

DIVIDED EARTH

DALE E. MCCLENNING

SAMPLE

The waving green wheat fields were a stark contrast to the military facility seen out the front window of the bus. The high, barbed-wire fence appeared to be holding off an invasion by alien plants bent on overtaking the world. As if the world for as far as the eye could see was not enough, the invader plants appeared determined to wipe out the last vestige of the buildings they hated. As the bus drew close, though, it was obvious that wheat was not what hated the complex.

Revelation Base, South Dakota, was perfectly round. Built on the site of the satellite-killer explosion caused by the aliens twenty-seven years ago, the base covered every inch that had been scarred by the explosion. At first, its name had been appropriate. It had not taken long for grass to grow once planted, the radiation of the particle weapon being short-lived by design. Soon after the facility had been constructed, the name had a whole new meaning to those who worked there.

Joseph Gint scoffed at the people camped outside the perimeter fencing near the southern gate of the complex. He shook his head as he talked.

“Don’t those Puritans have anything better to do than stand outside the fence and shout at us?”

“I guess not,” a man in military uniform sitting in the seat across the aisle said in reply. “Not sure who supplies them, but they don’t seem in any hurry to leave. How many are there?”

“I count six,” Joseph said, turning his head to continue looking at the protesters.

“Some must have left.”

“Yeah, I saw two dozen out there a couple of weeks ago. Maybe they’re wearing down?” Joseph’s voice tone went higher with a little hope.

“We could only be so lucky.” The man laughed. “All I know is that if they throw themselves in front of a tank, it ain’t going to stop in time to avoid running over them.”

Joseph turned to the man, a smile on his face. “That gives me an idea.”

The man laughed harder. “You ain’t the first to think of that.”

The bus came to a stop inside a fenced enclosure. The side door was opened and a uniformed army corporal entered. Hands that weren’t already holding forth identification interfaces pulled them out of pockets or pulled back sleeves to reveal them. The corporal held a small scanner in the palm of his hand, waving it at the interfaces as he passed. Each wave was followed by a small, twinkling beep. Most of the riders were military personnel in uniform. A few, like Joseph, were in civilian clothing. When the corporal came to Joseph and waved the scanner, he chuckled and grew a small smile.

“I don’t know, you still look mighty suspicious,” the corporal said.

“You’re just jealous about losing at darts,” Joseph said in reply with a small chuckle of his own.

“I’ve been practicing.”

“Oh! A real game, then?”

The corporal just huffed and shook his head as he continued down the aisle.

Joseph sat and stared ahead as the corporal finished his duty. When he came back up the aisle, the corporal spoke again.

“Darts tonight?”

“Sure. Have to see how much practice you got.”

“Loser buys?”

“Ha! Make sure you bring money then.”

“You Europeans,” the corporal tsked, “so arrogant.”

“Who you calling a European?” Joseph furrowed his brow with the statement.

“The guy born in Europe, that’s who.” The man smiled as he left the bus.

“Like that’s my fault!” Joseph yelled at him as the door closed. The

corporal waved at the gate and pounded twice on the vehicle.

“Where were you born?” the chatty man across the aisle asked.

“Netherlands, or Holland if you like the old name.” Joseph stuck out his hand. “Joseph.”

“Sergeant Edmond Harjo, Logistics.” Harjo grabbed Joseph’s hand and gave it a firm shake. His hand was larger than Joseph’s and had more muscle behind it.

“You’re new, I suppose?”

“Just assigned. Asked for it, in fact. Always wondered about this place.” The bus glided forward. “They really find alien tech here?”

“Yes and no.” Joseph smiled with an internal laugh. “We found pieces of aliens that survived the explosion. None of it worked, of course, but it was still pretty interesting. Led to a lot of new technologies of our own.”

“So I heard. What’s your assignment here?”

“Particle projectors.” Joseph waited for the normal response.

“They let civilians do particle laser research?” The man’s voice rose in pitch and his head turned to look at Joseph with his left eye.

“If you’re smart enough, they can’t do without you.” Joseph’s grin reached cheesy proportions. As Harjo looked shocked, Joseph added, “It also helps if you have connections.”

“Oh,” Harjo said, finding his voice, “you the son of some general or something?”

“No.” Joseph paused. “My dad is Arhus Gint.”

“Wait!” Harjo’s hands came up. “*The* Arhus Gint? The guy who talked to the aliens?”

“That’s the one. Got all my brains from my mom, though. At least that’s what she tells him.”

“Wow. Never been this close to an actual celebrity.” The bus turned down one of the roads toward the processing center.

“You know,” Joseph said, leaning toward the man, “he’s still in the Netherlands.”

“You’re close enough for me.” Harjo laughed.

“Actually, most of the research team are civilians here. Best minds, that sort of thing.”

The bus came to a stop with a hiss. People started to stand up and grab small bags from overhead racks or from under seats.

“Fine by me. Particularly if you have a few babes in the mix.”

“That, you will have to decide for yourself. See you around, Sergeant.” Joseph let the man stand first. He grabbed a small black duffel bag from overhead.

“Sure thing. Take care of yourself.”

Joseph sat while the line of people exited the bus. Turning over his wrist to look at his interface, he scrolled for the latest base news but grew bored fast.

“Call Wenk,” he told the interface.

In a few seconds, Wenk’s face appeared. “Hey! You here yet?”

“Bus just stopped inside. Where are you?”

“It’s Saturday, where do you think I am?”

“Crawling around some dungeon in your head?”

“Nope. We hit a wormhole and got sent to fifteenth century England.”

“Magic?”

“In fifteenth century England?”

“So you have to live by your wits?” Joseph laughed.

“Exactly!”

“You’ll be dead in a hour.”

“Thanks a lot. Oh, by the way, Mercedes is looking for you.”

“You know why?”

“I know why I would want her looking for me.” Wenk’s eyebrows went up.

“Pff. She’s not into pretend, which you clearly are.”

A hurt expression ran onto Wenk’s face.

“Do you have any real idea what she’s after?”

“Not a clue, but she doesn’t look mad, so I think you’re safe, at least for now.”

“Yeah, like that can’t change in a heartbeat. Thanks for the warning. See you at the pub later?”

“If I die, sure. If not, who knows. Gonna see if I can find me a wench while I’m here.”

“Well, I wish you all the luck finding that pretend girlfriend.”

“Even if it’s real, it’s only in your mind!” Wenk’s connection was cut.

“And he wonders why he doesn’t have a real one.”

Looking up, Joseph saw the last of the passengers leaving. He made his way down the aisle. Once outside the vehicle, he turned to the

side, where luggage had been slid onto the sidewalk. Bags were being claimed with military precision.

“The guy probably alphabetized them by name,” Joseph said to himself. To test his theory, he walked one-third of the way down the bus to find his red and blue rolling suitcase waiting for him. “Gotta love the military, at least at times.”

As Joseph stuck out his hand, a handle extended from the bag to meet it. Bypassing the line of people going into the processing center, he headed toward a gate along the right side of the building. It was white and made of wood in a style intended to mimic the picket fences people used to put around their homes. Once there, he flashed his interface at the port on the gate. A voice sounded.

“You too good to go through the center, Gint?” a woman’s voice teased.

“Yes, I am. I run this place, don’t you know?”

Laughter answered. “And what would the commander say about that?”

“He’d agree with me, if he was honest. Now, since I have been through orientation three times before, how about you let me through nicely?”

“According to procedure, you are supposed to go through orientation every time you come on base.” The woman’s voice took the tone of a mother talking to her kid.

“You want me to quote the whole speech to you? I could, you know.” Joseph tapped his foot, though he knew the woman couldn’t see it. After a few seconds, he added, “I brought chocolate.”

The gate clicked softly. Joseph pushed his way through to the other side, letting the gate swing back on its own.

A dark-skinned lady in her mid-forties appeared on his interface. “Is it German?”

“Bite your tongue! It’s Dutch.”

“Ooh, even better.” The woman licked her upper lip.

“I’ll put it in your mail box.”

“Thanks, sweetie. I’ll mark you down after everyone else is checked in.”

“Won’t want to look suspicious, now, would we?” Joseph smiled.

“Not when there’s chocolate involved,” the woman said in a serious voice before disconnecting.

Deciding to stretch his legs after the bus ride, Joseph walked past the Personal Conveyance Automaton, or PCAs, and took the path toward the tallest building. The sun was out and a small breeze, for South Dakota, was blowing, so the walk was pleasant. All it missed was a salt tang and it would have been like walking around his parents' house in the Netherlands. Revelry was interrupted by the interface.

"Receive," Joseph said.

"Joe!" Mercedes's face appeared in the interface. She was also twenty-five and had brown hair that curled around her head, stopping just above her shoulders. Her violently green eyes were appropriate for a biologist, though she had the pointed chin and cheekbones of a goddess, a gift from her super-model mother.

"Hey, Merc." A smile was forced onto Joseph's face by Mercedes's contagious smile.

"Welcome back! Got tired of gallivanting around Europe finally?" Mercedes tried to look serious, but was too happy to succeed. "I always wanted to do that, gallivant around Europe for a month."

"You can gallivant around Europe anytime you want. They still let Americans in, barely," Joseph teased back.

"I was never invited." A small amount of faked hurt crossed Mercedes's face.

"If you're waiting for the Common European Concern to invite you, don't bother. They can barely find their ass in the dark these days."

"I meant for someone I know who's from there."

Joseph laughed. "If I brought a female home with me, my mother would die of shock. And I love my mother, so I'd never do that to her."

Mercedes frowned in response, sticking out her lip for an instant. "So how's the family?"

"Fine." Joseph nodded at a few people as he walked. "Dad's still manually working the farm, though I am pretty sure Mom starts up those prototypes we sent her when he's not looking. The place looked pretty good for as slow as he's getting."

"Did you see your brother?"

"The musician? He wasn't scrounging free room and board from Mom and Dad, so I assume he's doing fine."

“You went all the way to Europe and didn’t talk to him?”

Joseph checked the traffic on a street before crossing. “You mean mister ‘I don’t believe in interfaces’? No way to contact him. I think he does it on purpose so he doesn’t have a horde of angry boyfriends on his tail seeking revenge.”

“Opposite of you in every way,” Mercedes said as she rolled her eyes. “I find it hard to believe your parents somehow ended up with one particle physicist and one musician.”

“Actually, what we do is not that dissimilar, just different applications of vibrating media and frequency excitation. It just looks totally opposite.”

“If you say so. Where you at?”

“Just approaching MASB now.” He pronounced it ‘mass B’, a name they had given the residence that stood for Minimal Architectural Support Building. It wasn’t totally devoid of style, but did not appear to have had much effort applied.

“Hey, stop by after you drop off your stuff. I fixed the software for your laser so it doesn’t think a turd is a bug.”

“Particle beam,” Joseph corrected, “and I need to stop for something to eat first.”

“I forgot I was talking to mister sensitive stomach.” Mercedes rolled her eyes again.

“Mach three and stomach contents do not mix, I don’t care what anyone says. Besides, have you seen what they serve you on those flights?” Joseph’s head shook as he turned off the walkway onto the walkway to his building.

“No, no one has ever taken me to Europe. Weren’t you listening before?” Mercedes’s eyebrows went up in emphasis.

“I’ll talk to Wenk about that for you,” Joseph said with a wink.

“Don’t do me any favors,” Mercedes huffed before disconnecting. Joseph shrugged as the front door opened in time for him to enter without losing step. Once in, he took a right turn. Along the wall were old-fashioned cubby holes with names below them. Joseph took a large candy bar out of his pack and placed it in the appropriate slot.

“The things I do for an efficient return,” Joseph muttered to himself.

“You got one of those for me?” a male voice said behind him. Turning, Joseph found that the voice belonged to a thin man in his

early twenties, dressed in an unnecessarily neat private's uniform.

"And why would I buy you chocolate, Craig?" Joseph shrugged before turning to the lift.

"A guy can dream, you know," Craig called out.

"I'd hate to leave you without any dreams," Joseph said over his shoulder as he walked away.

"Heart-breaker!" Craig said with mild accusation.

The greenhouse smelled of growing plants and flowers. Joseph was amazed every time he walked in how Mercedes could keep some type of flower in bloom at all times. The interior was also more humid than the outside. The plants were 'stacked' with the shade-tolerant ones at the bottom and the sun-hungry ones hanging above. Drains from the higher stacks supplied their excess water to the next level down, adding to the humidity. Mercedes waved from across the plants, barely visible behind a row of vines. It was as much of a greeting that anyone received from her while she was working, so Joseph walked in her direction. She met him on the near side of the pallet.

"Where's my tulip?" she asked right off.

"Your tulip?" Joseph's face crinkled with confusion.

"You went to Holland and didn't bring me back a tulip?"

"You have half a greenhouse of flowers. Why bring you one?"

"It's not the same as getting one." Mercedes tilted her head down and stared at Joseph through the top of her eyes. "I can't believe I have to explain that."

"Everyone else wants chocolate and you want flowers." Joseph spread his hands.

"Chocolate works, too, don't you know?" She raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you wanted to talk about software. I left the chocolate back at my apartment."

"Scientist! No social graces." Hitting Joseph in the shoulder with a dirty glove, Mercedes turned. "It's over here."

Joseph shrugged to himself and followed through the rows of plants to a dense stand of bush beans. The plants were thick enough that he couldn't see the soil underneath them.

"Let's not start somewhere easy," Joseph mumbled.

“When we perfect this stacking system of plants, there won’t be room for people to get between rows or individual plants to see if your robots are doing their job. So, yeah, we start here.”

“And how are we supposed to know if they’re working?”

“I’ll know, leave that to me.” Mercedes gave her head one shake as she made the statement.

“And,” Joseph added, “it’s not my robot, it’s Wenk’s. It’s my spaser.”

“Spaser?” Mercedes turned toward Joseph with the question.

“Synchronous Particle Amplification and Stimulation Energy Ray.”

“Really? You thought that one up, didn’t you?” Mercedes crossed her arms in front of her and shifted her weight to one foot.

“You don’t like it?”

“Sounds like you really wanted to call it a spaser.” She turned back to the plants with the comment.

“Maybe,” Joseph said in a non-committal fashion.

Mercedes pulled back some plants. “There. See it hanging on the stem?”

“Ah, it’s so cute!” The robot was the size of a large beetle and held a near resemblance to it, with six legs, sensors on the front-top, and the spaser protruding from where the mouth would have been.

Mercedes rolled her eyes. “I’ve released some pests of various sizes into the plants right after I talked to you. Ready to turn it on?”

“Sure! Let it rip!”

“Computer,” Mercedes said into her wrist, “turn on Pest Elimination Robot number one, please.”

“I’d be happy to, Mercedes.”

“I’ll never understand why you turned on the personality program for that thing,” Joseph said with a little disgust.

“Someone else around here has to have one,” came the flippant reply.

Two small red lights appeared on the top front of the robot. The sensor discs turned back and forth several times in unison and then out of sync. The robot moved along the plant toward the leaves.

“Exactly why do you guys insist on making this thing look like a real bug?” Mercedes asked.

“Because we can.”

“Boys and their toys.” She shook her head as she said it.

The spaser fired, aimed under a leaf.

“What’d it hit?” Joseph asked.

Mercedes bent down to look under the leaf as the spaser fired again. “Aphids.”

“Any leaf damage?”

“Doesn’t look like it, but I’ll get a better look later.”

“Neat and clean.” There was a pause as he waited for Mercedes to straighten back up. “You joining us at the pub later?”

“That an invitation?” Mercedes asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Didn’t know you needed one.”

“Always nice, you know.” Mercedes raised an eyebrow.

“Sure, see you there.” Joseph gave her a quick nod before turning and leaving. “What’s up with her?” Joseph asked himself as he left the greenhouse.