Protestant churches."

"Matthew 7:21, however, shows that Justification by Faith, at least in its most extreme form, is itself seriously flawed. Merely mouthing the name 'Jesus', no matter how piously done, is not a substitute for actually doing what God wants. Christ told us the same thing, a little bit differently, in a parable. Let's look at Matthew 21:28:"

"What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

“Actions speak louder than words.”

“Precisely. There is another passage, not from the Gospel this time, but from James’s letter, that reiterates this point:”

“What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

“So when Christ says that not all who call him ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of his Father in heaven, not only is it an amazing suggestion, that God actually has a will for each and every one of us, all six billion of us, but it provides a simple statement of what our goal should be in life - to do the will of God.”

“This, of course, is much easier said than done, to the point where *discernment* - discerning the will of God - has become a buzzword in religious communities. Some advocate meditation, St. Ignatius developed a lesson plan, Vic’s technique was the vision quest. Solitude, silence, prayer and fasting are common features shared by almost all. Another approach is based on the parable of the talents:”

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his money.”

“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’”

“His master said ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”

“The man with the two talents also come. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’”

“His master said ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”

“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master’, he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’”

“His master said, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.’”

“‘Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

“In this passage, we find more autonomy - we are given talents and it’s up to us how to invest them, rather than asking God to send us a portfolio. Rick Warren developed this approach in *The Purpose Driven Life*. He encourages his readers to look at their own skills, their own interests, their own limitations - in short, their own gifts, and achieve discernment by asking how best to invest them. Whatever the method, the attitude is that of a servant, and the goal remains the same - to do the will of God.”

“I haven’t done the will of God.”

Andrea paused.

“I don’t know about that. You’ve made your mistakes, but you’ve also said things that needed to be said, and found a platform from which they were heard. Now, did you need to steal a billion dollars to do that? I doubt it. I think you could

have found another way. This is why I don't buy the Christians who say you have to fight violently against evil. First off, it's un-Biblical - *resist not he who is evil*. Second, if there was ever a time when you could have justified a revolution, it was two thousand years ago when slavery was as commonplace as money, paganism was the religion of the masses, and Rome was the terror of the Mediterranean. Yet Christ didn't condone any revolution; didn't lead a protest march on the governor's residence; didn't stage a sit-in at the slave auction. Didn't do a thing to oppose his own murderers, and didn't let his disciples oppose them either. What he *did* do was teach; and in the beginning of John is this beautiful passage about the Word. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Why the Word? Because the Word is the weapon of the Christian, and the pen is mightier than the sword / books are the light of the world / free speech is greatest weapon in the world."

"But if you don't believe in Jesus? Who's going to listen then?"

"Well, people used to believe the Earth is flat. You can believe whatever you want; the fact is that the Earth is round. Now I believe that Jesus [of Nazareth] returned to life after three days in the grave. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't, but it's like the Earth being flat or round. People can debate it one way or another, but it's a factual question, and ultimately either true or false. I think it's true - the resurrection was God's ultimate stamp of approval; it was his way of telling us that we need to take Jesus seriously."

Alister had been seriously reading the Bible for the first time. Along with the rest of the crew, he had been receiving plenty of email from fundamentalists. Most of the *Xplorer One* crew deleted it along with the rest of their junk mail. Apparently Alister did not.

"Do you think we're living in the End Times?"

"Well, first of all, I don't pretend to understand the book of Revelation. Beasts with seven heads, strange numerology... People attach all kinds of meanings to it. But I'll tell you this. Even a cursory reading of Revelation shows that it's not about the end of the world."

"It isn't?"

“What happens at the end of the book?”

“There’s like a thousand years of peace, right?”

“So at the very least, we can say that it’s about a period in human history torn by war, oppression, deceit and disaster, that ends with the triumph of good. So I don’t even think about the End Times; I know people call it that, but I think about Revelation as more like the Transition Times.”

“But aren’t people going to be judged then? What do you have to do to be saved? Everybody says something different.”

“Well, that’s the nice part. Revelation doesn’t tell us how to live; the Gospels do that, and in fairly plain language, at least compared to Revelation. That’s why I don’t pay too much attention to Revelation. Maybe I should, but when I read the Bible, it’s usually the Gospels, because that’s where Jesus tells us how to live. And the basic rules are pretty simple: Love God - unconditionally, and love your fellow man - unconditionally. And maybe everyone says something different because even though that sounds easy, it can be really tough to figure it out in practice. Just like our Gospel reading today - easier said than done.”

T + 700 days everyone must be let off the hook

“Worry about your relationship with God; get that straight first, and the rest will follow.”

“Relationship with God? I’ve stolen who knows how many billions of dollars, gotten my two best friends killed, and am going to be sitting in a jail cell for the rest of my life, and you’re still taking about my relationship with God? I don’t think there’s much hope left in this life for Marc Mercuriou.”

“You’re looking at the past and the future, and you’re looking at it from a mortal perspective. Start with the present.”

Mercuriou waved his hands, gesturing around him.

“We’re floating in an air-conditioned tube with nothing to do and no way out. That’s my *present*.”

“An excellent opportunity for prayer and meditation.”

“I don’t know what to pray about.”

“You just gave me a nice little list! Forgiveness for the past; guidance for the future – two of the most important things for anybody to pray for.”

Mercuriou sneered.

“Forgiveness?”

“Marc, one of the central tenets of my religion is the *total forgiveness of all your sins*.”

For a moment, Mercuriou stared at her silently.

“To obtain that forgiveness, we are to commit our lives to God.”

“So a murderer, a rapist...”

“If the commitment to God is sincere and persistent, yes.”

The two astronauts floated in silence for several minutes. Finally, slowly, Mercuriou nodded his head in assent. “What have I got to lose, right?” Awkwardly, he clasped his arms around a hand strap, kneeled against the bulkhead, and was silent.

“Do you want me to leave?” Andrea whispered.

“No.” He sighed, bowed his head, paused again. Finally, in a low voice, he spoke.

“Dear Lord, forgive me my sins.”

T + 725 days fear must strike the hearts of men

Kyle Lankier fell into the morning rush heading into Building 39 and found himself beside a veteran astronaut prepping for an upcoming shuttle mission.

“How’s your thing going?”

Kyle shrugged. He struggled with his emotions before answering.

“I don’t know... everything looks OK... I’ve got a bad feeling, though.”

David grabbed his arm and stopped him.

“That’s mine! Everything looks OK... but it’s not!”

A chill ran up Kyle’s spine.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve had dreams... nightmares! We’re burning up in space! I’m all suited up, and I’m burning alive!”

The two astronauts stared at each other. Kyle ran over his thoughts. Had he had nightmares? He racked his memory. *Had he?* He looked up at David, his face ashen.

“This thing’s a disaster. I’m not coming back from this mission.”

“That’s mine. That’s mine, exactly.”

T + 756 days

some anti-government plot must be hatched

“Two thousand years ago we were told *Give to all those who beg of you*, but half of us still don’t believe that it was God speaking and the other half still don’t believe that he meant it. Amen.”

By the end of the sermon, Alistair had concluded that humanity was too primitive to be flying to Mars, too primitive to have nuclear power, too primitive to have global data networks, too primitive to have hyperdermic needles, or air travel, or oil wells or cars, and was genuinely wondering about the printing press. Mercuriou’s thoughts went in a more predictable direction, which he shared with Andrea in private.

“I cooked up some delusional scheme to achieve an impossible goal. I stole ruthlessly from strangers, got my two best friends killed, and will spend the rest of my life in prison. Obviously, I’m a total failure.”

“Don’t be so sure. You’ve accomplished a lot, and the least of that is that you’ve shown that man can fly to Mars and that a private space launch is plausible. You’ve made people question their basic convictions. But you’re stubborn and opinionated. As for Burns and Vic, you put us all in danger, but we went along with it, each for our various different reasons. You still need to set aside your material goals and put the Lord first in your life. You’ll still be stubborn and opinionated, but we can work on that. First get your course set straight, then we can trim the sails.”

In the next months, he cast himself into writing the words that would define him. For he would not be remembered for his flight to Mars nor his disaster there, not for his rants against capitalism nor his diatribes against democracy, but for the simple vision that he would now put into effect. And, for the first time in his life, Marc Mercuriou relied on God.

T + 681 days the ending must seem predictable

“Five.”

“Four.”

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

Alister’s voice clipped off the final seconds, then the computer began the insertion burn. The slight force from the engine pushed the crew gently backwards into their seats. The computer screen next to the engineer showed their current trajectory, in blue, an open hyperbola that skittered out off the screen, and their target trajectory, a neat red circle centered on a green disk that represented Earth. As the engines fired, the blue line began curving more strongly back towards the direction they were coming from, as another clock ticked down more seconds.

“Orbital interface in five, four, three, two, one, Earth orbit.”

The blue line flicked neatly into a broad ellipse. Alister breathed a sigh of relief. Almost nothing, short of something absurdly catastrophic, like crashing into the atmosphere, could stop them from getting back to Earth now. Even if the engine failed now, they would be in some crazy orbit that the OTV’s could get them down from almost no matter what. Now he just relaxed and watched the rest of the countdown.

“ECO in five; four; three; two; one; Engine Cutoff.”

The thrust stopped, just as the blue and red lines had merged into a single yellow circle. They were sitting in a circular, six-hour parking orbit above the heart of the African continent, clearly visible through the OTV’s portholes.

“Perfect burn,” Alister declared, letting out a whoop. “I almost expected a disaster, didn’t you?!”

“Sometimes you make it back alive, Alister! I’ve done it twice already!”

“There’s South Africa! There’s South Africa!”

Any reaction this would have prompted was interrupted by Andrea’s mobile.

“Good news, girl!” Kyle squawked on the radio. “We’re bringing you home on *Columbus*!”

T + 688 days

some dastardly blow must strike America

“Good evening. You first saw me floating in orbit two years ago, and have never known me any other way. Soon I shall disappear into prison, so it seems apropos that I bid you fairwell in this manner.”

“An age has passed and other has come in the brief hours that we have been apart. I left a nation confident and at peace and have returned to one scarred and at war. Half of my own companions have perished and our mission seems only able to limp on back home. Yet here, in the fleet-footed orbital day, I find myself looking more to the sunrise than the sunset, and feel myself thrilled again with the joy of youth!”

“For I see a new nation, rising up out of the ocean as if in answer to a prayer, a nation conceived in peace and dedicated to God. I see a young nation, hewn from the sea by fire and storm, settled by outcasts from remote lands who sought its yet farther shores. I see a nation determined to lead mankind away from its pitiful servitude to Mammon and into the broad light of freedom.”

“Alas, that nation is not America. She is committed to the chain, and only a revolution can break it. Yet how can we overthrow the American government? It possesses the most powerful military in the world, an able, though largely unnecessary police force, and, most importantly, a majority of 100 million determined to keep themselves in power on a game show.”

“We will overthrow them with democracy.”

“Impossible, you say? Let’s do the math. In the last election, Neil Abercrombie was elected governor of Hawaii with 222 thousand votes; James Aiona lost with 157 thousand. If all of them voted together, they’d have had 379 thousand. If the whole majority came streaming out to the polls for the election, maybe they could barely muster 500 thousand.”

“How much is 500 thousand? Well, in a nation of 300 million, it’s one sixth of one percent! Do you see where I’m going?”

“Under our laws, American citizens are free to travel anywhere in the United States and establish residency there. Hawaiian law enforces only a one-month residency requirement to vote.”

“So, are one-sixth of one percent of us so fed with up our leadership, so sick of our own lives, so disgruntled with America, that are willing to set sail for a foreign land and claim it for our own?”

“If so, then let’s take Hawaii and get the hell out of this country!”

“This will not be an easy path, and many will oppose us who should know better. It will take ten years of toil and struggle. The first years, especially, will be fraught with hardships.”

“We’ll need a common platform, broad enough to draw support from more moderate citizens, while not comprising our core values. What is it? Simply put, it’s everything that I’m been talking about since Launch Day, right?!”

“My great mistake was to reject capitalism without knowing what to replace it with. Some look to communism; some look to their religion. I’ve learned to look to *my* religion, and it is Christianity.”

“My first officer embodies everything that I am not. When I took the easy way out and stole, she stood cold and lonely by a highway on-ramp with her thumb out. When I set out recklessly for Mars, she told me that our problems were here on Earth. And I know that if all she has is a five dollar bill in her pocket, and a beggar asks for change, she’ll give him the five. Even if it means she goes hungry.”

“Remember that government is a coercive institution, and you can’t force people to be nice to each other. Yet words are more powerful than laws. Seek through *leadership* to enjoin upon citizens the need for Christian charity. Remind the waiters and cooks to feed the hungry. If they can’t pay rent, ask the carpenters to build them homes, and ask the farmers supply them produce. Ask your citizens to support those who base their lives on charity, instead of supporting those who know mainly the pursuit of money.”

“Do not work for the capitalists. If this seems anathema to you, then approach

it this way. Insist on Christianity. Tell your boss that when a customer comes through the door, you'll make it clear that they can take any product or service they want and will be asked only to make a donation if they wish. Does that boss still want you for an employee? If not, then part with him and his immoral lifestyle!"

"Look at employers the way you look at politicians. Always remember that we support the first with our labor as surely as we support the later with our votes."

"Make a strong commitment to education; it's one of the best investments possible. Rather than outlawing on-line public libraries, commit to building and maintaining them. As for the capitalist publishers, given their current business model, that information is a commodity to be packaged and sold, so therefore it must be locked down and controlled, only one response is possible. Simply abolish all intellectual property laws. Let us not tolerate a future where on-line public libraries are outlawed!"

"Without economic independence, political independence doesn't mean much. 'You have freedom,' we are told by the cynics. 'We will leave you hungry, homeless, ill-clad, without tools or training, but you have freedom - you can vote in our elections.' It's time to take them up on that offer, too!"

[ADD SOMETHING ABOUT FREE TECHNOLOGY]

"Now, free technology isn't just about free software, it's about going green. What happens when one of your capitalist gizmos breaks? You toss it into the nearest landfill. Now if the design is open, that device can be repaired. The capitalists don't want this. They don't want technology that can be repaired. They want throw-away technology. Instead of repairing these devices, they want you to buy a new one. Going green isn't mandated carbon scrubbers on smoke stacks. It's building clean, open, sustainable technology that everyone can build, improve, and repair."

"Now let us turn to our political system. We've got a lot of problems. We've built the largest prison state in the world. Our military is armed with the most lethal weapons of mass destruction that have ever been devised by man. Our flag has become a target of hatred and oppression to almost as many people as see it as a symbol of liberty and freedom."

“There is one central issue, though, that dwarfs all the others, that drives all the others - CAPITALISM! It is one of the most depraved and immoral philosophies that has ever been proposed by man. It is a modern day slavery that has corrupted and co-opted our entire society. NONE of the other issues can be addressed without addressing it first.”

“The majority of the American people, those few that are still listening, are dumbfounded at what they hear. That the police are not an instrument of social reform; that goods and services should be free; that books should be on-line; that capitalists must be driven out from every post of leadership. They will never accept this. They have built their entire society around rejecting this. And they are not going to change.”

“Those of us who reject capitalism face stark choices. We can continue to live in a society where we have no voice, no opportunity, and no future. We can trickle out in twos and threes, trying to find someplace in this world that doesn’t exist. Or, we can unite and we can concentrate. We can find a place in this world by making it. We can win an election in one state, and make that nation our own.”

“Finally, let me tell you the three most important things about democracy.”

“We’ve been told that democracy gives everyone freedom. It doesn’t.”

“We’ve been told that democracy will save the world. It won’t.”

“Freedom is choosing your own leaders.”

“I’m open to compromise. I am serious about secession, but the issue is not beyond compromise. We do, however, need serious political reform to avoid such a break. Several issues absolutely *must* be addressed to avoid such a break.”

“First, it is high time we put the mistake of Lincoln behind us, and grant states the right to secede. American states have no fewer rights than Russian satellites, and the causes of disenfranchised minorities here are no less noble than of those overseas.”

“Next, federal authority, beyond that granted to it in the Constitution, must be solely that granted to them by individual States. It’s unbelievable to re-iterate

what the Constitution already states, but we're still stuck with this rubber-stamp Supreme Court that Roosevelt put in in the thirties! Washington has no authority to regulate drugs, weapons, communications, abortion or agriculture, to name but a few of its extraconstitutional powers. However, if state legislatures want to maintain coordinated policy on these issues, they are amply able to grant powers to these national agencies themselves."

"Also, federal authority to regulate patents and copyrights must be repealed. I don't know what the states will do with this power, but hopefully it will be something better than outlawing on-line public libraries. This 'freedom' has been so abused that it must be abolished entirely, but we can leave that decision up to the various legislatures."

"Our courts must be reformed as well. Evidence shall not be excluded from juries, freedom of speech must be respected in the courtroom and juries must judge not only the fact, but the law. The suppression of defense evidence in the prosecution of Jack Kevorkian was terrifying, as were the contempt of court charges that have been handed out against journalists. We do not lose our freedom of speech when we enter the courtroom; in fact, that is often when we must rely on it the most! Juries are a crucial safeguard in a system of checks and balances, and must judge whether a law is just, not merely whether the defendant broke the law. We also need fair and independent judges, well versed in the law, ready to limit overreaching governments or juries. Both judge and jury must convict. The law, the prosecutor, the judge and the jury may each limit the sentence; only the least of these is imposed."

"America is unlikely to accept these changes, so instead I propose that we organize the Christian Commonwealth of Hawaii, to be governed by a bicameral legislature whose lower house suffrage shall be extended to all Hawaiian residents, and whose upper house suffrage shall be reserved for citizens. The elections will not be determined by simple majority rule, but will use a more complicated formula, similar to the Australian system, to promote representation of minorities. The chief executive shall be selected by the Christian churches of Hawaii, in conclave. There shall be neither oaths nor qualifications to hold elected office."

"We'll build a new Hawaii, an industrial Hawaii, whose industry must be centered on the big island, since only there, in the heat of the volcano, has Hawaii the energy reserves necessary to power a modern, industrial society. There, water

can be pumped into wells drilled down near magma formations, extracted boiling hot and driven through steam turbines to generate electricity. That electricity can then be converted to petroleum, or even better, processes can be developed to make petroleum directly in the hot wells. We'll need petroleum not only to sustain our economy until we can switch to more environmentally friendly solutions, but also to make plastics and other polymers."

"Any modern state requires a supply of silicon. The easy route would be to consume our beaches to obtain it, but a better route is to dig for our sand undersea and leave our beaches intact. Once purified, that silicon makes two great products: glass and semiconductors. Quality glass is needed not only for buildings and cookery, but also to make much of the laboratory and production equipment needed by modern industry."

"Our need to develop and protect our existing energy and technology should not lure us to neglect research. In many fields, but especially in computer technology, vast rewards lie ripe to be reaped."

"IBM has demonstrated 'Watson', a machine that can answer trivia questions well enough to beat Ken Jennings and Brad Ritter at *Jeopardy!* We need our own Watsons, in our airports to direct travelers, in our universities to aid literature searches, and ultimately on our desktops as the successor to Google. Will IBM release Watson's source code? If not, it must be duplicated."

"Let me emphasize this point: if IBM will not release source code, then Watson *must* be duplicated. It is as essential now as launching a satellite into orbit became after Sputnik. We are engaged in a technological arms race with a global capitalist network, powered by the forced or coerced labor of much of humanity, and dedicated to the principle that access to almost all of humanity's usable products will be controlled by money. Capitalism, especially globalization, must be stopped. If people wish to live in small communities governed by sick principles of social Darwinisms, coupled with a slick ignorance of the Christian Gospel, our commitment to freedom demands that we let them."

"Our revolution is not merely technical, though, it is spiritual. We seek not only free technology, but free food, free housing, and free beer. 'Free' does not mean without cost; none of these things are free in that sense. All must be strived to, worked at, and sacrificed for."

“Finally, let us remember why we bother to do this at all. We seek not merely to duplicate capitalism, but to supplant it. Our factory floors will be open to visitors; our blueprints will be published; our source code will be free.”

“One of the biggest challenges we face is energy. We need energy for lights, heat, transportation, communication. We need energy to drive our machines and energy to - our -. And we are dependent for that energy on Arab governments and petro-conglomerates. Energy, short of the spiritual crisis of capitalism, is the greatest challenge we face, because practically our entire society depends on it, and nobody can claim true political or economic independence unless we have energy independence.”

T + 690 days it must be rabidly anti-democracy

All of Mercuriou's opponents were back, their babbling heads arranged on the TV screen in a montage of boxes, each corner more determined than the other three to deride the space captain. Wye babbled nonsense, unclear to decide if Mercuriou was defending criminals and capitalists or terrorists and democrats, but absolutely *certain* that *these people will not get away with this*. Zee, stony and impassive, understood immediately that democracy itself was under attack, and right here in the United States of America, no less! Yet it was Ecks, red-faced with rage, and with his hand on the mute button, who was again the first to speak.

"A Christian! So the thief has converted to God!"

"Look, what I did was wrong, but there's nothing to do now but move on. If you don't have any questions about my speech, I'll just save some radio power now."

This time, he really was reaching for the switch, and there was a pause longer than the satellite delay.

"You seem to have quite an electronic library built up, Captain. I'd like to suggest a book called *The Wealth of Nations*."

"There's a copy on Gutenberg."

He produced a tablet computer and began reading from Chapter 2.

"In almost every other race of animals, each individual, when it is grown up to maturity, is entirely independent, and in its natural state has occasion for the assistance of no other living creature. But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which

you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens."

"Now, is this what we're taught by Christ? Is this moral?"

"What's immoral about asking people to pay what something cost to produce?"

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' or appeal to 'self interest' and 'self-love'?"

"I'm no theologian; you can direct your religious questions to the Reverend! I just want to know what's immoral about asking people to pay what something costs?"

"Well you can't get away from the religious questions because that's the whole problem! It's a *moral* issue. We are taught by Christ made generosity a lifestyle, not an option!"

Ecks shuffled some papers. "So we're just supposed to give away everything we've got, eh?"

"No, but sometimes we must do that. It is not *based* on that, though. It's based on love, generosity being just one of its most obvious forms."

"Most people have different ideas, Captain. Most people think that they can be good, generous hard-working citizens, expect that of others, and still allocate their own finances."

"Hidden here is the assumption that everyone lives that way! If someone adopts the Christian lifestyle instead, she is clearly at a 'competitive disadvantage' because she no longer has the resources that are so critical to adjust and balance those finances."

“Well, if they don’t want money, if they don’t want the advantages of capitalism...”

“It doesn’t matter; capitalism is *unfair*! It discriminates against people who are generous, and it discriminates against Christians! You’ve built a society that rejects Christian principles, discriminates against Christians, and then claims to offer religious freedom!”

“We don’t discriminate against Christians, Captain! We don’t arrest or execute them, either; some countries do! If some deluded ‘Christian’ wants to sleep under a bridge, let him! I wonder if that’s true Christianity, though. Again, please direct your religious questions to the reverend. I want to talk about your screwball secession plan! First came your idiotic Martian Republic, and now this! How will Hawaii survive without the mainland? Where will your computers come from, or is everyone going back to eating poi?”

“Hawaii will struggle, but she needs to be independent. Not just politically, but economically, too. States and nations need economic independence, or political independence means little. I don’t believe in globalization. We shouldn’t be trying to achieve efficiency through mass economies of scale because then few places actually develop their own technology. We need to achieve global economic independence for all nations, and that means nations producing their own computers, cars, buildings and factories. Hawaii will have to achieve that first for herself, and then lead the rest of world to achieve it for themselves. We’ll build a twenty-first century library of Alexandria to teach them how.”

“Sound to me like you want to steal Hawaii and turn it into an offshore piracy haven, where criminals can steal our technology with impunity! How can we compete with a bunch of thieves?!”

“You won’t be able to compete because your product is inferior. What you offer the world, under ‘globalization’, is a simple deal - find something you’ve got to sell, and then we’ll sell you our closed, secret, proprietary technology that we control. I’ll offer them something better - all the software, the chip masks, the factory blueprints - everything they need to build their own computers, their own cell phones, their own data networks. Now, which of these two ‘products’ do you think our ‘customers’ will prefer?”

“You do that with your technology, not ours!”

“So we’re supposed live in the dark ages because you control everything written in the last 70 years? Forget it!”

“We’ll stop you! We’ll stop you!”

“Go ahead! Stop us! Get tough! Go to war!”

“I just can’t... I can’t believe that an American citizen would push his own country to the brink of civil war. I can’t believe that any *patriotic* American would do that.”

Mercuriou started laughing.

“You’re too much! All your talk about the heroes who sacrifice their lives for the sake of freedom! That’s what it comes down to? We sacrifice when somebody else’s neck is in the block and then play safe when it’s our own?”

“You don’t believe in those heros, *Captain*. You mock them with your voice.”

“Believe in them! I’m one of them! I’m willing to fight for my freedom! I’m just doing it right here in America, that’s all!”

“Why someplace nice like Hawaii? Why not Alaska?”

“Alaska can secede, too!”

Ecks started screaming.

“Get out! Don’t go to Hawaii! Just get the hell out!!!”

“And go where? Australia? Europe? Japan? What political power would we have? We’re not even citizens. How would we get past their immigration controls? And why should we? We’re Americans. We were promised freedom just like everyone else, and we can’t get it anywhere but here!”

Ecks thought madly while his producer signaled furiously from the booth. Fi-

nally, he waved his assent, sank back into his chair and let the camera switch to Wye without bothering to introduce her.

[smile-laughing] “We have a long-standing principle, captain, that states are not allowed to secede from the Union.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. We’ll just wave a bunch of orange flags around in the air. You’ll let us go.”

“This isn’t a communist dictatorship, captain. The people will see through any gang of criminals no matter what color flags they wave!”

“What if every pot smoker in this country packs up and moves to Hawaii? What would you do then?”

“We live in a nation of laws. You are not going to just make up rules to interpret the election results however you see fit.”

“But these are the laws! We have free movement between states, and Hawaii only requires residency for one month before the election.”

“Our laws were created to implement democracy, and if there are loopholes, they will be fixed. [GOVERNMENT BY LAW or TYRANNY] We will enforce our laws, captain, we will enforce our laws. You’re not the only criminal in this country. Also, I’d like to know what’s going to happen once you throw off our hated government?”

“It’s a symbolic act, showing that minorities can choose their own leaders and live under a government of their choice.”

“Minorities do have freedom... we have freedoms... minorities don’t need to secede because they have freedom already!”

“I don’t...”

“We have many laws to ensure freedom for our minorities –” [angrily] “except for these people who don’t believe in democracy! You don’t believe in democracy! You don’t respect the people! You support everything that the people

oppose!”

“It’s freedom for the *majority*! You’re shocked that somebody else would even *aspire* to freedom!”

“We have freedom! But we have people in this country, born here, some of them, who won’t obey our laws! You reject one of the most fundamental human rights, that people have the right to *choose their own government*!”

“French propaganda! You can define ‘majority’ to be anything you want. What about all the illegal immigrants; can they vote? What about the people halfway around the world who desperately want America to change; can they vote? What about people like me? I don’t support this government! Can I choose my own government?”

“Captain, let me state this as clearly as I can. The majority rules. You are not going to twist our laws around to make them mean anything different.”

“Then the only reform possible for you is the reform of the terrorists. Perhaps a nuclear bomb in every major American city...”

“America will make whatever reforms her people choose to make!”

“Senator, your idea of reform and mine are two different things. You think a revolution means one group of people is in charge, then we have a revolution, then the same group is still in charge. I think a revolution means...”

“I’ve got a web update for you, captain! The people of this planet have decided on democracy, and we’re not going back!”

“Democracy is one of two things, and it means different things to different people. It’s either a particular system of government or its a philosophical principle that the majority are entitled to rule over everyone else. We can certainly have a system of government without any conception that it is specially entitled to rule. All systems of government are subject of the same tests, and no one of them is special.”

“What tests? The will of the people!”

“No, it is not the will of the people, which invariably means the will of the majority, which is one group only; that’s your propaganda. Governments are justified by moral judgements on their actions, not whether any one group supports them. You have to look at their actions to see whether they’re moral, just, and Godly. These are the things that determine whether a government is legitimate.”

“Senator, your hair is falling off.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to imply...”

“Actually, Patricia, your hair *is* falling off...”

“Wh-What!!”

A large section of her hair, apparently a wig, had in fact detached from the top of her head and slid approximately to her left ear! As she turned her head confusedly and started to grab for her hair, it detached completely and came off in her hands.

“Oh my God!” she cried, then started weeping, “I can’t believe...”

The camera switched off, leaving only Ecks and Mercuriou on the screen. Ecks recovered first and smoothly segued into a prepared segment profiling *Columbus*’s fairly typical astronaut crew, seven spectacular overachievers remarkable only for including the first Palestinian astronaut, on which half of the piece focused. When it ended, Rev. Caiaphas Zee strode confidently into the video Colosseum.

“Reverend, do you take Captain Mercuriou’s ‘conversion’ seriously?”

“No I do not. He has switched from theft to insurrection, not from the Devil to Christ. We are taught that government authority is consituted by God.”

“Can you show me where that is taught by Christ?”

“Romans 13, it’s taught in Romans 13, Captain.”

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no au-

thority except that which God has established.”

“That’s a letter of Paul. I asked for Christ.”

“So you don’t believe in the Bible?”

“I’m a Christian, not a Biblian.”

“Well, the Bible is the inspired word of God. If you don’t believe that, you’re no Christian!”

“I take the Bible seriously, not literally. Paul was the greatest misionary in the history of the church, but he was not Christ. He knew God, but he didn’t come back from the dead. His teachings don’t have the same weight, that’s why we don’t print them in red. I don’t buy Romans 13. Jews in Nazi Germany had a moral obligation to wear yellow stars? Because it was the law? Because their leaders were established by God?”

“A dictatorship...”

“No, Paul didn’t say that. He didn’t say that our obligation to obey the laws depended on the form of government! There is nothing in Christ’s teachings which gives us some moral obligation to obey every law promulgated by any government. In fact, one of the main themes of *Revelation* is the presence in this world of governments that are *not* ordained by God. Do Cubans have a moral obligation not to criticize their government?”

Zee paused for a moment and collected his thoughts. What had happened? Had he in fact converted?

“So, government is evil; people should do whatever they please?”

“No, but our *moral* obligation is not to obey the laws of government, but to obey the laws of God!”

“And if you decide the laws are unjust, then you take it upon yourself to ignore them?”

“Yes. That’s what people did in Russia, that’s what people did in Germany. That’s what people did here in 1776! That’s what Rosa Parks did in 1960!”

“Rosa Parks was a brave woman, and it is true that some laws are unjust. Yet this isn’t Russia, and this isn’t Germany! We have freedom in this country, and respect for our laws! Part of the law of God is obedience to legitimate, constituted authority!”

“So now we’re going to ‘interpret’ Romans 13, eh? What’s this distinction between legitimate and illegitimate government?”

“Legitimate government is Godly government.”

“That I’ll agree with. I’ll also say that legitimate leadership, of any kind, is Godly leadership.”

“And I’ll agree with that.”

“So is capitalism Godly?”

“Capitalism is *commanded* by God! The civil magistrate has a God-given duty as a minister of justice, and is not to exceed that duty!”

“I’m not talking about the government! I’m talking about the man who owns the restaurant! Is it Godly to deny a man food if he comes to the door hungry!”

“Send him to a food bank and support it with charity.”

“Why not feed him yourself? After all, you’re running a restaurant!”

“Because we are not socialists! You have no right to tell that man who he has to serve!”

“No, I don’t have that right. But Christ did! He said ‘give to all those who beg of you’! It’s the only *Godly* response, and therefore the only legitimate leadership!”

“Is a government dominated by capitalists legitimate? How can it be? How can a government of communists be legitimate? Communism is a *atheist* philoso-

phy! How can atheists run a Godly government? It's almost impossible, unless they never apply their atheist beliefs to any decisions they make! Likewise for capitalism; it's *immoral*! No capitalist government can be legitimate; it's *impossible*!"

"We're done talking! There's nothing left to talk about! We've talked about this over and over and over again! The majority of the people of this country are determined to have capitalism! It is a Godless and wicked philosophy! There is nothing legitimate about these people or their leaders and no election can change that! But this time nobody can say it's a dictatorship! Nobody can say there wasn't freedom of speech! Nobody can say we don't have a free press! Capitalism is what the majority of the people of this country want! And those of us who oppose had better get out!"

"This isn't the Will of God! You're a bunch of druggies! This isn't the Will of God! You're a bunch of druggies!"

Zee seemed stuck on re-re-repeat, so Ecks switched him to the standby track.

"Well, Captain, you'll be in a prison cell by tomorrow afternoon. I'm sure that your plans for Hawaiian secession will go the way of the Republic of Mars."

"Check the best seller charts, Ecks. You don't even know how well the Republic will do yet."

"I've got some people here on the phone to talk to you. They're Hawaiians, and not all of them seem very keen on your plans. Let's start with Beth in Mililani, Beth, you're on the air!"

"Yes, I'm a small business owner; I own a dry cleaner and I'd like Mercuriou to know that I can't afford to give away my services for free. I'm not some rich capitalist; I have employees that count on me for a paycheck, and there are some months when they get paid and I don't. He's up there in a space capsule, down here on Earth people just can't afford his loony ideas!"

"Well, it's about making sacrifices for what's important to you. If it's important to live in harmony with God, to treat others as we're taught by Christ..."

“Look, I’m a Christian, but that doesn’t mean I have give away my livelihood so I can live like a bum on the street!”

“Why is it, that when so many people say that they’re a Christian, the next word out of their mouth is ‘but’?”

“James from Kokua, you’re on ‘Outside the Beltway’!”

“I also run a small business. I can hardly feed my own staff because of taxes!”

“If it’s up to me, I’ll abolish taxes! Will you feed the hungry then? We’ll see!”

“Jill from Wahiawa!”

“I don’t care what your stupid economic ideas are; what I like is this political stuff! You want to turn back the clock 100 years!”

“That depends on your goal! Are you trying to put one group in power or do you truly want a balanced and representative government?”

“We have a balanced government! You want to go back to some kind of religious oligarchy!”

“I do not! The executive is one branch of government, that is all! Do you think the majority is entitled to rule over every branch of government, or do you want balance?”

“I want... I want elections!”

“Well, you’ll get them for the legislature, that’s it!”

“This is what I’m talking about... you want us to go back 100 years!”

“I want us to go forward! I want us to lose this crazy notion that everything had to be governed by elections and that the majority, somehow this one group of people are entitled to rule the world!”

“...and Jeff from Honolulu.”

“I’m telling you, you better think about that real, real, hard.”

“Well...”

“If you want people to respect these elections when you win, you better respect them when we do!”

“Now, look here! We respect these elections, but not when you try to rig them like this!”

“Rig them how?! It’s perfectly legal! Even when the dissidents finally figure out how to win one of these things, you scream foul!”

“The elections are there to decide the will of the majority!”

“Then those of us in the minority need never apply! We’ll just have to accept majority rule! Why should we do it peacefully?”

There was silence, then the telephone disconnected with an abbreviated slam.

“If you want us to accept the results when we lose, then you better accept them when you do.”

T + 694 days

it must be racist and anti-Semitic

ALT-ENDING

T + 695 days some sick ``freedom'' must win in the end

Mercuriou looked at the GPS. "If something's going to happen, it'll be any time now. We're crossing the California coast."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes.

"You know, I think I'd rather be dead anyway. Otherwise, I'll just sit in prison the rest of my life. Who cares if they kill me now?"

After a moment, Andrea shrugged. "Every foot you set out from your house could be your last. I pray that God keep me alive until I've done his work, and then I'd just as soon he send me on to the next thing. I know that sounds harsh, but I haven't lived a life of luxury, and it's how I feel."

"I want to live!" Alister said. He looked back and forth between the other two. "What?"

In the cockpit, the flight crew was studying a tire pressure warning.

"Does it look like instrumentation?" al-Nass asked, leaning forward from the one of the rear seats.

"Nope," 'Slick' answered after pushing buttons for a moment. "It's solid. Our left rear tires are blown."

"Now the left gear is showing a barber pole... We're getting a lot of aileron trim, too."

Heavy with the interference of reentry, the radio crackled to life.

"*Columbus*, Houston, we see your tire pressure messages and we did not copy your last."

Reginard ignored the radio, instead pointing to the small yellow lights that indi-

cated RCS thruster activity. The right yaw light was lit solid.

“How long’s that been on?” “What?” “That!”

Back in the Spacehab, Mercuriou was quietly explaining how to overthrow the government.

“Anybody can secede, well, almost anybody, I mean. You need to form a political party. You should hold a convention, too, but, finally, you have to convince your people to go somewhere on Election Day and just *demand* to be heard.”

He paused, then continued. “It doesn’t matter if I’m in jail. Or dead. Change; don’t change. They don’t need me. They really don’t.”

A warbling tone from the computers accompanied a sickening lurch, as the orbiter spun out of control and the force pushing them against their chairs dropped from three gees to a third.

“That’s a Master Alarm!” Andrea announced, reading from the display next to her. “We’ve lost hydraulics!” The orbiter swayed and rolled as it careened through the air, uncontrolled by man or machine.

“Tight up!” Mercuriou ordered.

Mercuriou and Andrea needed only to snap their visors shut to get “tight”, but Alister’s gloves were off. As he started to don his left glove, he looked up and caught Vic’s eye. He was floating leisurely in the middle of the SpaceHab, dressed in slacks and a T-shirt.

“Don’t bother.”

Alister’s jaw went slack.

“Vic?! W-what are you doing here? You’re...”

“So are you, Marc.”

The orbiter was now swaying wildly, exposing the top of the fuselage to the

direct heat of re-entry once every few seconds. They heard a loud crash and felt something break loose from the tail.

“There was a piece of frozen foam insulation that broke off the ET during launch... smashed a pretty good hole in the leading edge of the wing, right through all that protective heat shielding.”

“Was it sabotage?”

His question was punctuated by a ear-splitting crack, as if someone had taken a pound of linguini and snapped it in half in front of a microphone. The cabin pitched to the side as the SpaceHab access tunnel ripped away from the crew module. In fact, the entire cargo bay broke away from the forebody, with only a strip of aluminum skin connecting *Columbus* together on the left. Then that, too, tore free, and the orbiter had split in two.

The lights went out, but they were not long in darkness. The forward bulkhead began to glow red.

“This is a good way to go, Marc. Quick and painless.”

The bulkhead blazed white, then morphed into a sheet of flame that spilled over them, a crushing, foaming ten foot wall of raging red surf that buried them under an ocean of fire. They were burning, Burning, BURNING!! and then their suits burnt off into ashes which blew away with the flames and left them hanging in an azure haze.

Columbus was gone, replaced with a thousand blazing brushes painting fire on sky. Below them swept America, above them spanned space, and above space blazed a stupendous light.

“Wh-what!?”

Mercuriou turned to him as the earth, the sun, the galaxy fell away beneath them.

“There is no beginning; there is no end. This is the Great Conversation.”

The day after Thanksgiving 2010, I got on a plane to Los Angeles, and the next day took a plane to Hawaii. I came here to overthrow the government. I came here to find freedom.

I lived for years in my mom's basement studying math. I won't go back. I was just wasting my life away. I should be in some big R&D shop figuring how to make computers speak English, or how to automate our automobiles, or how to pump oil out of a volcano. But I won't do it for capitalists. I won't hand them my intellectual property for a paycheck.

After two nights in a Waikiki youth hostel, I sought out the Benedictine monastery on Mt. Kaala and stayed there for a week. I met one of their regular church-goers who had a room to rent in Haleiwa and that's where I spent the winter. I bought a surfboard for the first time in fifteen years – hell, it was a five minute walk to Ali'i Beach, the first leg in the Triple Crown! How could I not get a board?

There were jobs I'd do. I applied to teach in the public schools, but they don't want me because I never finished a college degree. John Benedetto tried his utmost to push me into it, and it almost worked. He arranged for a government contract to actually pay me to do math and I spent \$5,000 on classes that I never attended because I already knew the material. Why? *Why?* Why would anyone spend a penny on "tuition" to "learn" what they already know? This is your school system. I'd never accept the degree now if it was offered. So I can't teach. Go to hell. And you say I wouldn't work. To hell with you all.

I went to church. Not at the monastery; I went to an old Congregationalist church a block away from my house. The second-oldest Christian church on Oahu, Liliuokalani Protestant Church was founded by New England missionaries and patronized 125 years ago by the queen whose name it now bears. When I received the last paycheck from the contract, I computed a ten percent tithe and split it equally between the monastery and the church.

I didn't quite finish the novel. I could have. Could have worked harder; I only

wrote for three hours a day or so. Smoked a lot of weed; was in the ocean almost every day; spent a whole month working a math problem that I found interesting. After all, I knew that it might be the last winter of my life, and it was truly the best!

Haleiwa had a Christmas parade; the highlights (for me) were Santa driving a convertible and Surfing The Nations. STN is a Christian mission manned by young surfers. They have an office in Wahiawa and three-story apartment complex behind it. They have a major drive to feed the homeless and you see them all over the place helping with outdoor church services and the like.

Around the end of April my money ran out. It always does. I gave my landlady an extra \$1,200 because she asked. One of Haleiwa's cronic homeless asked me for money to buy a plate lunch; I gave him ten dollars. Someone else asked me for five dollars – all I had was two ones and a twenty; I gave him the twenty. I filled up my roommate's gas tank; I bought my landlady a washing machine and made no attempt to deduct it from the rent. And, of course, I no longer had a paying job.

I went to church on the first of May and asked around for a place to stay. Someone was flying to the mainland for a month; she offered me her room until she got back. Once we got there, she then wanted \$200 of my last \$300 for a room she couldn't possibly rent because it had all of her stuff in it. I agreed, and also informed her that I was a legally registered medical marijuana patient in the state of Hawaii; she raised no objection.

The next day this story changed. One of her other tenants was applying for a job that required a security clearance; I got a door slammed at me the first time we met and then had my money returned to me and was put out on the street. After a few days in a youth hostel, I was completely broke and turned to the minister.

He drives a car, probably lives in a house, never invited me to dinner, never offered me a place to stay, and instead pushed me off onto social services and their homeless shelter with no shower, no electricity, just a mat and a pillow in a gymnasium and you're back out on the street at 7:30 in the morning.

The monastery was no better; I asked to stay there and was told that they "weren't set up for that". Surfing The Nations turned me down cold with a bunch of

bullshit about how they had an application procedure and needed references to keep out thieves. Mind you, I had applied to a hostel in Honolulu that also needed references – references that they checked and then accepted me the next day. Did I mention that STN’s interns pay to go on their mission?

I blew. I went into the church a week later, walked up to the pulpit at the end of the service and lambasted them with Amos 3:1-2 at full volume! A cynical capitalist bitch trying to squeeze some of my last money from me and an utterly indifferent minister that does nothing but talk – that’s their brand of “Christianity”. Did I mention that they got a half tithe and then some – every time that collection plate went around I put in a ten or a twenty. The money itself isn’t important; the point is that when they asked for my help, they got it, but once my money ran out and I needed theirs...

I’ve now realized that their religion is not mine; they’re Christians¹ and I’m a Christian². I didn’t understand this, not really; that’s why I got so angry. For me, “give to all those who beg of you” isn’t an option; it’s a commandment, same as “thou shall not steal” and “thou shall not kill”. I saw a begger on the streets of Honolulu and he asked for a twenty; I gave it to him. If I pass a hitchhiker and I have room in the car, I stop. There’s hardly any choice; it’s a commandment, and Christians² are persecuted under capitalism as surely as Christians¹ were persecuted under communism. The rest of you “can’t live that way” because you’re enslaved.

So I’ve been living on the street, sleeping on the beach, carrying bags around everywhere because I had no place to store them, no place to stay, no place to work, no place to write. I decided to kill myself, or at least to throw myself to the ocean and to the Lord, paddling out on my board and then just paddling and paddling and paddling. Did I mention that I’d taken up surfing again?

They have a Ten Percent Religion. The most righteous among them give ten percent to charity and cram the other ninety percent into their own coffers.

I’m done with sham Christians. Sit behind your pews and do nothing. Carry on with your Ten Percent Religion. Whip your own into line. I won’t get in line, and I’m done being whipped.

I’m inspired! Inspired, I say, inspired! For the first time since I’ve been home-

less, I can write! I'm writing on the beach, now; I could soldier on. I have mosquitos flitting all over me; the laptop's battery will be dead again tomorrow; it's starting to rain, but I could soldier on.

I won't do it. I won't work under these conditions. I will not stand behind a counter and refuse to feed a man, and I won't sleep on the beach and finish *Icarus Wing* in the Coffee Gallery.

So, there's only one way you'll get this half-ass, unfinished novel, and that's the way you're getting it now. I refuse to finish this book. Ever. And I know where I'll be by midnight.

This is your sick "freedom".

© 2011. No rights reserved. You may freely copy, print, modify or redistribute this book. Please respect the intellectual integrity of the work.