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3,977 words

## MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL

by

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The clear, crisp fall afternoon in central Minnesota offered no hint as to the improbable chain of events soon to impact Dr. Bradley Hammond (and ultimately all of humankind).

The secluded facility for the National Center for Alternative Dynamism (NCAD) just west of Minneapolis was serenely peaceful. Peaceful, that is, until an alarm horn punctuated the din inside NCAD's high-security Lab Four.

Lab Four's roof was a white concrete dome measuring almost 100 yards across, partially buried in the black loamy midwestern soil. Deep inside the thick-walled dome lay a huge experiment consisting of three giant gyroscopes, arrayed in a triangular fashion with their translucent flywheels spinning perpendicular to each other. This unique inertial apparatus was rotating inside a large semi-transparent sphere filled with a pale-blue liquid. Two physicists in white lab coats were anxiously huddled around a large instrument panel at the base of the sphere. The reading on one of the gauges had just moved into the yellow caution zone and was steadily creeping toward the red abort zone.

"But you know he doesn't want to be disturbed while he's on holiday," one of the physicists protested.

“I know,” the other replied, “but the test is at a critical stage.” He pointed to the errant gauge. “If we can’t resolve this problem soon, there may not be an experiment for Dr. Hammond to come back to. We need to contact him now.”

###

An hour north of Bemidji, Brad Hammond turned his silver-Lexus SUV off the highway into a gravel lane through the woods. After a few miles the lane forked, and he veered left onto the less-traveled path which consisted of two ruts cutting through the grassy carpet of the forest floor.

Brad Hammond’s youthful appearance—his unshaven dimpled chin held high, his thick, wavy brown hair rippling in the north woods breeze, his deep blue eyes drinking in the details of the forest canopy—seemed to contradict the depth and breadth of his intellectual acumen. Behind the wheel of this car was a driven, dedicated scientist who had almost single-handedly created NCAD and had served as executive director since its inception.

As he bounced along with the last rays of the setting sun filtering through the trees, Brad felt a sense of childish apprehension. His steely, professional persona was beginning to evaporate as memories of his childhood in these woods flooded back into his consciousness. Brad hadn’t traveled down this path in nearly three decades. On that last fateful visit for his tenth birthday, his parents had drowned in a freak accident on the lake when their speeding boat struck a submerged boulder. Brad had been taken to live with his aunt, and the cabin had been leased to others—until now.

The trees gave way into a large clearing, and Brad pulled the SUV to a stop at the lake’s edge. His thoughts of the past were interrupted as his senses were bombarded by the scent of the

lily pads on the gently-rippling water, the mournful wail of distant loons, and the croaking chorus of bullfrogs heralding the deep orange hues of dusk settling in the woods. As a soft evening mist began to form over Mill Creek Lake, Brad scrambled up the hill, climbed the porch steps, opened the door and entered the sanctuary of his youth.

*God, it's good to be here after all these years, he thought. So little seems to have changed.*

The cabin had two rooms, a great room which included the living, kitchen, and dining areas, and a bedroom. The fireplace in the great room provided heat against the evening chill, and there was a small wood stove for cooking. As a young boy, Brad had hated the cabin's lack of electricity, but now he relished it. In the deepening twilight, Brad lit a hurricane lamp in the bedroom and changed into loose-fitting casual clothes. He listened as the first few drops of light rain landed on the roof. Just as his thoughts drifted back to earlier times in this special place, his musings were cut short by the loud chirping of his cell phone.

He grabbed it from the bed. "You'd better have a damned good reason for calling me here!" he bellowed.

"Dr. Hammond, your phase wave experiment is destabilizing. The current anti-matter reading has increased beyond safe limits."

Brad directed his subordinate to provide the current instrument readings. He scowled as they were read to him. "The gamma particle accelerator venturi is probably clogged. Try a burst at ten times the normal rate through the venturi tube to flush it out."

"B-b-but Dr. Hammond, won't that overload the particle beam?"

"Not with the readings you gave me. Just do it." Brad broke the connection and threw his cell phone on the bed.

###

Back at the lab, the red-faced physicist hung up the phone. *If Hammond weren't such a genius,* he muttered to himself, *I wouldn't put up with his crap. But if this experiment works, we could someday utilize anti-gravity for space travel, and I want to be part of the team achieving that chunk of history.*” He turned his attention back to the experiment, reaching for the venturi accelerator control...

###

As Brad stormed out of the bedroom he shouted, “Damn it, why am I surrounded by such stupidity? Why can't my staff exhibit sufficient intelligence to complete my experiment without needing their hands held constantly?”

The first few sprinkles had given way to a torrent of raindrops. Brad loved the sound of heavy rain on the roof. To dissipate the musty cabin odor, Brad laid and kindled logs in the hearth. As the flames crackled to life, he felt strangely unsettled.

An orange-yellow incandescence began to fill the room as warmth from the blaze began to dissipate the long-vacant cabin's stale odor. Brad set a plate of cheese and crusty French bread on the table by the worn old leather chair next to the fireplace.

Brad pulled a bottle of Dom Perignon out of his cooler. He turned, thrust the bottle toward the growing flames and addressed his comments to them. “This was supposed to wait until my experiment succeeds. But we will easily attain our objective, so there's no reason I shouldn't celebrate with some nectar of the gods.”

Later, as the fading embers and last fluttering flames painted dancing designs on the empty plate and champagne flute, Brad finally began to relax. His olfactory and tactile senses reveled in the aroma of the burning wood and the buttery, familiar feel of the leather chair.

Unexpectedly, his almost-closed eyes caught a glitter from a far corner of the darkening great room. He couldn't quite make it out, so he stumbled up from his easy chair and staggered to the corner. A sheet was draped haphazardly over a six-foot-high object. Brad pulled off the sheet and stood staring at an antique full-length mirror encircled by a thick, intricately-carved, dark oak frame.

*I don't think this was here before*, he thought to himself. *Then again, maybe I just didn't notice it.*

Brad glanced at his reflection. What he saw was a shimmering image, almost as if the surface of the mirror was liquid. He slowly extended his index finger to touch the image and was astonished when the tip of his outstretched finger vanished into the shimmering surface.

Brad jerked his finger back from the rippling reflection. As he regained his composure, Brad's scientific curiosity took over. He slowly thrust his entire hand toward the mirror, watching his appendage disappear into the curiously iridescent surface. He felt a faint but distinct tugging on his arm, almost as if the mirror were trying to pull him into it. Brad yanked his arm back. It appeared unscathed; only a tingling sensation remained. He sensed something familiar, yet this feeling frightened him. He turned and started walking back to the comfort of his leather easy chair. But a sudden impulse seized him, and he reversed himself. Without pausing, Brad quickly returned to the mirror and walked into it.

Brad felt himself being sucked into a dimly shimmering void, almost like being under water but still being able to breathe. Then he experienced a falling sensation and lost consciousness. When he awoke, he seemed to be standing in a small room with a soft, curved,

silvery cylindrical wall. The continuous wall had no openings and no protrusions. There was no sound, but Brad detected the aroma of ripe oranges. He was bathed in a relaxing orange-pink light but could not determine its source. The only furniture in the room was a small circular table, apparently made of the same silvery material as the wall. On the table lay a silver disk about the size of a small pancake.

Brad picked up the disk and looked at it. It seemed to have no weight and no discernable features. He tossed it up in the air and watched it float down like a feather.

Suddenly he heard a faint whisper, "Welcome back, Bradley."

He shook his head, thinking *I must be dreaming*.

The whisper returned, "No, you are not. But you have forgotten. Hold the Lamina of Revelation to your forehead."

"The what?" Brad replied.

"The thin circular object," the whisperer clarified.

As he did so, Brad felt a peaceful, pleasurable sensation. He closed his eyes and felt as if he were floating on a raft in the middle of a calm, dark sea. A voice, which was no longer a whisper, pierced his thoughts. "It's good to have you with us again, Bradley."

The voice seemed vaguely familiar.

For an instant he felt frightened, then waves of soothing calm seemed to wash over him.

Brad finally managed to speak, "I don't understand. Who are you?"

"Think back, Bradley, to your 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. Before that you were just like other children, but then something changed."

Brad concentrated. Suddenly a vision of the past swamped his thoughts. He could remember being at the cabin with his parents. It had been late at night, and he was alone in the great room, nestled in his sleeping bag by the fire. He was aroused from his sleep by a high-

pitched chirp. He assumed it was an insect, but then he saw a faint flash of light in the farthest corner of the great room. He rose from his sleeping bag to investigate and found...a shrouded mirror.

He had walked into it then, just as he had done a few moments ago. Back then he had met a being who looked very much human, except it had silvery skin and its eyes were very big and very black. It had introduced itself as Dask.

“Yes, I remember now. Where is Dask?”

The answer came flooding back into his thoughts, “I am here, Bradley.”

Brad looked up and stared into the silver space in front of him. Slowly, he began to visualize a hazy face. It was humanoid, oval shaped, hairless and rather gray. It had what appeared to be two dark, slanted eyes but no nose, ears or mouth. The eyes, which had been two faint slits, began to enlarge into ebony ovals. Then Brad realized the rest of the being’s body had also materialized.

Without understanding why, Brad sensed Dask appeared unchanged—at least in terms of his four-foot height and silvery complexion—from the first time they had met.

*Dask doesn’t seem to have grown up yet,* Brad mused to himself.

“But I have grown, Bradley,” Dask’s thought came back to him. “I was only 80 of your earth-years when we met before, which made me a child in my galaxy. Our race is known as the Kyra. As we grow older, our bodies do not become taller; only our side appendages—which you call ‘arms’—grow longer.”

“Why didn’t I remember you earlier, but I do now?”

“We blocked those memories so you would not suffer mental distress. Now we have removed that block, so you are free to recall those thoughts.”

“Why did we meet back then, Dask?”

“My race, the Kyra, carries the wisdom of our galaxy. We travel the universe seeking those who are ready, those with whom we can share portions of this knowledge. However,” Dask cautioned, “we are required to do this in a clandestine manner, so the species we select are not aware of the gift that has been bestowed upon them.

“After studying multitudes of humanoids, we found you, Bradley, had the cranial capacity to accept a portion of our knowledge, as well as the ability to comprehend it. You became our vessel, our conduit to impart knowledge to your species. The proper utilization of this knowledge will ultimately allow humanoids to undertake space travel over vast distances. We arranged that earlier meeting when you were an earthling child and transferred the necessary knowledge.”

Brad’s head was spinning. His scientific curiosity led to so many questions. He wanted to know how it was done, and why, but the first question that crystallized in his mind was “Why the orange smell?”

“The scent of orange blossoms is soothing to the humanoid olfactory bulb. That is why we added it to the environment here. We Kyra do not have what you call a sense of smell. However, we offset this lack with other heightened senses you can only imagine.”

“You referred to ‘the environment here.’ Where is ‘here’?” Brad felt bewildered. “Or to be more specific, where are we?”

“This may be difficult for you to fully understand, Bradley. We are presently on our ship. It is able to travel through space without disturbing time. The dimensions in which we exist are out of phase with those of humanoids, so you do not see us.”

Brad felt a sense of growing turmoil. “As a scientist I realize there are many theoretical dimensions of existence, but even I can’t quite grasp your explanation.”



It is quite elementary, Bradley. You humanoids exist in three dimensions and travel in a fourth, which you call time. We also exist in three dimensions; one of these three is time. We travel through a different fourth dimension. This allows us to travel unseen through space in your dimensional world without disturbing time as you know it.

“This cylindrical salon where we are standing within our ship is designed so that, although we exist in different sets of dimensions, we can experience each other’s presence.”

Brad’s questions began to come more quickly. He thought, *What happened during our first meeting?*

Dask’s response flooded back into his mind. “When we met before, you were an earth child with average intelligence who exhibited extraordinary mental potential. Using that same Lamina of Revelation, which you perceive to be a metallic disk, we imparted to you highly specialized knowledge in gravity drive theory. When we departed earth thirty of your years ago, you were the most intelligent being on your planet. Now you are about to perfect an anti-gravity drive which is the first necessary step for space travel.”

“Why have you come back?”

“Due in part to your efforts, humanoids will soon become galactic travelers. Therefore, it is time for our civilizations to meet and start to work together. We have much more information we can share with your race regarding space travel, while you humans have many overly-abundant resources you can share with us.”

Brad began to feel a bit uneasy. “What could we possibly have that you might want?”

“Our needs are relatively simple in your terms. Providing them for us would benefit your society as well. We have need of a few plentiful earth materials that are in short supply in our galaxy.

“One of these is the element you call tin, which we liquefy and use as ballast for our ships. Although you are unaware of this, tin exposed to earth air sublimates into isotopes that can be toxic to humanoids.

“Another of our needs is the radioactive waste from your nuclear power plants. Although this material is dangerous to humanoids, we can convert it easily to provide an auxiliary power source in our dimensions. Thus we can rid your world of a dangerous by-product from nuclear generating facilities.

“Our final need is carbon-based flesh provided by the dregs of your society. It can be decomposed to provide additional energy for our world.”

Brad felt an icy chill. “Are you telling me you want to kill human beings?”

“Not productive humanoids. Only those who are paralyzed, severely incapacitated, or those incurably mentally or criminally ill, those who poison your society. In this manner, satisfying our need would also benefit your earth society.”

“But Dask,” Brad argued, “humans will never accept this. Most of us believe in the sanctity of the human life force.”

“Surely not for criminals,” Dask countered. “We have observed you executing prisoners”.

“While it is true that we incarcerate our criminals to protect society from them, only rarely do we find it necessary to put a vicious few to death. It is the hope of many humans that some day this may no longer be necessary.”

“But until that day, Bradley, we can solve each other’s problems.”

“Dask, we believe even condemned prisoners still have rights, and those rights must be protected through our criminal justice system. What you are proposing would violate those most basic rights.”

“But what if we just took those prisoners without asking? From the perspective of your world, these captives would simply vanish during the transformation to our dimension.”

“Dask, such an act would cause much chaos, fear, and agony as our society tried to understand what had happened to these convicts. You are asking our society to provide you something of seemingly little value in your eyes, but this would still cause us much suffering and dread.”

“I still do not understand, Bradley. Are you saying your society would not see the value in this exchange if it was for the betterment of the universe?”

Brad’s voice quivered as he answered, “That is correct; our civilization would not. After all, we have fought world wars to protect these rights for the individual.”

“And our ancestors fought galactic wars so we could value the needs of the universe over the needs of individual races,” Dask responded.

“Dask, it may seem justifiable from your perspective, but in our society, the taking of any human life outside our system of laws for any purpose is a serious crime.”

“Even if the supplier of that life is one who is deficient and cannot contribute, and whose worth to the universe is greater as decomposed elements than as a deformed, deficient, or deranged humanoid?”

“Who is to say severely handicapped humans cannot contribute? We have had great artists who could only paint with their feet or their teeth. We have had blind scholars perform brilliantly with computers. We have had paraplegic physicists who have helped unlock the mysteries of the universe. Dask, there is no negotiating this point: the sanctity of human life is very important to us.”

“We do not fully understand, Bradley, but we must respect your society’s perspective. Perhaps humanoids are not yet ready for communion with the rest of the galaxy.”

“Perhaps not, Dask, if that communion means humans must give up basic rights within our own earthbound society.”

Dask’s voice manifested his confusion. “Although we must learn to appreciate your beliefs, it is very perplexing to us, especially in light of the hundreds of thousands killed in the wars humans continue to persist in waging, and the millions more on your world who continue to die from starvation and lack of sustenance.”

Brad shook his head. “I agree it is a tragic irony. We strive to eliminate suffering, hunger, and war, but because of the diversity and disagreements among the various human cultures, we have not yet achieved that goal. Still, we struggle to foster unity and achieve consensus with institutions such as the United Nations.”

“But,” Dask suggested, “if you could eliminate your basic philosophical disagreements with us, you would be closer to achieving communion with the galactic community.”

“Perhaps,” Brad responded, “but not necessarily.”

“Bradley, this is a significant and unanticipated development. I must take a few moments to communicate with the Body Kyra. Please be patient”. Dask’s eyes narrowed to slits and then vanished.

Brad was feeling very uneasy. He suddenly realized the orange aroma had vanished.

Then Dask’s eyes opened again, peering directly at Brad as he spoke. “Although it is difficult for us to understand the values of which you speak, we will acknowledge the validity of your assessment. There may still be a chance for us to help earthlings understand our perspective. However, we will need to pursue this effort in a different manner. Please allow us to show you.”

“What do you want me to do?” Bradley responded.

“We ask you to once again hold the Lamina of Revelation tightly against your forehead and clear all conscious thoughts.”

Brad hesitated for a moment; then he picked up the metallic disk and slowly raised it. The disk felt warm and vibrated slightly as it touched his forehead. Suddenly his mind was reeling. It was as if his brain had left his body and was floating on the surface of a storm-tossed ocean. He sensed violent currents penetrating to his core, an upheaval within his very being, but he was powerless to stop it. There was no pain, just turmoil and disorder. Amid the chaos he heard a faint voice invade his thoughts for the last time, “Goodbye, friend Bradley.”

At last, the stormy sea subsided to a calm, glassy ocean caressed by a cool sea breeze; then all consciousness faded.

###

Brad awoke from a deep sleep. He was slumped in the leather chair by the smoldering embers. His childhood memories of this place once again flooded back into his consciousness, but he no longer remembered the covered mirror that had stood in the now-empty corner, nor did he have any recollection of his recent conversation with an extra-terrestrial known as Dask.

Even though his thoughts seemed a bit hazy, he sensed his anti-gravity experiment would not succeed, but that didn't matter. He had more important initiatives to tackle, and he knew just what to do.

###

Three decades later, the world's scientific community mourned the mysterious disappearance of physicist Bradley Hammond. His subaqueous seamount oceanic plantations had been in place for a mere fifteen years. During that time, they had created a new and seemingly inexhaustible food supply for the world's billions. This food source contained nutrients that had significantly reduced the ravages of disease (although the medical community had yet to understand why) and of warring conflicts (although world governments had yet to understand why). In the process Hammond had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian efforts.

It had been only three months since Hammond vanished while sailing his longboat off Cape Cod into a late summer squall. Subsequent air rescue searches had been called off when no trace of Hammond or his boat had been found.

Two of Hammond's associates had been given the task of cleaning out his office at NCAD because his working papers were being donated to the planned Bradley Hammond Wing of the Smithsonian Humanitarian Museum in Washington, DC.

In one desk drawer, pressed neatly between pages of his journal, they discovered three newspaper clippings.

One clipping covered the mysterious apparent sinking of several cargo ships on the high seas carrying cassiterite ore from Thailand to the U.S. for smelting into tin. Piracy was not suspected because of the worldwide slump in the demand for tin.

The second clipping discussed the baffling disappearances of container ships loaded with sealed lead vaults containing radioactive waste headed for burial at sea.

The third clipping contained an interview with the supposed sole survivor of a prison aircraft that had apparently crashed at sea without a trace while in route from Madagascar to Tanzania.

In all three stories the vessels and their cargo had evaporated without a trace. On all three clippings the late Dr. Hammond had scribbled the curious notation “Dask?”

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