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IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T ...

By JOHN BRUDY



ILLUSTRATOR VARGA

To Amos Jordan, Secretary for Cislunar Navigation, no situation was unsolvable. There were rules for everything, weren't there.... Except maybe this thing ...

"What's the matter, anyway?" Amos Jordan snapped at his assistant. "Is everyone in the Senate losing their mind?"

"No more than usual," said Clements, the undersecretary. "It's just a matter of sentiment."

"Sentiment?" Jordan poured himself a glass of lemonade. "What's sentiment got to do with it? It's just a standard procedural problem."

"Well, not exactly," began Clements soothingly. "After all, now, '58 Beta was the first long-lived satellite ever launched, and the first successful shot of the old Vanguard series. People are proud of it. It's a sort of monument to our early efforts in astronautics."

Jordan sipped experimentally, adding a little sugar.

"But, Clem, the sky's full of the things," he complained. "There must be a hundred fifty of them in orbit right now. They're a menace to navigation. If this one's due to fall out, I say good riddance."

Clements spread his hands helplessly.

"I agree, chief. But, believe me, a lot of people have made up their minds about this thing. Some want to let it burn up. Some want to retrieve it and stash it in a museum. Either way it's a decision we're not going to reach in this office."

Jordan tossed down the rest of his lemonade.

"I'd like to know why not," he snapped, almost bristling.

"Well, frankly this thing is moving pretty fast." Clements fished a facsimile sheet out of his jacket pocket. "Everybody's getting into the act." He handed the sheet across the desk. "Read this; it'll bring you up to date."

Jordan stared at the sheet.

"*Senate Committee Probes Beta*," ran the lead, followed by,

"The Senate Advisory Committee for Astronautics began hearing testimony this morning in an effort to determine the fate of satellite '58 Beta. Mr. Claude Wamboldt, leader of the CCSB (Citizens' Committee to Save Beta), testified that the cost of retrieving Beta from orbit would be trivial compared to its value as an object of precious historical significance. He suggested the Smithsonian Institution as an appropriate site for the exhibit. At the same time the incumbent Senator from Mr. Wamboldt's district filed a bill in the Senate which would add a complete wing to the Smithsonian to house this satellite and other similar historic objects. In later testimony Mr. Orville Larkin, leader of the unnamed committee representing those in opposition to the CCSB stated that his group felt that to snatch Beta from orbit at this moment of its greatest glory would be contrary to natural law and that he and his supporters would never concede to any plan to save it."

Jordan raised his head and stared over the fax sheet at Clements. "Am I going out of my mind, or did this really happen?"

"It sure did ... and is," said Clements. "Later on, I am told, Wamboldt threw a chair at Larkin, and the committee recessed after declaring both men in contempt."

Jordan shook his head.

"Why didn't somebody tell me about this?"

"I sent you a ten page memo about it last week," objected Clements, somewhat aggrieved. "Gave you the whole story with extrapolations."

"Memo! You know I never read memos! I ought to fire you ... I would if I could ... you ... you 'appointee.'"

Clements shook his head warningly. "Better not, chief. You'll need me for the briefing."

"Briefing? What briefing?"

"*The* briefing. You're scheduled to testify before the committee tomorrow afternoon at three."

Senator Darius: Mr. Jordan, will you please state whether or not there is a satellite body known as '58 Beta?

Mr. Jordan: Yes, sir, there is.

Senator D: Will you describe its present orbit?

Mr. J: I'd be glad to, Senator. It now has a perigee slightly below 110 miles and an apogee of about 400 miles. The last perigee occurred 400 miles last of the Seychelles Islands about 35 minutes ago. Roughly its present position is about 250 miles above Manus Island.

Senator D: When do you expect it to enter the atmosphere for the final plunge to its death?

Mr. J: (bridling) Well, Senator, we in the Secretariat don't usually refer to such an occurrence in exactly those terms. It's really just a problem in celestial mechanics to us, and ...

Senator D: (glaring) Your administrative assistant testified a few moments ago, sir, that '58 Beta has had a life of 185 years. Will you kindly explain to the committee how anything which has had a life can end in anything but death?

Mr. J: I ... uh ... I believe I appreciate your point of view, Senator. '58 Beta experiences a very steep re-entry at each perigee. According to our computers it will disintegrate on the 82nd or 83rd revolution following that of 2:48 Greenwich crossing this afternoon.

Senator D: Tell us, Mr. Jordan ... how many revolutions about the Mother Planet has '58 Beta made since its launching?

Mr. J: (hastily working his slide rule) Upwards of eight hundred thousand, I should say. I can provide you with an exact figure if you wish.

Senator D: That won't be necessary, Mr. Jordan. Eight hundred thousand, give or take a few paltry thousand, is close enough. Eight hundred thousand endless, lonely revolutions about an unthinking, uncaring, ungrateful world is quite enough. Quite enough, Mr. Jordan. Now sir; (squinting over his glasses) what do you think is the proper action to be taken in the matter of retrieving this historic satellite from its orbit so that it may be preserved as a living memorial to the gallant efforts of those early pioneers ... those brave and intrepid men of Cape Canaveral ... to stand forevermore as a beacon and a challenge to our school children, to our students, our aspirants for candidacy to the Space Academy and to our citizens for all time to come?

Mr. J: Nothing, Senator.

Senator D: (aghast) Am I to understand, Mr. Jordan, that you are suggesting that this symbol, this quintessence of an historic and magnificent era in mankind's history ... this unique and precious object ... should be allowed to destroy itself and be lost forever?

Mr. J: (squirming) Senator, there are dozens of those things up there. Every year one or two burns up. They have no usefulness. They're a menace to navigation. I ...

Senator D: (interrupting loudly) Mr. Jordan, what was the date of your appointment to your present position?

Mr. J: April 11, 2138.

Senator D: Do you consider yourself fully qualified to hold this august position?

Mr. J: (tight lipped) Senator, I am a graduate of the Administrative Academy, the Logistics Staff School, and I have 31 years seniority in my department. Furthermore ...

Senator D: (banging his gavel) Mr. Jordan, please! Try to remember where you are! We had enough trouble yesterday with witnesses before this committee. There will be no more of it. And Mr. Jordan, while it may be true that your technical qualifications for serving in your present position may be adequate, it is clear to me and, I am sure, apparent to other members of this committee that your feeling for history and the relation of this problem to the destiny of the human race leave much to be desired. And, Mr. Jordan, may I emphasize ... *these* are the things that count in the long, long haul!

Jordan sat limply at his desk, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. "It's unbelievable," he muttered dully. "Where did this man Darius come from?"

"It doesn't matter much," Clements answered unsympathetically. "It's where he is now that counts."

Jordan shook his head.

"There has to be a way out. A clean, quick way out."

After a moment's thought Clements said, "Isn't there a regulation about orbital debris?"

Jordan nodded dully. "Someplace. Number 710.1, I think. Hasn't been invoked in years. Once they stopped using chemical fuels, we stopped having wrecks."

"Still," Clements went on more eagerly, "Beta's really a piece of debris, isn't it? It's not working or transmitting or whatever it was supposed to do, is it?"

"No." Jordan shrugged impatiently. "But, good grief, this thing isn't debris. Debris is ... is big *chunks* of things; broken up space stations, or ... or nuclear engines and things like that."

"Hell, no, chief," yelled Clements, jumping to his feet. "This is debris, pure and simple. That's your answer!"

Jordan's eyes slowly brightened.

"Clem, maybe you're right. Regulation 710.1 says that any orbital debris constituting a demonstrable menace to navigation may be destroyed at the discretion of this office." He brushed his hands together with finality. "That should do it."

Suddenly Clements' enthusiasm degenerated to a faint smile.

"I've just got to wondering, chief. Do we dare go right ahead with this?"

Amos Jordan's eyes took on a piercing glitter of command.

"This is our job, Clements. We should have done it long ago. Get Statistical and have them find out how much boogie time is consumed in plugging that silly thing into every takeoff problem. Multiply that by all the launch stations. Convert it into man-hours per year and make that into a dollar figure. That always scares the wits out a Congressman. They'll knuckle under...."

He paused and cocked an ear toward the door. A faint hubbub was now percolating through from the receptionist's lobby. It grew louder. Suddenly the door opened, letting in a roaring babble, as Geraldine ... the usually poker-faced secretary ... leaped through and slammed it shut again. Her eyes, behind their thick lenses, were round and a little wild.

"It's General Criswell and Admiral Flack," she panted. "They insist on seeing you." She gasped for breath and added, as though she could not quite believe her own words, "And ... and ... oh, Mr. Jordan; they're *quarreling!*"

Jordan said, "Quarreling? Two staff men quarreling?" He looked uncertainly at Clements. "I thought there was a regulation against that?"

Clements gave a palms up shrug.

"Well, there is," snapped Jordan. "Has something to do with interservice unity or something ... been on the books for years. Send them in, Gerry."

Tentatively she opened the door and almost had time to gesture before being bowled over by the visitors.

Admiral Flack had the advantage of volume, and Jordan got his message first.

"Jordan," he roared in true bullhorn style, "I want to make one thing clear! '58 Beta was Navy through and through! Start to finish! She's got salt water on her, and she's going to be pulled out of orbit and that's that!"

"Navy through and through, hell!" sneered General Criswell. "A fine botch you made of it, too! How many times did you try before you slung that thing up there? How many goofs were there afterward? The Dodgers are in last place, and they've got five pitchers who could have done it without warming up."

"Watch your mouth, Criswell," advised Admiral Flack, tightlipped. "There's considerable tonnage of Air Force hardware under water, too. Maybe the Russians beat us, and maybe von Braun got lucky, but *ours* is *still there*, Mac! Just remember that!"

"You people have fetishes," stormed the General. "You even keep Admirals' hats and hang them on pegs. Who wants your hat, you pack rat? Where would we ever keep all the junk you people want to save?" He shuddered. "Good God! Hats!"

"That's ... just ... about ... all ... I'm ... going ... to ... take," Admiral Flack said, spelling out the entire sentence. He stared furiously at the General. "Don't think we don't know that once '58 Beta is down it'll be your precious damned '61 Epsilon that's in the oldest orbit. I'll bet you fly boys will break your silly backs trying to recover that one when its time comes."

Jordan pounded his desk. "Gentlemen, shut up!"

Appalled by this exhibition of low level civilian effrontery, they both did so without really meaning to.

"Gentlemen," Jordan announced firmly in the almost uncanny silence, "the entire problem is solved as of now. '58 Beta constitutes a demonstrable menace to navigation. Under the authority vested in this office I will issue instructions to have it picked up by a salvage ship tomorrow. Once it's brought down you may claim it if you like and do with it what you please."

Admiral Flack shot a look of pure triumph at General Criswell. The General, however, was not paying attention. He was looking, almost with an expression of pity, at Amos Jordan.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Jordan," he said slowly, "that you don't fully realize the implications of such an act at this time. It may be within your jurisdiction to salvage and all that, but I believe that the decision *whether* to salvage now rests with the legislature. I would hesitate to act without securing high ... *very high* concurrence in this matter."

Flack erupted.

"Criswell, you're an idiot! A chicken hearted idiot! On top of that you haven't any business telling Jordan ... ah, *Mr. Jordan* what he can and can't do."

Criswell glared icily at Flack.

"A mere suggestion," he gritted and stalked out.

Admiral Flack paused and bestowed a warm smile upon Amos Jordan before hurrying out the door after the General. As the door closed Jordan heard the contest break out afresh in the lobby.

That was only the beginning. The general population, eager for a silly season diversion, chose sides with religious fervor. Congress went into emergency session. Newspapers drew their lines and fought ferociously. Student riots began on the second day and sympathy strikes on the third.

On the fourth Jordan got the big news break first, for a change. With growing caution he had been holding the situation unaided by the simple expedient of refusing to issue a salvage permit without which '58 Beta could not be touched. Clements brought the news at midnight, interrupting a tempestuous press conference.

He managed to get Jordan out of the milling lobby and into the office. "We've got trouble, chief," he began. "Ascension reports Beta out of orbit."

Jordan stared incredulously.

"Perturbed that badly already? Maybe something's wrong with their computers."

"Not perturbed, chief. Gone. It's just not there any more. It's been picked up ... no doubt about it."

Jordan's face purpled.

"I want a complete ground tracking report on that pebble for the last three revolutions. Fast!"

"I doubt if we can get it," said Clements dubiously. "Woomera only checks it occasionally to train radar operators. Perigee was south of Singapore on the last two passes, but so low I doubt if they got any clear sightings. It would be a waste of time."

Jordan wrung his hands. "You have something better?"

Clements sat for a minute with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Do we know anyone who can make Navy Operations toe the mark?"

"Of course. Why?"

Clements tapped his finger-tips together.

"Wouldn't it be interesting to filter the mission reports of all Navy ships that have been outside the atmosphere in, oh, say the last thirty-six hours?"

Jordan's eyes lit up like twin afterburners.

"They'll have it hidden like the British crown jewels, but...." He grabbed the phone. "Gerry? Have General Criswell paged and ask him to come to my office if possible." He chuckled triumphantly. "Criswell's on the Joint Security Service Board ... what an exercise for that gumshoe outfit!"

It took three hours for General Criswell's ferrets to obtain facsimiles of the reports needed. A sweating staff (borrowed from the cryptographic section to preserve secrecy) finally broke them down to three probables: a Lunar courier which had aborted and returned to base for no clean cut reason, an alleged training exercise in three body orbits with the instructors' seats inexplicably filled with nothing lower than the rank of Lieut. Commander and a sour smelling sortie out of Guantanamo labeled *Operation Artifact*.

Jordan remained sold on the latter for half an hour until fuel consumption and flight time log figures failed to correlate with an orbital flight, and the bottom fell out of the case. As it turned

out it was the courier after all. Both the pilot and his commander refused to talk until presented with the alternative of court-martial proceedings.

Senator Darius: Now, Admiral, I'm going to put the question to you this way, just to see if I can get a straight answer. Did you or did you not issue orders to Lunar Courier G771 specifying *in general substance* that it was to retrieve satellite '58 Beta?

Admiral Flack: (hurt but proud) The Navy, sir, has a long record of gallantry, a tradition of derring do dating back to John Paul Jones ... a tradition we are all proud of and which we continue and will always continue....

Senator D: (with acid patience) Again, if I may put the question, Admiral. Did you or did you not issue the order?

Admiral F: (defiantly) '58 Beta is Navy property, sir! I am glad and proud to say that I issued the order to retrieve her.

Senator D: Aha! (to the recording secretary) Did you get that? And now, Admiral, will you explain to this committee why this action, in view of the exigencies of the present situation, didn't strike you as singularly high handed, not to say out of your jurisdiction?

Admiral F: (after a whispered consultation with an aide) Well, sir, there is a precedent. May I recall to your attention an incident recorded in Navy history about eighty years ago. An officer of flag rank, if my memory holds, in defiance of instructions and in a damaged ship, at great danger to himself and his crew, acting on an operational plan which had been scathingly disapproved by his superiors, went to the rescue ... the successful rescue ... of a three-man Lunar exploration party which had become lost near the south scarp of Sinus Iridum. The officer's name, I am almost certain, was Captain Steven Darius ... the Senator's grandfather, I believe ... an officer the Navy will never cease to honor.

Senator D: (shuffling papers, clearing throat, wiping glasses) Well, ah, yes Admiral ... I do recall something along those lines. Of course, this is different ... altogether different. But at the same time, sir, a most interesting parallel. The ... ah ... the committee will recess until two o'clock. You are excused, Admiral. And ... oh, yes ... if you're free, sir ... possibly you might join me at lunch?

"If I were you, chief," said Clements soothingly, "I would just stop worrying about your jurisdiction in this thing. Beta's out of orbit, and we no longer have a problem. How nice can things be?"

Jordan gritted his teeth and wadded up paper with an odd gesture, as though his fingers were encircling someone's neck.

"You will be sorry you said that," he said peevishly. "Whatever happens I'm going to assign it to you for action while I sit on the bench and cheer." He rang for Gerry. "What's happening now ... I haven't been out of here in three hours."

Clements stretched out on the Vibrolounge and turned it on.

"The president," he began, as the machine went to work, "has called an arbitration meeting. Everyone's in on it ... Darius, Flack, Criswell, Wamboldt, Larkin and the Lord knows who else. They are supposed to come to some sort of agreement as to what's to be done. The minutes of the meeting are expected to take the form of a recommendation to congress for action. By way of the Advisory Committee for Astronautics with Darius introducing the motion, of course."

"Of course," echoed Jordan. "Who else could?"

The door opened, and the huge glasses of Gerry peered in.

"Yes, chief?"

"Get on your telephone and finagle a way to route the first press release from this big arbitration meeting direct to my DeskFax. Can do?"

Gerry nodded.

"No sweat, boss," she said and backed out.

"Now," said Jordan, returning to Clements, "you can get your overweight carcass out of my chair and let me into it. Sit on the hot seat for a while. I'll relax and you read the news when it comes in. It'll be your bad luck, not mine."

The facsimile machine gave a little chug and began unwinding a pale green, endless sheet. Clements began to read from it.

"In an unprecedented session at the White House today the President revealed that a unanimous decision had been reached regarding the fate of '58 Beta will be placed in the the congress for action it was recommended that a solid copy of the historic satellite, complete with meteor pits, be made and placed in a special display in the Smithsonian Institution. The original itself, '58 Beta will be placed in the third stage payload compartment of the Smithsonian's Vanguard

missile and ... in an historic re-enactment of the first launch ... will be injected into permanent orbit about the Earth."

There was a loud snap as Jordan turned off the Vibrolounge. In a single, convulsive movement he was on his feet and around the desk.

"Get out of my chair," he yelled at Clements. "Let me at that phone! Get Gerry in here! Get Flack on the telephone ... try to catch him at the White House if you can! And get Administration to send over some forms!"

Clements started for the other phone ... then stopped and stared at Jordan.

"Forms?" he repeated slowly. "What kind of forms?"

Jordan's answer rattled the windows.

"Resignation forms, you idiot!"

General Criswell walked briskly to the front of the conference room. He took chalk in one hand and pointer in the other. He rapped sharply on the desk with the pointer and sent a keen, Air Force type glance over his assembled staff.

"Gentlemen, by direction of Congress and under orders issued by the Secretary of Defense the Air Force has been assigned the mission of relaunching satellite '58 Beta. The launching vehicle will be either the Smithsonian exhibit Vanguard or a duplicate if the old one proves to be structurally unsuitable.

"To help you understand the magnitude of the problem involved and, of course, to give you guidelines for additional staffing, I will review for you the major techniques utilized in the original Vanguard launchings. I have had copies of the 1958 launch documentary films printed for each department. They represent excellent source material for your planning sessions.

"Now, gentlemen ... the original Vanguard was the classic example of what we now call, somewhat facetiously I'm afraid, the hybrid propulsion system. It utilized chemical fuels throughout ... liquid oxygen and kerosene in the first stage, fuming nitric acid and unsymmetrical dimethyl-hydrazine in the second stage and an unknown form of solid propellant in the third stage."

A buzz of nervous comment ran through the assembled officers, and sitting in the back row, Jordan felt his blood run cold. Where, he wondered in a sort of dreadful daze, would they even find a crew to work on this project. No sane Launch Monitor he had ever known would even go near such a bomb, much less work on it.

The General rambled on.

"Now the guidance system, gentlemen, may at first strike you as rather incredible. However, it worked remarkably well in the original, and there seems no reason to suppose we cannot force it to repeat. I foresee some difficulty in finding manufacturers whose shop practices are flexible enough ... or sloppy enough, if you prefer ... to turn out a piece of mechanical gear to such low tolerances. However, we will ask for bids and award to the lowest; that should do it. It always has in the past at any rate." He paused to allow the chuckles to subside.

Jordan crept quietly out and headed for his office.

Clements was busy supervising the placement of two new file cabinets. When he saw Jordan's face, he turned directly to his desk, poured a lemonade and handed it to his chief. Jordan took the glass, paused thoughtfully, opened a drawer and added a couple shots of gin.

Clements raised his eyebrows encouragingly, but Jordan simply drank and shook his head dully.

"Horrible," he said. "Horrible, horrible."

He turned and walked slowly back to the conference.

By this time General Criswell had a film showing in progress.

"This, gentlemen," he was saying, "was the famous launch attempt of December sixth, 1957."

Jordan had never seen the film, and he watched in fascination as the launch crew scurried about their duties. Propellants and explosives people appeared, waddling in grotesque acid suits. Liquid oxygen boil off made a hazy lake in which men walked with apparent unconcern.

Then, from a fixed and apparently unattended camera came a steady, portentous view of the rocket ... sleek and so incredibly slim that Jordan wondered why on Earth it didn't simply topple over and be done with it.

The sound track came to life with sudden, brassy violence. Someone was counting backward.

When he reached zero, the first stage engine burst into life, the rocket lifted off its platform, slowed, began to tilt slowly to one side and settled back into the stand. No, it kept right on going through the stand. The rear section began to crumple. Then there was a horrible burst of flame which engulfed the lower part of the rocket and then, with perfectly savage violence, erupted in great billowing bursts of fire until only the extreme tip of the missile was visible. The conical top of the first stage fell off and disappeared into the inferno rather like an ice cream cone falling into the sun. The film stopped at this point.

"That," said General Criswell matter-of-factly, "was the end of the first launch attempt. You will note, gentlemen, that not only was the vehicle structurally weak, but it also burned well, once ignited. These two points, I dare say, will exercise considerable influence over our handling of this project."

Jordan, sick to his stomach, got up again and left the conference, this time for good.

Once begun the program proceeded feverishly. A corps of designers rooted through every available shred of data: microfilm, old blueprints and ancient engineering notes from files so old that no one knew why they still existed. Films, recorded data, technical histories and newspaper reports ... nothing was spared.

Slowly at first and then with almost magical speed, the ancient Vanguard came to life. Her structure took shape. Her tankage and guidance were reproduced. Like long atrophied nerves and muscles her controls and electrical system once more hummed with power. Her engines were duplicated and tested (though not without an explosion or two), and her gyros were run in (by shuddering engineers who were accustomed to hitting Marsport on the nose with a box half the size). And tiny Beta, her wee antennas and Hoffman solar cells carefully fitted into place, now had a twin sister enshrined in the Smithsonian Institution.

Jordan reflected that it was a solution bordering on genius even though he was forced to admit that Senator Darius was its foremost architect. His feeling for the old coyote was still something less than brotherly, though forced association had revealed unsuspected and valuable negotiative skills.

One morning several weeks later Jordan sat before his desk which was piled high with unanswered correspondence. He drank lemonade and glared across at Clements whose desk was piled even higher.

"I told you this was going to be your baby," Jordan said, "but I guess I can't make it stick. There's too much of this stuff." He waved at the stacks of paper. "Where does all this junk come from?"

Clements picked up a letter at random.

"This one," he said, "is from the Dupont Chemical Corp. They want us to send them the quality control specification for the hydrazine that was used as fuel in the first launch. They say they can't proceed till they have it."

He tossed the letter aside and picked up another. "Here's a purchase request for four hundred yards of sailcloth. Now what the hell do you suppose they want sailcloth for?"

"Maybe it's for another project," said Jordan, cramming half a doughnut into his mouth. "I found one yesterday for hypodermic needles. On top of that it wasn't signed."

"That figures," said Clements tossing the letter aside and picking up another. "Now, how's this ... good grief! The Ancient Order of Hibernians, if you please, formally requests that ... since '58 Beta was launched on St. Patrick's day ... to do otherwise with this launch would be unthinkable, sacrilegious, treasonable, etc, etc."

Jordan froze in his chair.

"That's the one!" His voice sounded faintly strangled. "That's the one that'll kill us, right there! I have a feeling for these things. How long till St. Patrick's day?"

Clements looked at his desk calendar. "Three weeks."

Jordan's eyes rolled upward. "We're dead!" he said, buzzing for Gerry. "Dead as mackerel."

Gerry answered, and Jordan asked for General Criswell.

A fine seabreeze was whipping ashore at Canaveral Space Port; not strong enough to be a nuisance, but strong enough to blow Senator Darius' emerald green tie persistently around behind his neck. He was still puffing a little from his climb up the steps to the balcony on top of the Space Control Center. As soon as he caught his breath he tugged at Jordan's elbow and said, "Mr. Jordan, I have the great honor to introduce to you Mr. Patrick McGuire, president of the

Ancient Order of Hibernians."

Jordan shook hands, noticing as he did so that Mr. McGuire was carrying something that closely resembled a hip flask. It had a bright green silk ribbon tied around the neck.

"It's a pleasure," he said. "What's in the bottle?"

Mr. McGuire laughed a rich bellow.

"That, me friend," he said in a brogue so carefully cultivated that Jordan winced almost visibly, "is a bottle o' wather from the River Shannon, fer the christening', b'dad 'n' bejabers."

"The christening?" Jordan echoed hollowly.

"Indade, the christenin' ... with the Senator's kind permission I'll now step down and officiate. One piddlin' smash at the nose of yonder rocket is all I ask. One smash and a Hail Mary, and she's off to Glory!"

"Jordan ..." began the Senator.

"Now, Senator ..." began Jordan.

But the bullhorn above them drowned out everything and effectively stalled the plans of the Hibernians by announcing in deafening syllables that everyone was to clear the launch area.

In the distance Jordan observed dozens of tiny figures scuttling from the gleaming Vanguard toward something that looked vaguely like a turtle but which he had heard was called a blockhouse.

"I think," he said in unutterable relief, "that we're about ready to launch."

Jordan finally found Clements in the milling throng. They stood at the balcony rail staring fixedly at the Vanguard as the count progressed downward with what seemed dreadful slowness.

"How long *is* a second, anyway?" growled Jordan peevishly.

The countdown proceeded to minus twenty minutes ... minus fifteen minutes. Then came the quick announcement, "The count is T minus twelve minutes and holding."

"Twelve minutes and holding?" repeated Jordan jumpily. "What does that mean?"

"It means," answered Clements with just a touch of superiority, "that they have stopped the count at T minus twelve minutes because something is wrong. It will delay the launch."

Jordan wrung his hands fretfully.

"Something wrong? I never heard of such a thing. What could possibly go wrong?"

"Oh," ventured Clements, "I suppose there are a few things about this rocket that could fail to function under unusual circumstances." He snubbed out his cigarette. "After all, your watch stops sometimes, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes," Jordan admitted sourly, "but never at T minus twelve minutes."

After a short time the bullhorn shook the area with the news that the count had resumed. Jordan borrowed Clements' binoculars and stared fixedly at the abandoned Vanguard. Suddenly he started violently. "My God, Clem," he yelled, "it's on fire! There's smoke flying out right there in the middle. Look!"

Clements took a quick glance.

"Relax, chief," he said reassuringly. "It's oxygen coming from a vent. They can't seal the oxygen tank till just before launch, or it'll blow up."

"Oh, it can't blow up," quavered Jordan, going to pieces. "But it will. I feel it in my bones. It's going to blow up ... ker BOOM!"

Clements patted him on the back.

"Stop worrying, chief. It's going to work just fine. You wait and see."

Jordan shook his head in disbelief. "kerBOOM!" he said faintly.

The bullhorn announced T minus four minutes. To divert Jordan's attention Clements suggested that he watch the pilots of the photography ships who were about to board. With some difficulty Jordan focussed the instrument and observed the two pilots walk across the apron in front of the main operations building and climb into their small ships. A blue halo formed softly around the stern of each as they cut on the engines and brought them up to idle.

Then suddenly the count was a T minus ten seconds. 9 ... 8 ... 7 ... 6 Jordan thought he was going to faint ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 Zero!

There was a dazzling flash of igniting kerosene and lox which caused Jordan to jump into the air,

a terrible burst of smoke and dust and then an overwhelming, harsh shattering roar such as had not disturbed Canaveral Space Port in more than a hundred years.

Deafened Clements looked at Jordan; saw his lips form the word "kerBOOM."

But in spite of all the evidence to the contrary the Vanguard was off the launcher, balancing with unbelievable, rocklike steadiness on that flickering, fiery column. Slowly, almost painfully the thing rose, gathered speed, pitched slowly eastward and bored triumphantly into the sky. Beside it, a thousand yards to the north and south, sped the photo ships, their drive haloes still scarcely brighter than when idling on the ground. With cameras whirring they escorted '58 Beta into space for the second time.

There was considerable confusion, some hoarse cheering and a great deal of milling around. Clements got a grip on Jordan and steered him to the AstroBar where two quick ones put him back together again.

"Now, what we should do," Clements suggested, "is to go down to the trajectory section and find out the latest word on the launch analysis."

Jordan hiccupped.

"Why?" he said, a little belligerently. "What's to analyze? We got it launched, didn't we? What more d'they want? Besides, I like it here."

Forty five minutes later the reports clattered in from Cairo and Woomera. In the Port Commander's private briefing room a young woman brought a sheaf of papers to the Commander. He began to read aloud. The audience leaned forward in strained attention.

"Preliminary flash report on the re-launch of satellite '58 Beta. The launch phase was eminently successful. The hold at T minus twelve minutes was not due to any malfunction in the missile itself, but rather to a disorder of another kind ... the engineer who was functioning as Launch Monitor had fainted in the blockhouse. The count was picked up under the direction of the Assistant Launch Monitor. After launch the three stages of the rocket separated properly, and injection into orbit occurred at the predicted altitude."

He paused and shuffled the papers.

"Now I have here," he continued, dropping a sheet and picking it up, "the description of the orbit now occupied by '58 Beta. We have a perigee of six hundred twenty five miles and an apogee of twenty nine hundred miles, and ... oh, my word; this *is* a tough break! Well, gentlemen, we can't win 'em all. As you know, we had hoped for a permanent orbit. However, according to our computers, while '58 Beta is now in an orbit, it is a degenerative one. She will unfortunately suffer a progressive perigee drop on each revolution and after three hundred forty eight years, seven months and approximately nineteen or twenty days she will re-enter the atmosphere and burn up. I am heartily sorry, gentlemen."

They returned to the AstroBar, and Clements began trying to catch up with Jordan.

"You know," said Jordan, his head wobbling a little with the emphasis he put into the words, "this is the damndest farce in the history of the world."

"You're absolutely right, chief," agreed Clements, taking another slug. "And what are we going to do about it?"

Over his empty glass Jordan gave Clements a slow, confidential wink. Then he fished some papers out of his pocket. He folded them carefully and slipped them into an envelope. Meticulously drying a spot on the bar with his coatsleeve he put down the envelope and began writing on it. Finally he finished. Sealing it he waved it in the air in front of Clements.

"These," he said solemnly "are the resignation forms you got for me that day. Do you remember those resignation forms, Clements, you old appointee, you?"

Clements set his glass down indignantly.

"Certainly I remember, old chiefie. I remember because I got a set for myself while I was at it."

"Well, good for you, old appointee. Now, you take this envelope, and when we get back to Washington you put it in the office archives file, O.K.? Safest place this side of Fort Knox."

"Depend on me, chief," he said, taking the envelope and reading the instructions Jordan had written.

To be held for the use of the Undersecretary for Cislunar Navigation incumbent in the year 2492.

"Good idea," said Clements. "Let's drink to the jerk ... O.K.?"

Memo: 92 8574 27 October 2492

From: Secretary for Cislunar Navigation

To: Undersecretary

The oldest item in the archives file was opened today. We are not certain that it does not constitute some sort of barbaric practical joke. Note that the forms involved have been superseded several dozen times over since they were originally printed. Investigate and report.

Memo: 92 1751 29 October 2492

From: Undersecretary for Cislunar Navigation

To: Secretary

Due to excessive demands for time caused by the present Congressional furor regarding our department and its rights and duties concerning debris collection and disposal we have been unable to act on your memo 92 8574. Present priority weighting indicates that the earliest compliance date will be late in December. Please denote concurrence.

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