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## It's Mostly a Question of Molecular Bonds

By Steve Bates

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Good timing. They are marching along Route 110, almost here. There must be 50,000 of them, flowing like a torrent of fresh-born lava. As their destination comes into view, they lock arms or stab the sky with handmade signs proclaiming “Stop the Bombing” and “Withdraw Now.”

Ramrod-stiff military police officers tighten grips on freshly oiled rifles or slap thick hardwood batons against white-gloved palms. As they are substantially outnumbered, they have taken up positions near the entrances. Yet they possess the weapons and the unshakable conviction of their moral superiority.

The protesters fan out in a crude semicircle around the drab gray structure, their nervous energy surging with each step. A grinning male marcher approaches a line of policemen, produces a fistful of orange flowers and inserts them stem-first into the barrels of gleaming rifles. The officers respond with violent grimaces.

This is the part I like. The protesters are attempting a feat that they believe is impossible. How fascinating to observe the beatific faces of so many sentient beings, emboldened by their numbers and a shared sense of purpose, as they seek to defy every law of physics that their species has stumbled upon during its brief existence. They have chosen a cool but pleasant day for this supreme act of faith, during the interval that they identify as October 1967.

A man with unkempt shoulder-length hair who has not bathed in some time raises a conical device to his lips. “We have gathered to exorcise the Pentagon of evil spirits and levitate

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it with the power of our minds,” he begins, his words booming across the battle lines. “So if we want to stop the war and stuff, we have to concentrate, people. We have to believe.”

I am drawn to two young natives who are watching the proceedings raptly. They appear to be a couple, though they present a study in contrasts. The male is adorned with wire-rim spectacles, a thin brown coat and shoes with heels nearly worn away. The female displays a colorful jacket and handsome blue slacks and is endowed with abundant tresses of bright red hair.

The man with the amplifier continues to shout, pausing only for deep, raspy breaths. “On the count of three, we’re going to raise the Pentagon, to levitate it three hundred feet in the air!”

Protesters join hands and close eyes in fervent concentration. As the air draws still, a photographer captures images of the young people, including the two I monitor. The male is known as Peter. The female is named Debbie.

“Here we go,” the amplified man yells. “One ... two ... three!”

No immediate change is evident. A few protesters giggle nervously. As a transport vehicle becomes airborne at the place named National Airport, a low rumbling sound is detected. The vehicle passes overhead and vanishes to the north, yet the sound persists. A mild shaking commences. Concrete pillars and portions of the Pentagon’s ornamental limestone façade develop fine cracks, and now larger ones.

The building groans and begs for release. Steel rods vibrate, twist and abandon their positions within thick concrete walls. Pipes rupture, spewing water in all directions. Wires sever and snap like snakes. The building is rising, rising in the cool afternoon air, the two subterranean floors accompanying the five above-ground levels.

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This is the part I do not like. Police and protesters race in all directions, colliding and shoving and falling and running again. Amid a cacophony of sirens and shouts, two hovering vehicles dart and bank sharply around the floating edifice like angry insects, the reverberations of their frenetic blades evoking the echoes of gunfire in the place named Vietnam. A white vapor swallows many of the protesters, who cough and shed tears profusely.

This is the part I do not foresee. Military police strike Peter and Debbie with their sticks. Again. And again. The two natives are taken away.

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Burdened by a bulky cast on his right forearm, Peter paces the cramped, windowless cell. Debbie buries herself deep in a corner with her knees pressed against her chest, rocking. A pink fluid oozes through a bandage on the left side of her head. An armed MP stands motionless near the door. The male and female have no way of knowing that the MP is me in disguise. I morph my appearance into one that is premised upon their culture's longstanding if inaccurate perception of my kind: a slim gray hairless figure with a long neck, an oval head, two large black lidless eyes, no nose, and a small circular mouth.

Peter gasps. Debbie looks up and unleashes a piercing scream. I revert to my previous appearance, but she continues to express terror. I project calming visions to both.

A guard bangs on the outer surface of the cell door. "Any problem in there?"

"No," I respond. "Concussion injuries require time to heal."

The guard grunts and moves away.

"Please do not do that again," I communicate to the detainees. I would employ a term that denotes speech, but I am forming word symbols in their minds, for I have yet to learn how to create vocalized words effectively in their language.

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“Who—what the hell are you?” says Debbie.

“Names are superfluous among my kind. However, you may refer to me as Fred. Or Fred Astaire.”

“Like the dancer, in the movies?” says Peter.

“Exactly. Now that we have a cultural experience in common, we are friends.”

Says Debbie: “Nobody who beats the crap out of me and imprisons me is my friend.”

“You misunderstand,” I communicate. “I am--.” I detect a member of the ruling elite approaching the cell. A tall male wearing a finely crafted blue suit enters and addresses the young people: “Do you have any idea how much trouble you two idiots are in?”

Peter starts to speak, but Debbie interjects: “Don’t say anything, Peter.” To the man in the suit, she asserts: “We want a lawyer. Or a radical priest.”

The man’s eyelids narrow as he receives a message through a device in his ear. He pivots and departs without explanation.

I seek to relieve the tension. “You should be proud. You have accomplished the most impressive feat of telekinesis by a non-advanced race that I have witnessed on this side of the galaxy.”

Peter shakes his head. “We didn’t do anything. It had to be an illusion.”

“Maybe somebody slipped us some drugs at the rally,” says Debbie. “Buildings just don’t rise up in the air.”

Peter paces anew. He stops and looks at me sideways. “You did that, didn’t you?”

My attempt at a chuckle manifests in their minds as the noise that a New Jersey Turnpike tollbooth makes when struck by a 240-ton meteor shaped like Mermaid Barbie. I continue: “I assisted. Given the quality and pace of your efforts, it would have taken you 147 of your years to

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disrupt the molecular bonds of the base of the structure adequately to force it to detach. The Pentagon would already have been vaporized in the War of 2041—or is it 2031? You must excuse my confusion; often after long journeys I am afflicted by a measure of Relativity Lag.”

“Why? Why did you do this?” Peter asks.

“Your ruling elite must be taught a lesson.”

“To stop the war?” inquires Debbie hopefully.

“Sorry, no,” I communicate. “No force in the cosmos can prevent members of your species from killing each other in astonishing numbers. What concerns me and those of my kind is the determination of your military to shoot down our craft as we conduct our peaceful missions.”

“And what missions would those be? Kidnapping innocent citizens and making buildings float?” asks Peter.

“We do not abduct native individuals,” I reply. “My primary mission is to secure copies of the motion pictures that your artists create, which we value highly. My personal favorite takes place not far from here. Perhaps you know it? It is named ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still.’”

“Garbage,” mutters Debbie.

Undeterred, I continue. “Others of my kind are tasked with gathering certain highly potent cactus buds that are found only on your Earth. Unfortunately, some of our pilots have been captured—likely the consequence of sampling the hallucinogenic harvest. Your military’s so-called alien autopsies are absolutely abhorrent. Hence my decision to support your protest initiative by enhancing your powers.”

“And you’re going to let us take the blame?” inquires Peter.

“You may inform your ruling elite that a visitor from beyond your solar system is responsible for levitating their building,” I say.

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“Like they would believe us,” says Debbie. “Why don’t you stand up for what you believe and tell them yourself? Like the alien in your stupid film.”

“Your military’s extreme demonstration of bellicosity prompts me to conclude that such a revelation on my part would cause further retaliation against my kind. However, I have a suggestion. The ultimate goal of your ruling elite is to return the Pentagon to the ground. You may offer to produce that outcome.”

Says Debbie: “And how exactly do we do that?”

“Allow me to assist you once more,” I respond. “When the ruling elite return you to the scene, close your eyes and chant this expression: ‘There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s--.’”

“No way,” says Debbie. “I hate that movie. I’m not doing it.”

“How about this one: ‘Luke, I am your father.’”

“What the hell does that mean?” says Peter.

“Just humor me,” I suggest.

“You know what,” says Debbie, “you’re full of shit.” She punches me in my MP gut. Involuntary, I project a noise that the natives interpret as the sound that a flash-frozen block of pistachio gelato 4,000 meters across makes as it is sucked into a star that is about to go supernova. “That was—unpleasant,” I communicate. “I assure you that waste products constitute less than 1 percent of the corporeal presence I have adopted for this mission.”

The man in the suit is back, with two additional members of the ruling elite. “This must be your lucky day,” he informs the young people. “Somebody wants to see you. Somebody big. You have exactly one chance to survive this stunt.”

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Their blindfolds removed, Peter and Debbie find themselves in a dimly lit, musty room with cinderblock walls. At the far end sits a solitary figure, a pair of brown leather boots resting on a dark wooden table. His face is obscured in part by a large white hat with wide, curved brims.

“Slide on down this way,” he says with an accent associated with the place named Texas. Prodded by an officer, the youngsters advance with short, uncertain steps. The seated man lifts his chin slowly to reveal the face of Lyndon Johnson, Earth’s supreme leader.

“So, these are the punks who caused the ruckus,” says Johnson, rising and looking them up and down—especially Debbie. “Before I decide what to do with you, can you tell me how you managed that trick?”

Debbie glances in my direction, hoping that I will speak. I do not. “We didn’t manage anything,” she says. “We just showed up to speak out against the war.”

“That so?” replies Johnson. “Well, you might have just started another war. Every patriotic, law-abiding citizen in this country who is old enough to vote is urging me to lock up or wipe out all you snot-nosed, lazy hippie bastards because of what you did.”

Peter and Debbie remain silent, concentrating on not shitting their pants.

“Just one more question,” says Johnson, advancing almost into contact with the protesters and studying their faces intently. “Got any idea what we found in the Pentagon? In the walls of the Pentagon?”

The two natives stare ahead blankly.

“Some of those walls have hollowed-out spaces. Spaces crammed full of spy gear. Commie spy gear. Apparently, it isn’t working yet, but before long it could have given up our deepest secrets—maybe even our nuclear launch codes.”

Peter and Debbie shit their pants.

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Johnson winces and steps back. “Thank God only a few people know about this,” he says. “But a floating Pentagon could give our enemies an excuse to do something crazy. And, frankly, it’s making us look bad. So I need you two to set it back down nice and easy.”

“S-sure, we can do that,” says Debbie. “But only if you promise that we won’t be prosecuted.”

Johnson expels a shallow laugh. “You’ve got some--” he says, suppressing the rest of the thought. “Well, shit. Just go do it. Pronto!” he snarls. As he approaches the door, he turns to an aide. “Somebody hose down these two.”

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The black vehicle clears three security checkpoints and deposits us near the south side of the Pentagon, which continues to hover in the chill predawn air. Peter and Debbie recite the Darth Vader quote, though their voices are much too high. I lower the building to its foundation with a resounding thud. Clouds of pale gray dust billow high into the deep violet sky, drawing a veil across billions of blinking suns.

The three of us are back in the black vehicle. “What’s going to happen to us now?” asks Debbie. “Will they let us go?”

“In a way. After a minor procedure,” I communicate.

“Procedure? Like taking our fingerprints?”

“More like removing significant portions of your frontal lobes.”

Debbie shrieks. “Lobotomies! You can’t be serious.”

“The ruling elite have concluded that you know too much to be allowed to return to the general population,” I advise. “Your loved ones are being informed that you ingested excessive

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amounts of recreational drugs and must be institutionalized. You may take comfort in knowing that the rest of your lives will be carefree.”

“No, that’s a fate worse than death,” says Debbie. “Please, take us with you. We’ll do anything you want.”

Says Peter: “You owe us. This is all your fault.”

I sigh, which is interpreted by the young people as several runaway freight trains loaded with unsecured bowling balls skidding along gigantic cello strings in a driving hailstorm. “By any chance is either of you an expert on quantum mechanics or antimatter conversion?”

After a pause, Peter offers: “Once I changed a flat tire. Well, I helped.”

“I can drive a stick shift,” states Debbie.

“Perhaps I could test your navigational skills. If you can pilot my craft into a gravitational slingshot maneuver around Jupiter and execute a 90-degree turn across the plane of the ecliptic, I might have some use for your services.”

“Jupiter: That’s the one with the rings, right?” guesses Peter.

I issue a noise that is the equivalent of a laugh among my kind and that the young people experience as the sound generated by a rabid badger crashing through a plate glass window on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan during the holiday shopping season. I am compelled to add: “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

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