

# SLEEPERS

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4-05-2005

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3,393 WORDS

A sleek space ship drops silently through the vacuum, a gleaming javelin thrown by the arm of God, dropping ... dropping up, ... dropping down, ... dropping sideways, through endless cold, endless burnings.

Within the hollow needle of the vessel, electrical circuits sizzled and popped in the life sustaining machines watching over the sleepers, dreaming through years of curving darkness on a trackless trajectory toward the Trigent system with its twin yellow suns, the third planet of which was the target of this expedition.

Sent by the New World Confederation, this mission was to establish an Earth embassy on the tiny green globe called Morpheus. It had taken two decades to decode a signal beamed toward earth from the orb. It had, at first, sounded like a heartbeat. Blub-drub. Blub-drub. A cadre of scientists were taken off of other projects and dedicated to figuring out what the message could be. A Nobel prize was awarded the young egg-head who eventually broke the code and translated the thumps as a distress call from a planet in trouble. The mission was two-pronged: first to meet these beings, and second, to help in any way possible.

As the ship approached the mottled green planet, mechanical systems clicked on, lights commenced flashing, new hums and rhythmic tappings greeted the waking crew that had slept for the last eight years.

Their rising is slow. Fingers spasm first, followed by eyelids jerking and fluttering, blood quickens a snake-like passage through veins and arteries, hearts clench and releasing like a fist. Warmth spreads though stretching bodies. Cupped Plexiglas covers slowly rise in unison, like beetle wings floating over neat rows of caskets. Soldiers, scientists and technicians are resurrecting in space.

One at a time, a great birthing commences, heroes furl from dormancy, like emerging insects, sit up, stretch their frames in luxuriant freedom. Needles that had channeled fluids in and out of sleeping bodies withdraw from the flesh to sleeve themselves safely away.

Captain Parker bends one long leg over the side of the capsule. He looks to the left and right, assessing the motions of the crew. There are smiles and scowls. Heads shake, necks crack, fingers pop. Hellos are murmured. Small talk and light expletives begin to issue from cracked lips.

“Does everyone feel like shit?” the captain asks.

A round of affirmations and coughs rolls out and back from the six-foot leader.

“Good. That’s the feeling of life. Take your time, but I want everyone in the control room in one hour,” he said.

One hour. Earth time. Wherever earthmen go they bring their rotations, their revolutions, their time. Who knows what system is used on Morpheus. Do they have a system? Does time mean as much to them as it does to earth?

The crew slowly gathers in the control room until all are present whereupon the captain gives is his orientation and safety talk.

“Buddy system as usually,” he said. “Do not separate for any reason. Keep with your partner. This is going to be like a trip to the old swimming hole when you were kids. Keep close to each other. We will separate in twos only when I assign you to do so.

“Our job is to find the beacon and make contact with whoever or whatever turned it on. Time has been moving on ever since we heard the signal twenty years ago. The

instigator might be dead. It might have been sent by an entire civilization or one individual. It might have been sent by a criminal. We have no way of knowing. It could even be a trap, so stay on your toes and, as the old timers used to say, keep your eyes peeled. Radios will be on always. Do not turn them off. If something happens to any one of you, your buddy is to report immediately. If no report is received during an incident your position will be tracked by your transmitter. We will get to you as quickly as possible. Does everyone understand? We are a small band of brothers. We need every one of us to get back home. No one is expendable. Do you read me?"

"Yes, sir," chorused the entire crew..

"Squad leaders, organize your men. We all go out as one and we all come back as one. Clear?"

Space suits are pulled on and sealed, buddies check other buddies. Radios are keyed and checked. When everyone is lined up before the hatch the door in the outer hull slides open at the push of a button and the inner seal opens like a great iris. One by one the men file out and down the short gangway to the glittering alien soil of the planet's surface.

It seems very bright outside. The captain looked up at the two suns slowly gamboling around each other in the purple sky. He looked at a small box on the arm of his space suit.

"The signal is coming from the left."

The group began to amble behind the captain as he heads up out of a vast valley into which the ship has settled. It is about an hour later that they all climb to the top of a rise and get their first look at a full horizon. As far as they can see is the shining flat roof of a building that seems to go on forever. The captain raises a small sensor that estimated the distance of the building at a little over a mile. He waves it from side to side and announces the figures.

"That structure measures five miles wide and over twenty miles long," he reports. "It is about 50 feet tall and the sensor shows it to have no walls inside. The roof is held by pillars. Telemetry also indicates that there are other equally large structures all the way to the horizon.

"There appears to be an entrance somewhere over to the right. Check your weapons. We have no reason to believe hostility will greet us, but then, we don't have any reason to believe it will not."

Cautiously the men walk toward the building which looms larger the closer they get to it. It is an impressive structure, no windows, only one door, not unlike one found on any earth building. Soon they are standing in a semi-circle in front of the entrance and step back quickly when the door opens on its own, sliding straight up into the wall.

"Whoever is in there knows we're here," the captain said.

The captain pulls his weapon from his holster and holds it up. Every other man does likewise. "No one shoots unless I give the order. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they reply.

Parker steps out of the bright double-sunlight into the darkness of the doorway followed by his crew, all sweeping side to side with their weapons. When every man is inside the door quickly closes behind them. Riley pounds on it in despair, but there is nothing to be done. They are in and they are staying for a while.

There is an audible 'whoosh' and Captain Parker says, "The air in here is breathable." There is a hiss as he takes off his helmet. The crew follows suit and takes deep breaths, looking around as they fasten their helmets to their packs.

At first they find it difficult to interpret to their minds what their eyes are seeing, but soon each mouth hangs agape at the scene surrounding them. They attempt to take in the vastness of an interior horizon stretching miles in every direction. This walled world is filled with bodies hanging from the endless ceiling.

Hundreds. No, not thousands, tens of thousands of bodies lie on glass racks suspended by cables at the corners ten feet above their heads stacked all the way to the ceiling. Tubes of colored liquid run into arms and legs, run out from orifices and coil down into the floor. Wires and small machines run the regulators surrounding each body. An electric hum tones under the soft sucking of pumps thumping away beneath the floor. Pillars stud the space between the ceiling and floor, perfectly spaced between large groups of bodies.

Parker mounts a moveable ladder, one of hundreds that can be found periodically along the floor. He peers at one body very closely.

"They're not too different from us," he says. "Put 'em in a Brooks Brothers suit and they could hide on Wall Street. They all seem to be sleeping."

He looks again at the box on his wrist. "We're getting another signal. One more local. It appears to be within the confines of this building, a few miles in that direction."

Hours of walking beneath a sky of bodies nearly unnerves the group. Dodging mobile ladders and pillars each man's mind is alert but buzzing with questions. Hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of people are sleeping in this building alone. How many can there be? Where were the conscious ones? What could have happened here? Is this a hospital full of victims of some planetary epidemic?

The monotony of sameness offers no answers as they hike toward some unseen locus dead ahead. They walk seemingly forever and still only bodies for stars in this indoor world. Bodies wreathed in tubes and wires.

"We're nearly there," Parker says, almost whispering, then louder, "Keep alert."

"There, ahead!" one man says, pointing his weapon forward.

They come to a break in the series of tubes reaching down like tentacles. There is a wall with a door. It is not a large wall, clearly housing a cubical.

Parker glanced down at his wrist again.

"This is the exact center of the building and there appears to be an office or room before us about two hundred feet square."

As before, their approach seems to cause the door to slide up into the wall and the opening lay before them like a gaping mouth.

Parker looks back and waves them on. Once inside they turn, expecting the door to drop as before, but this one remains open.

"Eyes front," Parker snaps, and all turn to focus their eyes to a dimmer space in which they see a figure seated in a swivel seat surrounded by monitors and keyboards.

"Hello, my friends," the occupant said in perfect English. "Welcome to my world, such as it is. I have waited a long time for your visit."

The being is garbed in some fabric that sparkles a rainbow of colors. The body sock clings so closely to his form that each muscle and ripple of his body is defined. He rises to walk lithely toward them. Parker notes how human he appears.

“You have many questions, not the least of which is why we are so alike. You sense we must be somehow related.” The being holds out his hand for Parker to shake. “I believe this is your custom upon meeting new acquaintances,” he said.

After a tiny pause Parker holstered his weapon, signaled the rest to stand at ease, and shook the alien hand.

Parker realized his thoughts were being read when the being noted, “It is *your* hand that is the alien one, Captain. You are on *my* planet now.”

Parker smiled weakly.

“I have no name,” the being said. “I am the Nurse of Trigent Three, the planet you have named Morpheus. I have been monitoring Earth for quite some time. I, of course, know more about you than you know about me.”

“Captain Parker of the New World Confederation, duty station Earth,” he said. “It is a pleasure to meet you. We do indeed have questions. Your beacon brought us to your world. We understand you are in need of help.”

“Ah, it is a long story and I will need a little time to tell it to you all. Please take off your suits and relax. I have refreshments for you that I’m sure you will enjoy.” A few feet away soft couches rise from the floor and a kind of coffee table on which hors d’oeuvres and tall drinks sit on white linen doilies.

Parker is wary, but the Nurse tries to settle his concern. “I understand your reticence, but be assured that your fears are unjustified. I am the only conscious sentient being left on this planet and you are in no danger.

“My calling to you over many million miles is the only selfish act of my life. I have no desire to see any of you harmed in any way. I have need of your service.

“Please note that I have created food that you are used to, so enjoy the moment and eventually we will get around to seeing if you are as kind as you seem.”

Captain Parker raised his glass and drank. It was delicious and his crew, seeing that he is not harmed imbibe themselves. To their surprise the wine is exquisite and the pigs-in-a-blanket and caviar are out of this world.

“I have lived three-thousand of your earth year, my friends, and I am tired and near my end. You have landed on a planet that has always has a history of good natured people endowed with good hearts. All citizens here have valued life in a way you may not have ever experienced. All good things end. I trust that, being similar entities, you all will come to understand the predicament I find myself in.

“It may be that we are cousins or brothers in some cosmic way. Certainly our evolution into the similarity of what you call human form would indicate some relationship in the history of our galaxy. It will be the job of your extraterrestrial paleontologists to divide the truth from the fiction in some far future study I would suppose.

“You are waiting for me to tell you about the bodies housed within this facility. I will treat your curiosity now.

“As long as I have lived they have been called the Sleepers and were probably known that for millennia before my birth. We were an empathetic people.

“Our planet probably began in much the same manner as your own. Chemical reactions to heat and cold and combinations of chemical reactions eventually resulted in simple cells forming, which over time became chains of multiple cells then evolved into self-replicating organisms of ever increasing complexity. Life. Ah, life. What a grand

side product the universe has manufactured. It seems to be everywhere in the galaxy, possibly everywhere in the Universe. And, as on your Earth, life developed a tooth and claw existence that finally sprouted into some type of empathetic intelligence. Beings began to contemplate themselves. This seems to occur only when a combination of factors of physical traits occurs. Eyes must be set in such a way as to be able to detect color, depth and distance. Fingers, or some such appendages, must be suited for close work so that tools are invented to defend against predators, to hunt for game, to till the ground. Feet must form from extremities to allow these hands to be free for work and invention. A skull must be for a helmet to house, but not overly confine, a growing brain. Lungs must bellows, sending puffs of air through cords to vibrate into real speech. Without such communication intelligence dies in each lonely brain, but with it schooling and sharing occur. Societies form to collectively solve problems for all.

“And so, as with your story, ours is told of beings who gain ascendancy in the natural order because of sentience, sharing and group action. Intelligence by path is road freed from isolation, grows the imagination, secures expansion of knowledge and skill.

“Our people, too, went through a tooth and claw stage of history, but we became compassionate earlier in our social development than you did on your world. We began to feel empathy for the suffering of others and tried in every way to alleviate it. We took care of our young and our elderly. We found cures to all of our diseases, even aging, even death. War dissolved into love, crime into compassion. Everyone had everything they needed. They lived for centuries and eventually millennia.

“The planet began to be used up. Our people began to quit having children so that those then living would not be starved by the depletion of necessary elements to existence.

“Our scientists dedicated no time to military pursuits and armaments. They solved the resource problems, quelled all natural enemies. Excess natural disasters were averted. There came a time when there was no death. Life was virtually eternal.

“We found, however, that our each of our race went through a change after about three thousand years of continual life. Our bodies were healthy, but something in us began to die. It was a great tiring that oppressed our minds. We had lived long enough. We wanted to sleep. .

“Because of our dedication and respect for life our scientists could not bring themselves to reintroduce death into our system and since we had the scientific know-how and the resources to avoid it, we began to retire people. We put their minds to sleep and their bodies on life-support systems.

“It took many centuries to get to a crisis. With the technology we had we could limit the number of those who must remain awake to watch the machines of those who slept. Two thousand years ago I was one of several hundred-thousand Nurses who watched and maintained the machines. Over time robots were fashioned to take aid in care of the Sleepers and now I find myself the last wake Nurse on the planet.

“I have been at these monitors, pushing these buttons, for the last nine hundred years, which brings me to the reason I have called you here. I am tired. I wish to quit my job. I have been a loyal and faithful Nurse for all of my days. I wish to retire.

“I know that it is possible to have the robots hook me up and I will simply go to sleep. There are reasons why I don't want to do that. The robots are perfectly able to keep these tubes full, these electrodes maintained, these waste tubes draining, for another

thousand years or so, but to what end. The generators will eventually go down and all will stop.

“You have a riddle on your planet. If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? There are those of you who think they know the answer. It lies within the semantics of your language. They go to a dictionary and point out that the word ‘sound’ is defined as a vibratory disturbance with a frequency range between 20 and 20,000 cycles per second, a range capable of being heard. And further, that sound is the sensation stimulated in the organs of hearing by such a disturbance. Now if there were no animals in the forest, or a man there to hear it, there is no sound, by definition. That riddle can be argued until one is, as you say, blue in the face, but I know of beings that are already blue in the face.

“My riddle is more complex. If an entire planet is filled with bodies that pump blood from hearts through vessels, that takes in air and lets it out, that has electrical impulses coursing through nerves, but no sentient brain to sense any of it, is there really life?”

Parker suddenly looked up with wide eyes. He had figured out what the Nurse wanted.

“No,” said Parker.

“Yes,” said the Nurse. “I want you to turn off the machines after the robots hook me up. Or, if it is in your nature, you can just kill me now and then turn off the machines. This lever will do it. It controls all of the generators. Just pull it down and it’s done. I don’t want to hang in the halls of sleep for another thousand years. What’s the point? Where’s the life in a hall full of bodies with no sentience?”

“We could take you with us, our scientists ...”

“I am tired.”

“But you respect life ...”

“Yes, Captain Parker. I respect life. That is precisely why *I* cannot do it, but you know that *you* can.

Parker shook his head from side to side, but the Nurse smiled knowingly.

“I will leave you for a while to talk amongst yourselves.”

The Captain and crew talked for many hours. At some point the table lowered for a moment and resurfaced restocked with a sumptuous supper of cooked goose, red wine, potatoes and other treats. The discussion continued for hours over chocolate pudding.

Finally the discussion began to wane and the Captain and his crew wondered when the Nurse would return. Soon they went looking for him and found him hooked up and asleep in his own cubical above his monitors and controls.

“What are you going to do, Captain?”

Parker reached up, pulled down the lever and all of the lights went out. Each man took out a his flashlight and they began to retrace their way back through the dark corridors of corpses to the front door. The last small surge of electricity in the building slid the door open. There was a small sign they had not noticed when they entered painted neatly on the floor by the doorsill. It read:

THANKS FOR TURNING OUT THE LIGHTS WHEN YOU LEAVE.

