



Lights Over Sheel

By

Barry Stead

The Recruitment



Michael scanned the text again then: "Machine, read out from *One afternoon.*"

The Draco 4 did not quite cough but there was a gently rumble as its voice circuits warmed up. This was no mechanical toneless voice that read without reference to the emotions of the piece, this was uncanny, responsive technology. Despite what he was about to do to them Michael had astounding regard for FACTOR's engineers. The technology inside the Draco was unquestionably years ahead of anything anywhere on earth and Michael sat back as a smooth androgynous voice read out the text:

One afternoon, on one of those English June days that are all blue, I was running by the river, trying to think of nothing at all, hoping the problems I was having with Net Theory would resolve themselves in my subconscious. Across the lawn came Jenny Hunter to ask if I was doing anything that evening. Whoopee, I thought – this is it, and I positively beamed that I was free.

"Good," she said. "Matheson wants to see you in his rooms at eight."

Professor Matheson was my research supervisor. So at ten minutes to eight I walked around the quadrangle and up the dark stairs to his elegant and faded rooms. I thought he merely wanted to see me before the long vacation but as soon as I closed the door I knew it was for something else.

Two men with military style close-cropped hair were sitting on his couch with solid humourless faces. A shiver stirred in me when I looked at Matheson. He seemed terrified and his voice trembled while he spoke.

"Michael," he said, "I would like to introduce these gentlemen to you. They are from a place that does not exist, has not existed and will never exist."

Matheson continued. "You are the most promising physicist of your generation, your Grand Net Theory will revolutionise cosmology and our understanding of the structure of existence: it could well be the ultimate Theory of Everything but you cannot finish it here. Not only do we not have the mathematical tools, we don't even have the technology to test its hypotheses, not even CERN; and we certainly don't have the science to develop it.

"The time in a physicist's life for making great discoveries is very slim but these gentlemen," and here he paused and licked his lips, seeming nervous, "will provide what you require. In exchange for that they will ask you to do some work for them. And may God forgive me."

One of the men stood up as Matheson glided behind a chair.

"Sit down, and look at these," said the man in an American accent. He placed four photographs from a thin attaché case onto the coffee table. When I saw them I almost laughed, suspecting them to be fakes but Matheson assured me that they most certainly weren't. The American pointed to the second photograph, saying, "this one is completely intact, in working order, but we cannot get it to fly. Since the mid seventies our engineers have tried everything. We now realise we do not understand their physics."

"My guess," added Matheson, "is that they utilise Net Theory's Bend force."

"Where did it come from?" I asked.

"It made a controlled landing in Oregon in September 1973."

"I worked for them for five years," said Matheson. "My CV says I

was doing research at Berkeley at the time. I wasn't, I was with them. Even then their facilities were out of this world."

"What about its crew?" I asked. The man who was showing me the pictures gave me a look that said another question like that and I would be found at the bottom of the river.

"Who am I supping with, Alan?" I asked Matheson.

The answer was a long time in coming. "With Lucifer himself."

The more I studied the photographs the more I became blind to the warnings that Matheson was telegraphing me. I was utterly seduced by what they promised. I couldn't wait to get my hands on what I saw, finish my theory, collect my Nobel prize and sit next to Newton and Einstein. Hubris.

"Where do I sign?" I asked. The Americans smiled.

Matheson assured me—because it had happened to him—that a teaching position would always be found for me when I had finished working for the Americans' organisation, for FACTOR, as he called it.

"Some parts of FACTOR are so secret they are beyond top secret," said the first American. "It stands to reason that you will never speak to anyone of us, or this conversation if you decline our invitation."

"Of course not."

The second American smiled and said, "We have ways of assuring that you won't."

"But you'll never be able to factorise a quadratic equation again," added Matheson

I was given as much time as I needed to see my family and say a passionate goodbye to Jenny Hunter. I was instructed to tell them I was holidaying in America then starting research work at Berkeley. A tearful Jenny wanted to come with me but I was allowed to bring no one.

So on an August evening I was driven across the fens, in a car with smoked glass windows, arriving at Lakenheath US Air Force base at midnight. The sight was dramatic: all lights at the base were off, perhaps even the base had been evacuated, except for floodlights illuminating a massive C-5B Galaxy heavy transport plane. I was evidently not the only cargo. The front cone was up exposing the massive bay into which a large tarpaulin covered object was being loaded. Armed guards flanked it on either side. And curiously standing to the side watching all was a lone tall figure, a man, dressed in a black, close-fitting suit with pale white skin and impenetrable dark glasses. His head turned to me as I was escorted up the steps. My minders escorted me to a windowless part of the plane where we were joined just before take off by the black suited figure. He sat far from us at the front, and even then I know he was not to be disturbed. This was the first time I had seen what later I came to know as a Suit.

We crossed the Atlantic in silence, and after refuelling somewhere in New England, we landed at the Mt Wisco installation. It was a crisp desert dawn that held the promise of a hot, dry day, and waiting for us was a minibus and two officers. With the up-front courtesy typical of the American military I was invited to step aboard. The dark Suit followed me though neither officer

spoke to him. In fact I sensed a distaste in the officers toward him.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Don't know sir," replied the co-driver.

We were heading along a wide dusty road toward a low but steep mountain, a strange greyish white, spotted with sagebrush, under which nestled a small air-force base. As we approached the outer fence the gates opened automatically. We drove straight toward the foot of the mountain to a place where the rock had been cut away to form a cliff some fifty foot high and about thrice as wide. The rock was not polished but it was smooth. Just to right of this cliff was a hangar built into the slope of the mountain. The mini bus drove in through the wide door and let us out. The Suit beckoned that I should follow and without speaking he lead me through a metal lined tunnel.

We emerged into a vast hangar inside the mountain. There were several small aircraft, one I recognised as an F-117A Stealth Bomber next to a squat black helicopter. Even the windows were black. Around me technicians went unhurriedly about their work while men in uniform walked smartly across the floor. We were heading for another corridor on the opposite side of the hangar.

From it we emerged into a huge control room of sublime technology, pristine and white. Great buttresses rose up to a central column whose top was lost in cables and gantries suspended from an unseen ceiling. High above me people were hurrying about their work. Around the base of the column was a circular control station manned by a mixture of military and civilian personnel watching monitors and radar screens. From here a lift took us down to a large meeting room, oak-lined and plush, with photographs of galaxies and nebulae hung at intervals on the wall.

"Wait," said the Suit before he left, though it sounded more like a hiss.

Eventually, a burly well built man with greying hair greased back entered the room. He looked anything between forty five and seventy

"Harkley Symonder," he said shaking my hand with a firm grasp, "Harkley Symonder III. Welcome to FACTOR." The voice was rough, as though broken glass were lodged in his throat but the accent was straight out of the antebellum South. Just listening to him conjured up cotton fields and balls where ladies wore enormous gowns.

I tried to respond but he cut through me. "I sure know who you are Mr Durham. You, my dear boy, we have watched for a long time. Professor Matheson passed on the word four years ago of your genius and he tells me you have a new theory of everything."

"Partially —"

Again he rode straight through me. "Now I am here to welcome you here, my boy. If anything in our little family upsets you then you come right along to me. You will be assigned a place to sleep and all the little rules and regulations will be explained. The process is called Induction, a horrible word. Then when you understand our organisation a little more we'll have another

talk.

A young lieutenant summoned by a buzzer lead me away through a maze of corridors. "Boy," he whistled. "Boy, you must be some pretty hot dude to get into the old man's crypt."

Thus I came to Mt Wisco.

"Stop," commanded Michael. He was getting lost in the remembrances of that pivotal time when his life changed. He could almost smell the heat of the desert and the ozone cleanliness of FACTOR's air.