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Lights Out

by Thomas Canfield

“And how many are there, Boots, can you tell me?”

Boots turned a quizzical look at Professor Hatcher. His pale grey eyes were dreamy, flecked with traces of an even paler green. They were the eyes of someone not wholly engaged, not entirely committed to this world. Boots was thin, had knobby wrists and hands, his nails bitten to the quick. Lank, dirty brown hair spilled untidily over his ears and collar. His Adams apple stood out prominently. But for his eyes, no one would have glanced twice at Boots.

“I’m sure that you know. In fact, I’m told that you’re something of an authority.”

Boots ducked a quick look over at his uncle, Fritz. He hitched one shoulder in a gesture that perhaps signified embarrassment or perhaps discomfort. “Sixty-three,” he said. He was looking down, away from Professor Hatcher when he said spoke and his words sounded sullen, almost cross.

“That’s very good, Boots.” Hatcher smiled and, gave Boots a brief nod of encouragement. “Jupiter has sixty-three moons. There are not many people who know that.” Hatcher examined the scale model of the planet Jupiter, the size of a beach ball, that rested on the table. It was composed of papier-mâché over a wire frame, painstakingly crafted, and accurate in every detail.

Attached to it, in a three dimensional representation of the Jovian system, were sixty-three marbles: the moons of Jupiter. Hatcher gave a minute shake of his head and the corners of his mouth turned downwards.

“Well, carry on, Boots. I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I only wanted to admire your handiwork.”

Hatcher walked over to the table where Boots’s uncle was sitting, settled into an armchair. He ran his fingers through his hair and, sighed.

“I don’t know, Fritz. I don’t know what to tell you.” He glanced at Boots adjusting the ‘moons’ in various configurations, completely oblivious to anything, or anyone, else. “You say that you’ve verified this absolutely: the positions chosen by Boots to represent the Jovian moons

correspond to the actual physical disposition of the moons at any given point in time?"

"More than simply correspond." Fritz Brownmuller drummed the table with the fingers of one hand. "I went to the source, I went to NASA, and after a lot of persuasion they came through with the data. I didn't tell them about Boots of course, or anything about him. I don't need the grief. But when I checked their coordinates against those Boots has devised, they're the same. Not in a couple of instances, not a few lucky hits. Every one of those moons, every frigging one of them, is precisely where it should be. Not only are they where they should be but they're in the proper location relative to each of the other sixty-two moons. In three dimensions! You tell me how anyone can account for that."

Hatcher leaned forward, clasped his hands together on the table in front of him. "I suppose there's no possibility that Boots somehow accessed this same data from NASA and used it to complete his model?"

"Not a chance. He doesn't have a clue how to operate a computer. You know that. Functionally, but for a few special talents, he has to be considered a child."

"Yes, well, I had to ask. It certainly would make an explanation easier. But you're right: I can't see Boots practicing that sort of deception. It simply isn't in him."

"Boots has his faults, god knows. But lying, deceiving people, that wouldn't even occur to him."

"Suppose we approach it from a different angle then. You remember the film Rain Man?"

"Sure, the Dustin Hoffman character – an idiot savant. Drop a box of toothpicks and, at a glance, he knows how many have spilled out onto the floor. Things nobody would know."

"Exactly. And he does it because he has blocked out 98% of the sensory input around him. You or I, we have a million things running through our minds. Drop a box of toothpicks and it's an inconvenience, nothing more. Your idiot savant, his mind focus'es on one thing and on one thing only. He zeroes in on the number of spilled toothpicks. To us it seems a miracle. But the idiot savant achieves such a feat only by sacrificing everything else. All normal human intercourse lies beyond him. That's a steep price to pay for such a 'gift'."

"I don't know." Brownmuller studied his hands, caressing an old scar with one thumb. "It seems a reach. Toothpicks are one thing. The moons of Jupiter – that's something of a slightly different magnitude."

"No argument here. But then, Boots has been astonishing us for years. His talents are outsized. As too, I might add," Hatcher laid a hand on Brownmuller's shoulder, "are his handicaps."

Brownmuller grunted. He looked over at Boots, still standing spellbound over the globe of Jupiter. Boots had been his ward for fifteen years, his care, his burden, his cross to bear – and his chief joy and reason for living.

"There was something else, Fritz, wasn't there? Something bothering you?"

Brownmuller turned and looked at Hatcher and his expression was bleak and troubled, shot through with genuine worry. "Boots and I, we've developed this rapport, this ability to communicate, over the years. To anyone else much of what he says is incomprehensible. His reactions seem inappropriate, his behavior erratic. Perhaps even scary." Hatcher nodded. "But I can read between the lines, I can fill in the gaps. We've spent enough time together that I can interpret what he's trying to say even when no one else would bother."

"I've seen that for myself, Fritz. There's no question about it. It's rare to see two people, any two people, communicate on the level that you do." Hatcher's eyes probed Brownmuller's face. "What is it that he's told you? What is it that's got you so upset?"

Brownmuller sat up straight in his chair. "Boots," he called out. "The thirteenth moon, what is its name?"

"Leda," Boots answered, never hesitating or pausing to search for the answer.

"And the fifty-first?"

Boots looked over at the two men and he smiled slowly, a sly smile that held a hint of secret amusement. "It has no name officially." Boots did an involuntary shuffle forwards and then back again. "It does not merit one."

"That's right. It's too insignificant. The Wise Men have decreed that, in their judgment, it should remain nameless. And so it has." Brownmuller leaned forward, his manner urgent, almost angry.

"Boots believes that Jupiter, and its sixty-three moons, are a galactic combination lock."

"Excuse me?" Hatcher looked startled, flabbergasted, completely nonplussed. "Come again?"

"A combination lock, the thing you slap on a locker to secure the contents. You align the three tumblers and, bingo, it springs open. Only in the case of Jupiter each of its sixty-three moons operates as a tumbler. And it takes place spatially, in four dimensions. Only when one unique combination occurs – the moons aligned just so, relative both to Jupiter and to each other – will the lock spring open."

"That's madness," Hatcher said. "It's so off-the-freakin'fucking-charts inconceivable that it defies lucid analysis."

"That it is," Brownmuller agreed.

"Boots said this to you?" Hatcher demanded, still incredulous. "He offered this as a theory to account for the sixty-three moons?"

"Not a word of it. Boots doesn't analyze issues the way I've presented this to you. Nothing so simple. He's fixated on mathematical relations – sixty-three is three squared times seven, seven is a prime number, three squared invokes three two times, two and three are prime numbers, forty-nine named moons, invoking four, seven and nine, seven squared equals forty-nine, four and nine respectively the squares of two and three – are you following me? That's only the beginning. But what Boots meant, what he would have said were he you or I, is what I just told you: it's a combination lock."

"But the number of combinations – they're endless. They would play out over millions of years. I don't know if even a computer could track such an equation."

"Just so."

Hatcher looked over at Boots, at the brooding mask of his face and the peculiar grey-green light that bled through the pupils of his eyes. "And you believe that Boots can?"

"I believe that if anyone can – that person would be Boots." Boots swung one of the moons around in its orbit, advanced it a month, a month and a day. He adjusted a second moon relative to the first.

"Why a combination lock?" Hatcher protested. "In heavens name, why?"

"Boots, that is me, if I'm interpreting Boots correctly, believes that something sowed the Earth with life, with seeds that would result in life, and wanted to monitor how the experiment would

develop. They, whoever 'they' were, wanted the experiment to progress uninterrupted and uncontaminated by influences from the outside. They secured it with a lock. In a billion years, or two billion or three, whatever the figure is, when the moons fall into precise alignment, 'they' can check back and see how things turned out."

"And Boots has a theory about that too, I'm certain," Hatcher said, in an attempt at sarcasm that fell flat. His eyes betrayed genuine uncertainty and fear. "He knows what would meet with the approval of those who authored the experiment – and what would not?"

"Knows is perhaps too strong an expression. This is all pure theory and nothing else, of course. But Boots, I, believe that compassion is the desired end – the ultimate objective of evolution. An idiot savant walks amongst you: how will you treat him? Will you embrace him, draw him to you, offer him emotional warmth and sustenance? Or will he instead be ostracized, shunned by his fellow men, feared and ridiculed. I think we both know the answer to that."

"So, we are short of compassion, the experiment is a failure. What then?"

Boots chivied a final moon into its exact position, so that all sixty-three were aligned just so – the tumblers in the lock. "It's lights out," he said softly. And he smiled.