

Diamond In The Roughage

by Michael P Calligaro

"So I'm standing at my post, and this really hot babe walks by. She stops and looks back, kinda checking me out. Then she smiles and winks at me."

The cat was singing, but he was off key. I wasn't buying it for a second. I looked to Sammy's Little Helper on my shoulder, managed to ignore his silly getup, and rolled my eyes. SLiH waved his "wings" (really his disguised upper arms) and bounced a bit. He was doing a fine imitation of the disbelief dance of the Sonarian Toe-Armed Feathered Friend he was supposed to be.

The soldier turned indignant. "Hey, tell your STAFF that I cut a mean figure when I'm in my uniform."

Through considerable effort of will, I forced myself not to chuckle. Never make fun of a soldier. It doesn't matter if you're packing twice as much heat as he is; unnecessary gunfights suck. On the other hand, his gun was the only thing worth worrying about. Calling him "unimpressive" did an injustice to tree moss everywhere. His arms looked like pencils, and not even the big fat ones they gave you in grade school. These were more like the little No. 2's you had to take tests with and that always broke while you were trying to completely fill in the ovals. His legs were equally thin, and his neck, well, it looked like three pencils taped together.

I'd only been cooped up in this backwater universe for a few weeks, but if that was what a Tundrainian "really hot babe" found attractive, then I'm an overly cynical detective with an aversion to honest people.

Okay, so that shoedoes fit.

Still, the only uniform that could have made this little twerp look good would have been one that warped space around him and sucked in the photons being bounced off the stud in the underground sex club downtown. Not that I've been there. Much. See, even the "really hot" Tundrainian females leave something to be desired.

My voice sounding completely sincere, I said, "I can imagine. What happened then?" Yeah, I'm not above pandering to a perp's delusions. If I don't get results, I don't get paid. At the end of the day, you can't buy beer with your moral superiority.

He continued on in his nasal voice. "Well I looked down at my feet for a second. Then I grinned, looked up, and she's gone! Where she had been standing is this ugly hag. And, since I'd already been grinning, the hag thinks I'm looking at her! I had to quickly look away before she thought I was hot for her."

His shudder made me think he was about to physically fall apart. I didn't want to be present for that spectacle, so I hurriedly said, "And then?"

"Well, I heard something bounding toward me. Thinking it's the old lady, I kind of sneak a glance up at her. But it's not her. It's this rock monster! I grab my gun, but the monster's too close and smashes me. Next thing I know I'm being shaken by Sergeant Kalson."

"So, you got clobbered by a babe who turned into a hag who turned into a monster?"

The soldier looked confused. "Well, no. They were three different people."

"You saw them all at the same time?"

"No."

"And you only looked away for a second each time?"

He nodded.

"But you think they were each different beings? What, did someone forget to tell me that you Tundrainians know how to teleport?"

"What's that mean?"

So he was as intelligent as he was physically impressive. I sighed and spoke slowly. "Kid, you were attacked by a polymorph."

"A what?"

"A being that can change its shape."

His face split into a wide grin, and he laughed. "Naw, that's impossible! You're funny."

I nodded. "Thank you for your time. That's all I need to know."

Still chuckling at my "joke," he walked down the dirt path we were standing on and disappeared into the jungle.

"What do you think, SLiH?"

My little robot bounced a bit on my shoulder and said, "Cookoo." When I got here, I gave him back some speech synthesis so that I wouldn't have to explain to everyone why my "bird" was mute. His disguise just wouldn't hold up to heat from some pencil neck's peepers. And, if you think the Tundrainians react badly to the concept of a polymorph, you should see what the luddites do when they see a robot. My first two days there were *not* pleasant. Not that the following thirteen had been much better.

Unfortunately, I hadn't come up with any brilliant plans for finding the exit. Therein lies the danger of hopping universes every time you find a truly honest person. The universe you're leaving might be an affront to all you hold decent, but you never know what you're going to get on the other side.

"Okay, bird brain, start scanning for polymorphs. They'll most likely have a different density than the things they're imitating."

SLiH flapped his wings wildly, smacking me in the face as he jumped up and down on my shoulder.

"What?"

He crossed his wings in front of him and gave me what was probably a perturbed look. It was hard to tell behind the fake beak I'd glued to his face.

"Oh, you didn't like me calling you 'bird brain.' Sorry little guy, I'm taking out my frustration with these Tundrainians on you again. You're much more intelligent than a STAFF bird." There was no doubt about that. Show me a STAFF that can out-cheat me at poker. They're good, but I'm devious. "Okay, let's see if this kid's sergeant is any more intelligent than he is."

SLiH hopped up and down and said, "Cookoo, cookoo." I had to agree. The odds were not in the sergeant's favor.

I opened a thin, bamboo-esque door and entered a sparse room with a sandy floor, a thatch roof, and nothing covering the windows. Yes, this was the main research center in the Tundrainian capital city. Mentally shaking my head, I turned to a guy in a uniform sitting behind a desk. He looked a good deal like the kid I'd just talked to, only the pencils making up his arms *were* as thick as the ones you got in grade school. I'm sure that was impressive for a Tundrainian. The insignia on his almost non-existent shoulders was that of sergeant. The nametag said, "Kalson."

Before I could say anything, he barked, "Diamond, eh?"

I nodded. "That's right. Sam Diamond."

"And you come from a different continent on the other side of the sea?"

That was the story I'd been telling everyone, at least. I nodded again.

"Came across on a small craft that broke up close to shore?"

"Nothing gets by you, does it, sergeant?"

I'd played it cool, so he couldn't tell if I was teasing him or not. He ignored me and accused, "Why should I trust you?"

I started to reach into my coat, "I'm sorry, didn't someone tell you about the letter from the president?" Shortly after I'd arrived in this universe, a conniving and clever fellow kidnapped the president's favorite STAFF. I'd proven my usefulness as a detective by retrieving it for him. You should have seen what I had to use to bribe the damn bird and keep it from fingering me, though. Sometimes I think the STAFFs have more upstairs than their masters do.

The sergeant waved this aside. "I don't care if you've got a letter from my mother. I don't see why I should trust you."

"That is wise of you. You never know whom you can trust. But the president has requested that I get to the bottom of this situation, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you a few questions." I put my hands on his desk and leaned forward. "Neither of us wants to have the president call your general, so why don't you get off my back?"

He frowned at me for a moment then opened his mouth to speak. I cut him off.

"Look Mac, where I come from we fought nasty wars against nastier people. I've had at least twice as much training as you have, and plenty of real world experience to back it up. If wiping this floor with you will somehow earn your respect, I'm happy to oblige. Shall we?"

I held his gaze evenly as he stared at me. Then he smiled. "Well, you've got spunk."

I nodded. I bluff well too. That war was a long time ago.

He stood up, "Come on, I'll show you the situation." He beckoned for me to follow him down a hallway. As we walked, he asked eagerly, "So you served in an actual war?"

I nodded, "For five years."

He got a faraway look on his face. "There hasn't been any action here since the Great Battle,

seventy-three years ago. We're just now starting to build up a military again."

I'd heard only vague references to "the Great Battle" so far. The reference books didn't have much on it either. "Who were you fighting, other Tundrainians?"

He frowned and shrugged. "No one remembers. All we know is that we lost everything: our technology, our power, our dignity, our self-confidence..." he sighed, "and, in the seventy-three years since, we've done a lousy job of getting any of that back."

I stopped and stared at him. He walked on a bit before noticing. "What is it?"

"I spent one of those five years locked up in a tiny cage in a POW camp. Technology and power come and go, but there's nothing more important than getting back your self-confidence."

He nodded. "I agree. Unfortunately, someone else doesn't." He pointed to a solid wooden door with an enormous metal lock. I wondered how the average Tundrainian managed to lift such a beast. The sergeant continued. "It took a while to learn what was stolen. This room was still locked when we arrived." He held up a six-inch key with only two teeth at the end. "Very few people have keys, and we've accounted for them all." He unlocked and opened the door.

I examined the lock. Even if I'd tied three of SLiH's arms behind his back, he could have picked the thing in under a millisecond. Me, I could have done it in the dark with burned fingers and nothing but a rusty nail to aid me. However, from what I'd seen of the Tundrainians, the lock would have kept out the vast majority of them. We went down a flight of stairs, but the sergeant cautiously stepped over one of them and admonished me to do the same. I looked around at the split bamboo walls and noticed a few holes at strategic locations. The old, "pressure plate releases spears" trick. Crude and ineffective if you knew to watch for it. At the bottom of the stairs we came to a heavy metal door. The sergeant had difficulty swinging it open. But the floor on either side of the door was dirt. Anyone with a shovel could have easily dug his way under. These people desperately needed a lesson in chains with weak links.

Beyond the metal door was the techiest room I'd seen since I'd arrived in this universe. Granted, it had a dirt floor and poor lighting, but the walls and ceiling were made of some kind of plaster. There were resistors and wires and soldiering guns spread about in ways that implied they were being used. There were various pieces of complicated machinery, and workbenches, and half finished projects all over the place.

But, then I saw something that convinced me that techies worked here. Games. Yeah, they were board games, but still. All the techies I've ever met have been driven by the creation of better games to play. I'd lay odds that these people were hard at work inventing computers so that they could computerize their board games. Then, when I looked further I saw another telltale sign--junk food.

Yep, junk food and games, two sure signs of the presence of engineers.

There was a workbench in the center of the room that was conspicuously empty. I pointed to it. "Whatever was stolen came from there, didn't it?"

The sergeant nodded. "I don't know why, but the engineers were really excited about it. It seemed pretty simple to me. It had three plugs. You put power on one of the plugs, and it let power go through the others. If you took the power away, nothing went through. What's that good for?"

He was describing a transistor. "How big was it?"

The whole apparatus was pretty big, but they said the actual device was smaller than my finger."

Impressive, considering the small size of Tundrainian fingers. These people seemed poised on the verge of making some real progress.

"I'll need to talk to the engineers who were working on it."

The sergeant frowned. "Sorry, no can do."

I sighed. "I thought we'd gotten over this. I can't do my job without everyone's cooperation."

He shook his head. "No it's not that. I'd be happy to let you talk with them. But the two engineers who had been working on this ended up on this week's Disappearance List.

I glanced over to SLiH, who just squawked. Without a networked computer system to hack into, he was far less useful to me than he'd been elsewhere. "Disappearance List?"

The sergeant nodded. "Didn't you have one on your continent? It's just a list we post of the people who disappeared that week."

I stared at him. "And people disappear often?"

"Well, yeah. A few every day."

His raw acceptance of this unnerved me enough to make me ask a stupid question. "Where do they go?"

"If we knew that, we wouldn't say they disappeared, now would we?" Okay, I deserved that.

"Well, who disappears?"

He shrugged, "Different people."

"Give me something to work with here. Are they always scientists? Do you get more young people than old?"

He stared at me, "Old?"

I blinked and started to understand why I hadn't seen any elderly Tundrainians since I'd arrived. I'd figured I was just in a yuppie part of town. "Wait a minute, let me get this straight. Tundrainians don't die of old age. They disappear? And they usually do it when they're fairly young?"

Nodding, he looked up at the ceiling as he thought. "Yeah, I can't remember anyone who ever made it to forty."

So nonchalant about it. Were these people cows? Suddenly, I realized what was going on. The smart people were leaving, and using the disappearances to cover their tracks. It was devious, but I was relieved to see it. I get uneasy when I find people who aren't, at their core, greedy liars. The physicists have it all wrong. The trans-universal constant isn't Obermier's Number. It's greed. But that's okay. I understand greed. It's honesty that scares me. Put me in a room with a bunch of honest people, and I won't know what they're going to do next.

So, here we had two scientists working for a government facility and about to make a major breakthrough that would change all of society. But they conveniently "disappeared" along with their hardware. "These scientists. Were they in their late thirties?"

He shook his head. "No, they were pretty young."

Uh huh. Okay, the universe was starting to acquire a familiar spin. Now I just needed to find out where they were going, how they were getting there, and what polymorphs had to do with it. All in a days work. "Thank you, Sergeant. Is there anything else I should know about?"

He shook his head. "Not that I can think off."

I turned to leave, but he stopped me. "Aren't you going to look around some more?"

"Naw, I've seen what I need to."

"So, do you know how the thieves got in?"

If the polymorph could take arbitrary shapes, then it wouldn't have had any trouble with this place. But, remembering the other soldier's reaction to the suggestion of such a creature, I shook my head. "I've got some ideas, but I'm going to need to do some investigating. Thank you for your time."

"I'll show you out."

A Tundrainian female was walking by as we left the stairway. She was anorexically thin, even for a Tundrainian, with large bumps running down her back, and a long mane of hair. I'd spent enough time eyeing the field to determine that this one was a looker by their standards. The sergeant's overt, longing stare cinched that opinion.

Suddenly, SLiH started squawking. I reached up and patted his head. "What is it?"

He laid a density spectrum over the female on my retinal implants. She was hollow. So, the polymorphs were hanging out at the scene of the crime. Typically this would have caused me to draw negative conclusions as to their intelligence, but I let them slide this time. If the worst I had to deal with every day was a group of stupid Tundrainians, I'd go soft too.

Since I was watching her carefully, I heard but didn't see the sergeant lock the door. I continued to watch her as we started walking down the hall. So, I only half heard the sergeant's question.

"How'd you get out of your prison?"

I blinked and looked down at him. SLiH would keep a sensor on the polymorph. "What's that? Oh, well I spent the first half of the year waiting for someone to come rescue me. I spent the next half waiting for the war to end. Then I realized that my best chance for escape would be to get myself out. So I outsmarted the guards and snuck into the jungle. I laid low for a while and got my strength back, then I fought my way back across the lines."

He got a faraway look on his face. "I wish we had that kind of drive."

"What's stopping you?"

Sighing, he said, "What can we do?"

Emphatically, I said, "Two people who could have helped lift your race up out of the mud just disappeared. You've got an enemy. I suggest you do everything you possibly can to find out what it is." SLiH squawked again. I looked up to see that my quarry had gone outside and turned a corner. A trifle hastily, I said, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must be going. Thanks for your help."

Not waiting for a reply, I rushed outside and turned the same direction she had. Nothing. "See anything little guy?"

SLiH scanned around as I moved forward. No sign of my polymorph. I came to an alley, and, on a hunch, went in. There was a dame there. She wasn't a Tundrainian female mind you, but a human dame. Well, at least she was a decent approximation of one. And her being naked as the day she would have been born was a nice touch.

"A good effort, darling, but humans have breasts on the front, not the back. And there's only two of them. Also, while I like the long hair, I prefer redheads. You could also stand to be a little bit more curvy."

She stared at me and frowned, obviously trying to figure out what to do.

I nodded. "Yes, I know you're a polymorph. You can drop the act."

Her frown growing, she continued to consider.

"Look babe, as much as I appreciate the naked bit, if you'd worn clothes you could have pretended to be packing heat. As it is, you're going to have some difficulty convincing me that you've got a weapon hidden there somewhere." Though the fact that SLiH's scan wasn't showing one shored up my confidence. "So why don't you switch back to something that fits in around these parts, and we'll go someplace to talk."

She held her hand out, and it quickly morphed into a Tundrainian pistol. I was unimpressed. "That thing works by propelling small, dense objects at enormous speeds. First, I don't believe you can throw pieces of yourself at me with any real power. And, second, I can't imagine that having parts of you split off and thrown about the room is very comfortable."

She still hesitated, so I threw down another card. Don't worry, I've always got about ten lined up. I drew my organi-blaster and showed it to her. "I on the other hand, have a weapon that doesn't require any sort of self-sacrifice on my part, and will split apart the bonds of every organic molecule in your otherwise fine body. Now, do either of us want that?" When she didn't answer, I sighed and said, "Look, I went to the trouble of learning Tundrainian. Won't you at least say something to me?"

She considered for another moment, then changed back into her Tundrainian shape. In a sexy (to a Tundrainian) voice, she said, "I'm going to have to take you to the queen."

Well, that sounded like a step in the right direction. Wondering if the queen was a figurehead or if she had any real power, I put my organi-blaster away and smiled. "Lead the way, darling."

We walked down the alleyway and across the street into the jungle. The city was small and surrounded by farmland and wilderness. I was quite disappointed when I learned that this was the capital city, not an outpost. I like big, bustling places with enough people to ensure graft, corruption, money laundering, and other enjoyable pastimes. Of course, my methods for profiting off of such activities involve finding and turning in the perps engaged in them. I'm a respectable businessman, you see. Well, I'm a businessman at least. Okay, okay. *Ido* regularly get paid though. Does anything else matter?

My polymorphic guide said, "I'm sorry, but we're going to need to go in through processing. You can't fit through any of the real entrances." She didn't look back when she talked, but that didn't surprise me. The likelihood of her seeing through the "eyes" in this body was nil. I'd bet she could see from every last bit of her body mass. She'd been eyeing me the whole time we were walking. To verify this, I just nodded. She didn't look back or say anything else. She'd seen me.

We entered a small cave, went down a short distance, and came to a solid-looking rock wall. However, as we approached the wall, it split open and left us room to go in. "Your guards are also your

camouflage. That's cute." She didn't respond.

The hallway on the other side was made of poured concrete and was well lit. Yes, the service entry to this place was higher tech than the Tundrainian's high-tech research center. I started to suspect that I was working for the wrong side. The guys with the better tech can always pay more. We went down a long hall past what appeared to be a large kitchen and numerous food storage facilities. This made me wonder if they'd feed me while I was here. I hadn't eaten since that morning. I tried to get a glimpse of what they were preparing, but I could only see that it was long and thin. My guide was moving too quickly, and I didn't want to be rude. I save rudeness for when I'm sure I can get away with it. After all, I'd never actually tried an organi-blaster on one of these polymorphs. I didn't know for sure that it would work.

We came to a large audience chamber with a dais on the floor and a throne on top of it, but no queen sitting on the throne. Then I noticed that the throne and dais were both moving rhythmically. My guide made a sound that probably amounted to clearing her throat. The dais immediately collapsed down to about an inch high and slid toward a door on the far end of the room. The throne morphed into a better approximation of a woman than my guide had done, complete with red hair. Of course, the shade was unnatural, but I had to give her credit for trying. She was wearing a small amount of clothing, and appeared to be flushed.

Okay, so the polymorphs could communicate with each other over distances without appearing to. I filed that under "useful information."

The queen rushed over to me, bouncing as she went, and took my arm in hers. "Sam Diamond, how nice to meet you."

No one was ever this happy to see me. She was up to something. "The pleasure is mine, Queen...."

"Oh, don't be so formal. I'm not your queen. Just call me Rachel."

"Rachel?"

"Yes, the sound of it suits my mood. You can't pronounce my real name anyway. Now, tell me, what do you call your species?"

I opened my mouth to lie, but she cut me off. "And forget the story about the other continent. There isn't one. I know you came through the universal door."

For the first time in fifteen days, my prospects looked good. If they knew how I got here, then they had to know something about the location of the exit door. "I'm a human."

"Oooh, a nice name. How am I doing as a human female?"

"Extremely well for someone who's never met one before."

She smiled and said, "Later on, you'll have to show me what to do with some of these parts."

Not bloody likely. I smiled and nodded. She led me to the back of the room, where there was a large couch. I wondered if this was a real couch, or one of her playmates. Keeping her arm in mine, she sat us both down, then released me and leaned back suggestively. I wasn't buying it. Yes, I prefer redheads, but I really prefer *human* ones. I didn't want a dame who could be both my lover and the bed at the same time. Still, I needed to play along with her game, so I made a show of glancing down at her body and then looking away hastily. This seemed to please her.

"So, you're from another universe. How exciting. Is this your first new place?"

I shook my head. "It's my fifth."

She went fluid for a second. "Wow, you're quite the traveler. I haven't worked up the nerve to try the door myself."

"That's a good thing. It's a one-way trip."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You go through a universal door, and it's a crapshoot where you end up. No one I've talked to has any idea how many universes there are, but we know it's a huge number. I've never met anyone who's seen the same universe twice."

"When you step up to the gate, you must be terrified."

I shrugged. "I'm usually not leaving much behind. And I know I'll be able to survive on the other side. Whoever built these doorways obviously breathed the same kind of air as I do, because they all seem to go to the right kind of planet."

"How convenient."

I shrugged again. "It's just the way it is. If it weren't that way, there wouldn't have been a door on my planet, and I'd never have left."

"Well, there must be something difficult about hopping universes. Surely everyone doesn't speak the same language?"

"That's correct. But I can learn a new language in my sleep." SLiH puffed out his chest and waved his wings.

She looked up at him and said, "How wonderful! From your silicon artificial companion?"

SLiH's face fell into a depressed frown and he plopped back down onto my shoulder. I patted his head and said, "He's real to me."

She stared at him for a moment before nodding. I took note at how well she was imitating my behaviors.

Hoping that I'd done enough buttering up and that I wasn't going to need to go carnal, I said, "Can I ask you a few questions?"

"Sure! You've been quite helpful to me."

"The Great War that the Tundrainians talk about, was it against you polymorphs?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't all that great, and it wasn't much of a war. More of an attempt at an uprising. But that's okay. The silly things don't know any better."

"But, if you won, why do you hide from them?"

She frowned. "Hide from them? You mean on the ranch? Well, it just works better. When they know about us they get all riled up, and the quality of our crop goes down."

I stared at her for a moment, worried that the implication I'd just drawn was correct. "You mean that you use the food that they grow, and when they're riled up they don't grow as much food as they should?"

She looked confused. "Well, not really. *I guess* you could say we use the food that they grow. But only in the sense that they eat it, and that make *them* grow."

I'd caught the right implication. Keeping my voice neutral, I asked, "You eat the Tundrainians?"

"Well, yeah. Why do you think we go to all this trouble to raise them? Their bones are nice, thin tubes of silicon. Quite a delicacy to us."

It took SLiH exactly one billionth of a second to put two and two together. He cowered against my ear. I held up two fingers. "Okay, two questions first. One, does my companion here have enough silicon in him for you to care?"

She shook her head. "It's easier to process the Tundrainians." SLiH immediately relaxed.

"Then number two. How do you feel about calcium?"

She frowned. "Makes us sick."

I too relaxed. "Back to the Tundrainians. They're a sentient race."

She laughed. "Just barely. The poor things can't even figure out space travel."

"Isn't that because you keep eating their best scientists?"

She gave me a fine approximation of a perturbed look. "Please. Are you really trying to tell me that there were no creatures on your home world that showed some signs of intelligence, but that you didn't mind eating because they didn't compare to you?"

I coughed.

"Thought so."

"But none of our meat animals have language."

"That you could understand."

I frowned.

After an awkward silence, she said, "Look, I can't let you mess up our yields. So, what would it take to get you to look the other way?"

I put on a show of surprise. "Are you suggesting that I'd double cross my employers? Send them up the river? Sell out to the highest bidder?"

She just shrugged and kind of nodded.

I shrugged too. "Okay."

Like I said, in the end of the day, you can't buy beer with your moral superiority.

She hopped up and down and clapped her hands, causing herself to bounce. I ignored the pseudopods, but I did wonder how many of these human-like expressions were really Tundrainian. Or, had she met other humans before and not let on about it?

"Name your price."

I didn't hesitate. "Passage to the universal door for SLiH and I."

With a blink, she said, "Is that it?"

Shrugging, I replied, "It's pointless to try to bring money across. In this universe, silicon is a delicacy. In the next, it'll be growing on beaches."

"Done." She leaned forward seductively. "So, you wanna teach me how this body works?"

The thought horrified me. Some say I'm a deviant for wanting to stick to my own race. I can't argue one way or the other. "Actually, need to get back to my room and grab a few personal effects. Then I'd like to move on. This place is nice, but it's not quite my speed."

Obviously disappointed, she said, "Very well. Come back to the processing entrance you used before, and someone will show you to the door. Good luck in your next universe."

"Thanks." I stood up, but she stayed sprawled on the couch. It started to blend into her a bit, and a look of rapture came over her face. I decided to show myself out.

As soon as I hit the jungle, I asked SLiH, "Any of them around?" He shook his head. "Okay, you know what I want." He nodded.

Back at my room, I set SLiH on a table and gave him a pen and some paper. "Draw it, but make sure a moron could understand." He tried to take the pen in a wing arm, frowned, and grabbed it with a lower hand. "Soon, little guy. I'll be able to get you out of that getup soon."

He chewed at the bottom of the pen for a second, then hopped down on the paper and started drawing diagrams. I tidied up my "personal effects." Not that I actually cared about any of that stuff; all I really need when I go to a new universe is SLiH. But, if I saw the queen again, she'd be expecting me to have these things.

SLiH finished with his diagrams, stood back, looked them over carefully, then gave me a thumbs up. "Great, little guy. Now, take a memo."

He excitedly grabbed another piece of paper. I dictated, "Sergeant Kalson. You can't fight an enemy you can't see. Have one of your techies build this, then use it to look around. You may be surprised. But be careful how you proceed. If the wrong people figure out what you're doing, you'll end up on next week's Disappearance List."

I folded the papers up, sealed them, and put the sergeant's name on the bundle. I'd bribe the concierge to bring it over to the research center. I didn't need my Tundrainian money anyway. After putting SLiH back up on my shoulder, I said, "Okay, little guy. Let's hope the next universe is better than this one."

So, I'm a sucker for a lost cause. Sue me. Besides, while I can't buy beer with my moral superiority, I can't enjoy the beer without it.

The End

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