"Brick, my friend," I laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder. "Look around you. There are four submachine guns leveled at you. I could kill you with a word, and I would do it now if I were not planning something far more dramatic. Shall I tell you?"

"Ya put that back," Brick insisted, "or there's going to be trouble. I'm not telling ya no more. Ya heard me, so put it – hey! What the heck!"

We had been plunged into utter darkness.

Elaine's voice caressed the gloom. "I would imagine, doctor, that your car fires have burned the insulation from Commonwealth Edison's high-tension lines. They've shorted out."

The sound of a heavy blow was followed by the rattle of a dropped submachine gun and the rustle and thud one hears when a unconscious man falls to the floor.

"That was the Uzi, I think," Elaine said.

"Got a glass jaw, ya know?"

Another blow, and another rattle, rustle, and thud.

"That sounds like the Astra machine pistol. He was kind of cute."

"Lemme try again."

Yet another blow, a rustle, and a soft thud.

"I think that must've been the cute bald guy in the front row," Elaine murmured.

"Where's the doc?" Brick inquired.

"Over here," I told him. Fortunately, I have mastered ventriloquism. I listened to Brick lumbering off in the wrong direction and waited for the thump. It came – he had collided with the wall, and I pushed open the door of the emergency exit.

"Quick!" Elaine shouted, "he's getting away."

As indeed I was. My speedboats were already docking. I boarded, and watched with a satisfaction that you cannot possibly conceive as the men I had posted behind the blazing automobiles boarded the rest. I had stolen Mars!

Oh, yes, I realized it was Mars as soon as I searched it thoroughly without finding either Paris or Chicago. The canals were another giveaway. Mars... Elaine had known no better than I!

And yet Mars offers certain advantages. He is the god of war, and in conjunction with Saturn... In the end I was not displeased.

But that was at the end. I was indeed displeased when I saw Brick and Elaine commandeer the last of my boats. I could still blast the planetarium into orbit, as I did forthwith, but those two had escaped it.

They had escaped, and merely watched (as I did), the explosion that shot the great dome into the sky. In all honesty, I must admit that it did not hold together as well as I had anticipated. Even so, the fine powdering of human beings that surrounded the wreckage – many in bright summer attire, and others dyed in pleasing shades by their own blood – made a stirring sight. More than a few of my men applauded, at which I made them a seated bow.

"They're comin' after us!" the man in the stern shouted.

They certainly were. Elaine was at the tiller and appeared to have given her craft full throttle while Brick lightened it by casting unconscious gunmen, henchmen, and thugs overboard with their weapons.

"They're gainin', boss!" It was the man in the stern again.

I assured him that neither he nor I had anything to fear, and summoned the Lakemich Monster. It rose, water cascading from its huge head as it does when at last a fat woman quits her bath. Stinking mud and great streamers of water weeds clung to its head and neck; but as they fell away its iridescent scales shone in the afternoon sunlight, each as large as many a satellite dish: cerise and aureate and heliotrope; damask, argent, and sapphire, scales that formed a pattern more complex and more lovely than that upon the back of any serpent.

Its cavernous mouth gapped wide, displaying discolored fangs as long as the legs of any center the Bulls have ever boasted. My breast swelled with pride as I watched its jaws close upon Brick Somethingorother. Never again, I told myself. Never would I be troubled by him again!

Alas, it spit him out.

Further adventures await our heroes and villains…

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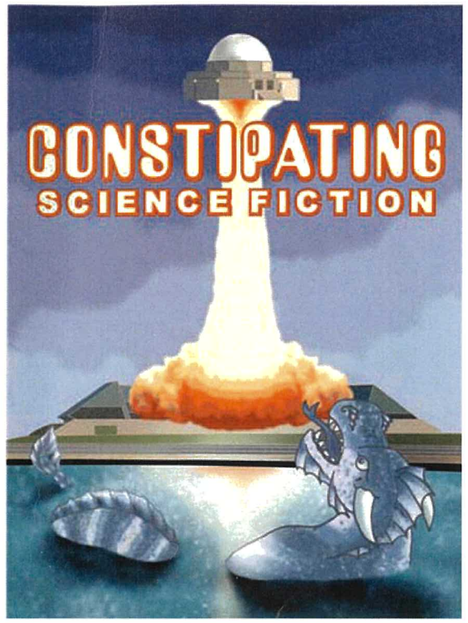

Planetarium in Orbit

Gene Wolfe

My subordinates call me Doctor Death. That is all you need to know; it may be more than you will want to know. I am the master of the Lakemich Monster, and the man who stole Mars.

The police have never brought me to justice and they never will. My scientific knowledge stands at eight-hundred ninety five, highest in the known universe. My cruelty at nine hundred and ten. That puts me third, but there is clearly an error; a better reckoning would advance me two grades. When I have Elaine Ecdysiast in my grasp...

No! Never mind.

I am the master of Mars.

The essential essence of every planet was stored in the planetarium in the lake. In my hands that essence – the essence of Earth! – would make me Master of the World. I devised a plan that could not fail.

At the head of twenty men I drove to the planetarium. In a trice our stolen cars were positioned to prevent all access via the narrow isthmus joining it to the western shore, doused with gasoline, and set ablaze.

I entered the planetarium itself, where a burst of fire from our submachine guns brought new galaxies into existence and silenced the otherwise disordered audience.

"You must wonder," (here I addressed that audience, which heard me with nervous attention) "just what hell is going on here. Allow me to explain. My name is Doctor D. Vice, Ph.D., and the letters after my name indicate that I have gained a doctorate of philosophy in mad science. It is mad science that all humankind requires today."

"He am de mon," one of my henchmen announced proudly.

"Thank you." I returned to my anxious audience. "The black cloak you see, scarlet-lined, is one of the badges of my scientific specialty. Every laureate in mad science dons such a cloak at graduation."

A youthful blonde with an alarming chest rose from the audience. "May I feel the material, Doctor D.?"

I recognized her at once. It was whatshename, Brick Somethingorother's girlfriend.

I bowed. "Certainly, my dear. I would be honored."

She came forward – she was always forward. "Wow! Real silk! Can I ask why you're wearing the fancy clothes? Must be something big."

"It is indeed, as I was about to explain the group."

I addressed them. "Before you, you see a model of the solar system in which the sun is much too small and the planets much too near it. There are other errors, as well."

The blonde interrupted. "I see you've forgotten my name, Doctor."

"Not at all." I returned to the audience. "How are they to be corrected? Mad scientists employed by Mayor Daley XXXIII–"

"Are you in pain, Doctor D.? I have some aspirin in my shoe."

"No, my dear. I was merely indicating to the group that the number thirty-three is to be expressed in Roman numerals."

I was interrupted again, this time by a thunderous baritone from the audience. "I betcha forgot her name, Doc. My dear is whatcha always calls her when ya can't think of her real name. Her real name's not my dear, ya know? Her real name's ... uh ... Elaine. Only I can't never remember the last one."

"Ecdysiast," the blonde told us. "It's Greek."

I said, "I know her name as well as I know yours, Brick Somethingorother. May I explain to this audience why you and she are here?"

"I'll do it," Elaine announced. "We're balance. The universe tends toward balance in all things; if it didn't, it would've flown to pieces long ago. Snow White's pretty, so the dwarfs are funny. All that stuff. Dr. Vice here has blocked the isthmus with burning cars, and he has men in back of them with machine guns to kill the first hundred or so cops who make it through the fire. With a setup like that, everything's too easy for him. So the universe kicks in by providing Brick and me to keep the balance."

"Besides," Brick rumbled, "we heard a lot about it, ya know? Only I don't unnerstand whatcha want the little balls for. Uh... Elaine told me, only I still don't get it. Whatcha gonna do with them?"

"Allow me." I waved Elaine to silence. "In order to correct this model, probes have been sent throughout the system as far as Kepios, the sun's most distant satellite. Those probes have recorded the essential essence of our sun and its planets, plus that of Luna, Deimos, Phobos, and all the other pieces of rock with lovely names. The spheres you see are those recordings. Possessing the essential nature of the planets themselves, they should gradually correct the model – unless they are interfered with."

"In the higher Platonian universe," Elaine added, "this really is the solar system. Isn't that cool?"

"I will now pluck Earth from its orbit," I announced. "Watch carefully, for you see history in the making."

For two point four seconds only, I hesitated. Two point four five, perhaps, but not more than that. As you may imagine, I was savoring the moment; in addition, a slight confusion had overtaken me. Red or blue? Blue or red?

I turned to Elaine. "My dear, I've forgotten. Is Earth the blue planet or the red one? Silly of me, I know..."

"I'm happy to help." She favored me with a far too charming smile. "Earth is the blue one, Doctor D. Look here? See the big yellow ball? That's the sun. You'd better not touch it – it'll be hot."

Brick had joined her. "Ya can cook a hot dog there without ya take it outta your pocket, ya know. Elaine told me. Only I don't see why anybody would want to unless maybe they had a pet mouse in there with it. Only he'd get that hot grease on him, wouldn't he?"

I smiled. "A point to consider. The blue one you say, Elaine?"

"That's right, and here's another way to tell. The sun is in the middle and we're three doors down. So just start at the sun and count out three. Here's Mercury, number one. This is Venus – I just love her! – number two. And the third one is us, Earth. Terra was her maiden name, but she's Earth now."

"Thank you," I said. "Your clumsy deception has provided the clue I required." I plucked the red planet from its orbit. "Poor Elaine!" I dropped the red planet into my pocket. "Did you really believe you could fool me so easily?"

"Gasp!" she replied, and grew pale. "I failed to take your diabolical cunning into account, Doctor. It's hanging out with Brick so much. I get to thinking all you men are, well, you understand."

"He's not near as strong as me," Brick told her.

"Got it."

Brick leveled a finger somewhat thinner than his skull at me. "You put that back, Doc!"