

OMPHALOS

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

WATCHING THE BLADE of the awesome machine lower into position, Malone was afraid.

It had started six months before. Malone was running the first magnetometer survey to determine the shape and structure of the land under the ice of the South Pole. He watched the final set of graphs come off the machine and lunged for the phone. Within an hour he was on a secret flight, headed for the lab at UCLA.

“It can’t be a natural ravine,” Malone insisted to Dr. Skinner. “The sides are perfectly smooth, like, well, I hate to say this, but like polished metal. It runs perfectly straight for about four and a half kilometers, with totally ordinary igneous rock blocking either end.”

“And the formation surrounding this ravine?”

“Circular, sir. Perfectly circular.”

Dr. Skinner set the graphs on his desk and took several minutes to light his pipe. “Are you trying to tell me,” he said at last, “that what you’ve found here resembles nothing so much as the head of a giant screw?”

“Not just resembles,” Malone said nervously. “I believe that’s exactly what it is.”

THEY’D GONE to the United Nations, of course. With UN funding they cleared away the ice sheet and revealed exactly what Malone had predicted.

The next step was obvious, but hotly debated.

The US resisted it, insisting the whole thing was a communist plot. The Arabs pushed for it, believing untold treasure lay underneath. The Russian scientists were convinced it was a signaling device that would bring “the new men” from space to help the ongoing revolution.

When funds were voted and construction of the machine—inevitably called “the Screwdriver”—began, so did Malone’s nightmares.

There was an old joke about a kid born with a big shiny screw in his navel. His parents told him never to touch it, but when he grew up his friends laughed at him in the locker room and women were repelled. He prayed to every deity he could find and one day a big screwdriver came down from the sky and took the screw out of his navel. And then his buttocks fell off.

In Malone’s dream he saw the world broken into oddly shaped pieces, floating through space. The pieces looked like one of those wooden puzzles from Taiwan.

Malone’s wife was no help. “Whoever built that thing,” she said, “is playing in a whole different league from you and me. You’re probably right. The whole planet is probably nothing but a toy to them.”

NOW MALONE WAS THERE for the moment of truth. The Screwdriver,

a miracle of engineering and mechanics, was poised over the formation like a suspension bridge crossed with an oil rig. The engineer in charge, a Pakistani named Khan, gave the signal. The blade began its counter-clockwise rotation.

The screw turned easily. Even through earplugs Malone was shaken by the low-pitched ratcheting noise it made.

It slowly began to sink into the earth. Reverse threaded, Malone thought. Aliens, for sure. Khan signaled again and the machine ground to a halt. "Pull it out," he shouted over the P A . "Remove the blade!"

Slowly the blade lifted from the slot. Almost immediately the giant screw began to turn again, this time clockwise.

Malone, terrified, braced himself for the worst. It was futile. The first notes toppled cathedrals, killed small birds, and triggered avalanches around the world.

"A music box!" Malone shouted. "Oh my God, the planet's a goddamn music box!" Blood ran from his ears and he realized he hadn't been able to hear his own voice.

The thundering alien music built to a crescendo and died.

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