

Soldier, Sailor

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By Lewis Shiner

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Stepping out of the airlock behind Reese, Kane was amazed by the weight & wetness of the air. He could make out the odors of cut grass, honeysuckle & ivy. Martian night was falling outside the dome & he sensed clouds forming above him. Rain on Mars. Evenly spaced houses surrounded him, covered with ivy & separated by rows of elephant ears & ferns. The intricacy of the ecological planning startled him; a bee floated over his head & somewhere a mockingbird whistled.

The sight of the colonists sitting on their porches in the sunset filled him with a mixture of nostalgia & surrealist horror. They smiled & nodded to Kane as if it had been days instead of years since they'd seen a stranger, as if the space program still existed & Reese was once more in uniform.

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Reading Ouspensky, he had found the first clue to the strange visions that spun around the lip of his consciousness. "Every separate human life is a moment in the life of some great being which lives in us." But when he tried for a more concrete image than ships & shadowy figures rising from the ground, it melted away. From Campbell Kane learned of the Pattern of the Hero, the inexorable circle, the path of exile & return. For an instant the memories—if that was what they were—clarified. Kane saw that he must take it all personally. Then it was gone again.

*

Eventually Curtis asked how things were on Earth & Reese framed a careful reply. Kane paid little attention to the measured, cautious description of the riots, the famines, the plagues. Instead he examined Curtis, the governor of the colony, with care. The man was soft, pallid, mannered in his speech. Kane asked simple questions—limits to the population, energy sources, chains of command. He found Curtis's answers evasive, dismissive. Kane felt the vast gulf between himself & the earth as an ache inside him.

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Their first morning on Mars, Reese had taken him to the ruins of the native city. Kane was fascinated by the enigma of the Martian holocaust—the artifacts of intelligence assimilated into the processes of nature.

“Why no bodies?” Kane asked, scuffing through the rings of ash, sand & boiled rock. “They should have mummified when the water went.”

Reese shrugged, the motion barely discernible through his bulky suit.

Kane wandered off, trying to picture the city before the disaster. Some of the walls were almost intact, blistered & pitted, but recognizable, while on all sides there was only rubble. The stone, obviously artificial, was indistinguishable from the surrounding rocks. It formed an architecture of intersecting lines, with the Druidic power of Stonehenge.

*

At dinner he sat across from Curtis’s wife Molly. She was tall, dark, full-breasted, with a quality of listless abstraction that Kane found compelling. He desired her in a dark, impersonal way that was none the less intense. As for Curtis, Kane found him increasingly officious, dangerously authoritative. He identified Curtis with his uncle; at the thought the taste of his food turned sour. His mood turned chaotic & violent & he held his fists under the table until the worst of it passed.

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“The panel,” his uncle said, “is circular, about 35 cm in diameter, studded at irregular but frequent intervals with PROMs.” The fluorescent light was harsh & Kane’s attention wandered toward the smog & riot torn streets outside the window. “At least three of these chips are mutants, and are responsible for the power output curves on this chart.”

Kane glanced at the chart & away again, despising his uncle, the broad waxed desk, his own poverty & failure. His uncle’s life depended on his staying in business; if he failed, his employees would tear him to pieces.

“We have to get those chips into the lab,” his uncle said, “or we’ll never know

why they perform they way they do.”

“You say this panel is dangerous.”

“In the hands of the colonists, yes. It’s been ten years since the space program was terminated. They undoubtedly need resources from Earth, if they’re even alive at all. How do they feel about Earth after we cut them off? Can we even hope to understand them? A ship powered by that panel is a weapon pointed at the Earth.”

The walls of the office were lined with renderings of yet more offices. Kane sat & allowed himself to be manipulated. Something had gone out of him during his years of student exile. He no longer had the will to resist.

*

On their second trip to the ruins, Reese took Kane into the central underground complex. The entrance was small, a vivid black hole in the orange glow of the desert. Kane lowered himself after Reese & found himself on a steeply descending ramp. As his eyes adjusted to their flashlights he made out the circular pit to his left. It seemed to have no bottom. The ramp curved around it & he followed, no more than a spectator, just as he had been in grade school, watching on TV as Reese planted the US flag on these same ruins & turned to wave to the cameras.

Now Reese turned off the ramp & moved between tilted slabs of rock to an inner chamber. Reese’s hand moved & a door swung open from the wall. Kane followed him inside. The door closed behind them & Kane heard the unmistakable hiss of pressurized air. Inside his helmet a light changed from red to green. Reese took off his helmet & opened an inner door. Light flowed from the walls themselves & Kane turned off his flash.

The walls were made of the same artificial stone as the ruins above, lacking all ornament. Walking into the room, he loosened his helmet & set it on the floor. The chill air stung his cheeks & made him wince. Here there was finally decoration, a low relief that reminded Kane of a printed circuit board. It ran from floor to ceiling with circular protrusions at key points, but no visible dials or meters. He understood the chauvinism of such an expectation. At the far end of the room, where Reese stood, the outlines of a door were etched into solid rock. No handle or indentation marred its surface. Kane pressed his hand to it. He

sensed its importance, connected it instinctively to the disappearance of the Martians, but could not guess its function. It did not respond to his touch. He turned to look at Reese. “What does it mean?”

Reese put his helmet back on & started for the door.

*

Like a fragment of melody on a tape loop: clear, high voices in a minor key, without a message, offering only coloration, a distortion in his ability to see the world. Or like a flickering at the edges of his vision that seemed to be the curves & angles of fourth dimensional space. Behind it a sense of alien personality, lurking. The ghosts of the Martian builders?

*

Kane wandered barefoot through the city under the dome. It was a quiet suburb painted by Magritte, too Uniform, too clearly defined, too obviously existing in a vacuum. The grass under his feet was a rich green, round-bladed & moist. The houses were like those in the poverty-level neighborhoods where Kane had grown up, after his father died—vinyl siding, short porches, bushes & trees growing unhindered against the walls.

At the edge of the dome he watched distorted images of dust storms blow past the double wall of yellowing plastic. High CO₂ levels & the peak heat of afternoon made him drowsy & short of breath. Reese & Curtis would be at the ruins all day; he had time for an hour or two of sleep.

Retracing his steps, he saw Curtis’s wife Molly on the porch of their bungalow.

A chill of prescience went through him. The Presence in his mind sang to him as he climbed the single step & stood in front of her. She was solid, indifferent, languidly sensual. Kane’s hands were clenched again.

“Sit down,” she said, making it a polite question. Kane sat facing her. He searched her face for information, admiring its clean, symmetrical weight. They had reached the neutrality of afternoon. He could not avoid looking at her breasts, at the wide brown nipples visible through her T-shirt.

“You’d like a drink,” she said, standing. Kane heard the power of command she

chose not to use. He felt her matriarchal strength, her link with the rich, darkly scented vegetation that surrounded them. He followed her into the gloom of a curtained kitchen, hearing birds cry outside in an eternal, abstracted spring. He stopped Molly at the refrigerator with a light touch on the arm. As she turned to him her eyes lost their focus & became distant, passive. His hands went to her breasts, thumbs touching her nipples as she gripped his elbows. She led him into her bedroom, a dim, fragrant place more personal, more private than her body. Standing across the bed from him she pulled her clothes off as he watched. The aroma of her body drifted to him, heavy, sweet, blatantly sexual. Kane shut his eyes, unwilling for a moment to continue with it: his internal struggles, his helplessness before his own sexual urgings, the climax inevitably empty compared to the ritual preceding it. As their bodies merged, Molly astride him, her hands on his wrists, Kane felt the violence rise within him. With effort he delayed his ejaculation until Molly had satisfied herself; by that time he had become detached from his own passion. He spasmed quickly & they lay together in the heat of the drowning afternoon.

*

Kane had been amazed by Reese's easy acceptance of his uncle's offer. Clearly Reese had ulterior motives; Kane had no desire to learn them. From this understanding came a kind of mutual respect, or at least silence. Reese did not ask Kane to justify his part in the scenario, a scenario that seemed to point to both their deaths.

Reese claimed to have translated the Martian engravings during the ten years he'd spent on Earth, an involuntary furlough caused by the failure of the space program. Kane eventually began to believe the translations were genuine, but knew Reese was holding something back.

*

Reese assembled the entire population of the colony in their conference room. Kane sat on the back row with a piece of string, idly weaving cat's cradles.

"Today," Reese said, "I took the preliminary dictionary to the ruins, with Curtis's help. We were able to piece together a long section from one of the engravings."

Kane wondered if Curtis should have been involved. Curtis was clever & authoritarian & the less he knew the better. Kane sensed a primal conflict

between himself & Curtis, building toward a violent release.

Reese moved through the translation, pausing frequently to fill in gaps, suggest explanations, grapple with alien concepts. Kane found himself moved, almost against his will, by the story. He gazed out the windows of the auditorium, seeing past the verdant languor of the trees to the desert beyond. Always poor, always dry, feeding a few vastly alien creatures just enough to keep them in perpetual warfare. Reese offered no physical description of the Martians, & Kane could only conceive of them in grotesque, cartoon terms.

If anything, he thought, they must have been like Reese. Large, powerful, but carrying an aura of defeat & doom. What culture could have reached the peak that Reese described & left so little behind? A single devastated city, the last refuge of the artists & scientists fleeing the final war. Where they waited for the catastrophe of their own making to wipe the oxygen from the air, boil away the water, lacerate & blister the very stone. The translation made compelling poetry, full of strange pairings & cryptic emphases. In it Kane saw again the equanimity that moved him so strongly in Molly & Reese.

*

They had given Kane his own house & Molly came to him there. The sexuality of their attraction had withered & Kane had come to see in her the power & competence he saw in Reese. His own nature, prone to extremes of apathy & violence, was in perfect opposition. In the darkness they sat on Kane's bed without touching. As Kane listened, she drew him into the power struggles of the colonists. Without hesitation or encouragement from him she talked of the panel, taking his knowledge of it for granted. He wondered if she took his motives for granted too, or if she even cared.

Curtis wanted the panel to power the generators of the colony, to expand, to solidify. Kane had heard the arguments before, on another world; more or less, they were the same as his uncle's. Plodding, methodical, a denial of impulse or creativity. Molly—& others—wanted the panel to power a ship that could reach Jupiter, Saturn, beyond. Kane listened in silence, allowing Molly to engulf him with her dreams, the way she'd engulfed him earlier with her body. She knew as if by instinct how to reach him, tantalizing him with the inhuman beauty of the outer planets.

Molly & the void of space were linked by the same relationship as Reese & the ruins. In Reese's case it was a destiny of annihilation, the merger of his lost career with the fate of the lost Martians. For Molly it was something more vital, but still a gesture of despair. Both were prisoners, deprived of the frontiers they needed by an accident of time.

After Molly left, Kane took the pistol out of the bottom of his flight bag & stared at it. The voices sang in his mind.

*

Kane, Molly & Reese went out to the shipyard. Here the remains of the big ships that had brought the colonists from Earth lay in shining disarray. Broken down in orbit, brought piece by piece to the surface in shuttles, converted into furniture, tools, decorations. What was left over stretched for five hundred meters across the pale sand. Kane walked through huge rings of metal, lightly touching them with gloved hands. It was an edited & polished scrap yard, free from the violence of oxygen & rain.

"From this you're going to build a ship?" Kane asked.

"There's still one ship in orbit," Molly said. "Not that we can get to it, of course. But yes, between it and the parts here and the panel, we could build a ship."

"If," Kane said, "Curtis were not governor of this colony."

She didn't answer. Kane thought about Jupiter. Massive, inhuman, constructed on a different principle than Earth or Mars. With moons like worlds, floating under the huge red Eye. He found his breath coming short. His hands tingled & he heard a roaring in his ears. It didn't seem important. Reese called his name. Kane tried to answer but couldn't seem to get his breath.

"Hypoxia," Reese said.

Molly was standing behind him. "Pressure's all right."

"It's the mixture," Reese said. "Look out..."

Kane sat down. He was aware that Curtis was trying to kill him, gently & from a distance. Reese disconnected his own tank & traded it for Kane's. In the moment

of the exchange, without air for a second or two, Kane had a particularly intense occurrence of the vision.

His mind gradually cleared. Molly was driving them back to the base, Reese lying quietly, living off the air inside his suit. Eyes closed, Reese whispered: “Don’t talk about this.”

*

Molly showed Kane where the panel attached to the city power grid, nestled in wiring like a flat egg. Kane had begun to feel the pressure of time & wanted as many pieces of the puzzle within reach as possible. Soon he would have to make his decision.

*

After sunset Kane sat on his porch & watched the rain. It fell almost hesitantly, without thunder to announce it or wind to carry it. Puddles of light from neighboring windows illuminated the grass & trees.

Reese’s suit was missing. Kane did not doubt he’d gone to the ruins. Curtis had noticed as well. Kane felt the wheel turn under him, exposing a new segment of the Circle.

*

When they stole the ship from Canaveral, with the help of his uncle, Kane had known that Reese was following some elaborate purpose of his own. Without him Kane would have been helpless; Kane himself seemed to make little difference to Reese beyond his ability to provide the ship. Still Reese had taught him to navigate, led him through rigorous physical training, controlled the mission from the first. Now Kane sensed a shift in the power balance. His own time had come, his phase, his moment. Or perhaps Reese had simply diverged, entered the final stage of his own compulsion.

Kane had rejected the idea when it first came to him. But it continued to haunt him. He thought of Reese, out in the ruins, his labors, his feats of courage & strength. He thought of the Circle & the great fourth dimensional being outside time. Of the salt spray & the shining cup & the others who had come before him. And then he knew.

*

In the darkness Kane lost sense of his own body. His limbs seemed to shrink & swell as if in a fever dream. Over it all he smelled the stale salt of the sea & high harmonies rang in his ears.

He dressed in darkness & tucked the pistol into his jeans. Out under the dome the rain had ended. The stars were smears of brightness behind the plastic. The lights flickered as Kane switched over to the auxiliary generator, but stayed on. He disconnected the panel with a few precise gestures, hampered by the pressure of the pistol in his waistband.

He sat in the wet grass outside Curtis & Molly's house until the lights went out. Curtis finally emerged & headed for the air lock. Suited up, the panel in one hand, the pistol dangling from the other, Kane followed him across the desert. Taking huge strides in the reduced gravity he slowly gained on Curtis's headlamp, now almost halfway to the ruins.

*

At night the desert became an ocean. Freckles of white froth sprayed the dune tops. Imaginary ships sailed off its edge. The desert seemed to exist in all dimensionalities, to form a link or stepping stone to the incomprehensible.

*

“Curtis.”

Curtis turned, startled, & Kane shot him through the helmet. Curtis's face exploded & a fine spray of blood hissed through shattered glass as the body crumpled to the ground. Kane's hand throbbed slightly from the kick of the gun in the low pressure. He tossed the weapon into the dirt beside Curtis's body. Carrying the panel like a shield in his left arm, he noticed the voices had become quieter.

Once he was into the central pit, he had little trouble finding his way. He went through the airlock & sat down beside Reese.

“How much have you figured out?” Reese asked, not looking around. His hands rested on the carved circles as if they were dials & knobs. Perhaps they were.

“Most of it,” Kane said. “I just came to say goodbye.”

Reese turned, nodded. “You took the panel. Have you decided what to do with it?”

“Not yet.”

The doorframe now surrounded a shimmering, luminous area of force. Rainbow colors ran off it, reminding Kane of an oil slick or a huge fire opal.

“Will you be able to come back?” Kane asked.

“I don’t care to, either way,” Reese said.

“Good luck.” Kane reached up from where he sat & took Reese’s hand. He felt the link between them that had never been realized.

Reese nodded & stepped through the shimmering gateway, across billions of miles of nothingness to a new world, just as the last of the Martian builders had, while the city above was pounded into rubble. Kane continued to sit & stare at the shifting pattern. At last he got up & stood beside the opening, hesitating. He stuck one finger into the pulsing glow, felt the summer warmth beyond. And then he turned & walked away from it, the colors fading to chilly stone behind him.

*

Passing the nadir of descent, Kane felt the insistent tug of the Return, a conceptual rebirth. His pattern nearly finished, he thought of the others who had walked it. Most of all Jason, the obsessed & broken sailor, whose creaking ship & brine-scented voyage had haunted his dreams. Of Percival, the soldier maddened by his realization of the Pattern, ending his days in futile subservience to a nameless God.

Kane knew that each of them, the single being they made up & the single act they performed outside time, would continue. To each of them was a unique moment, a contribution, a change. Kane knew what his had to be.

Molly was asleep & he was relieved that she did not wake up when he entered. His voices silent now, Kane set the panel beside her bed. Her Pattern was yet to

come; Kane wondered if Odysseus would sing to her on her voyages.

Kane's point of view had begun to shimmer & bleed, like the gate that Reese had used. Only a force of will held his perceptions together as he suited up & began the walk back to his ship, back to the Earth, back to his kingdom.

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