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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIFTY PER CENT PROPHET ***

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**FIFTY
PER CENT
PROPHET**

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PER CENT**

PROPHET

By **DARREL T. LANGART**

That he was a phony Swami was beyond doubt. That he was a genuine prophet, though, seemed ... but then, what's the difference between a dictator and a true prophet? So was he....

Illustrated by Schoenherr

Dr. Joachim sat in the small room behind his reception hall and held his fingers poised above the keys of the rather creaky electrotypewriter on his desk. The hands seemed to hang there, long, slender, and pale, like two gulls frozen suddenly in their long swoop towards some precious tidbit floating on the writhing sea beneath, ready to begin their drop instantly, as soon as time began again.

All of Dr. Joachim's body seemed to be held in that same stasis. Only his lips moved as he silently framed the next sentence in his mind.

Physically, the good doctor could be called a big man: he was broad-shouldered and well-muscled, but, hidden as his body was beneath the folds of his blue, monkish robe, only his shortness of stature was noticeable. He was only fifty-four, but the pale face, the full, flowing beard, and the long white hair topped by a small blue skullcap gave him an ageless look, as though centuries of time had flowed over him to leave behind only the marks of experience and wisdom.

The timelessness of an idealized Methuselah as he approached his ninth centennial, the God-given wisdom engraved on the face of Moses as he came down from Sinai, the mystic power of mighty Merlin as he softly intoned a spell of albamancy, all these seemed to have been blended carefully together and infused into the man who sat behind the typer, composing sentences in his head.

Those gull-hands swooped suddenly to the keyboard, and the aged machine clattered rapidly for nearly a minute before Dr. Joachim paused again to consider his next words.

A bell tinkled softly.

Dr. Joachim's brown eyes glanced quickly at the image on the black-and-white TV screen set in the wall. It was connected to the hidden camera in his front room, and showed a woman entering his front door. He sighed and rose from his seat, adjusting his blue robes carefully before he went to the door that led into the outer room.

He'd rather hoped it was a client, but—

"Hello, Susan, my dear," he said in a soft baritone, as he stepped through the door. "What seems to be the trouble?"

It wasn't the same line that he'd have used with a client. You don't ask a mark questions; you tell him. To a mark, he'd have said: "Ah, you are troubled." It sounds much more authoritative and all-knowing.

But Cherrie Tart—*née* Sue Kowalski—was one of the best strippers on the Boardwalk. Her winters were spent in Florida or Nevada or Puerto Rico, but in summer she always returned to King Frankie's *Golden Surf*, for the summer trade at Coney Island. She might be a big name in show business now, but she had never forgotten her carny background, and King Frankie, in spite of the ultra-ultra tone of the *Golden Surf*, still stuck to the old Minsky traditions.

The worried look on her too-perfect face had been easily visible in the TV screen, but it had been replaced by a bright smile as soon as she had heard Dr. Joachim opening the door. The smile flickered for a moment, then she said: "Gee, Doc; you give a girl the creepy feeling that you really *can* read her mind."

Dr. Joachim merely smiled. Susan might be with it, but a good mitt man doesn't give away *all* his little secrets. He had often wished that he could really read minds—he had heard rumors of men who could—but a little well-applied psychology is sometimes just as good.

"So how's everything been, Doc?" She smiled her best stage smile—every tooth perfect in that perfect face, her hair framing the whole like a perfect golden helmet. She looked like a girl in her early twenties, but Dr. Joachim knew for a fact that she'd been born in 1955, which made her thirty-two next January.

"Reasonably well, all things considered," Dr. Joachim admitted. "I'm not starving to death, at least."

She looked around at the room—the heavy drapes, the signs of the zodiac in gold and silver, the big, over-stuffed chairs, all designed to make the "clients" feel comfortable and yet slightly awed by the ancient atmosphere of mysticism. In the dim light, they looked fairly impressive, but she knew that if the lights were brighter the shabbiness would show.

"Maybe you could use a redecorating job, then, Doc," she said. With a gesture born of sudden impulse, she reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope and pressed it into the man's hands. He started to protest, but she cut him off. "No, Doc; I want you to have it. You earned it."

"That San Juan-New York flight, remember?" she went on hurriedly. "You said not to take it, remember? Well, I ... I sort of forgot about what you'd said. You know. Anyway, I got a ticket and was ready to go when the flight was suddenly delayed. Routine, they said. Checking the engines. But I'd never heard of any such routine as that. I remembered what you told me, Doc, and I got scared."

"After an hour, they put another plane into service; they were still working on the other one. I was still worried, so I decided to wait till the next day."

"I guess you read what happened."

He closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "I read."

"Doc, I'd've been on that flight if you hadn't warned me. All the money in the world isn't enough to pay for that." The oddly worried look had come back into her eyes. "Doc, I don't know how you knew that ship was going to go, and I won't ask. I don't want to know. But, ... one thing: Was it *me* they were after?"

She thinks someone blew up the ship, he thought. *She thinks I heard about the plot some way*. For an instant he hesitated, then:

"No, Susan; they weren't after you. No one was trying to kill you. Don't worry about it."

Relief washed over her face. "O.K., Doc; if you say so. Look, I've got to run now, but we've got to sit down and have a few drinks together, now that I'm back. And ... Doc—"

"Yes?"

"Anytime you need anything—if I can ever help you—you let me know, huh?"

"Certainly, my dear. And don't you worry about anything. The stars are all on your side right now."

She smiled, patted his hand, and then was gone in a flash of gold and honey. Dr. Joachim looked at the door that had closed behind her, then he looked down at the envelope in his hands. He opened it gently and took out the sheaf of bills. Fifteen hundred dollars!

He smiled and shoved the money into his pocket. After all, he *was* a professional fortuneteller, even if he didn't like that particular label, and he *had* saved her life, hadn't he?

He returned to the small back room, sat down again at the typer, and, after a minute, began typing again.

When he was finished, he addressed an envelope and put the letter inside.

It was signed with his legal name: *Peter J. Forsythe*.

It required less than two hours for that letter to end up at its destination in a six-floor brick building, a rather old-fashioned affair that stood among similar structures in a lower-middle-class section of Arlington, Virginia, hardly a hop-skip-and-jump from the Pentagon, and not much farther from the Capitol.

The letter was addressed to *Mr. J. Harlan Balfour, President, The Society for Mystical and Metaphysical Research, Inc.*, but Mr. Balfour was not at the Society's headquarters at the time, having been called to Los Angeles to address a group who were awaiting the Incarnation of God.

Even if he had been there, the letter wouldn't have reached him first. All mail was sent first to the office of the Executive Secretary, Mr. Brian Taggart. Most of it—somewhat better than ninety-nine per cent—went directly on to Mr. Balfour's desk, if it was so addressed; Brian Taggart would never have been so cruel as to deprive Mr. Balfour of the joy of sorting through the thousands of crackpot letters in search of those who had the true spark of mysticism which so fascinated Mr. Balfour.

Mr. Balfour was a crackpot, and it was his job to take care of other crackpots—a job he enjoyed immensely and wholeheartedly, feeling, as he did, that that sort of thing was the only reason for

the Society's existence. Of course, Mr. Balfour never considered himself or the others in the least bit crackpottish, in which he was just as much in error as he was in his assumption of the Society's *raison d'être*.

Ninety per cent of the members of the Society for Mystical and Metaphysical Research were just what you would expect them to be. Anyone who was "truly interested in the investigation of the supranormal", as the ads in certain magazines put it, could pay five dollars a year for membership, which, among other things, entitled him to the Society's monthly magazine, *The Metaphysicist*, a well-printed, conservative-looking publication which contained articles on everything from the latest flying saucer report to careful mathematical evaluations of the statistical methods of the Rhine Foundation. Within its broad field, the magazine was quite catholic in its editorial policy.

These members constituted a very effective screen for the real work of the society, work carried on by the "core" members, most of whom weren't even listed on the membership rolls. And yet, it was this group of men and women who made the Society's title true.

Mr. Brian Taggart was a long way from being a crackpot. The big, dark-haired, dark-eyed, hawknosed man sat at his desk in his office on the fifth floor of the Society's building and checked over the mail. Normally, his big wrestler's body was to be found quietly relaxed on the couch that stood against a nearby wall. Not that he was in any way averse to action; he simply saw no virtue in purposeless action. Nor did he believe in the dictum of Miles Standish; if he wanted a thing done, he sent the man most qualified to do it, whether that was himself or someone else.

When he came to the letter from Coney Island, New York, he read it quickly and then jabbed at a button on the intercom switchboard in his desktop. He said three syllables which would have been meaningless to anyone except the few who understood that sort of verbal shorthand, released the button, and closed his eyes, putting himself in telepathic contact with certain of the Society's agents in New York.

Across the river, in the Senate Office Building, a telephone rang in the office of Senator Mikhail Kerotski, head of the Senate Committee on Space Exploration. It was an unlisted, visionless phone, and the number was known only to a very few important officials in the United States Government, so the senator didn't bother to identify himself; he simply said: "Hello." He listened for a moment, said, "O.K., fine," in a quiet voice, and cut the connection.

He sat behind his desk for a few minutes longer, a bearlike man with a round, pale face and eyes circled with dark rings and heavy pouches, all of which had the effect of making him look like a rather sleepy specimen of the giant panda. He finished the few papers he had been working on, stacked them together, rose, and went into the outer office, where he told his staff that he was going out for a short walk.

By the time he arrived at the brownstone building in Arlington and was pushing open the door of Brian Taggart's office, Taggart had received reports from New York and had started other chains of action. As soon as Senator Kerotski came in, Taggart pushed the letter across the desk toward him. "Check that."

Kerotski read the letter, and a look of relief came over his round face. "Not the same typewriter or paper, but this is him, all right. What more do we know?"

"Plenty. Hold on, and I'll give you a complete rundown." He picked up the telephone and began speaking in a low voice. It was an ordinary-sounding conversation; even if the wire had been tapped, no one who was not a "core" member of the S.M.M.R. would have known that the conversation was about anything but an esoteric article to be printed in *The Metaphysicist*—something about dowsing rods.

The core membership had one thing in common: *understanding*.

Consider plutonium. Imagine someone dropping milligram-sized pellets of the metal into an ordinary Florence flask. (In an inert atmosphere, of course; there is no point in ruining a good analogy with side reactions.) More than two and a half million of those little pellets could be dropped into the flask without the operator having anything more to worry about than if he were dropping grains of lead or gold into the container. But after the five millionth, dropping them in by hand would only be done by the ignorant, the stupid, or the indestructible. A qualitative change takes place.

So with understanding. As a human mind increases its ability to understand another human mind, it eventually reaches a critical point, and the mind itself changes. And, at that point, the Greek letter *psi* ceases to be a symbol for the unknown.

When understanding has passed the critical point, conversation as it is carried on by most human beings becomes unnecessarily redundant. Even in ordinary conversation, a single gesture—a shrug of the shoulders, a snap of the fingers, or a nose pinched between thumb and forefinger—can express an idea that would take many words and much more time. A single word—"slob," "nazi," "saint"—can be more descriptive than the dozens of words required to define it. All that is required is that the meanings of the symbols be understood.

The ability to manipulate symbols is the most powerful tool of the human mind; a mind which can manipulate them *effectively* is, in every sense of the word, truly human.

Even without telepathy, it was possible for two S.M.M.R. agents to carry on a conversation above and around ordinary chit-chat. It took longer, naturally; when speaking without the chit-chat, it was possible to convey in seconds information that would have taken several minutes to get over in ordinary conversation.

Senator Kerotski only listened to a small part of the phone discussion. He knew most of the story.

In the past eight months, six anonymous letters had been received by various companies. As Taggart had once put it, in quotes, "We seem to have an Abudah chest containing a patent Hag who comes out and prophesies disasters, with spring complete."

The Big Bend Power Reactor, near Marfa, Texas, had been warned that their stellarator would blow. The letter was dismissed as "crackpot," and no precautions were taken. The explosion killed nine men and cut off the power in the area for three hours, causing other accidents due to lack of power.

The merchant submarine *Bandar-log*, plying her way between Ceylon and Japan, had ignored the warning sent to her owners and had never been heard from again.

In the Republic of Yemen, an oil refinery caught fire and destroyed millions of dollars worth of property in spite of the anonymous letter that had foretold the disaster.

The Prince Charles Dam in Central Africa had broken and thousands had drowned because those in charge had relegated a warning letter to the cylindrical file.

A mine cave-in in Canada had extinguished three lives because a similar letter had been ignored.

By the time the fifth letter had been received, the S.M.M.R. had received the information and had begun its investigation. As an *ex officio* organ of the United States Government, it had ways and means of getting hold of the originals of the letters which had been received by the responsible persons in each of the disasters. All had been sent by the same man; all had been typed on the same machine; all had been mailed in New York.

When the sixth warning had come to the offices of Caribbean Trans-Air, the S.M.M.R., working through the FBI, had persuaded the company's officials to take the regularly scheduled aircraft off the run and substitute another while the regular ship was carefully inspected. But it was the replacement ship that came to pieces in midair.

The anonymous predictor, whoever he was, was a man of no mean ability.

Then letter number seven had been received by the United States Department of Space. It predicted that a meteor would smash into America's Moonbase One, completely destroying it.

Finally, a non-anonymous letter had come to the S.M.M.R. requesting admission to the society, enclosing the proper fee. The letter also said that the writer was interested in literature on the subjects of prescience, precognition, and/or prophecy, and would be interested in contacting anyone who had had experience with such phenomena.

Putting two and two together only yields four, no matter how often it's done, but two to the eighth power gives a nice, round two hundred fifty-six, which is something one can sink one's teeth into.

Brian Taggart cut off the phone connection. "That's it, Mike," he said to the senator. "We've got him."

Two of the Society's agents, both top-flight telepaths, had gone out to "Dr. Joachim's" place on Coney Island's Boardwalk, posing as customers—"clients" was the word Dr. Joachim preferred—and had done a thorough probing job.

"He's what might be called a perfectly sincere fraud," Taggart continued. "You know the type I'm sure."

The senator nodded silently. The woods were full of that kind of thing. Complete, reliable control of any kind of psionic power requires understanding and sanity, but the ability lies dormant in many minds that cannot control it, and it can and does burst forth erratically at times. Finding a physical analogy for the phenomenon is difficult, since mental activities are, of necessity, of a higher order than physical activities.

Some of the operations of tensor calculus have analogs in algebra; many do not.

Taggart gestured with one hand. "He's been in business there for years. Evidently, he's been able to make a few accurate predictions now and then—enough to keep his reputation going. He's tried to increase the frequency, accuracy, and detail of his 'flashes' by studying up on the

techniques used by other seers, and, as a result, he's managed to soak up enough mystic balderdash to fill a library.

"He embellishes every one of his predictions to his 'clients' with all kinds of hokum, and he's been doing it so long that he really isn't sure how much of any prediction is truth and how much is embroidery work.

"The boys are trying to get more information on him now, and they're going to do a little deep probing, if they can get him set up right; maybe they'll be able to trigger off another flash on that moon-hit—but I doubt it."

Senator Kerotski thumbed his chin morosely. "You're probably right. Apparently, once those hunches come to a precog, they get everything in a flash and then they can't get another thing—ever. I wish we could get our hands on one who was halfway along toward *the* point. We've got experts on psychokinetics, levitation, telepathy, clairvoyance, and what-have-you. But precognition we don't seem to be able to find."

"We've got one now," Brian Taggart reminded him.

The senator snorted. "Even assuming that we had any theory on precognition completely symbolized, and assuming that this Forsythe has the kind of mind that can be taught, do you think we could get it done in a month? Because that's all the time we have."

"He's our first case," Taggart admitted. "We'll have to probe everything out of him and construct symbol-theory around what we get. I'll be surprised if we get anywhere at all in the first six months."

Senator Kerotski put his hand over his eyes. "I give up. First the Chinese Soviet kidnaps Dr. Ch'ien and we have to scramble like maniacs to get him back before they find out that he's building a space drive that will make the rocket industry obsolete. Then we have to find out what's causing the rash of accidents that is holding up Dr. Theodore Nordred's antigravity project. And now, just as everything is coming to a head in both departments, we find that a meteor is going to hit Moonbase One sometime between thirty and sixty days from now." He spread apart the middle and ring fingers of the hand that covered his eyes and looked at Taggart through one eye. "And now you tell me that the only man who can pinpoint that time more exactly for us is of no use whatever to us. If we knew when that meteor was due to arrive, we would be able to spot and deflect it in time. It must be of pretty good size if it's going to demolish the whole base."

"How do you know it's going to be a meteor?"

"You think the Soviets would try to bomb it? Don't be silly, Taggart," Kerotski said, grinning.

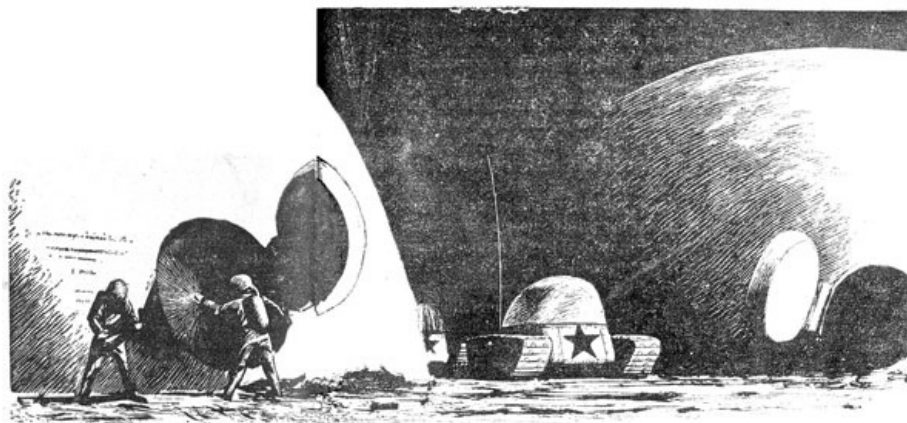
Taggart grinned back. "I'm not thinking they'd bomb us; but I'm trying to look at all the angles."

The worried look came back to the senator's pandalike face. "We have to do something. If only we *knew* that Forsythe's prediction will really come off. Or, if it will, then exactly *when*? And is there anything we can do about it, or will it be like the airline incident. If we hadn't made them switch planes, nothing would have happened. What if, no matter what we do, Moonbase One goes anyway?"

"Remember, we haven't yet built Moonbase Two. If our only base on the moon is destroyed, the Soviets will have the whole moon to themselves. Have you any suggestions?"

"Sure," said Taggart. "Ask yourself one question: What is the purpose of Moonbase One?"

Slowly, a beatific smile spread itself over the senator's face.



The whole discussion had taken exactly ninety seconds.

"Mrs. Jesser," said Brian Taggart to the well-rounded, fortyish woman behind the reception desk at S.M.M.R. headquarters, "this is Dr. Forsythe. He has established a reputation as one of the

finest seers living today."

Mrs. Jesser looked at the distinguished, white-bearded gentleman with an expression that was almost identical with the one her grandmother had worn when she met Rudolph Valentino, nearly sixty years before, and the one her mother had worn when she saw Frank Sinatra a generation later. It was not an uncommon expression for Mrs. Jesser's face to wear: it appeared every time she was introduced to anyone who looked impressive and was touted as a great mystic of one kind or another.

"I'm *so* glad to *meet* you, Dr. Forsythe!" she burred eagerly.

"Dr. Forsythe will be working for us for the next few months—his office will be Room B on the fourth floor," Taggert finished. He was genuinely fond of the woman, in spite of her mental dithers and schoolgirl mannerisms. Mysticism fascinated her, and she was firmly convinced that she had "just a *weenie* bit" of psychic power herself, although its exact nature seemed to change from time to time. But she did both her jobs well, although she was not aware of her double function. She thought she was being paid as a receptionist and phone operator, and she was quick and efficient about her work. She was also the perfect screen for the Society's real work, for if anyone ever suspected that the S.M.M.R. was not the group of crackpots that it appeared to be, five minutes talking with Mrs. Jesser would convince them otherwise.

"Oh, you're *staying* with us, Dr. Forsythe? How wonderful! We simply *must* have a talk sometime!"

"Indeed we must, dear lady," said Forsythe. His voice and manner had just the right amount of benign dignity, with an almost undetectable touch of pompous condescending.

"Come along, doctor; I'll show you to your office." Taggert's face betrayed nothing of the enjoyment he was getting out of watching the mental gymnastics of the two. Forsythe and Mrs. Jesser were similar in some ways, but, of the two, Mrs. Jesser was actually the more honest. She only fooled herself; she never tried to fool anyone else. Forsythe, on the other hand, tried to put on a front for others, and, in doing so, had managed to delude himself pretty thoroughly.

Taggert's humor was not malicious; he was not laughing at them. He was admiring the skill of the human mind in tying itself in knots. When one watches a clever contortionist going through his paces, one doesn't laugh at the contortionist; one admires and enjoys the weird twists he can get himself into. And, like Taggert, one can only feel sympathy for one whose knots have become so devious and intricate that he can never extricate himself.

"Just follow me up the stairs," Taggert said. "I'll show you where your office is. Sorry we don't have an elevator, but this old building just wasn't built for it, and we've never had any real need for one."

"Perfectly all right," Forsythe said, following along behind.

Three weeks!

Taggert had to assume that the minimum time prediction was the accurate one. Damn! Why couldn't this last prediction have been as precise as the one about the air flight from Puerto Rico?

It had taken six days for the "accredited" agents of the S.M.M.R. to persuade Dr. Peter Forsythe that he should leave his little place on the Boardwalk and come down to Arlington to work. It isn't easy to persuade a man to leave a business that he's built up over a long period of years, especially during the busy season. To leave the Boardwalk during the summer would, as far as Forsythe was concerned, be tantamount to economic suicide. He had to be offered not only an income better than the one he was making, but better security as well. At fifty-four, one does not lightly throw over the work of a lifetime.

Still, he had plenty of safeguards. The rent was paid on his Boardwalk office, he had a guaranteed salary while he was working, and a "research bonus," designed to keep him working until the Society was finished with that phase of its work.

It's rather difficult for a man to resist the salesmanship of a telepath who knows exactly what his customer wants and, better, what he needs.

On the fourth floor, there were sounds of movement, the low staccato chatter of typers, occasional bits of conversation, and the hum of electronic equipment.

Forsythe was impressed, though not a line on his face showed it. The office to which he had been assigned was lined with electronic calculators, and his name had already been put on the door in gold. It was to his credit that he was impressed by the two factors in that order.

In the rear of the room, two technicians were working on an open panel in one of the units. Nearby, a dark-haired, dark-eyed, maturely handsome woman in her early thirties was holding a clip board and making occasional notes as the men worked. One of the men was using an electric drill, and the whine of metal on metal drowned out the slight noise that Taggert and Forsythe made as they entered. Only the woman was aware that they had come in, but she didn't betray the fact.

"Miss Tedesco?" Taggert called.

She looked up from her clip board, smiled, and walked toward the two newcomers. "Yes, Mr. Taggert?"

"Bout done?"

"Almost. They're setting in the last component now."

Taggert nodded absently. "Miss Tedesco, this is Dr. Peter Forsythe, whom I told you about. Dr. Forsythe, this is Miss Donna Tedesco; she's the computer technician who will be working with you."

Miss Tedesco's smile was positively glittering. "I'm so pleased to meet you, doctor; I know our work together will be interesting."

"I trust it will," Forsythe said, beaming. Then a faint cloud seemed to come over his features. "I'm afraid I must confess a certain ... er ... lack of knowledge in the realm of computerdom. Mr. Taggert attempted to explain, but he, himself, has admitted that his knowledge of the details is ... er ... somewhat vague."

"I'm not a computerman, myself," Taggert said, smiling. "Miss Tedesco will be able to give you the details better than I can."

Miss Tedesco blinked. "You know the broad outline, surely? Of the project, I mean."

"Oh, yes, certainly," Forsythe said hurriedly. "We are attempting to determine whether the actions of human beings can actually have any effect on the outcome of the prophecy itself. In other words, if it is possible to avert, say, a disaster if it is foretold, or whether the very foretelling itself assures the ultimate outcome."

The woman nodded her agreement.

"As I understand it," Forsythe continued, "we are going to get several score clients—or, rather, *subjects*—and I am to ... uh ... exercise my talents, just as I have been doing for many years. The results are to be tabulated and run through the computers to see if there is any correlation between human activity taken as a result of the forecast and the actual foretold events themselves."

"That's right," said Miss Tedesco. She looked at Taggert. "That's what the committee outlined, in general, isn't it?"

"In general, yes," Taggert said.

"But what about the details?" Forsythe asked doggedly. "I mean, just how are we going to go about this? You must remember that I'm not at all familiar with ... er ... scientific research procedures."

"Oh, we'll work all that out together," said Miss Tedesco brightly. "You didn't think we'd plan a detailed work schedule without your co-operation, did you?"

"Well—" Forsythe said, swelling visibly with pride, "I suppose—"

Taggert, glancing at his watch, interrupted. "I'll have to leave you two to work out your research schedule together. I have an appointment in a few minutes." He grasped Forsythe's hand and pumped it vigorously. "I believe we'll get along fine, Dr. Forsythe. And I believe our work here will be quite fruitful. Will you excuse me?"

"Certainly, Mr. Taggert. And I want to thank you for this opportunity to do research work along these lines."

Brian Taggert thanked Forsythe and hurried out with the air of a man with important and urgent things on his mind.

He went up the stairs to the office directly over the one he had assigned to Forsythe and stepped in quietly. Two men were relaxed in lounge chairs, their eyes closed.

Meshing? Taggert asked wordlessly.

Meshing.

Taggert closed the door carefully and went into his own office.

General Howard Layton, USSF, looked no different from any other Space Force officer, except that he was rather handsomer than most. He looked as though he might have posed for recruiting posters at one time, and, in point of fact, he had—back when he had been an ensign in the United States Navy's Submarine Service. He was forty-nine and looked a prematurely graying thirty.

He stood in the observation bunker at the landing area of St. Thomas Spacefield and watched through the periscope as a heavy rocket settled itself to the surface of the landing area. The blue-white tongue of flame touched the surface and splattered; then the heavy ship settled slowly

down over it, as though it were sliding down a column of light. The column of light shortened—

And abruptly vanished as the ship touched down.

General Layton took his eyes away from the periscope. "Another one back safely. Thank God."

Nearby, the only other man in that room of the bunker, a rather short civilian, had been watching the same scene on a closed-circuit TV screen. He smiled up at the general. "How many loads does that make, so far?"

"Five. We'll have the job done before the deadline time."

"Were you worried?"

"A little. I still am, to be honest. What if nothing happens at the end of sixty days? The President isn't one of us, and he's only gone along with the Society's recommendations so far because we've been able to produce results. But"—he gestured outside, indicating the newly-landed ship—"all this extra expense isn't going to set well with him if we goof this once."

"I know," said the civilian. "But have you ever known Brian Taggart to be wrong?"

General Layton grinned. "No. And in a lesser man, that sort of omniscience could be infernally irritating. How is he progressing with Forsythe?"

The civilian frowned. "We've got plenty of data so far, and the method seems to be working well, but we don't have enough to theorize yet."

"Forsythe just sits in his office and gives 'readings,' or whatever you want to call them, to the subjects who come in. *The Metaphysicist* has been running an ad asking for volunteers, so we have all kinds of people calling up for appointments. Forsythe is as happy as a kid."

"How about his predictions?"

"Donna Tedesco is running data processing on them. She's in constant mental contact with him. So are Hughes and Matson, in the office above. The three of them are meshed together with each other—don't ask me how; I'm no telepath—and they're getting a pretty good idea of what's going on in Forsythe's mind."

"Every once in a while, he gets a real flash of something, and it apparently comes pretty fast. The team is trying to analyze the fine-grain structure of the process now."

"The rest of the time, he simply gives out with the old guff that phony crystal-ball gazers have been giving out for centuries. Even when he gets a real flash, he piles on a lot of intuitive extrapolation. And the farther he gets from that central flash, the less reliable the predictions are."

"Do you think we'll get theory and symbology worked out before that meteor is supposed to hit Moonbase One?" asked the general.

The civilian shrugged. "Who knows? We'll have to take a lot on faith if we do, because there won't be enough time to check all his predictions. Each subject is being given a report sheet with his forecast on it, and he's supposed to check the accuracy of it as it happens. And our agents are making spot checks on them just to make sure. It'll take time. All we can do is hope."

"I suppose." General Layton took a quick look through the periscope again. The ship's air lock still hadn't opened; the air and ground were still too hot. He looked back at the civilian. "What about the espionage reports?"

The civilian tapped his briefcase. "I can give it to you in a capsule, verbally. You can look these over later."

"Shoot."

"The Soviets are getting worried, to put it bluntly. We can't hide those rockets, you know. Their own Luna-based radar has been picking up every one of them as they come in and leave. They're wondering why we're making so many trips all of a sudden."

"Have they done any theorizing?" the general asked worriedly.

"They have." The civilian chuckled sardonically. "They've decided we're trying for another Mars shot—a big one, this time."

The general exhaled sharply. "That's too close for comfort. How do they figure?"

"They figure we're amassing material at Moonbase One. They figure we intend to build the ship there, with the loads of stuff that we're sending up in the rockets."

"*What?*" General Layton opened his mouth, then closed it. Then he began to laugh.

The civilian joined him.

Donna Tedesco pushed the papers across Brian Taggart's desk. "Check them yourself, Brian. I've

gone over them six ways from Septuagesima, and I still can't see any other answer."

Taggert frowned at the papers and tapped them with a thoughtful finger, but he didn't pick them up. "I'll take your word for it, Donna. At least for right now. If we get completely balled up, we'll go over them together."

"If you ask me, we've already completely balled up."

"You think it's that bad?"

She looked at him pleadingly. "Can you think of any other explanation?"

"Not just yet," Brian Taggert admitted.

"Nor can I. There it is. Every single one of his valid predictions, every single one of his precognitive intuitions—*without exception*—has been based on the actions of human beings. He can predict stock market fluctuations, and family squabbles, and South American election results. His disaster predictions, every one of them, were due to *human* error, *human* failure—not Acts of God. He failed to predict the earthquake in Los Angeles; he missed the flood in the Yangtze Valley; he knew nothing of the eruption of Stromboli. All of these were disasters that took human lives in the past three weeks, and he missed every one of them. And yet, he managed to get nearly every major ship, airplane, and even automobile accident connected with his subjects.

"Seven of his subjects had relatives or friends who were hurt or killed in the earthquake-flood-eruption sequence, but he didn't see them. Yet he could pick up such small things as a nephew of one of the men getting a bad scald on his arm.

"In the face of that, how can we rely on his one prediction about a meteor striking Moonbase One?"

Taggert rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. "I don't know," he said slowly. "There must be a connection somehow."

"Oh, Brian, Brian!" Her eyes were glistening with as yet unshed tears. "I've never seen you go off on a wild tangent like this before! On the word of an old fraud like Forsythe, a man who lies about half the time, you talk the Administration into sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into the biggest space lift in history!

"Oh, sure; I know. The old fraud is convinced he was telling the truth. But were you tapping his mind when the prediction flash came? No! Was anyone? No! And he's perfectly capable of lying to himself, and you know it!

"And what will happen if it doesn't come off? We're past the first deadline already. If that meteor doesn't hit within the next twenty-eight days, the Society will be right back where it was ten years ago! Or worse!

"And all because you trusted the word of Mr. Phony-Doctor Forsythe!"

"Donna," Taggert said softly, "do you really think I'm that big a fool?" He handed her a handkerchief.

"N-no," she answered, wiping at her eyes. "Of c-course I don't. It's just that it makes me so d-darn *mad* to see everything go wrong like this."

"Nothing's gone wrong yet. I suggest you go take a good look at Forsythe's mind again and really try to understand the old boy. Maybe you'll get more of the fine-grain structure of it if you'll try for more understanding."

"What do you mean?" she asked, sniffing.

"Look. Forsythe has made his living being a fraud, right? And yet he sent out those warning *free*—and anonymously. He had no thought of any reward or recompense, you know that. Why? Because he is basically a kind, decent human being. He wanted to do all he could to stop any injury or loss of life.

"Why, then, would he send out a fraudulent warning? He wouldn't. He didn't. Every one of those warnings—including the last one—was sent out because he *knew* that something was going to happen.

"Evidently, once he gets a flash about a certain event, he can't get any more data on that particular area of the future, or we could get more data on the Moonbase accident. I think, if we can boost his basic understanding up past the critical point, we'll have a man with controlled prescience, and we need that man.

"But, Donna, the only way we're ever going to do that—the only way we'll ever whip this problem—is for you to increase *your* understanding of *him*."

"You're past the critical point—way past it—in *general* understanding. But you've got to keep an eye on the little specific instances, too."

She nodded contritely. "I know. I'm sorry. Sometimes a person can get too near a problem." She smiled. "Thanks for the new perspective, Brian. I'll go back to work and see if I can't look at it a little more clearly."

In the White House, Senator Mikhail Kerotski was facing two men—James Bandeau, the Secretary of Space, and the President of the United States.

"Mr. President," he said evenly, "I've known you for a long time. I haven't failed you yet."

"I know that, Mike," the President said smoothly. "Neither has your Society, as far as I know. It's still difficult for me to believe that they get their information the way you say they do, but you've never lied to me about anything so far, so I take your word for it. Your Society is the most efficient espionage and counterespionage group in history, as far as I know. But this is different."

"Damned right it's different!" snapped Secretary Bandeau. "Your own Society, senator, admits that we've stirred the Soviets up with this space lift thing. They've got ships of their own going out there now. According to reports from Space Force intelligence, Chinese Moon cars have been prowling around Moonbase One, trying to find out what's going on."

"More than that," added the President, "they've sneaked a small group aboard the old *Lunik IX* to see what they can see from up there."

Secretary Bandeau jerked his head around to look at the President. "The old circumlunar satellite? Where did you hear that?"

The President smiled wanly. "From the S.M.M.R.'s report." He looked at Kerotski. "I doubt that it will do them any good. I don't think they'll be able to see anything now."

"Not unless they've figured out some way to combine X rays with radar," the senator said. "And I'm quite sure they haven't."

"Senator," said the Secretary of Space, "a lot of money has been spent and a lot of risks have been taken, just on your say-so. I—"

"Now, just a minute, Jim," said the President flatly. "Let's not go off half-cocked. It wasn't done on Mike's say-so; it was done on mine. I signed the order because I believed it was the proper, if not the *only* thing to do." Then he looked at the senator. "But this is the last day, Mike. Nothing has happened."

"Now, I'm not blaming you. I didn't call you up here to do that. And I think we can quit worrying about explaining away the money angle. But we're going to have to explain *why* we did it, Mike. And I can't tell the truth."

"I'll say you can't!" Bandeau exploded. "That would look great, wouldn't it? I can see the headlines now: *'Fortuneteller Gave Me Advice,' President Says. Brother!*"

"Jim," the President said coldly, "I said to let me handle this."

"What you want, then, Mr. President," Kerotski put in smoothly, "is for me to help you concoct a good cover story."

"That's about it, Mike," the President admitted.

Kerotski shook his head slowly. "It won't be necessary."

Bandeau looked as though he were going to explode, but a glance from the President silenced him.

"Go on, Mike," he said to the senator.

"Mr. President, I know it looks bad. It's going to look even worse for a while. But, let me ask you one question. How is the Ch'ien space drive coming along?"

"Why ... fine. It checked out months ago. The new ship is on her shakedown cruise now. You know that."

"Right. Now, ask yourself one more question: What is the purpose of Moonbase One?"

"Why, to—"

The telephone rang.

The President scooped it up with one hand. "Yes?"

Then he listened for a long minute, his expression changing slowly.

"Yes," he said at last. "Yes, I got it. No; I'll release it to the newsmen. All right. Fine." He hung up.

"Twelve minutes ago," he said slowly, "the old *Lunik IX* smashed into Moonbase One and blew it to smithereens. The Soviets say that a meteor hit *Lunik IX* at just the right angle to slow it down enough to make it hit the base. They send their condolences."

Brian Taggart lay back on the couch in his office and folded his hands complacently on his abdomen. "So Donna's theory held water and so did mine. The accident was due to human

intervention. Forsythe saw something from space hitting Moonbase One and assumed it was a meteor. He never dreamed the Soviets would drop old *Lunik IX* on it."

Senator Kerotski carefully lit a cigar. "There's going to be an awful lot of fuss in the papers, but the President is going to announce that he accepts the Soviet story. I convinced him that it is best to let the Soviets think they're a long way ahead of us in the space race now. There's nothing like a little complacency to slow someone down."

"How'd you convince him?"

"Asked the same question you asked me. Now that we have the Ch'ien space drive, what purpose does a moon base serve? None at all, of course."

Donna Tadesco leaned forward in her chair. "Did you happen to notice the sequence of events, senator? We were warned that the base would be struck. We decided to abandon it. We organized the biggest space lift in history to evacuate the men and the most valuable instruments. But the Soviets thought we were sending equipment *up* instead of bringing it *down*. They didn't know what we were up to, but they decided to put a stop to it, so they dropped an abandoned space satellite on it.

"If we hadn't decided to evacuate the base, it would never have happened.

"*That* is human intervention with a vengeance. We still don't know whether or not Forsythe's predictions will ever do us any good or not. Every time we've taken steps to avoid one of his prophesied catastrophes, we've done the very thing that brought them about."

The senator puffed his cigar in thoughtful silence.

"We'll just have to keep working with him," Taggert said. "Maybe we'll eventually make sense out of this precognition thing.

"At least we've got what we wanted. The Soviets think they've put us back ten years; they figure they've got more time, now, to get their own program a long ways ahead.

"When they do get to Mars and Venus and the planets of Alpha Centauri and Sirius and Procyon, they'll find us there, waiting for them."

Senator Kerotski chuckled softly. "You're a pretty good prophet, yourself, Brian. The only difference between you and Forsythe is that he's right half the time.

"You're right *all* the time."

"No," said Taggert. "Not all the time. Only when it's important."

THE END

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