

## **THE TENTH PLANET**

by Tony Giovia

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"You're the one, Manny."

History has its lessons. When my boss Netto called me Manual, it was business as usual. When he got formal and called me Mr. Levels, he was going to read me the riot act. But when he called me Manny ....

"The tenth planet." I meant it as a question but it came out as a statement.

Netto nodded his big bald head.

I sat down in one of the deceptively soft chairs they favor at the National Science Foundation. Two months ago Hubble had discovered a new planet. Three weeks after that Hubble picked up radio transmissions. They appeared to be coming from the planet.

Somebody had to investigate.

Netto's trademark stare wavered for an instant. "The Special Committee has signed off on the mission. You're the best Troubleshooter we've got. They want you to go."

Netto wasn't a bad guy - he spread the tough jobs around - and I appreciated that he looked uncomfortable dumping this on me. It wasn't his choice to send me, just his duty to tell me.

"Mentalos will be at its closest in a few days. The Innerspace Vehicle is being readied."

One of the world's best kept secrets, the IV is a one passenger space ship that uses the curves of space-time for its "propulsion". So far none of the curves has dumped the IV into a black hole, but everybody around here assumes that it's just a matter of time. The math says the IV is safe out to Neptune, but after that the numbers break down. I would be travelling way out past Pluto.

"Tristater is your contact on this. Good luck."

Netto stood up and shook my hand.

\* \* \*

Tristater is a Somebody at the NSF. Over the years we had become pals, in the sense that we were simpatico on a lot of things, a lot of important things. Now he was my go-to guy when I needed real information. But because of his job he was a man of a thousand secrets, which made him worthless as a drinking buddy and therefore of limited social value to me. His strengths were that he knew everything about everything, and you could depend on what he said.

For this mission he was my ops officer. I always had the option of seeing him at his suite of offices or just calling him. I called.

He greeted me with "Hey, if you don't make it back, can I have your parking space?" Followed by a hyena laugh.

Get this picture. Tristater knew I believed he was a member of The Special Committee. It was The Special Committee that picked me for this job. So he leads with "Hey, if you don't make it back ...." Feel the edges?

"Yeah, take the parking space but stay away from my ex-wife."

"I'll try, but I honestly think she has a thing for me. You've read the brief?"

"Yeah."

"So you know about the RF signals?"

"Yeah."

"Double check that your scrambler's on."

I checked. "It's on."

"Six people know what I'm about to tell you. The signals are encrypted. We broke the code."

"WHAT?"

"It gets much better. It turns out the original signals, before encryption, are in English."

Whoa. Slow the train down.

"Also in French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Swahili, Chinese, and Japanese. The same message repeated once in each language, in turn, over and over."

I considered it. "Goodbye." I hung up.

The phone rang fifty-two times before I picked it up.

"Excited, huh?" Tristater hadn't missed a beat.

"This is way out of my league. It's too big. I'm not going."

"Want to know what the message says?"

"Nope."

"Ready?"

"Go."

"Quote: 'The Answer you seek is a product of The Big Bang Theory and  $E=MC^2$ . Physical ideas obey physical laws.'"

I wasn't sure I heard him right. "Say again."

"The Answer you seek is a product of The Big Bang Theory and  $E=MC^2$ . Physical ideas obey physical laws."

It took a half minute of fast thinking to find the missing link. Right after that the first jolt hit, and then a few more seconds passed before the second jolt creamed me.

"OOOOOO, lay lady lay."

Tristater laughed, a thick rich laugh that said he knew he had me hooked.

Then **he** hung up on **me**.

\* \* \*

That was 48 hours ago. The navigation computer was homing in on the radio transmissions from the new planet, and the IV was surfing the curves in that general direction. I was wearing sunglasses to soothe my eyes against the bright blips of nearby stars, and I had the rock and roll turned way up.

One thing for sure, the Universe can be a big and lonely place.

\* \* \*

When I first saw the planet I didn't realize what I was looking at. Milky white and a perfect sphere, it hung in space like a spinning cue ball. I switched the IV to manual control and fired the maneuvering thrusters.

\* \* \*

The air was a near match of Earth's, which for some reason really unnerved me. There were no signs of life reported by my instruments or my eyes.

The hot, sandy surface was well illuminated by seven bright stars - their relative distances and sizes were being calculated right now by the IV. But the presence of the stars suggested that this planet may be shared by other solar systems.

The silence was total.

A flashing object caught my attention. As I approached I saw that the object was attached to the top of a ladder that disappeared into the depths of the planet.

I took a long apprehensive look around me, and climbed down.

\* \* \*

They were waiting for me. The inhabitants of this planet resembled dream-like characters I had seen once in a virtual world. They had human bodies, with one glaring anomaly.

They had no skulls. There was a mouth, nose, eyes, and then - a geometry of interlocking shapes, three-dimensional holograms of active colors. I could "see" their minds working as energy flashed among and through the cubes and spheres and pyramids. Pinball heaven and an incredible sight.

I was taken to a room fully occupied by a large round table. By design, only the perimeter of the table had been constructed, leaving a large open area in the center. A door in the perimeter was flipped up and I was ushered, alone, into the center of the room.

Nine inhabitants sat around the table, surrounding me. All had open air heads.

"Welcome to Mentalos, Manual Levels."

I turned to face the very deep voice. The speaker wore a satiny yellow floor-length toga, and had extremely broad shoulders. His mental processes dominated the air space, interlocking with the two "heads" on either side of him. Ninety degrees of the circle were occupied by his thoughts.

Believe me, I was scared. So I blustered. "OK, so how do you know my name?"

The mouth beneath the mind curved up into a smile. "I can read your mind."

Sure you can, you freak. You ransacked my IV's computer, and call it mind reading. I smiled broadly. "I bet that trick comes in handy, Mr., Mr., ...."

"Call me Bandwidth." He gestured without taking his eyes off me, and each of the inhabitants rattled off their names - the names of the nine planets, except for Earth: "Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Uranus, Pluto." Venus and Mars were the two inhabitants whose minds were interweaved with Bandwidth's mind. A thought struck me and I noticed that there were mental links among all the planets, hard to see but there, which tied them all together and to Bandwidth.

The scene was weird, but I was getting used to it. No one had actually threatened me ... yet.

"So you've got your own little solar system here."

"A solar system of ideas," thundered Bandwidth. His voice echoed off the smooth walls of the room. "Combine all these ideas and you create a bandwidth containing all these ideas plus all the physical relationships among these ideas. You create me."

I sure didn't know what to say to that. So I tried to switch him to my agenda. "You sent a message to Earth, and Earth responded by sending me to you. Our intention is peaceful. We want to establish a communications channel between this planet - "

"Mentalos is a planet and an idea," Bandwidth said mildly.

"... between Mentalos and Earth. Would you like to do that?"

There was actual movement in the shapes composing Bandwidth's mind, and hundreds of flickering lights played in the air.

"No. Earth will not receive special treatment."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What kind of treatment did you have in mind?"

"You are here because I want a human brain, Manual Levels. Yours will do."

I didn't like the sound of that either.

\* \* \*

They didn't physically restrain me. Instead, every time I thought about escaping, my next thought was blocked. It was "I've got to get out of here" and then I'd hit a wall between me and the next thought. I couldn't get to "move your legs", for example.

An inhabitant who introduced herself as Ms. Terry was doing the thought blocking. We were in a small room filled with electronic machines. There was a big glass window, and I could clearly see the ladder I had used to climb down from the planet's surface. It was maybe thirty meters away.

Without ceremony Bandwidth entered the room, and immediately Ms. Terry's mind designs melded into Bandwidth's mind. It happened so fast it startled me.

Bandwidth must have seen my reaction. "Your mind has also melded with my mind," he said. "You just can't see it." I was right next to him and got a good look into his eyes, but it was like staring into two small mirrors.

Ms. Terry, a honey, a knockout and a Babe in all parts but the top of her head (which I was willing to ignore anyway) waved her hand and the lights went out. Apart from sparkling rock chips in the ceiling the room was nearly dark. I heard a button click, and a dim clear light flooded the room.

And then I saw what Bandwidth meant. My own thoughts were no longer encased within my skull - they spread out in an egg shape around my head. And one whole side had melded with the huge expanse of Bandwidth's thoughts. A nice chunk of my mind also melded with the free edge of Ms. Terry's thoughts. I threw her a wink.

The room lights flipped back on.

"So your plan is to suck my brain dry," I said.

"You don't understand, Manual Levels. Your mind is a part of my mind. It is already there. I don't have to take anything."

"You told me you wanted a human brain. Why would you need a brain if it was already a part of your mind?"

"He wants a human brain, but not in the sense you mean," whispered Ms. Terry. Then she winked back.

"I'll leave you to ponder that on your own, Manual Levels. Tell me why you chose to take this dangerous mission to Mentalos."

"Don't you already know? I'm an open book, right?"

"You have been well treated here. Indulge me."

I hesitated briefly. "I came because of the message."

"But the message was incomplete."

"It was missing one element. The message said the Universe was created in a Big Bang - in other words, in and as a burst of energy, the sole substance of the Universe.  $E=MC^2$  shows that energy and matter are views of each other. The last part of the message, "Physical ideas obey physical laws" is an apparent non-sequitur, until you add the link you left out of the message."

"Which is?"

"Ideas exist in the Universe."

"Your chain of reasoning, then?"

"Energy is the sole substance of the Universe. Matter and energy are equivalent forms of each other. Ideas exist in the Universe. Ideas are composed of energy. Ideas can be viewed as matter. Matter and energy obey physical laws. Ideas obey physical laws."

Bandwidth said nothing. Instead he reached into the space around my head. His arms twisted, and I lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

The buzzing woke me up. As I grew aware of my surroundings I saw I was lying on a table, and I was not physically restrained. An inhabitant was approaching me with a bucking power saw, and I "knew" he was about to open my skull and remove my brain.

I thought about moving and immediately felt the follow-up thought blocked. It was like wanting a drink of water and not being able to pick up the glass. I cursed and sensed another inhabitant behind my head. He was the one controlling my thoughts.

The more I struggled to free my thoughts the tighter the grip on my mind became. The saw was so close I could smell the hot oil of its motor. I yelled with fright you can't fake and suddenly my mind cracked open and clarity flooded in. Instantly I knew what to do.

I rapidly thought thoughts that had multiple meanings, multiple definitions - exit, bolt, split, part, run, flight, free - until I overloaded the mind of my controller. I could actually feel his thoughts divide into dozens of logical paths until he couldn't hold it together anymore. His mind spun out of control and he let go of me.

One swift kick and the character with the power saw bounced on his behind to the far side of the room. I spun and reached into the physical mind of the inhabitant that had been controlling me and ripped two handfuls of idea designs out of his head. They felt like tingly wires and stones. He dropped straight down.

I opened the door, and the ladder to the surface was right in front of me.

\* \* \*

Lift off from the planet was without incident. Soon I was surfing the space-time curves back to Earth. The shakes set in about an hour into the ride.

\* \* \*

I was a few hours from Earth when I admitted to myself how easy the escape had been, how convenient my sudden idea to overload the mental abilities of my controller, how lucky I was that no one was guarding the IV.

Bandwidth wasn't after my brain. Not in the sense that I thought.

I smiled and popped a Springsteen rocker into the player. But it wasn't the Boss's voice that filled the ship. It was Bandwidth's. He was singing "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places ...."

I laughed. I thought it was funny and I laughed.

\* \* \*

"So he let you go," Netto said as he puffed his stubby, gnarled pipe.

"Yeah."

"So what do you think of all this?"

I shrugged. "The inhabitants of Mentalos are a new form of life. They have to be studied."

"I mean the physical idea thing."

"For that we have logicians."

"It's not that easy. There are ... vested interests. What do you think?"

"I think if you put one hydrogen atom and two oxygen atoms together they will react in a regular way, such as always forming a water molecule - as long as the combining mechanisms, the right environmental conditions exist.

"In the same way, if you combine an exact shade of white with an exact shade of black you will always get the same exact shade of grey. Colors are ideas, no different from other ideas. You can put that shade of grey into any group of ideas, any context you want, but the shade itself can always be created by combining the exact shades of white and black. It suggests that any exactly defined ideas will always combine in the same way, independently of their context, as long as the appropriate combining mechanisms are present."

Netto grunted and rubbed his forehead. "Gonna be hell over this."

THE END