

Artesian Moon

by C.F. Pierce

Minutes before his fateful interview, the candidate was anxious. The tough questioning he would encounter was not the reason for his discomfort. Neither was the intense heat radiating from Artesia's twin suns. Within the green zexaglass of the Planetary Actors' Association, the temperature was cool and pleasant. The problem was deep down Jerethian Quith knew he did not want to be an actor.

It was not long before he was summoned to one of the quadraplex's silver-domed towers. He slipped a small mathematical device into his jacket pocket — he hoped the movement had gone unnoticed — before entering a hallway that would transport him to the interview chamber.

“Please have a seat,” said the interviewer. Tall and slender. A smile that would have been friendly had it been genuine. Jerethian sat behind an impressive clear desk in silence. Looking out on a lavender landscape divided by a lime canal, the bright spacious enclosure had white walls and a crystalline pyramid ceiling.

“What can we tell you about the Association?” asked the interviewer.

Jerethian recoiled from the artificial enthusiasm and staccato inflection. But he was ready. He would demonstrate his preparation but not appear more knowledgeable than the interviewer. That would not be prudent.

“How many thespians does the Association currently employ on the planet of Artesia?” asked Jerethian.

“Well, we have over 400,000 in these coordinates. There is also the Underwater Complex and we just opened our Satellite Theaters where 250,000 thespians will be performing. The Occupational Revolution changed everything. We're still adapting to the after-effects. Since the OR, we are always interviewing and always hiring. Always looking for more qualified actors.”

“That's good to know.”

“What kind of compensation are you looking for?”

“Starting wages would be fine. I am mostly interested in improving my craft and honing my skills as an actor.”

“You should know that we offer extremely competitive remuneration with unparalleled opportunities for advancement. Your resume is impressive. I see you have a degree from the Upper Quadrant University of Drama.”

Jerethian suppressed an urge to grimace.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

His mind flashed before answering. Youth. Early Development. Fascination with numbers, equations, formulas. While most of his peers were immersed in astro athletics, he fixated on mathematical problems. Later this obsession evolved into a passion for finance, balance sheets, interest rates, equity. And then the dream of becoming an investment banker. A brilliant future should have lain ahead. And it would have. Had it not been for the Occupational Revolution.

It happened so gradually it was almost imperceptible. A movement, a wave creeping into the very fabric of Artesia's foundation. Something that would make profound changes to the planet's economy and culture. Once it started, it was unstoppable.

The Occupational Revolution eliminated the need for most professions relating to business. Accountants, financial analysts, economists, and investment bankers soon became obsolete. After the OR, the jobs could all be done by automation, even the ones that required analysis and the rendering of advice.

Very few opportunities remained in the banking industry. There were still some positions left as a failsafe, mainly for scholars and a handful of others. But to secure any of these posts involved an extremely competitive process. Those who succeeded did so by a rare combination of talent, luck, and timing. The remaining investment bankers were mere hobbyists.

At the same time, the OR, by an extraordinary phenomenon — theorists called it a cosmic cultural correlation — created an overwhelming increase in the demand for artists. Actors, musicians, writers, dancers, sculptors were sought after and

employed like never before. Therefore, Jerethian did the sensible thing, the expedient thing. He studied drama, discreetly hiding his distaste, indeed contempt for the discipline.

"I see myself performing works by the great masters all over the planet. More stage than screen."

"Who are some of the playwrights you enjoy?"

Jerethian mentioned Artesia's greats. "Stillifance, Experiter, and Peratazee."

"Are you familiar with any outer-planetary dramatists?"

Jerethian's preparation had paid off. He mentioned several writers including one from a remote area on the third planet of a distant solar system from which many timeless pieces emanated. The interviewer lit up as Jerethian made reference to Stratford-Upon-Avon and an outer-planetary work titled *As You Like It*.

"Mr. Quith, I am happy to inform you that the Planetary Actors' Association is extending you an offer. Acceptance must be made before the next syncapse of the Artesian moon." Jerethian realized that this was scheduled to occur in about three Artesian solar periods. Time enough for some reflection.

"We do require a lifetime commitment here. And I would be remiss if I failed to mention that the Association reserves the right to revoke this offer any time prior to acceptance."

Jerethian knew what awaited him at home. He could picture the exchange.

"Wonderful news," his wife Belena would say. "When do you start?"

Belena had just given birth. Remuneration from the Planetary Actors' Association would come in handy. Until then, Belena had worked as a dancer. She danced ever since she could remember. At every opportunity. As a child walking, she would involuntarily embellish her strides with dance steps.

Professional fulfillment was never a problem for her, especially after the OR. Of course she still needed her husband to have job security. Not that she was without understanding. But it would not do for Jerethian to be an unemployed investment banker.

Acting on a sudden impulse, Jerethian decided to make a detour. He had to take the sky portal to the very last stop to arrive at his destination. Eerie unfamiliar screeching could be heard in the distance as he exited the huge cylinder and descended into the gray zone.

Bracky lived in a metallic shanty in a desolate part of this forsaken region. Jerethian sensed quiet danger as he passed cracked glass complexes making his way by memory to the coordinates he sought. When at last he reached the rundown but still recognizable structure, he sighed with relief.

"Jerethian Quith. What brings you to these parts?"

"I wanted to see my old friend, the solitary banker."

Bracky looked thinner since their last encounter. His life of investment banking in seclusion hadn't dampened his good spirits. His small chamber was cluttered with books, ledgers, financial statements. Plastic cups stained with the remnants of orange coffee. Walking on the dusty floor, Jerethian stepped over rectangular cigarette butts. The smell of smoke combined with the aroma of empty Artesian whisky bottles pervaded the room.

"How is the serious drama student? What have you been up to?"

"Drama graduate. Just got offered a position by the Planetary Actors' Association. Full time acting. Very intense."

"Congratulations. That sounds like one serious solar job. Won't leave much time for investment banking, will it?"

"That it won't. Moontime and any stolen moments I guess. Have you heard from our friend Dorit? Remember that theory he devised involving equity inversion and zacro leverage multiplied by macro market ratio divided by quadro fund profit apportionment? That was something. After he explained it, I was wondering why I didn't think of it myself. Those were good times. He still at it?"

"No. Not at all. He gave it up entirely."

"Then what's he doing?"

"You don't know? I'm surprised. He's now working full-time for the Planetary Literary Institute."

"Really? Doing what?"

"Writing literary fiction. Sold his soul if you ask me. Almost no time at all for business. What are you going to do?"

"Don't know, Bracky. I really don't. I'm trying to figure it out."

"So you came here. The gray zone definitely is not for everyone. But I know I wouldn't be happy pretending to be an artist. May I show you something?"

Bracky removed a ledger and handed it to his old friend. Jerethian looked at the figures and felt a surge of excitement.

"Is that what I think it is?" His voice shot up an octave. "Aroon oscillator hedge market analysis using zenith trust geomargin and barometric accumulation?"

"It's a coincidence you stopped by. You and Dorit are the only ones I know who would understand it."

"What about replacing geomargin with zeomargin?"

"Yes." Bracky smiled with satisfaction. "That could also work."

They discussed variations into the night. Laughter and enthusiastic clamoring could be heard echoing through the harsh carbon atmosphere of the gray zone.

Jerethian boarded the sky portal and thought about his dilemma on the journey back. He had to make a choice. He didn't want to commit to the Association. He didn't want to lose his family. Passing through the gold region, he glanced at the endless row of giant neon performance halls and gilded amphitheaters. *What a frivolous pursuit.* If the interviewer at the Association only knew how he really felt.

He looked up at the pale green Artesian moon and arrived at a decision, a pragmatic one. *Do what you have to do.* At that moment, a message was being transmitted. It would be waiting for Jerethian at home on the zilo screen:

Planetary Actors' Association regrets to inform you that our background investigation revealed material misrepresentations regarding your stated objectives. Offer revoked.

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The four walls of Jake Johnson's modest apartment were covered by posters of his favorite movies: 2001: A Space Odyssey, Blade Runner, Planet of the Apes, Minority Report. Strewn all over the bare floor of the studio were huge piles of magazines and beat up paperback novels of the same genre. Jake could barely walk to the door without stepping over one of them. Scattered on a wooden desk in a corner were unpublished manuscripts: short stories, screenplays, and one novel. And the corresponding rejection letters.

Amid the mass of papers was the manuscript *Artesian Moon* on which Jake had recently been working. Perhaps, thought Jake, this one might be accepted. Jake put the text in his briefcase before heading to the subway.

An hour later, he was seated at a work station in a modern office complex surrounded by white walls and sparkling windows. When no one was looking, he reread the draft and considered alternate endings. The phone rang. Jake discreetly put the pages back in his briefcase.

"Artesia Realty, Jake Johnson speaking," he answered.

"Jake," said the voice on the other end. "Did you deliver the letter?"

"Not yet. But I'll be leaving shortly."

Jake studied the document in his hand. It was addressed to Outer World, one of the few remaining independent bookstores in the city. Outer World was well known to Jake. It was an old unique three-story building with a cast-iron spiral staircase. At the moment, it happened to be owned by Artesia Realty.

Jake had many fond memories of the long hours he had spent there. Not only browsing the sci-fi collection for which Outer World was known, but those unforgettable surreal readings and book signings with his favorite writers.

He'd never forget nervously asking Ray Bradbury why the Martians continued pretending to be human even after they had killed the crew of the Earth expedition whom they had fooled by their illusion. The thrill when the great master replied: "It's an ironic twist. They do it to amuse themselves."

The troubles of Outer World were no secret. Late rental payments and bounced checks would not be tolerated. Several financial institutions, including one investment banking firm, had become very interested in the property.

Jake suspected the inevitable and frantically searched for a solution. Alternate locations. Shared space. He avoided social contact apart from work and shut himself in his apartment. When he couldn't sleep, he wrote *Artesian Moon*.

Jake's long patronage of Outer World was well known to the powers that be at Artesia Realty. The task therefore fell on his shoulders. Might make things go a bit smoother. Not that it really mattered.

The aspiring writer studied the business cards on his desk. Printed on them were the words *Jake Johnson, Commercial Leasing Agent, Artesia Realty*. He thought for a moment. *How did I get here?* Jake had hoped his passion would also provide a source of income. But reality eventually set in.

By chance Jake landed a position as a realtor. It was his day job. And today, it was his duty to deliver an eviction notice. One that would cause his favorite place to close its doors forever. *The Outer World is coming to an end*, thought Jake. *And I am the messenger*.

