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Missing Pieces

By Clint Hall

Cal desperately punched the number pad of his videophone, sweat dripping from his brow. Hopefully Ron didn't hand the call off to his secretary again.

"Hello, Cal." It was Ron.

"Ron, please help me!" his voice trembled.

"Cal, I've helped you before and it almost got me fired. The President doesn't find your 'theories' too reliable," he raised his eyebrows in a remember-when? fashion.

"The smuggler story was a setup to discredit me! They took away my job and my status and my pride, but you must listen! All three human worlds are in danger. WE'VE FORGOTTEN AN ENTIRE YEAR!"

Ron leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Someone went to the trouble of erasing the memories of some 16 billion human beings?"

"It must be the aliens – the Chiimcha. There's no one else."

Silence.

Ron's smile remained plastered on his face, but turned wry. "We've been over this," he said finally, "they are our friends. Calvin, you are my brother-in-law, and I love you like a – brother-in-law, but I am the Secretary of Defence and you can't keep bothering me with your ridiculous conspiracy theories. You aren't a reporter anymore because reporters don't make news, they report it."

“Ron, . . .” Cal gripped the edge of his instrument panel, his knuckles white. “They messed with the Frebin fuel in my ship, overcharged my engines. MY GOD, THEY ARE TRYING TO KILL ME!”

“Phone me back when they’ve got a gun to your head,” the screen went black.

Cal passed his fingers through his dark brown hair and stared at the table. Maybe that’s what had to happen.

The stars raced past the large view window in Cal’s small interstellar flier like little fireflies. He hoped there wouldn’t be another “malfunction” and increased the Frebin consumption to its 89% capacity, shaving off light years faster than he could shave his stubbly face.

The Floating Astronomy Research Observatory, or FARO, was a dot in the viewscreen at first, but grew quickly into a large platform in low-orbit over Earth. He let the observatory computers piggyback his own and waited for the green safe-dock light above the viewscreen to flash.

Cal approached his informant, and good friend, Erik who sat perched at some type of viewing station and plopped himself down in a stiff chair.

“Cal, I gave you all the information I had.” Erik didn’t even look up from his station.

“I know, I know. I need something tangible, though. A smoking gun.”

“This didn’t just happen, man, the gun’s been tossed in the proverbial river,” he adjusted his reading glasses.

“Is it possible you are mistaken? I mean, if I go public with this and I’m wrong . . . everyone in the universe will think I’m crazy!”

“Most people already think you’re crazy. I wouldn’t worry about it – the only reason I said anything to you was because I knew you wouldn’t think I was nuts. And the stars don’t lie, my friend. We’ve lost a year.”

“It’s the Chiimcha, isn’t it? They did this somehow.”

“Get out of here before my boss—”

“Something amiss, employee?”

The voice came from behind Cal. There was something terrifying about it. Something about its inhuman tones that chilled the blood running through Cal’s veins. Cal turned in his chair and saw the seven-foot tall headless green and yellow beast, four ungodly eyes in its midsection, and weaving tentacles – one of which had a horrible plasma gun scar.

Cal blanked out as Erik provided a response to his boss – he had never seen one this close before.

He whispered to Erik as the beast left, “A Chiimcha runs this place?”

“Yeah, that’s Stasta. Chiimchas run every astronomy lab on the three worlds. They used to watch the stars a lot more than we did.”

At that, Cal did not need to be told to leave again. This was his smoking gun, the best he could hope for anyway. He had to let someone know . . . had to let the world know.

“It was them!” Cal burst into his friend Trent’s dressing room at Triworld News Desk Headquarters a short while later.

“Calm down.” Trent adjusted his cheap tie in the mirror of the cramped dressing room, paying no attention to his friend’s familiar agitation. “I have no time for you right now, I’m on air in ten minutes.”

Cal’s face went red and he punched the dresser beside him, knocking off mini-mikes and jostling other such reporting paraphernalia that Trent had piled on its top. “I’m sick and tired of everyone pointing and laughing every time I have something important to bring to the world!”

“The sky doesn’t fall every day, Cal!” Cal’s aggression provoked Trent’s outburst. “I am a legitimate reporter now; I can’t just put the news on hold to write about Chiimcha Frebin smugglers.”

Cal didn’t have anything to say about that. His eyes glossed with the recollection of that fallacy. The ultimate low-point of his life when he reported what he thought to be news, but was a mere fabrication. A cover-up of a dirty company, and the event that forever discredited him as a reporter of news and remade him into a man of gossip. He cleared his throat and left the room with his eyes to the floor, pocketing a small device from Trent’s dresser on his way.

The majestic waterfall in the centre of the TNDH lobby caught Cal’s attention as he descended the moving stairs. The bubbling water seemed to slow and take years to splash to the reservoir beneath. Time was slipping away. The colour vanished from Cal’s face as vacant appreciation was replaced with horror. A Chiimcha – the only one in the

lobby – stood beside the centrepiece, intently watching Cal. There was something familiar about this Chiimcha, however. A plasma scarred tentacle! This was Erik's boss! He must have followed Cal to see what he was up to, maybe to destroy evidence, or maybe to silence him, or even kill him! The whole race was after him. This was something big.

He ran the rest of the way down the escalator. The alien sprinted to catch him at the bottom, but Cal leapt from the final receding steps and raced for the rotating door. He threw down chairs and pushed frightened bystanders into the path of the swift beast. Cal glanced behind him only to see the monster hadn't been slowed in the least.

Out of the building he ran, the Chiimcha steps behind him, he tossed himself aside into a dark alley and gained a few paces on the monster, but it wasn't enough to catch his breath as the beast regained the lost paces, Cal torpedoed his body straight into a mess of garbage cans, seized a steel lid, and turned to face the angry pursuer with the lid as a shield, the wind kicked out of his lungs from the impact on the ground and the Chiimcha jumped on him in a fury of flipping tentacles and squawking-hissing sounds. Cal smashed the beast in the torso with the lid to gain more room to defend himself from his terribly strong attacker, but the beast would give him nothing.

The attacker suddenly went limp on top of him. It continued to make sounds, but it only pinned Cal to the cold pavement with its heavy frame. A thick orange jelly oozed onto Cal's pant leg and he realized the being had apparently been injured. Had he done this? He looked over the alien's big shoulder to see Trent standing with a crowd of pedestrians in the entrance of the alley, his plasma gun's barrel radiating heat from the blast.

“I was going to apologize for what I said. Looks like I did you one better,” Trent examined the burn in the alien’s back. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and take what you said as news. I’ll go back to the newsroom and give our writers some details, I might be able to get this on the air tonight if we hurry. I’ll need the usual from you, Cal. I really hope you didn’t just owe this thing money.” Trent ran from the scene.

Cal pushed the heavy creature off him and it stirred, began to talk. He got to his feet.

“Government wants you silenced,” it said.

“Why? What did you people do to us?”

“No . . . not Chiimcha government. Human.”

The creature stopped stirring. The universe no longer made sense – again.

Cal walked cautiously down the empty street. The street lamps were switching on with the approach of darkness. His brow was deeply furrowed, his mind working at hundreds of calculations per second trying to decode this odd turn of events. The Earth government was responsible for the loss of time? Why would they send a Chiimcha to do their own dirty work? And what kind of Chiimcha worked with Earthers? It didn’t make any sense. There was only one place where he could find answers, but no guarantee they would be the right answers, or if he would even get them at all.

Cal reached a tall, elaborately constructed apartment building and pressed the numbers of the room he wanted.

The Secretary of Defence’s smiling face appeared on the call screen.

“I’ve been expecting you, brother,” said Ron as the door clicked open. Cal made his way to Ron’s door and when it opened Cal couldn’t help but drop his jaw in bewildered betrayal.

Erik stood beside Ron with a smile on his face, “I’m sorry, Cal, but you have to be a millionaire to buy a house on this planet and Ron was the only one who could give me a bigger paycheque than FARO.”

Cal composed himself and asked Ron what was going on.

“Have you heard of Planet Eden?” said Ron. Cal admitted that he had not. “You might know it better as planet RI138.”

“The Frebin planet? I’ve never heard it called Eden before. In fact, in school they taught me that Frebin made the world inhospitable to the first settlers. The generation ship that brought the first interstellar colonists into space tried to settle there, but the alien mineral made the world hazardous to their health. They had to move on to the next planet. It was blind luck they found that the material could also be used in our first interstellar drives.”

“No, Cal. Eden was the first Earth colony. There used to be millions of people on that world,” the man smiled at Cal’s confusion. “They traded the Frebin with the other three worlds quite generously at first, but they were a very religious sect of human society and when we discovered life elsewhere, they deemed Frebin ‘the devil’s rock’, and the Chiimcha the devil’s children. They ceased all trade immediately and wouldn’t allow it to leave the planet.

“Frebin is how we explore, how we open up new worlds for our bloated population and, to a lesser extent, how we keep the Chiimcha in check. Before us, they could not traverse the stars. Would you want to live in a world where they controlled us?”

“They control every Astronomy lab because you put them there.” Cal was beginning to understand.

“You didn’t learn about Eden in school. Earth’s government taught you, and everyone else that about 13 months ago. We lifted Eden from everyone’s memory so we could have our rock back.” Ron was glowing with satisfaction, no doubt relishing in crushing any ounce of credibility his brother-in-law had left.

“You wanted the Chiimcha to take the fall in case someone got wise, because the human race still distrusts them. But, why let Erik tell me?”

As if the holovision was waiting for him to say that, it undulated to life to produce a 3D version of Trent at his news desk, talking about Cal’s late-breaking story about a Chiimcha conspiracy. Two round men with well-kempt beards and inconspicuous earpieces entered the room.

“We had to get the ball rolling, and we knew we could control you. I’m sorry, Cal, but you are responsible for the death of a Chiimcha diplomat, a keeper of peace between our two worlds. Stasta will be sorely missed at the embassy,” he said putting on a show for the security guards.

Cal revealed the device he took from Trent’s dresser and the two men sagged to a slouch when they saw what he carried. He pressed the ‘send’ button on the side of the voice recorder and the 3D image of Trent immediately touched his earpiece, listening to Cal’s recording and conveying the new testimony to the three worlds.

“There’s your gun to the head, Ron.”

Cal smiled as he realized that his universe made sense again. Maybe he would even become a legitimate reporter again.

Maybe not.