

## Noon

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A group of BTSI agents sat around the table of the conference room. Each of them was dressed in a silver suit with matching boots and a glittery turquoise tie. They all had the same shoulder-length hair pulled back in a pony-tail by a silver rubber band. Their faces were as still as stone as they discussed what was both the most life threatening and life giving object in the universe—the sun.

“We haven’t much time,” said Sperares, the head of the Department of Human Existence Maintenance.

He was about 45, but years of strain, worry, and responsibilities had ravaged his once smooth skin. Practically an insomniac, he had huge bags under his eyes. He had not even attempted to get plastic surgery. He had more important things on his mind than his appearance. As a religious man, he still had hope that a miracle would come along to save humankind from this catastrophe.

“Now as you all know, we sent the satellite up to Venus five years ago today. In one year it needs to be activated, and you all know what that means. We need to find the remote (it activates the satellite) that the evil spy Malus stole and dropped somewhere today when we arrested him. If we do, then we can at least save half the world. If we don’t, we’ll all die. The satellite will zap enough hydrogen into the sun to keep it going for another 5 billion years. Unfortunately, when the hydrogen enters into the sun, it will create a brief explosion sending shots of hot fire onto the earth, but only where it is noon. Those who get hit won’t even have a chance. I wish there was some way to prevent all this....”

Sperares could speak no longer. He was all choked up with tears in his eyes. Every man in the room looked down at the flat metal table. No one dared to speak. There was in fact, nothing to say. No one had the perfect solution. No one knew what to do. These men were the only people in the world to know their fate. None of them wanted to know they were helpless. Just a few days ago one of the agents had committed suicide. Things were getting tense. Knowing when they might die was something that they could seldom handle. Sperares called to his robot to activate the computer simulation of what would happen if the T-8900 satellite were not activated. The robot wheeled into the conference room. He had a rectangular metal body, stretchable arms and legs made out of a translucent metal called Firon, and an oval head with sensory eyes and a nose. Inside his head were swarms of wires and lights, including a new state-of-the-art emotion chip. He was more intelligent than the average human and could perform many tasks. Sperares had named his robot Ambactus. He stepped up to the computer to launch the simulation. The agents watched in horror as they viewed the model of the sun spreading to the earth’s orbit, charring and swallowing the planet in one fiery gulp.

“We better find the remote—and soon!” one of them said. They knew what awaited the earth if they didn’t.

Meanwhile, the remote tumbled down a hill along the solar freeway, where Malus had been captured. It finally landed at the bottom of the rise along a small path that led to the nearby park. The BTSI agents continued their unsuccessful search for it.

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Trebax sat in the classroom along with 60 other students of the college. They listened to their professor go over what would be on tomorrow’s exam. Trebax just stared blankly into space, thinking about the big laser ball tournament that was to occur in a few hours, about how he couldn’t wait to play. He was a very athletic young man with tremendous ambitions and a comfortable life. This blue eyed, blond haired brainiac had graduated valedictorian of his high school class and hadn’t a care in the world. He hoped to be a programming technician someday.

“This is so boring,” he muttered to his twin brother Cantus. His brother nodded.

“Can’t we just get Anculus to study this for us?”

“Good idea,” replied Trebax just as the final siren of the day went off.

With school finally over, they hopped in their green floater and headed to the apartment they had been sharing ever since they were 15 and moved out of their parents’ house. As soon as they got home, they called on Anculus, their robot, very much like Ambactus, to study for their test. They handed him their computers and informed him of the chapters that were to be covered. After the robot had scanned the information for a few minutes, he pulled out a long, wire tube and stuck it into Trebax’s ear. After that he began to send the information he had learned to him through electrical currents on the wire. After 30 seconds the process was over. He then did the same to Cantus. Trebax got up to go to the park to play his favorite sport, waving goodbye to his brother as he flew out the door.

“If I win today, I’ll be the champion of all laser ball players!” he said with an excitement that was rather odd and immature for his age.

He quickly ran to meet his fellow teammates for the competition.

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Sperares remained apprehensive as the search went on. No one could find the remote, not even with their trackers and computers running at full speed.

“I want a total search of the solar highway again, along with all the nearby perimeters around it. We must find it. We must.” Sperares leaned against the wall with his hands over his face in concern.

“We must.”

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Trebax walked home solemnly through the darkness. He had lost the game and had a big fight with all the other players because of his lack of sportsmanship.

“I still think they were wrong to fight with me like that,” he said to himself.

He had decided to take the shortcut and go along the path below the solar freeway. As he exited the park, something metallic and shiny caught his eye. He leaned over to pick it up. It was oval in shape and had three buttons on it—one red, one green, and one white.

“What the heck?” He seemed puzzled by it.

He was about to press the red button when something told him he should stop. It was a strange feeling of caution that came from nowhere, but he took it.

“It might do something crazy if I press it. I’ll show it to Cantus or maybe I’ll take it apart and see what makes it tick. Yes, this will take my mind off the game.”

But as he paid attention to it less and less, he seemed to forget he was even holding it. His mind traveled along to other things, and when he got home and found Cantus asleep on the couch, he threw it in the closet and forgot about it for the next eleven months.

Trebax’s 3D television blared brashly about the coming of a New Year in approximately one month. 4516301996 was fast approaching. Trebax sat on his couch as a special report came on the television.

“Boring,” he mumbled to Anculus and changed the channel. But the same report was on every channel.

“Ugh.” He sat back and listened, since it was of obvious importance.

“Hello. My name is Sperares and I am the head of the Department of Human Existence Maintenance for the BTSI. I am addressing the world today in this very pressing matter of life and death.”

Trebax leaned forward with interest. In the next few minutes, Sperares addressed the world about the remote and how it was missing. He also, for the first time, spoke about the sun and what will happen if the remote button is not pressed. He conveniently forgot to mention anything about how, even if the button was pressed, half the world would perish anyway. Among other things he explained how the satellite worked and not to panic.

“Please, if you have this remote, press the red button on it when the Earthical Siren (bell heard all around the world) goes off, or return it to the BTSI immediately. Thank you.” Trebax laughed.

“This has got to be a joke. The sun expanding now? I heard that it won’t happen for another million years. What a bunch of liars. They really had me going there for a minute, too.”

“Are you sure it’s not true?” asked Anculus. “My signs read that this was an authentic message from the BTSI.”

“It’s just too impossible to believe,” argued Trebax.

“What about that machine you found awhile ago? That could be the remote. My files show that the picture on the television screen matches something I’ve seen before.”

“Get it. It’s in my closet,” replied Trebax, still in doubt that this could all be true. Anculus came back with the machine in hand. Trebax’s mouth dropped open as he could not deny the truth any longer. He had the remote.

“I need to call the BTSI. Thank God you found this or the world would be dead meat. I can’t believe it’s true. But it doesn’t matter. I’ll just return it and save the world. I’ll be famous! Imagine that, me, a hero!” He picked up the phone.

“Be careful. The government can be dangerous. Don’t give them your name, address, or phone number. Just make an appointment to meet with them to discuss this. And call from a pay phone so they can’t trace it,” warned Anculus.

“You’re right,” replied Trebax, “I will do as you say.” And he did. He made the anonymous call and an appointment.

“When do you go there?” asked Anculus.

“Next week.”

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Next week seemed like it was so far away, but the time flew by like a bluebird in the spring. It was the day of Trebax’s meeting. Cantus could tell he was nervous as he sped out the door. He had left an hour before the appointment so that he wouldn’t be late. He got to the BTSI headquarters 45 minutes ahead of time and sat down in the waiting room after announcing himself to the secretary at the desk. He decided to stroll the halls after waiting impatiently for a few minutes. His curiosity got the best of him when he heard a muffled conversation between two agents. He quietly opened the door to their



## Cold Comfort

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The light blinded me as I blinked them open. A light breeze was whipping the strands of my disheveled hair across my face, tickling the hair in my nostrils. I sneezed and quickly wished that I had reevaluated that decision as the sharp pain ripped through my skull, forcing a cry of pain to escape from my bruised lips. I gingerly felt through my hair and found the source of my discomfort—an enormous lump on the side of my head the size of a ping-pong ball. *This is not good*, I thought, *not good at all*.

Carefully, I propped myself up on my arms and looked around. I was on the side of the road, the same road I walked along every day on my way to school. My book-bag lay beside me, its contents strewn across the shoulder of the highway. *Great, now am I supposed to crawl around searching for lost physics notes?* As I struggled to get myself onto my feet, trying to ignore the dizzying swirl in my head, my shoes slipped out from under me and I found my self on my derriere once more. Bewildered, I looked around to see if there was a banana peel or anything on the ground to explain my fall, but found nothing. Again I got up, this time slower, and managed to stand on both feet. As I took a step towards my book-bag, my foot slipped again, threatening to betray my balance, but I quickly caught my self in time.

*What is going on*, I asked myself, beginning to get worried. I gingerly slid my left foot across the seemingly rough pavement of the street and found that it felt like ice.

*Ice? But I'm on a road...and it's summer!* Exasperated, I collected my things and headed on my way to school—very slowly. Walking on a surface that resembled ice was not a simple task, but I managed to make my way to school, bruised, broken and very confused.

When I reached the familiar building, I noticed right away that something was very wrong. Icicles hung from every inch of the school, and a frigid wind blew out every time the door was opened. I cautiously made my way up the ice-encrusted steps, but to my surprise, it was easier to step on the ice than it was on the pavement! Now even more confused, I threw the door to my school open and walked inside.

Everything was shimmering in a carpet of ice. The hallways were slick, the doorknobs were covered, and even the tiny ridges in the dials of our lockers seemed to be filled in with the slippery stuff. Except, it wasn't slippery. Kids walked down the hall with the greatest of ease--the icy floor made no match for them. Shaking my head in disbelief I made my way through the crowded hallways, heading for the only person I thought could explain all this to me—Mr. Bowmont.

Mr. Bowmont had to be the greatest physics teacher in the history of physics teachers. He knew everything there was to know about anything, and considering this plethora of knowledge, he had to have an explanation for why I slipped when I wasn't supposed to, and why I didn't when I should have. It was during this bit of pondering that I began to catch the weird glances kids were giving me as I passed by them. They would giggle and whisper to each other, all the while looking me up and down with creases in their brows. I looked down at myself, hoping to find an answer, and realized that I was wearing shorts and a tee shirt. This did not strike me as odd, considering it was the end of June and had gone up to a sweltering 102 degrees last week. What did strike me as odd, however, was that everyone else, and for good reason, was wearing winter clothing. They had on ski jackets, gloves, and scarves, and seemed to be quite warm and toasty. Which explains why they were looking at me funny, and why I was feeling so utterly cold. I rushed to Mr. Bowmont's class, threw open the door, and slammed it behind me.

He was sitting at his desk in all his glory—glasses perched on the tip of his nose, rosy from the cold air, hat pulled over his ears, scarf wrapped around the bottom half of his face, and in a great big, puffy, orange winter coat. He was a marvelous scientific pumpkin.

"Mr. Bowmont," I stammered, trying to get the words out from my frozen lips.

"My goodness, Rupert," he exclaimed, looking up at my pathetic form, shivering in the corner. "Why are you dressed like that? You could catch your death of cold!"

With this, he took off his big, puffy pumpkin and wrapped it around me. He led me to his desk and placed me into his chair. He looked at me, shaking his head.

"Did you forget to bring your clothes to school today? You should have gotten your extra pair from your locker. You shouldn't be walking around these freezing hallways in nothing but shorts!"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about Mr. Bowmont, about the freezing hallways! Why are they all covered in ice? How come when I walk, I don't slip, and when I do slip, it's on rough pavement? How come nobody notices that even though it's a hundred degrees outside, it's fifty below in here? I don't get it, Mr. Bowmont, what's going on?"

He looked at me oddly for a couple of seconds, blinking his eyes. “What are you talking about Rupert, what’s gotten in to you? Why weren’t you in first period? Are you feeling all night?” It was then that he noticed the bump on my head. “My goodness, did you fall?”

“Yeah,” I said, becoming a bit diverted, “I think so. I woke up and I was on the side of the road. Somehow, I got this bump. I don’t know what happened.”

“Hmmm...maybe you should get the nurse to check that out for you,” he said, moving me to the door, “it’s getting kind of large.”

“Yeah, maybe I shou—wait, wait, Mr. Bowmont,” I exclaimed, remembering my purpose, “I need some answers! I need someone to explain to me why all these crazy things are happening! I came to you because I knew you would know what was going on.”

“Rupert,” he said, bewildered, “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. What answers? What explanations? To what questions? Nothing unusual is going on—if that’s what you are asking. I think whatever caused that bump on your head hit you pretty hard.”

“No, no, well...yeah, actually I think it did, but that’s not what I want to be talking about,” I shouted, becoming extremely frustrated. “Mr. Bowmont, the world has gone all screwy!”

“Whoa, whoa, there Rupert. Let’s not get hysterical, now.” He sat me down in his chair once more. “Now,” he said, taking off his glasses, “what seems to be the problem?”

I sighed, and calmed myself down. This was the Mr. Bowmont I had learned to love. This was the understanding man who would always listen to you, whether you had qualms about Newton’s third law, or just wanted to gripe about the principles of thermodynamics. I collected myself and recounted the elements of my day—from waking up on the side of the road, to finding a school made out of ice. He listened carefully to everything I said, nodding here and there to let me know that he was following. When I was through, he looked at me—for a long time. I was beginning to fear he thought I was insane until he finally spoke.

“HMMMMM...” is what he said.

“Hmmm?” I asked, not knowing what to read from the expression on his face.

“Hmmm.” That’s all I got from him for at least ten minutes. He seemed to be thinking, either that or he had fallen asleep, for his eyes were shut and his breathing had become soft and even.

“Rupert,” he said finally, opening his eyes to me, “It’s seems as though you are experiencing some sort of amnesia.”

“Amnesia?” I said, “You mean to tell me that there is nothing wrong with the world, but something wrong with me?”

“Exactly. Rupert, this other world you talk about, the one where things that are rough are easier to walk on and where people usually slip on ice, that world is not real.”

“Excuse me,” I said, blinking profusely. “Are you saying that the world had always been this way, that kids have always had to go to school in ice?”

“Go to school, go to the malls, sleep in their beds...they do all these things with ice. If they didn’t then they would be slipping and sliding all over the place. Rupert, don’t you remember learning about friction in class? The bigger the coefficient, the slipperier something is. That is why all our big, important cities are in the colder regions of the earth, like the Arctic and Siberia. These places are the easiest for us to inhabit—yes they’re cold, but at least we can walk down their streets by easily encasing them in ice.”

I looked at my beloved physics teacher, not believing what I was hearing. *Is this true, I pondered, has the world always been this way? Am I the one who is whacked out?* I numbly thanked Mr. Bowmont for his help and turned to leave.

“Rupert,” he called. I turned back to him. “Are you going to be all right” I still think you should go to the nurse or maybe home so that you can rest. You’ve been through a rough time.”

I nodded in agreement and walked out the door. As I closed it behind me, I thought to myself, *so if this is how it has always been, then I guess this is how it will always be.* And it has. I’ve pretty much convinced myself that the bump on my head really screwed with my mind that day, and that I wasn’t thinking straight. For the most part, I really believe that’s what happened. But sometimes I think about the world that Mr. Bowmont says never existed and wonder if he’s right. I wonder if I’ll ever, maybe one day, visit that world, to see with my own eyes if it’s real or not.

## Paranoia

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They're watching me. I can't see them at the moment, but their eyes and ears reach out to me in spite of that. Wow, that has to be the most paranoid statement I have ever heard. I can't be paranoid though, because paranoia is an unjustified fear. This is definitely for real.

Maria (from *The Sound of Music*) would say, "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start." That presents a major problem, because there is no clear beginning. It wasn't apparent all at once what was going on. So many people in this world depend on concrete facts, so, if forced I would put my date of recognition sometime in late January, say the 22<sup>nd</sup>. On second thought, realization might be a better word.

It was small things at first, like more cars on the road in the early-morning hours that are usual. They would slow down as they went by me, and, once past, speed up again. The little signs became bigger; footprints in the snow outside my window; the same car going around the block two and three times. Later, in the spring, I was cleaning behind my mirror and found a little black dot stuck there. It was about the size of a large watch battery, with a sort of metal mesh on one side and a heavy adhesive painted on the reverse. The device itself produced very little problem, just a quick flush and it was gone. Unfortunately, the questions weren't as easy to get rid of. All those question words you learn in grade school; who, what, when, where, why, how, presented themselves but I think Why was the biggest problem. Why would somebody bug my house? I wasn't a member of the CIA, MI-6, KGB, IRA, or any other of those ominous acronyms. I wasn't a spy from any foreign country. Hell, I didn't even have a passport! How would I get these people to stop? It wasn't exactly the type of question that one could just write into Miss Manners with. The police are useless, too. Can you imagine what would happen if someone were to call and tell that someone was watching them. The police would lock him up in a padded room before he could even hang up the phone (or get a chance to tell them about his alien abduction last summer).

Well, I wasn't about to just sit there while I was being stalked. After the incident behind the mirror I was very careful about what I said, and on constant patrol for more bugs. I never did find any more. Anyway, like I was saying before, I took the offensive when it came to my safety. I bought a good camera, and this wonderful little device that clips on to the lens to make it infrared so you can take pictures in the dark. I realized that eventually I would need the help of the police, and wanted to provide them with enough evidence so that they wouldn't lock me up with the loonies. I also paid for one of the local security companies to install exterior cameras, with a control station located in my bedroom. My efforts proved futile, however. Oh, I caught my neighbor stealing some bedding plants, and another one switching the lightbulb on my front porch with another from his house (no clue why, it still works and everything), but no one with binoculars in the bushes or anything like that. Maybe they had noticed my cameras and decided to lay low for a while! That must be it.

I decided to pretend that I had dropped this infatuation with my personal security. Two can play at this game! I even started talking to my neighbors again, but as the months wore on I became more and more nervous. My neighbor to the left, Dan (the porch-light switcher) was becoming more and more amiable. He asked me one night why I looked so worried, was there anything wrong? I thought for a long time whether or not to tell him. In the end I decided to do it; even Emperor Hitler had friends with him in the bunker during his first, unsuccessful coup. So I told him the entire story from the beginning. Dan became agitated. After that night he stopped returning my phone calls, and was always busy when I suggested we get together and do something. My only friend had turned into a traitor. It was a sad, sad day.

After Dan's meltdown (what else could explain such behavior?) I was OK for a while; content watching the monitors in my room and warming up soup when I got hungry. Then I started to think. Why hadn't my captors made their move yet? It was July already, an entire month since I had bought the equipment, and nothing. Had they gone away to torture another random civilian? I dearly hoped so, but something inside me didn't think that was the case. I decided to do a perimeter check; my first one in almost two weeks.

Outside the damp night air made the heat feel even worse. The new chain-link fence I had installed right after the cameras glistened both with newness and the moisture of the night. I was halfway done with my check when I saw a large bush rustling outside the fence. I tensed, part of me wanting to face the person who had held me hostage for so long, the rest of me worried about my safety. The figure was emerging and beginning to stand upright, but it was too dark to see a face (or a potential weapon)! I almost giggled as I remembered the enormous Army-surplus flashlight I had grabbed at the last minute. My body was rigid as I turned on the enormous flashlight; ready for the bullets to hit my soft flesh. But they never came. The figure...it was...a WOMAN...and she was wearing a sundress! Now, don't get me wrong, it was nice as sundresses go, just not what I was expecting.

She broke me out of my shock with “Hi, I’m Inez, your new neighbor.”

I mumbled back something, but I don’t think she heard me. Inez was babbling on. I decided to tune in for a minute.

“...used to live in Flagstaff, have you ever been to Flagstaff? It’s a nice place, but I was raised in the desert, and I just missed it too much...”

I just stood there nodding. This was a wonderful woman; she would make a better friend than Dan could ever hope to be. The big problem was Could She Be Trusted? What would she do with the information that I was being stalked by an unknown assailant? This would require some heavy thinking. I retreated to the comfort and security of my castle.

After a week of serious thought I decided that indeed, Inez was trustworthy. Of course, I wouldn’t tell the whole story at once. I had made that mistake before. No, I would just let bits and pieces drop, and let them land where they may.

Oh, the agony of it all! Just two weeks after our first encounter I was ready to tell her the whole story. I had been letting the tidbits drop, but Inez hadn’t been picking up on them. She had called me and told me to meet her on the bench in her garden; she had some exiting news to tell me. I was there almost before she hung up the phone. Outside, in the garden, it was damp. Not the July dampness of when we first met, but an October dampness that seeped into the bones and sat. Inez was already sitting down. She begged me to let her tell her news. I said of course, and she proceeded to tell me that she is going to marry Dan! They are already engaged as a matter of fact! It will be a December wedding. I stalked out of the garden. To think! I had almost been ready to tell her about The Watchers (I got the name out of a book; I thought it was more than appropriate)! Back to my castle, and to unchanged comfort. What? The door leading into my house was standing open. I most certainly *did not* leave it like that. How could this have happened? An intruder would have get through four locks, a voice recognition system and a retinal scan just to be able to disarm the alarm! I raced up to my room. Piles upon piles of broken surveillance equipment lay on the floor. Television monitors, cracked beyond repair. All of the cords had been cut leading out of my computer and police scanner. The Watchers! They’d come! Quickly I scurried down to the basement, and to my bunker. I lay there, waiting.

I heard them calling outside. They told me to come out quietly with my hands up; that I wouldn’t be hurt if I just listened to them. How clever! One of the Watchers had identified himself as the chief of police. Liar! If I came out it would be over. As I waited I began to grow sleepy. The room filled with gas; I was powerless against it. I made a break for the door. I had to tell Inez....

The world went dark. The last thing that came to me was “Why are my feet so close?” as I crumpled to the ground in a heap.

“It’s sad, really. They say he was holed up in there for almost a year. Never went out to eat, didn’t have any real friends, only the lady who lived next door. She kinda took pity on him.”

“I heard that’s why he did it; she told him that she was marrying the guy across the street and he took it in a bad way. They say he was nuts, thought people were out to get him. They found all this stuff in his house, weird stuff like soup cans with strings hanging off them taped up all around the outside of the house. The strings all led up to a big ol’ pile of cereal boxes in his bedroom.”

“I wonder what all this was in his little world?”

“We probably wouldn’t want to know.”

“Isn’t that sad. But really, who in their right mind thinks that the whole world is after them?”

The two women moved on down the street, clucking their tongues, eager to tell their friends what had happened.

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“How did you manage it?”

“What?”

“The whole thing, the cereal boxes, all those bits of string.”

“I did it when you were in the garden talking to him.”

“The locks and stuff weren’t a problem?”

“He had all this stuff on the door, made the place look like Fort Knox, but the windows were unguarded. In fact, one of them was even unlocked.”

“We should find a place to dump this junk. I don’t want bits of TV monitors and cables and junk all in the back seat forever. Someone will see it eventually.”

“There’s a landfill about two miles north of here. We’ll go there.”

“So, any idea who we should hit next?”

“Can’t think of anyone in particular. Get out the phone book and we can flip the pages and just point.”

“Watch it, you almost missed the exit.”

“I love this game.”