

Immortals

or

A Matter of Life and Death

“Gentlemen, we have a problem,” Dr. Zarconi said, when glasses had been filled and quaffed sufficiently for other matters to occupy the Council’s attention. “An Earth woman--an alchemist--has discovered the secret.” He paused for dramatic effect, which did not materialize.

Finally, someone in the back of the hall shouted, “What secret? That opposable thumbs are good for more than pleasuring themselves?” General hilarity ensued. Dr. Zarconi knew he had only until the next round was served to impress upon the Council the seriousness of the situation.

“Immortality,” he said, with quiet gravity. A sudden hush fell upon the room.

The twin representatives of the Gemini Association spoke in unison. “Doesn’t one of the Earth leaders make a similar claim every decade or two? Some religious fraud, a phony guru or snake-oil huckster? Lately it’s the DNA-snippers and advocates of artificial intelligence. They promise miracles of longevity--the human body will never die, human consciousness will take up residence in a computer chip, so forth; but then the mortal dies, as mortals will, the computer malfunctions, and the vacuum awaits its next con artist.”

“Yes, but this time it’s quite serious,” said Zarconi. “I repeat--this Earth woman is an alchemist. Nor is that the worst. The situation is far more disturbing. Potentially

worse, even, than when they almost discovered how to harness dark energy.” Zarconi knew he should get on with the tale, but he could not resist another dramatic pause. This time the silence was tense with anticipation.

The old Councilor from Vega Sector spoke. “Out with it, then. The human may become immortal, but we’re not getting any younger.” His tentacles quivered with impatience.

Or more sober, thought Zarconi. “She intends,” he said, “to share the secret with everyone on that entire gods-forsaken planet.”

“Something must be done to stop her, then,” the Aquilan delegate said at once, fluttering a wing in horror. “If they learn that trick, humans will infest the entire Galaxy. They’ll be everywhere.”

The delegate from Orion stood and spoke again, all six of his nostrils flaring in excitement. “I know exactly what to do,” he said. He stroked the curve of his hunter’s bow and rattled his quiver. “Not even immortals survive my arrows.” He withdrew a razor-sharp shaft and waved it aloft, nearly piercing an eye of the envoy from Canis Major. She bared her teeth and growled ominously.

Zarconi pretended not to hear the Orion delegate. This job required more subtlety than Orionids could typically manage. When threats of violence failed, actual violence was swiftly employed, usually making bad situations worse.

So Zarconi opened the floor to general debate. Motions were made and seconded, resolutions ratified, and it was decided: an investigator would be dispatched to Earth. Furthermore, the investigator would be authorized to employ any and all

measures necessary to maintain Galactic equilibrium. If humans gained immortality, it would be the biggest disaster since the Tower of Babel Incident. That had ended well for no one.

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The laboratory was quiet. Bunsen burners were extinguished for the night, lesser mortals dismissed to attend their mundane affairs, and computer screens darkened. All but one.

“Do you think you are the first who tried to save humanity from human nature?” the Cassiopeian delegate asked, pulling a stool from under one of the lab tables. Being a couple of millennia younger than any other member of the Council, she had been dispatched to reason with the human. “It is your nature to die. You cannot avoid it without paying a price worse than death.”

“Who are you? Who let you in?” The alchemist looked up from her computer and blinked.

“Call me Cass. Is that the formula?” She took a seat on the stool in hopes of relieving her aching feet. Painful things called shoes were apparently necessary for walking on the hazardous grime of this wretched little planet. Already, Cass found she had a slight grudging respect for humans, as the species not only rarely complained about shoes, but many of them actually seemed to enjoy, even fetishize, the wearing of them. Moreover, many survived for decades, breathing ozone and hydrocarbons that made Cass’s eyes water and her nose run. The stench was only slightly alleviated here in the lab, replaced by more exotic odors.

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“That’s not really an answer. Is Cass your name, or do you just want me to call you that?” The alchemist folded the computer closed.

“*Cass* is good enough. You wouldn’t be able to pronounce my real name.” She wiped her watery eyes and runny nose.

“How do you know? I’m good with names.”

“The same way I know what will happen if you give that formula to the world: experience. I’ve watched humans make fools of themselves for a long, long time. So do us all a favor and keep the formula to yourself.”

“What formula? My grandmother’s green bean casserole recipe?”

“No. The other recipe.”

“I have no idea--”

“If you take away humans’ greatest fear,” Cass interrupted, “do you know what happens? Your second greatest fear takes over.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“But of course you do. Your species’ greatest fear is death. Your second greatest fear, which you do not yet recognize, overwhelmed as you are by the first, is living forever. If you become immortal, you will long for nothing more than to die.”

“Well, that’s a paradox.”

“Humans are rarely accused of being too rational. But you are curious as well as fearful. And rebellious. Told you must die, you long for immortality. Told you will

live forever, you would long for death. Your desire for something only because it is forbidden or unknown is recorded in your oldest stories.

“Besides, Marie Curie Oppenheimer, surely you know the fates of your namesakes. They were not only too inquisitive, but they were also willing to share their knowledge with those who would misuse it.”

“How do you know my name?”

“The same ways I know about the formula, and what humans are like, as I told you. Observation from a vantage point not available to you.”

“Then you should also know I am not persuaded by bad arguments. Or intimidation, for that matter,” Marie said. “Yes, Madame Curie’s work led, indirectly, to the deaths of thousands of people. Probably hundreds of thousands, when you consider the bombs, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and so on. Not to mention people killed by radioactive patent medicines and endless fear and anxiety in the nuclear age. You might argue it were better if we’d never known what made rocks in the lab glow in pretty Promethean colors.

“Yet if we stop there,” she continued, “if we give in to fear and ignorance, the struggle so far will truly have been in vain. Knowledge is what separates us from the worms. We must pursue it, or we might as well be dead.

“Now I get to do something that balances the books. Alchemy that serves life, not death.” Marie opened the computer and began typing again.

“What fools these mortals be,” sighed Cass. “You prove, ironically, that humans cannot be trusted with knowledge that yields great power. Yet you propose to

make them immortal. The horror! Because even slow learners--and your race boasts many of these--will in time discover much that is dangerous. The books of cosmic justice you aspire to balance will be thrown even more wildly out of kilter. If you cannot kill each other, you will find new, astonishingly cruel ways to torture each other. And that is only the start. Consider, for instance, the problems of overpopulation, which are bad enough now. In just a few decades, the entire planet will have standing room only, packed from ocean to ocean with miserable humans, each ready to cut another's throat for a breath of air, a moment of privacy."

Marie's fingers drummed the computer. She looked thoughtful. "What concern is it of yours, then?" she asked slyly. "If you object to immortality, don't drink the potion. Remain mortal."

Cass smiled. "I think we both know how irrelevant that argument is. You are familiar with the story of the oracle at Delphi?"

"I've heard of it, yes."

"And the tale of Croesus?"

"Refresh my memory," Marie said.

"Asked what would happen if Croesus invaded the Persian Empire, the oracle predicted a great empire would be destroyed. Croesus, in his arrogance, assumed that meant he would win a glorious victory. Of course it was his empire that met destruction, not the Persians."

"Nice story," Marie said. "What's it got to do with me?"

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“You propose to invade the empire of death. You will destroy yourself in the process.”

“You worked awfully hard for that metaphor, I’ll give you that. But I hold a better opinion of us humans than you do. I think we will learn. Freed from our fear of death, we will learn to cooperate, not fight. Learn how to expand beyond this little planet. Explore the stars. Become the gods we have dreamed of for so long.”

That’s what we’re afraid of, Cass didn’t say. She did say, “I implore you, reconsider. Once you tell this secret, it can never be untold.”

“You offer me no real incentive to keep quiet, except the sort of fearmongering and melodrama that have haunted humanity since the dark ages. If Galileo had listened to that bad logic, we would still think Earth is the center of the universe. If Lister and Pasteur had listened to superstition, we would still die of easily cured diseases. If John F. Kennedy had bowed to religious fundamentalists, there might be Soviet missile bases on the Moon. We can go only one way--forward.”

Cass wiped a mock tear from her cheek. “Your humanitarianism and patriotism overwhelm me. If you had a flag handy, I would gladly salute it. But let’s suspend the discussion of history and philosophy for the moment, and negotiate on practical terms. What can I offer that would induce you to destroy the formula. Or at least let it remain a well-kept secret?”

Marie leaned back in her chair, her face lit only by the red glow of exit lights.

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“You want to know the price for which I will sell out the entire human race? And all future generations? Condemn everyone to death? What you ask might be considered the most heinous mass genocide imaginable.”

“No. I ask only that you let nature take its course. As it has always done. I ask you to forego condemning humanity to a fate worse than death.”

“And what is your interest in all this, whoever you are? *Whatever* you are. Because I am sure I was alone and that I locked that door before you appeared.”

“Just a concerned party sent to negotiate, with extensive leeway to exercise my best judgment, provided the formula is not broadcast to the world. If I fail to persuade you, however, some of my colleagues who are less diplomatic will, doubtless, be here soon. More than that you need not know.”

“I know an ultimatum--and a threat--when I hear one. Very well, then, I’ll have to sleep on it. Meet me here in the morning. Six a.m., before the grad students show up. I’m an early riser.”

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A few hours later, over a steaming cup of coffee which, she found, made her terrestrial duties almost pleasant, Cass listened to the alchemist’s proposal.

“Here is my price,” the alchemist said. “Like Galileo, I must at least be allowed to look through my own telescope. I alone will become immortal. Allow me to use the formula for myself. No one else will know.”

“Even that is far too dangerous,” Cass replied. “My colleagues would never allow it. Other humans would sooner or later discover your secret. That, you surely

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see, would not end well for you. You would be accused of making deals with devils, imprisoned, tortured. Or strapped to a table in a laboratory much like this one, never allowed to go free til the secret is prized from your very cells. If you avoid those fates, consider your loneliness. No, you do not want to be the one immortal stranded on a planet of mortals.”

“It seems our negotiations are concluded, then. You offer me nothing persuasive.”

Cass took a deep breath. “Let me emphasize--I am only the first, most polite visitor you will meet, if you insist on giving immortality to the entire human race. You’ve heard of Sodom and Gomorrah? They got off easy. And their offense, contrary to moral superstition and revisionist history, had nothing to do with sex or wild parties. A group of mystics and alchemists, people with whom you would have felt deep kinship, discovered the secret of immortality. One of the secrets, anyway. Unfortunately, I was not involved in that affair, or a more peaceful settlement might have been found.”

The alchemist took a sip of her own coffee. “There is one other option. . . . First, I want to live out my normal mortal lifespan, be it long or short, and die as fate decrees--heart attack, plane crash, cancer, whatever. No interference from you people, whoever you are.”

“Easily done,” Cass said.

“Not so fast,” said the alchemist. “Here’s what else I want. . . .”

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Back in the Council chambers, Cass reported: “The Earth woman is a formidable negotiator. But I finally hit upon a deal she would accept.”

“Which was--?” Zarconi demanded, impatiently. It was well past his usual tee-time. Cass knew Zarconi considered golf the only worthwhile invention ever to come from Earth.

Cass handed the alchemist’s computer to the science expert from the Aquarid Association, whom Zarconi had invited to hear her report. While Cass and Zarconi spoke, he studied the formula.

“The alchemist’s interest in immortality,” Cass explained, “has a personal urgency about it. She herself has terminal cancer. The only inducement she would accept, other than complete immortality in her mortal form, was to be made a ghost. The deluxe package--spectral privileges on equinox and solstice.”

Zarconi made a mild gesture of acceptance.

Wincing, Cass added, “And non-voting membership on the Council.”

“This Council?” Zarconi spluttered in outrage.

“*Non-voting* membership,” Cass repeated. “She will be nothing more than an observer. On that I was adamant.”

“Is that all?” Zarconi demanded testily.

“Every Blue Moon, she is granted full materialization, including powers of telekinesis.”

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“Unacceptable. A super ghost. A telekinetic spectre. There will be no end to the mischief she can cause.”

“It was either this, or send the Orionids. I got the best deal I could,” Cass said, feeling her efforts were underappreciated. She knew Zarconi was loath to dispatch the Orionids. They were always messy, and messiness delayed his tee-times.

“Very well, then. But I hope you at least clarified what constitutes a Blue Moon? The humans have endless pedantic arguments over that question.”

“It’s right there in the contract. Appendix A,” Cass said.

“Well, at least that’s an end of the matter,” Zarconi said. “Just see to it that the formula is destroyed. I want no chance for it to fall into the wrong hands. Now where’s my caddy? I should have teed off half an hour ago.”

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After Zarconi stormed off, the Aquarian scientist invited Cass for a drink. He stared at her reflection in the long mirror over the dark wood of the bar.

“The Earth woman is certainly clever,” the Aquarian said.

Cass nodded.

“But not the way you think. I’m afraid we’ve been had,” the Aquarian added, tapping the computer. “This formula’s a fraud.”

“Fraud? You’re sure?”

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“Quite. It would no more make anyone immortal than a good shot of fifteen-year-old Scotch. It’s an old formula, one the Pharaohs tried. Didn’t work for them, either. You think she planned the whole thing as a scam?”

Cass said nothing for a moment. Then, “Beats me. I don’t know how she could have known I would come to negotiate. Yet, as you say, she’s clever. And she would not be the first human who tried to manipulate the cosmic bureaucracy.”

“Nor the last, I’m sure.”

“Like the good doctor ordered, destroy that computer. We don’t want word of this affair getting out.” Cass signaled for another drink. “Make it a double,” she said.

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