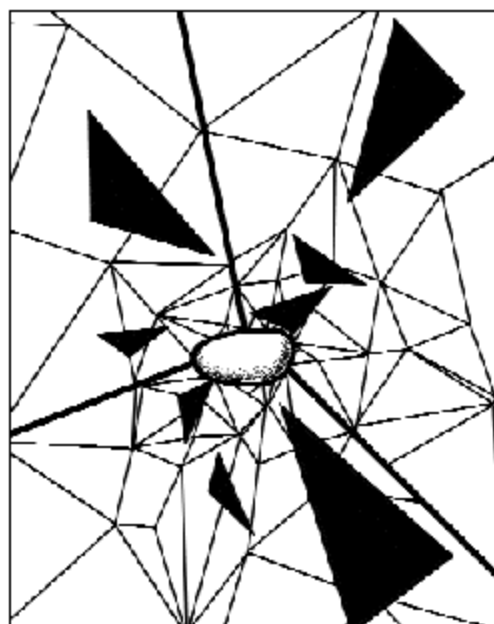


COLLIDESCOPE

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Grace Chetwin



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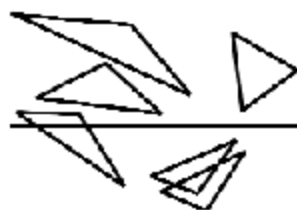
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*For Claire, with love:
It never gets easier.*

GLOSSARY OF AMERICAN INDIAN
terms and ancient place names

- Aquehonga Manacknong— Staten Island
auke— land, ground
huskanaw— rites of manhood
- Kona ande Kongh— village located on Manhattan between what is now
Lexington Avenue and Madison Avenue from 98th
to 100th Streets
- Mahicanituk— the Hudson River
- o jík ha dā gé ga— the Atlantic Ocean (Iroquois)
sachem— chief
- Saperewack— Marble Hill, Bronx
- Sapokanikan— a place situated on the bank of the Hudson River
near what is now Gensevoit Street in lower
Manhattan
- shaman— medicine man, healer
- Shatemuc— another name for the River Hudson



Prologue

Emerging from the dark side of Pluto, the tiny alien ship flashed silver in the light of the distant sun. Across the egg-shaped vessel's prow were stenciled neat, red symbols; strange dots and slashes meaningless to Earthlings' eyes. In English, they might read:

Intergalactic **S**ociety for **P**lanetary **C**onservation
H.A.H.N. Patrol Scout Class IX/Pod #6

There was no break in the pod's polished sides, no hatch or porthole. The hollow interior—the cabin—was richly studded with many-colored crystals, some small as a thumbnail; others big as a fist: the ship's instrumentation. Here and there, crystals winked on and off at differing frequencies. Most were dark and unlit, awaiting some signal that would trigger them to their proper tasks.

Amidships, the cabin traced the vessel's ovoid curve. Fore and aft, the walls were flat. The front wall housed three tiers of square boxes, twelve to a row. At first glance, they looked like a bank of screens in a TV store. A closer look would show they were not flat at all, but 3-D projectors, or holographs. *Holoboxes*.

When activated, these holoboxes presented visual data from the ship's scanners: charts, graphs, computer-generated constructs; linear models of rivers, seas, and mountains. These boxes were currently set in *porthole* mode, acting as windows to the outside. All together, they formed a compound eye, giving a 360° sweep of the ship's surroundings.

The cabin's back wall housed a storage panel, with rows of doors like lockers in a gym.

And the pilot?

In the middle of the floor was a platform. On the platform was a giant cylinder, seven feet long with hinged lid: the ship's LSRM—Life-Support and Repair Module. In that cylinder the pilot lay enclosed; in dark blue jumpsuit with high neck and long red sleeves, his head encased in a silver cap connected to the cylinder walls by various tubes and wires. He looked quite dead. His chest never moved in that airtight, mylar-padded cocoon; his eyelids never wavered. There he lay, in stasis, awaiting a signal that would trigger him to life, while the craft sped on, past Neptune, then Uranus, and then Saturn, and in toward Jupiter.

Time passed, registered and calibrated in fractions of light years.

The spotless cabin hummed with noise: clicks, and snicks, and whirrings, as the vessel constantly checked and modified its course around Mars, then in toward the third planet from the sun.

Suddenly, as the craft neared that third planet, crystals winked on in clusters, filling the cabin with radiance. The LSRM lid slowly

lifted. Hahn stirred, opened his eyes, and blinked up at the ceiling. Disengaging himself from the metal cap, he rubbed his shaven head and climbed out onto the floor. He touched a crystal in the cylinder's side, a panel opened at his feet, and the LSRM sank into the floor.

Hahn moved into the newly created space and stretched, spreading his arms wide, pressing his large palms against the cabin ceiling. He was big-boned and tall, with generous features, and well-shaped skull. His feet, large also, were encased in dark shoes, like running shoes, that made no sound as he moved to inspect the ship's instrumentation and the flickering monitor wall. He had been activated: now to find out why. Leaving the top boxes on porthole mode, Hahn tapped out a series of rhythmic codes, converting the lower lines to show other data.

Stars gave way to charts and numbers.

Hahn surveyed them in surprise. That third planet out from its sun: the last time he'd swung by looking for signs of significant life—eons ago, local time—its atmosphere had been anaerobic: largely methane and carbon dioxide, allowing none but the most primitive of life forms: simple-celled bacteria. But according to the signals now coming in, between his last visit and this one, the planet had "hiccupped," and reversed itself. Now its atmosphere was predominantly oxygen—aerobic—which could mean . . .

The data was streaming in now. No doubt about it. Things had moved radically since his last patrol. If some more complex being now lived upon that world, he'd find it. He had been programmed to identify all shapes and forms of intelligent life, which was just as well, for of all those he'd found on over one hundred different worlds during his career, very few had been remotely human. . . .

Hahn checked the top row of boxes, scanning the space around

the ship carefully. Several H.A.H.N.s had gone missing on patrol lately, right across the galaxies. Why and how, ISPYC had yet to determine. So caution was the word. With scouts disappearing, emergent planets were increasingly at risk: unrecorded, and unprotected from alien settlers.

Many member worlds of the Intergalactic Federation were not pleased with the space protection laws. Resented ISPYC's efforts to protect evolving worlds from outside encroachment. Defeated by law, land-hungry systems were working to sabotage ISPYC's patrols by any means, illegal, or even deadly. . . .

In view of the disappearances, all scouts were on alert. In the event of sudden attack, evasion was the first course. But if capture seemed inevitable, the scout, sworn never to harm his environment, never to be seized by any force hostile to ISPYC, had one final drastic step.

Hahn glanced up to a panel set high in the curve of the cabin wall. Etched on its glossy surface was what looked like a figure eight lying on its side: symbol of infinity. Behind the panel gleamed a large, dark quartz—his doomsday stone, as he called it. In the final resort, Hahn would tap out the access code—three short, one long, three times—on the seal, and it would release, exposing the stone beneath. A single touch on that crystal would send craft and scout on a one-way trip through space and time—nonstop. Once activated, the command could not be canceled.

Hahn eyed the doomsday stone uncomfortably, sensing the inhibiting factors implanted deep within him. Craft and scout had cost so much; could not easily be replaced. Therefore, these inhibiting factors were designed to prevent any scout from self-destructing unless it was the last resort.

Hahn turned back to the holoboxes. Scanners had picked up a

large number of small communications satellites in orbit above the planet's atmosphere, all of them active.

Passing the one small moon, Hahn set his ship in orbit against the direction of the planet's turn, scanning its night and day side continuously.

Data—in rapid strings of binary code—were stacking up in the computer banks too fast for the holoboxes to handle. Scanning them in visual, human terms took far too long, much as Hahn liked it. He put a finger to a terminal in the left wall and stood, eyes closed, head to one side, as though listening.

That planet was inhabited, all right, by many minds and voices, all of which he could hear and understand simultaneously through his built-in translator. And those people were human! This made Hahn feel glad, as he had felt those other times he'd discovered humans, although he wasn't supposed to feel disposed toward one form more than any other. The fact that he felt glad at all puzzled him highly, for he had not been built to *fee*/anything. Perhaps, he thought, it was that he himself was of a humanoid cast.

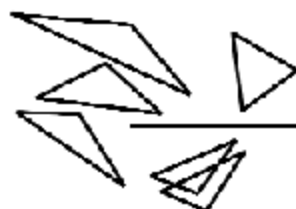
That world down there—it must have a name. Hahn rapidly scanned the swelling data banks, finding what he sought in many sounds and symbols, some dating back to the earliest history of the planet:

. . . erde . . . eorthe . . . erthe . . . erdha . . . jordh . . . jord . . .
áírtha . . . terra . . .

His little craft, emerging from dark to light, and passing over a wide land mass in the northern hemisphere, caught and focussed on one overriding local name:

Earth.

Hahn



1

Hahn glanced wistfully into the boxes. The data banks were almost full; his job was almost done. He had discovered another viable world, and recorded proof of its fitness to be entered into the register of protected planets. Once he beamed the data back to ISPYC, Earth was out-of-bounds to grabby alien settlers. Then, his job done, he'd go back into the LSRM to lie dormant while the ship carried him on to the next star system, light years away.

He shouldn't mind going on again, Hahn told himself. He wasn't made to mind. He was designed as a single patrol scout unit, no more, no less.

Still. All those humans down there, going about their lives, quite unaware of him, of his coming and going. Those other worlds where he'd discovered live thinking beings—he'd had to leave them, too, without meeting one of them face-to-face. Hahn was forbidden to interfere with any newly discovered world lest he

change the natural course of its evolution. In fact, ISPYC rules forbade him to make the slightest contact with a member of an alien world, or to reveal his presence in any way. His job was merely to observe and record, make his report, then go on, as he'd done faithfully, obediently, from the moment he'd been activated. But, lately, each discovery of one of those planets was leaving Hahn more and more lonely for company—especially human company. Which was strange, for Hahn wasn't supposed to feel lonely: he'd been programmed to operate alone.

Without thinking, Hahn had edged the ship down into stationary orbit over the land mass below. The United States of America, the data said.

Sprinkles of spring were spreading up into the northern latitudes. Hahn had seen it before on similar planets with frozen polar caps, hot equators, and wobbly axes. In fact, his own homeworld, Telfar, ISPYC's base, was one such. When spring came, the sap rose; warmth returned to the land, and new life emerged into a season of hope and fresh starts: a time when all kinds of miracles might happen beyond the city domes that sealed the people in. But he had never actually witnessed his homeworld's spring, and of all the springs he had observed on all those other worlds, he'd never had a chance to stop and savor one. Sighing, Hahn nudged his craft slowly up the eastern seaboard, scooping up final coded samples of information.

The United States of America.

United. Hahn liked that word. It spoke of cooperation, a cardinal sign of higher intelligence. Wouldn't be long, he thought, before those people down there got around to joining the Federation. Another generation or so—maybe less—and they'd be manning expeditions into space. One such landing on another

planet, even one in their own local system, that's all it would take to earn this world galactic recognition. Another few hundred years only, and they'd reach intergalactic status for sure.

Hahn zoomed in his roboscope for a view from thirty thousand feet, and caught soft blue mountains, and shining silver rivers flowing toward the sea. Looked more and more like Telfar, Hahn thought. There, also, the dominant intelligent species was human, though it was not Telfar's only form of thinking life. Maybe this was why he lingered, looking, even though now the data banks signaled FULL.

He continued north up the glittering coastline, until he was directly above an island of towers that shone like a stack of tall quartz columns in the sun. Beautiful. Its name? Hahn found it in a blink.

Manhattan.

Like a boat, it floated, with the Hudson to port, and the East River to its starboard side. A crowded boat, with many masts, open to the air. On Telfar these days, cities were sealed under quartz domes, their atmospheres filtered and controlled. Megalopolises, that seemed to Hahn more like insect colonies than human dwellings. Rapt, Hahn gazed into the holoboxes, desire growing within him to transmat down there. How long since people on Telfar had walked down a street feeling the sun and wind directly on their faces? Or the rain falling spontaneously from the sky? He focussed the roboscope on the island's southern sector, on a particularly thick concentration of humans, streaming like a turbulent river through narrow, canyon streets. Eye fixed to the 'scope, Hahn zoomed in more closely yet: three thousand feet, three hundred. Thirty. Still going, he edged the 'scope's viewfinder down between tall buildings into a narrow crevasse deep in late

afternoon shadow, knowing and understanding exactly what he saw as if he had been born and bred in that city. Moving the 'scope around, he could pick out quite plainly individual pedestrians crowding the sidewalks, and street signs: Broad Street, Wall Street, Hanover. Primitive wheeled traffic packed the thoroughfares. It was Friday afternoon rush hour, the data said. These humans had finished work for the week, and were set on getting home. Most of them hurried by alone, clutching bags and briefcases. Some, like that man and woman there, walked more slowly, rapt in each other. Even as he watched, they ducked out of sight into a coffee shop. As they disappeared, a woman stopped to gaze into a large, bright shopwindow, clogging the sidewalk; creating a jam.

All those humans, so many of them. So like the ones on Telfar even if the surroundings were more aboriginal. . . .

Hahn was just zooming in for yet a closer look when a bottom row box caught his eye: a 3-D radar grid of the space sector behind him. A bright blip was crossing that grid, heading for his ship. Hahn pressed for porthole mode, maximum resolution. The radar grid vanished, replaced by a view of starry space, and Hahn saw that the blip was a silver pod, just like his own—and it was coming straight at him!

Even as Hahn felt his shock of surprise, he mechanically registered the accompanying surge of adrenalin, and checked the flow back down to normal. He slowed his breathing, calmed himself. All these symptoms were the result of emotion, and emotion was a human trait, stemming from the heart. And he was supposed not to feel but to think, and fast. Another scout pod, here, in his patrol sector? How? And why?

Hahn hailed the approaching pod on ship-to-ship frequency.

No response.

The little craft, still on collision course, was now so close that Hahn could see quite plainly the logo on its nose:

Intergalactic **S**ociety for **P**lanetary **C**onservation
H.A.H.N. Patrol Scout Class IX/Pod #24

Pod #24? That had gone missing a while back in the Andromeda section. How had it gotten here? And why this hostile maneuver? Hahn reached to hail again. At that instant, blue light flashed from the pod's nose and hurtled across the void toward him. A disruptor charge, a bolt of blue deathlight!

Hahn activated his own craft's deflector shield and swerved. His ship shuddered as the shot grazed its starboard side. A H.A.H.N. turned against his fellow? *What was going on?*

Hahn spun his ship about to face the oncoming craft, his mind racing.

Orders were, when under attack, especially near an inhabited planet, to take evasive action.

Even as Hahn faced about, a second bolt came at him.

Despite the deflector shield, the shot skinned his craft's thin shell, and the little ship juddered, throwing him against the wall. Evasion was not enough. He must fire a warning shot. Hahn righted himself, steadied his craft, then, fixing pod #24 grid-center, he touched his own deep blue firing crystal. A ball of light cut the dark, hurtled toward the other ship's nose.

Hahn called out in dismay. A hit! How, when he had been at pains to miss the craft? The stricken pod twisted, spun, then began to fall in toward Earth's atmosphere. Hahn watched, horrified. All those people down there! The damage from the crash would be catastrophic! He waited for the other H.A.H.N. to use his doomsday button and disappear, to remove himself from this sector of space and time.

But the disabled pod only continued its deadly dive unchanged toward the atmosphere. Of course! Hahn smacked his brow. If H.A.H.N. #24 was acting like an enemy, he would have been subverted. And ISPYC's fail-safe command, erased. This H.A.H.N. wouldn't care whether he hurt anyone or not.

Minutes now, and that pod would crash down upon those masses.
What to do?

There was only one option: to vaporize the stricken pod, now! Hahn checked his power reserves. Those hits had cost. He cut his shield to boost his drive, and dove after the disabled craft.

He had the falling ship dead-center, was just putting his finger to the firing crystal, when light shot across the space between them, catching him full on. Hahn's pod lurched, sent him sprawling.

Fool! He'd been caught with his shield down! Bank upon bank of warning lights signaled damage all over the cabin but his own built-in sensors already warned his ship's hull was breached, and its stabilizers gone wild. He tried to stand, fell back again, his own inner gyroscopes whirling. The enemy craft was aligning for the kill. No need. Hahn's pod labored under the gathering pull of Earth's gravity. In horror, Hahn realized that the tables were turned: now he, Hahn, was the falling bomb!

He threw an agonized glance to the distant crowds in the holoboxes.

Only minutes now.

There was no way he could stop the dive. Hahn eyed the doomsday stone high in the wall, way out of reach. He struggled to haul himself up, only to fall back again. *What to do?* Blow the ship up? There'd be enormous fallout. Crash intact onto those crowds? Code red code red code red—*think!*

He couldn't stop the crash, couldn't change his course through space.

There was just one chance, one way out, maybe. Hahn mustered all his strength, came up onto one elbow. Then he reached with his free arm until his groping fingertips found a white quartz button partway up the wall: the ship's built-in time stone. Were there enough seconds left to pull back through *time*? To find somewhere—*somewhen*—with room to crash without causing harm?

He was so close now, he must be almost within sight of those crowds down there. A meteor, they'd think him; a fireball falling from a clear blue sky.

Well, he must make that fireball disappear!

Hahn tapped in the activation code, thinking of the danger to this world's space/time continuum. One error, and his entrance could disrupt the flow of local space and time significantly. Some choice! That or blowing up all those people, and loosing massive radiation!

He pressed for go.

The moving shapes in the top row boxes began to shimmer, then blur as the ship, falling faster, raced back through time. Where, *when*, was he headed? Would he make it back far enough before the crash?

Hahn slowed for a nanosecond, the merest blink of an eye—enough to see that the skyscrapers had given way to brownstone houses, tenements, and busy streets. And lots of people still. His anxiety deepened. Only seconds now to impact.

He went on again. The ship was bucketing badly. The pressure in the holed cabin was dropping fast; the interior, filling with droplets of mist.

Five seconds left.

Hahn kept his hand firmly on the crystal, his eyes steadfast on

the changing scene. He sped back another hundred years, then two, the quickening strobe of days and nights fusing into one gray blur, but when he slowed again to check, there were people still, so many of them, in long skirts, breeches, wigs and plumes. Wooden houses, cobbled streets, horses, carriages.

Four seconds.

The houses grew smaller, rougher, and sparser on the ground.

Would they be gone when he hit?

Three, two . . . one!

The streets vanished, leaving woody hills, a wide tract of marsh: beside the marsh, rough hide shelters, an open bonfire, and lines of drying pelts flapping in the wind.

The ground rushed up. Darkness. Trees. Reed clumps.

There came a sudden tremendous impact. A flash of light, a deafening hiss of steam. And humans? Hahn wondered urgently, as his head smacked the floor. *Were there humans still?*