

Bypassed

by Howard I. Cannon

The Master Maintenance Chief executed a perfect cloaked landing on the desert mesa. All the prairie dogs saw was a slightly unusual heat pattern – it didn't faze them in the least. The ApprenticeBoy observed and learned. Soon he would have to do these things himself.

"Boy, activate the siltang and deploy the entry chute," the Chief commanded, "Then wait for me. Do not go down."

"Yes, Chief, Sir."

The Chief pondered the situation. He'd been on literally tens of thousands of these visits over the last hundred thousand years. Ironically, it was on this very planet at this very facility that his former Chief allowed him, for the first time, to do the preventative maintenance on the Psycho-Social Field Generator all by himself. Now he was a Chief and had an apprentice of his own. They were returning for what was supposed to be a regular tune-up, but the telemetry indicated something was seriously wrong.

The Chief knew the basic idea behind the operation. The head honchos identified planets on the verge of developing intelligent civilizations. They sent the Corps to install the Generators, which guided the psychological and sociological development on the planet towards peace and cooperation, rational thought, evidence-based science, and so forth. This allowed the Galactic League, when the time was right, to send down emissaries and rapidly bootstrap the civilization to full status as a member state.

"Chief, we're ready to go," said his Boy.

The Chief ambled to the chute and lowered himself onto the ladder. The siltang was doing its job, making it possible for him to push his body through the solid ground and past the exotic metal covering of the Generator Control Room. He climbed the rest of the way down the ladder and stepped onto the solid floor. He called for the Boy to come down from the lander.

The Generator Control Room was large, with hundreds of closed and labelled access panels along the walls and a semi-circular control console near one end. There was diffuse illumination but no visible

status indicators. It looked dead, but this was normal – why waste resources on indicators when there was no one around to see them.

The Chief was puzzled. The Generators were extremely reliable, generally self-repairing and able to call for help when required. But this one must have a serious fault. The downloaded historical records and operations logs for the last few thousand years told a horrific story: the intelligent civilizations on this planet had gone completely, utterly insane.

If the Generator had been working properly it would have steered them away from this mayhem. The logs showed that the control systems detected each case where civilization started to veer off in the wrong direction. They showed the computers calculated an effective correction field and programmed the equations into the emission processors which sent the fields to the power amplifiers. But somehow there was no effect. As time went on the system constructed more and more elaborate fields as it tried to correct for an ever-widening divergence from the established norms.

“Boy, what do we do first?” queried the Chief.

“Uh, sir, we should activate the console then make a thorough multi-sensory inspection to search for any obvious problems.”

“Exactly right. You let the console know we’re here. But given the unusual nature of this situation, I’ll take the lead poking around. Stay out of my way and do your best to find something before I do.”

A semi-circular control console was near the far end of the room. The Boy jogged over and flipped a switch on its side. The room immediately sprung to life, full of virtual and physical indicators, readouts and displays.

The Chief and his Boy paced around, looking for anything out of the ordinary. There were hundreds of closed and labelled access panels along the walls. The Chief went to several of them, felt around for temperature differentials and smelled for signs of failure. He checked certain gauges and displays.

Meanwhile, the Boy examined every aspect of the console carefully. And when he bent down to inspect the small, shadow-filled space between it and the wall, he noticed something.

“Chief,” called the Boy, “I think there’s a piece of paper behind the console. I don’t recall that being standard.”

“Hmmm, you’re quite right, let me see.” The Chief shone a flashlight into the shadows. “Give me an extensor with a suction attachment.”

It took the Chief several tries to retrieve the paper. He held it up to the light and inspected what they had found. The Chief smiled and his thoughts were instantly transported back many, many years ago...

The young ApprenticeBoy descended all alone into the cavernous Generator control room. His tool kit followed him and hovered by his side. He walked over to the console and flipped the enable switch.

This was a simple preventative maintenance visit. He’d watched his Chief do many of these and had studied the procedures inside and out. But this was his first time in charge, and out of an excess of caution he had printed out a checklist. He pulled the sheet from his pocket and placed it on top of the console. He started to work the list, checking off each line item as he accomplished the task.

The Boy moved slowly and deliberately. He was far more concerned about doing everything right and in the right order rather than beating some arbitrary record. The work went smoothly and without incident. As he was checking off the next-to-last item his Chief’s voice rang through the chamber, “Boy, get your ass moving. We have five minutes to return to orbit if we’re going to make mess tonight. And they’re serving my favorite!” The startled Boy fumbled the paper and watched it flutter behind the console. He went to retrieve it but it was too far back and he didn’t want to take the time to grab a tool. Anyway, there was only one more item on the list and he remembered what it was. He completed the last step and returned to the lander.

His Chief was correct. The meatloaf was, in fact, very, very good...

The Chief stared at the paper and saw his own check marks staring back at him. It was as he remembered – all save the last item was checked. But then he was hit with that nagging feeling, the one that would occasionally come over him while he was drifting off to sleep and reviewing the key points of his life. He needed to check something, to know.

“Boy,” the Chief ordered, “go back to the lander and make sure we retrieve a complete data dump, not the usual summaries.”

“Yes, Chief!”

The Chief waited until he was alone. With shaking hands he turned over the paper. As he feared, on the back were several additional unchecked items. As he read them one by one he let out an audible gasp and felt sick to his stomach. One of them was particularly significant. He walked slowly towards Panel LA-43-8976A4.

He thought once again about what this civilization had become, aghast that it was likely his fault. These people were everything the Galactic League sought to avoid. They eschewed logical explanation in favor of irrational beliefs in Deities and mysticism. They fought World Wars and engaged in religious crusades. They built arsenals that could destroy their enemies and themselves many times over, or hopelessly pollute their planet with nuclear waste. They burnt carbon-positive fuels even after they knew with scientific certainty that they were making the climate unlivable. They allowed terrible men with names like Ramses, Nero, Caesar, Caligula, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Amin, Un, Putin and Trump to rule over them. It was likely too late to redeem this planet.

The Chief arrived at the panel, reached up and turned the latch. It was, as he feared, already open. He removed the cover to reveal a large-handled two-position red switch with the label: *Psycho-Social Field Injection Manual Failsafe*. One position was marked as “Normal Operation.” The switch handle pointed the other way. It read: “Bypassed.”

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