

DAN CONOVER

## ABUNDANCE

*If we've learned anything from astronomy, it's just how lucky we are to live in the Goldilocks Zone here on Earth. But what if life, as an organizing force counter-balancing entropy, exists everywhere? How might it adapt? And how might that surprise us?*

**I**f the dogs had not been in the room the whole thing might have descended into a fistfight. Judith Regner was not the type to throw a punch – not normally – but the NASA team had come to *her* office, on *her* campus, to challenge *her* assessment, and they had been both adamant and personal. This wasn't science, she thought, or even ego. This was a shakedown.

Regner flashed so angry, in fact, that she found herself trying to provoke Frank Bulger physically, invading his austere personal space, thrusting her bosom against his waistline and – she was embarrassed to think of it later – basically screaming up his nose. Frank went silent, looked straight ahead, refused to acknowledge her. His colleagues looked away as well, as if they were witnesses to a domestic squabble at a neighborhood restaurant rather than a screaming match over the immediate future of planetary evolution.

She might have punched him right then, only the dogs got upset: Fritz was the older and wiser of her two Dachshunds, so sweetly attuned to her moods that he plopped down out of his plaid bed and pranced over to nuzzle her foot. Andie was the younger dog, the bitch, still in throes of her playful infatuation with Fritz, and his sudden movement roused her, causing her to jump on his back and go for one of his ears, all while yapping excitedly. The commotion at her feet broke Regner's self-destructive trance, and she stooped to scoop up her animals, turning away from the confrontation while Fritz gratefully licked her ear.

"You're off the project," Frank said, nostrils flaring but composure intact.

Regner sank into the faux-leather office chair behind her desk, avoiding the NASA team's eyes as she arranged the dogs. "You really don't know what happened up there, do you, Frank?"

"And you don't either," he said, approaching her desk. Frank selected a corner that was relatively free of academic and personal detritus and made room for his attaché, popping the catches with his thumb and removing a silver disk. The other two NASA scientists stepped up to flank him, adopting

poses that reminded Regner of something out of that cable TV gangster series from her childhood. “Your public comments have been pure speculation. A scientist of your standing has no inherent right to be that irresponsible.”

“What? Only political appointees like your bosses have that right? Get off your high horse, Frank! This isn’t about science!”

Frank’s expression cleared like a shaken Etch-A-Sketch, and that’s when Regner knew what was coming. She could fight it, complain about it, raise holy hell. Not that it would matter. Not the way things had gotten over the past three years. Besides, people-skills had never been her strong point.

“Frank, we used to be friends,” she said, controlling her rage by petting the rambunctious Andie. “Don’t kill all my data.”

“You know the rules,” Frank said. “In fact, you made the rules, Judith. You broke your confidentiality agreement and thereby lost your right to possess these government files.” He slipped the data bomb into her disk slot and waited for the blue flash that signaled the ‘bot had done its work. All told, it took six seconds.

Gone, she thought. Thirty years of Martian exploration.

“It hurts me to do this, Judith,” Frank said, snapping the disk back into his attaché. “I just want you to know that.”

“Oh cry me a river,” Regner said. “You’re going to want me back before all this is over.”

“I cut you some slack, you know,” Frank said, pausing as he reached the doorway. He was a big man to begin with, but the fashionably padded shoulders of his charcoal-colored suit made him almost imposing. “I didn’t bomb your files – I simply ‘bot-rigged them.”

Meaning: Frank had stationed an intelligent agent in her machine and given it standing orders to destroy her computer drives and network caches if anyone tried to gain access to her impounded data.

“I’m supposed to thank you for this?” she asked. Frank brushed his hand lightly across his balding

scalp and flashed a phony bit of simpatico.

“I don’t break regulations lightly, but we go back a long way. I’m sure you’ll understand. I’m just doing my job, Judith.”

“You know what, Frank?” She leaned across her desk to glare at him. “The human ability to rationalize bullshit like that is the main reason I like dogs so much.”

Frank gathered himself regally, rearranging his impressive jawline. Everything about him at that moment smacked of theatrics – an annoying trait for a bureaucrat. “This is a critical juncture, Dr. Regner,” he said, his tone suggesting that she was being taken into a confidence. “Once we get past this next sample-packet retrieval and the commission issues its LAMP report, I may be able to authorize the ‘bot to unlock your files. In the meantime, all your grant accounts here at the college will remain active.”

“So long as I keep my mouth shut.”

“Exactly. And I don’t think I need to explain what happens if you try to hack the locks on your data, correct?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she said, her hands growing agitated again. “You’ve properly chastened me now. So now that you’ve re-established your alpha-male dominance, why don’t you just go back-channel to the National Science Advisory Council and raise the question. You know I’m not crazy, Frank. The President should at least be warned.”

“The President has a full staff of science advisors.”

“Who are the same politicians who have been successfully cutting scientists like me right out of the loop ever since this administration took office”

Frank shook his head. “Judith, what you suggest would cast doubt on a program that carries the President’s signature. Right before an election. Do you have any idea...”

“Well duh, Frank. Of course I do. We’re talking politics, not rocket surgery.”

Frank was getting mad now, but she didn’t care. “You know, comments like that were what always got you in such hot water, Judith. For all your

talents, you lack a certain...

“Hypocrisy?”

Frank’s eyes narrowed. “Good day, Dr. Regner,” he said, and the NASA team swooshed out of the office like a flight of crows abandoning a picked-over corn field.

Alone in the stillness of they left behind, surrounded by the souvenirs of her career, the Chairman of the Astrobiology Department at the College of Charleston released her anger as best she could. Her eyes fell on a framed snapshot of Fritz from his triumph at the South Carolina Kennel Club Trials, but when she reached for it her elbow dislodged a paper-slide that splashed various documents onto the early 19<sup>th</sup> century hardwood floor.

As if purposefully, a hard copy of the initial Lethal Anomaly involving Mission Personnel bulletin – the “LAMP Flash” from Tharsis Planitia that started all of this – landed atop the pile. Regner sighed audibly. Her Very Bad Feeling about things simply would not go away, but the smell of dog in her lap was soothing, and she lifted Fritz up so she could peer directly into his sweet little Dachshund face. Regner kissed his nose and snuggled both her pets close.

“Oh, my little babies,” she said, rocking back and forth gently. “Everybody gets so very, very mad when mommy tells those dumb bastards that the Martians ate those silly astronauts.”



“I can’t talk to you,” Regner said, and clicked her phone shut. It rang immediately.

“You’ve been talking to me for years, Judith,” Terri Accel protested. “Don’t put me off. Give up the goods.”

“Screw you, Accel, I’m not playing this time!” Regner shouted, snapping the phone closed again. It was one of her affectations, that phone – Old School, just like her. Everyone else wore their phones discretely in one ear, so that businessmen

and students and schizophrenics were practically indistinguishable on the street, but Regner liked the heft and weight of her three-ounce cell, loved the feeling of popping it open and smashing it shut when she really didn’t want to talk any more.

Up ahead, Fritz and Andie strained against their leashes, creating the campus’ classic image of Professor Regner: a short, well-groomed chariot tugged ever-onward by two crazed Dachshunds. They always got like this when she took them for their midday spin to The Cistern – ready to strangle themselves for the tiniest iota of speed, intoxicated by the prospect of rolling in the grass and dappled sunlight of the college’s signature lawn.

Terri Accel buzzed in again.

“I told you I can’t talk to you!” Regner said in a tense stage whisper. “I may not ever talk to you again, you nosey fat bitch!”

“If you really meant that, you wouldn’t have answered the call,” Terri said, nonplussed. “Why answer the phone to say you’re not going to talk?”

“To insult you, that’s why!”

“We go back too far,” Accel laughed over the phone. “And calling me fat is hardly a stinging barb.” Accel’s profound obesity was legendary among her sources and fellow science journalists.

“Then how about this one, Terri? I’m getting fatter just talking to you. Your fatness is coming over this phone straight into my ... *ohmigawd get off of her! GET OFF OF HER!*”

“You’re with the dogs again, aren’t you?” Accel asked.

“I’m taking them to the Cistern and there’s some stray mutt trying to hump Andie!” Regner shouted as she tried to shoo the offending dog away, creating a tangle of dogs and leashes and dean in and around and through the bike rack outside Randolph Hall. “Jesus! *Get away!*” Andie began barking, and Fritz, now agitated, joined in.

“Are you OK, Judith?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she said, tugging the dogs out of the bike rack. “I’m fine.”

“Listen, if this is because of the LAMP piece I

wrote, I need to know.”

“I can’t say.”

“So it was the LAMP,” Accel concluded, keyboard clicking in the background. Regner promptly switched off her phone.

It rang again as Regner reached the Cistern and released her Dachshunds, who bounded off valiantly on the trail of a squirrel.

“Why do you keep cutting me off?” Accel asked.

“We cannot do this,” Regner said, shaking her head firmly as if Accel could see her. “I cannot do this.”

“Are they listening?”

“Well what the hell do you think, Terri? It’s just the future of the manned space program we’re talking about.”

“Did Frank Bulger come to see you?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Did he force you to sign a confidentiality agreement?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Did Frank drop a data bomb on you?”

“What the hell do you think?”

“Jesus Mary and Kaplan, Judith, what did you say to piss those guys off so bad?”

“Take it up with my spokeswoman,” Regner said. “Which, by the way, you ain’t. I talk to other reporters, you know. You’re not the only site on the web.”

“Who else are you talking to? I thought you said you had a confidentiality agreement.”

“Nice try. I told you I wasn’t at liberty to say whether I had a confidentiality agreement. And no, I’m not talking to anybody right now. I’m just saying I have talked to other people in the past. You’re getting too uppity, Terri.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

This time it was Terri Accel who hung up. Judith Regner’s jaw dropped, emitting an exasperated “uh!” She punched up Accel’s listing at the assisted living facility in Nebraska.

“What do you mean hanging up on me like that?” she asked.

“You hurt my feelings,” Accel replied. “I thought we were friends.”

Regner sighed. After thirty years in the astrobiology business she had old friends spread across the globe, many of whom – like Accel – she had never met in person. “You should know better than to expect me to talk to you on an incoming call, Terri. I’ve got zero encryption when you do that.”

“Are we secure now?”

“Secure?” Regner laughed. Her dogs frolicked on the lawn under ancient live oaks, and there was no one in obvious earshot. “I haven’t felt terribly secure in years, but I called on my encrypted line, for what that’s worth.”

A dreamy tone slipped into the grossly obese Nebraska space industry reporter’s voice. “Are you there at The Cistern?”

“Sure,” Regner said. “Beautiful day.”

“Send me a clip, eh?” There was a wistful note in the request that the dean couldn’t quite refuse, something sad and lonely and alien. Regner held up the phone and pressed the capture toggle as she made a slow, five-second pan: the original colonial cistern grown over with well-tended grass, surrounded by thick masonry walls and sweetly faded Federalist structures that combined to create a square. Brick walkways bisected the lawn with a classical symmetry, but the round cistern gave an organic curve to the place and the deep green of the moss-draped live oaks kept everything cool and shadowed for the lounging undergrads and noshing faculty.

Regner pressed the “send button” and the five-second video flashed across a satellite to Nebraska.

“That’s just lovely,” Accel said. “If I were the type to go outside, that’s the first place I’d want to see.”

“What, and give up your exciting career as an agoraphobic?”

“The irony is, in space all this mass wouldn’t matter,” Accel said. “And not wanting to go outside wouldn’t be considered strange on a space colony. I’m a born space traveler, which makes me the last

person on Earth to want to piss on this project. Which reminds me: What part of our discussion got Frank involved in this?”

“It’s all about the sample packet,” Regner said. “Frank said raising questions about the security of the Earth quarantine facility was far too likely to raise alarms among the general public. And let’s face it; the president isn’t riding too high in the polls right now. The explosion at Tharsis Planitia has everybody over at the White House very, very jumpy.”

“So let me get this straight: You raise a simple concern about the safety and handling of Martian dirt from the accident scene, and now you’re data-bombed?”

“Not quite. Frank says if I’m a good little girl I can get my files back once all this settles back down – but I’m finished as the chairman of the Astrobiology Security Committee. The politicians are firmly in control now, and perception is everything. It just fries my ass, Terri.”

“How long before we know whether we’re in real trouble?”

“With the new deceleration rules for Earth orbitals, the samples won’t arrive back here until October at the earliest. I figure we’ll hear something just before the election – or not at all.”

“That’s a long time to sit around on your hands.”

“It’s not so bad,” Regner said, rearranging her skirt and leaning back into a patch of sunlight with the phone pressed against her ear. It was bright and warm even for a Charleston January and Regner loved this time of year more than she ever let on. “Don’t worry about me, Terri – I’ll be quite busy. The Kennel Club show is coming up and I’m trying to train Andie for it. She’s terrible.”

“And you think you’ll be happy like that? Sitting on your ass waiting for the world to end? Training your little bitch for the Kennel Club?”

“It’s not so bad.”

Accel paused.

“Judith, what do you need? From NASA, I mean. I’ve got the sources – I could get my hands on

practically anything – only I wouldn’t be able to recognize the answer if it perched on my keyboard and screamed at me. But if you can figure it out, then I can publish the answer – protecting your identity, of course – so that we stop this train.”

“This train is already moving full speed with no brakeman, Terri,” Regner said. “Ten astronauts were killed by unexplained volcanism at Tharsis three days ago, *on a planet where there is no volcanism*. And the official report is going to conclude – correctly yet vaguely, as if a conclusion is the same thing as an answer – that this was an anomaly. Well duh.”

“So what do you need?” Accel persisted. “You’re the chairman of the team that’s supposed to inform our decisions about the risks of alien contact – or you were until this week, anyway. We need to hear what you think”

A spit-covered stick interrupted their conversation. It dropped on Regner’s knuckles where she leaned in the grass, and she turned to find Fritz and Andie peering intently at her with serious but expectant eyes. The dean picked up the branch and chucked it, and off the Dachshunds went, tumbling over each other’s backs in the chase.

“Get me the enhanced video of the explosion from Goddard and the data log from JPL,” she told Accel, “and then we’ll talk.”



“Fractal *what?*” the college’s president asked, confusion blending politely with the Tupelo honey in his voice.

The president was a judge by trade, a raconteur by inclination, and nothing in his background prepared him for anything to do with the hard sciences. He stared at her across the mahogany expansive of his desk with a quizzical look that was equal parts feigned and true ignorance.

“Fractal geometry imaging,” Regner said, speaking loudly and slowly as if talking to the deaf. “It’s an experimental technology.”

“Well ... what’s it *do*?” the president asked, his face screwing up so that he looked like a man passing painful gas.

“It lets us write algorithms that compare seemingly chaotic patterns to create high-resolution, detailed closeups from original photographs with much lower resolution.”

”It does?”

“Yes sir, it does.”

The president drummed his fingers on his desk and stared out the window for a moment. Regner folded the pleats of her skirt and tried to sit the way the nuns had taught her.

“So why does it need so many computers?” he asked.

“We have to test the math, frame by frame. It’s a slow process.”

“And ... what’s the *point*?”

“We use the fractal geometry to derive pictures of very small things. It actually draws still pictures of things too small to be seen in the original video.”

“*Very* small?”

“Very small.”

More finger drumming.

“*How* small?” This time he engaged her eyes. He really did want to know – he just couldn’t figure out how to ask.

“Maybe smaller than a bacterium. Maybe almost as small as a virus,” she said. “It’s possible, in theory, although anything we produce is going to be controversial as hell...”

“And you’d draw this picture with a *computer*? Would an image like that be admissible in court?”

Regner snorted. “Not a chance in hell. But see, we’re not after a conviction, Judge – just a temporary injunction.”

“And what do you think this picture will show you?”

“A Martian.”

“A Martian?” The Judge looked at her with detached curiosity, his jaw working absently as if he were literally chewing on her. “We’ve already got pictures of Martians. They looked like little ...

Palmetto Bugs. Amoebas. Garden slugs.”

“No sir. Those are all fossils. I mean a *live* Martian.”

“Dr. Regner,” the president said, laughing and taking his feet down off the desk. “Now you know ain’t nobody ever found a live Martian, much less take a picture of one.”

“Well sir, just think how good it will look for the college when we’re the first to find one,” Regner said.

“No, no, I think you miss my point,” the president said, rising to pace and shaking his finger. “This is the College of *Charleston*, Professor Regner. We don’t produce *Martians*. We produce teachers and businesspeople and cultured, charming *spouses*. Hell, we barely produce *graduate students*. And if you go out and tell people that you’ve got the first snapshot of a little green man, well, I can tell you what we’ll be producing among my academic colleagues: *peals of derisive laughter*.”

The president came to a stop in front of her chair, then put a hand on her shoulder.

“So try again, professor: What’s the point?” He cocked his head expectantly.

“To use the study of this material as a cutting-edge learning opportunity for our students,” Regner said. She didn’t get to be department chair by being stupid.

“Damn right,” the president said, his beefy paw slapping across her shoulder. “And so long as these cutting-edge learning opportunities keep bringing in NASA grants with built-in 60 percent administrative overhead, I’ll keep loaning you as many computers as you need. Drink, Judith?”

“Do you have any Southern Comfort, Judge?”

“I keep it around for your visits,” he said, returning from the antique glass-doored cupboard with a fifth of the peach-flavored liqueur and two bell-shaped glasses. After clinking their snifters together in a toast, the president loosened his tie and settled into a red leather chair across from her, joyfully soaking up the slanting winter sun like an antebellum reptile.

“I want to tell you something, Judith, but you’ll

have to be discreet. Can I count on you for that?”

“Of course.”

“I’m assuming that you know you’re back on NASA’s shit list – it’s no secret, and hell, we both know the only reason you even considered accepting this job was the fact that the agency promoted Frank Bulger over you.”

It was a sensitive subject, even if it was true, and Regner squirmed to hear it named so plainly. Frank had been her protégé up until the moment of his promotion, and Regner’s very public melt-down after his betrayal was the talk of the astrobiology world for months.

“I’ve gotten over that, Judge, I really have,” she said. The Judge waved off her concerns with a pinched expression and loose flicks of his wrist.

“Your problems never really made any difference to me, Judith – I brought you here because I thought you’d be an asset to the college, and I don’t drop my friends just because they fall out of favor with the current ruling clique.”

“But...”

“But I want you to know that your name came up at dinner Wednesday night with the Senator and his wife. Just a passing comment, really, if you’re dumb enough to believe that that sumbitch ever makes a passing comment.”

“What did he say?”

“I’m not going to tell you. Besides, what he said wasn’t important – the important thing was the message he delivered: I’m supposed to keep you in line, Judith.”

“Horse hockey.”

“Nevertheless,” the Judge said, waving off her protest again. “There’s a lot riding on this Mars base, the president’s second term not least among them. He doesn’t have much else to run on with the war dragging on and the economy back in the toilet.”

“You’re calling me off,” Regner said, her eyes tracing his face in disgust. “Oh, God, don’t tell me they’ve gotten to you, too, Judge.”

“Well of course they have, Judith,” he said. “I’m a

*politician*, which means I’m ‘gettable’ by *trade*. But that’s also why I’m capable of understanding what’s happening: The new Mars-base crew should arrive right before the election, and the sample return to Huntsville will give everyone at NASA a chance to say ‘amen’ over whatever theory the President’s advisors have chosen to promote. Then – once the voters have seen the video and heard the talk about staying the course with this president – then you can go back about the business of pissing NASA off. Only right now, I want you to keep your head down, Judith. Hell, play with your dogs for six months.”

“Why is it,” she asked, “that the most powerful men in the world are so afraid of looking weak that even a hint of the possibility of the appearance of weakness drives them to all manner of irrational acts?”

“Because there is never enough,” the Judge said, shaking his head slowly. “A good politician keeps power because he is always in the market for more of it – never resting on laurels, never taking anything for granted. You sweat the details, you anticipate the contingencies, you limit the variables. And that’s what you scientists are to them – a variable they can’t control. To that mindset, whatever cannot be controlled is, by definition, a threat.”

“I don’t think you quite get what I’m talking about,” Regner said, inching her butt forward in the chair. “We’re not talking about NASA incompetence and White House campaign commercials – we’re talking about the very real chance that whatever’s in that sample-return packet could threaten the continuation of life on this planet.”

“That’s foolishness,” he said, but the words lacked his usual conviction. “There are no diseases on Mars. No viruses. No bacteria. No plagues. We went through all of this years ago. Hell, Judith, you chaired the oversight committee – you’re contradicting your own findings.”

“Whoever said that the only kind of life that could threaten us would be diseases?” she asked.

The Judge gestured with his glass. “Well ... you did. You signed off on the exploration plan, the quarantine plan. You signed off on everything.”  
 “Not everything,” Regner said, shaking her head.



Fall in the Lowcountry came with its traditional heat wave. Charlestonians always wait for the “cool spell in August” and know that the first truly cold weather of the year comes about the time the fair begins out at the Exchange Park in Ladson, but those who have watched its years come and go over decades recognize the warm period in between. In early September the high spiked to 101 degrees and all the carriage horses came off the streets for a week, but by mid-October things had moderated into the low-80s again: It was as beautiful and sweet a time as the Lowcountry year ever produced, and Regner – transplanted Yankee though she was – had come to love it with all her heart.

She sat on the lawn at the Cistern in her favorite white linen dress. The cloth spread beneath her came from Guatemala, a happy memory from a long-ago trip during her doctoral work. Her crystal was Waterford. The wine was genetically engineered Chilean – not famous, but good. It was not a day to stand on status.

Terri Accel was not as comfortable. At over 600 pounds, it was hard for her to find any position that felt right, and being outside was such a novel experience for her that her enjoyment was periodically interrupted by near panics. She, too, wore a white dress, though in her case it was more like a giant christening gown – a shapeless thing that covered her enormous body while she was out in public. Accel was in a three-quarters reclining position, her upper torso propped against the cushions that her traveling companion from the home had carried from Nebraska in anticipation of this moment.

“To life,” said Regner, raising her glass. Accel followed suit, and the crystal clinked sweetly. They

drank and let the complex flavors wash over their palettes. Fritz and Andie lounged in the shade of Accel’s belly.

The scene drew the attention of practically everyone who passed through the Cistern – it was the last day of classes before fall break, and students and faculty slowed as they passed, as if mentally struggling to interpret the incongruously idyllic tableau. Such a buzz was sure to bring out the Judge, and it did. He descended from Randolph Hall with his entourage like an Old Testament king gone out to walk among the commoners, but he honed in on them with a singleminded purpose.

“Dr. Regner, I don’t believe I’ve met your friend,” the Judge said, stopping in front of their picnic.

“Judge, this is Terri Accel, the space industry reporter.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, extended a marbled hand. “Charmed,” said the Judge. “To what do we owe this honor, Ms. Accel?”

“Judith invited me here for an end-of-the-world luncheon,” Accel said.

“Yes, and we would be so happy if you’d join us,” Regner offered. “Look, here come the caterers now.” A squad of tuxedoed-and-aproned waiters, servers and musicians flowed through the Gatehouse arch from George Street loaded down with baskets, wine bottles and stringed instruments. The college president stirred uncomfortably, then nodded to his companions, who went ahead without him.

“You know, Judith,” he said under his breath, “you’re supposed to clear anything of this nature through the provost...”

“Oh give it a rest, Judge,” Regner said, standing and smoothing out her dress. “None of that will matter soon, so have a damn drink.” She extended a full glass of wine to him.

“Now sit,” she said, and as if compelled, the Judge found himself on his haunches on the Guatemalan throw next to Accel. Fritz sniffed his crotch and looked up approvingly.

“Good,” Regner said, then turned to give her instructions quickly to the caterers. They fanned out

around the party in fluid efficiency, silver serving trays of prime rib, asparagus and new potatoes emerging from wicker baskets. Tables and chairs unfolded smartly to be topped with crisp napkins, polished silver and fresh flowers. The violinists and the cellist were already tuned, and broke immediately into a Strauss waltz.

“Don’t forget to serve the dogs,” Regner reminded a waiter as she took her seat.

“Judith, please,” the Judge said as he hoisted his considerable heft from the lawn and lowered himself into his chair. “This is all *wonderfully* eccentric, as would befit Charlestonians of our stature, but surely you must...”

“They’re opening the sample packet today,” Accel said as a waiter poured fresh wine into her glass. No folding chair could ever accommodate her girth, so she prepared to dine from her reclining position. “In fact, they should have opened it just a few minutes ago.”

“Ah...” the Judge said. “So if you’re right, Judith, then something bad is about to happen, yes?”

“Oh, I’m right,” she said, taking her first bite of prime rib and savoring it. “We’ve got the tapes to prove it.”

“I don’t understand,” the Judge said.

“You explain it, honey,” Regner said to Accel. “I’m eating.”

“The LAMP at Tharsis was not an explosion,” Accel said, her eyes trailing through the branches of the live oaks that arched overhead. “It was metabolism.”

She turned her face to the Judge as if to see whether or not he was following her, then proceeded.

“This is what Mars should have taught us, you see. When we first found those Martian fossils so many of us were disappointed – people wanted to see themselves as special. They wanted to believe that life could only happen here.

“But what they *should* have seen was how special we really are. The miracle of Earth isn’t life – life occurs everywhere, all the time, a continuous counterbalance to entropy. The miracle of Earth is

that our planet treats life so generously: here life cavorts and plays. Earth is life ascendant, bubbling, intertwined and beautiful. We have such surplus of life that we can squander it, store it, take it for granted.

“Not so elsewhere. Elsewhere life is as blind and harsh and violent as a furnace. It serves no discernible higher purpose – it is simply nature’s answer to chaos, an organizing principle weighing against the slow grind of thermodynamics. Do you follow, Judge?”

“Not at all,” he said, growing impatient. He didn’t have time for this – two representatives from the faculty senate were due to meet him in a matter of minutes... yet the smell of the prime rib tugged seductively...

“What Terri is trying to tell you is that I screwed up,” Regner said. “When I signed off on our sample return protocols from Tharsis, it was based on an incomplete reading of the data. I thought life there would always look like life here, but I didn’t consider the implications of an environment that provides the proper conditions only once a millennia. We missed it.”

“So what does that have to do with the explosion?”

“Think of it this way,” Regner said, pausing to chew and gesturing with her fork. “Here on Earth we have desert watering holes that fill up only once every five to seven years. We used to think that life couldn’t exist under such swings – sure, we could imagine life that adapted to one condition or another, but we always believed that continuity was the key. Evolution could never keep up with such extreme swings. Yet these desert watering holes flourish wildly after a rain: spores bloom, flies hatch, microbes split and eat and split again. It is life in rapacious abandon: it arrives on short notice, responds immediately, reproduces frantically and then disappears.

“Earth-like life on Mars disappeared a billion years ago, killed out by the cooling of the planet’s core. Without plate tectonics, all the heat and vapor that escaped came spewing and trickling out

of the volcanoes of Tharsis, so it just made sense that life would make its final stand there. Over the millennia, Martian organisms learned to suspend their processes between eruptions, harsh reality winnowing life down to its thin, hard core, until the final survivor emerged.”

Regner reached into her pocketbook and retrieved an envelope. The Judge took it and withdrew the slick photograph from inside: It looked like an abstract painting of some medieval weapon, gray spikes projecting from a spherical center.

“There you go, Judge,” Regner said. “A living Martian.”

“That’s not possible,” he said, shaking his head. “You would have seen it before. You would have studied something like this.”

“Scientists have just as much trouble spotting anomalies as regular people do,” Regner replied, smiling. “It’s too small. We didn’t look for something this size because we didn’t think a living thing could be so small and hard, and if you just scanned a soil sample you’d never recognize this as a life form: It doesn’t act like a life form.”

“So why are you so scared of it?”

Regner laughed and Accel chuckled along.

“I want you to imagine with me, Judge,” she said, touching his hand. “Imagine a world with only the thinnest of atmospheres – a dry and frigid place where time almost stands still. Five thousand years pass with only wandering dust storms to break the monotony, and then one day, a tiny little remnant of volcanic pressure shoots a jet of steam and heat up through the crust of the planet. It lasts only minutes, and then it is gone for another five thousand years. Now, Judge, imagine a life form that has adapted to this environment.”

He didn’t answer, only sat chewing.

“The LAMP report said anomalous volcanism caused the explosion that killed the Tharsis base,” Accel said. “What it didn’t say was that when the LAMP occurred, Simonton and Kahn were using a ground sonar device to map a defunct thermal vent. The mapper creates a three-dimensional image of

underground structures based on sound waves, but it creates the sound waves by making a small underground explosion.”

Fritz whined suddenly, his head perking up. Regner reached a hand down to scratch behind his ears.

“The Martians responded to the energy from this explosion as they had evolved to respond: they left their state of expended animation to consume and reproduce.” Regner said. “Only this time it wasn’t a geothermal jet they consumed – it was a tiny explosion and a generous helping of astronaut.”

The Judge’s laughter caught everyone by surprise. It roared out of him, startling birds and squirrels.

“You mean to tell me,” he said, regaining his composure, “that little, itty bitty Martians ate Simonton and Kahn?”

“I mean to tell you that little itty bitty Martians ate Simonton and Kahn and their rover and the heat of their rover tracks in the sand all the way back to the Tharsis base, where it ate the other eight astronauts and all their equipment and batteries and food and oxygen,” Regner said. “And I particularly mean to tell you that the little bastards ate all of this so rapidly, so voraciously, that to a video camera it looked as if everything was being wiped out by an explosion. The more energy and water the Martians encountered, the more ferociously they fed and reproduced, and a few seconds later it was all over and every single newborn Martian sucked itself down to a spore and went to sleep.”

Fritz was begging now, trying to scale Regner’s leg. She scooped him up and deposited him in her lap, but the little dog was shivering. Andie was alert now, too, barking and growling.

“OK, that’s a fine theory,” the Judge said, “but even if it’s true, the sample that we’ve returned from Tharsis is quarantined at Huntsville. You helped design that lab yourself, Judith. There’s no way these little buggers can escape it. We’ll be fine.”

Off across the Ashley River the sound of a distant thunderstorm rumbled, and Andie’s barking descended to a low growl. Regner scooped her up

as well.

“Everybody have a drink,” Regner said to the caterers and musicians. “Stop what you’re doing. Have a drink with us. That’s right. Don’t be shy – I’m paying for all of this, and I’m telling you to join me. It’s OK.”

A waiter made the rounds with fresh glasses as the rumbling grew louder. Regner led them all in a toast and knocked back the wine in one quick swallow.

“Judith,” the Judge said, a sudden feeling of dread taking hold, “please tell me that’s just a thunderstorm. Please tell me those Martians didn’t escape the lab.”

“Well duh,” Regner said. “Those Martians didn’t *escape* the lab. Those Martians *ate* the lab. Voracious little buggers.”

Regner’s cell phone rang as the first excited screams began to reach the shady peace of the Cistern. She held it against her ear with her shoulder as she hugged her dogs.

“Dr. Regner,” Frank Bulger began, “There seems to be a situation in Huntsville, and now Atlanta and New Orleans are offline, too. I am going to need your data, but I can’t signal the ‘bot to unlock it remotely...”

“Frank, what do you expect me to do now?” Regner asked. “We showed you the fractal enhancements, but you weren’t interested. I considered going over your head – for the sake of the dogs, anyway – but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that once it was over, it would just be for the best.”

“Judith,” he said, his voice crackling with static, “please...”

“You know what really got me?” Regner said, her eyes gazing absently through the live oak leaves to the perfect sky beyond. “The fact that the whole of recorded human history probably took place

between just one life cycle for these creatures. They’ve traveled so far and suffered so long just to make it to this day. I couldn’t very well deny them their victory, now could I?”

“Judith!” Frank screamed, his voice now audible to everyone standing next to her, “you’ve got to help me stop them! You were right! It’s out of control! It’s...”

The line went dead.

“Can you imagine what this must be like for them?” Regner said to no one in particular, her voice trailing wistfully through the afternoon light. “Everything you are is programmed for scarcity, and suddenly you have more than you could have ever imagined. Earth must seem like heaven to them. I can almost feel their joy.”

“Please tell me this is all a joke,” the Judge said, looking to the west. “The rumbling is getting louder!”

“Yes Judge,” she said, bending forward to kiss his cheek. “It’s a joke. Everything is a joke. It always was.”

A blonde undergraduate student raced down the brick walkway and flew past them as he headed north towards Calhoun Street. “It’s an attack!” he shouted. “We’re under attack!” If he even noticed them in his panic, the boy gave no sign of it.

Accel smiled and laughed as he passed, then took the deepest breath of fresh air she had ever experienced and tossed her arms open to the sky. “Oh, Judith! Thank you so much for bringing me here! It was such a perfect day!”

“You’re welcome, Terri,” Regner said, snuggling her Dachshunds in the crook of one arm and raising her glass to her companions. “Let it never be said of me — for all my flaws — that I failed to appreciate the true abundance of life.”

Together they drained the wine and settled in for the short wait.

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