

# Inter Nova

The International Science Fiction Magazine

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## Light

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### by Achmed Khammas

After we had completed the installations on the moon where by now more than ten thousand people lived, I applied for my compensation to pay off the last instalments for our farm in Wyoming. After all I had promised my wife to stay on Earth and with her in the future after these “brainless adventures” as she repeatedly called them. Although our two children already studied, she thought that some fatherly presence might help. I had just the opposite opinion but I certainly didn’t want to risk a marital dispute.

“What do you mean by ‘That’s not so easy?’” I never got on well with the accounting department.

“Well, Mr. Hendershot let us know that sheik Ali wants to meet you personally by all means before any further steps are taken.”

“I have already decided to leave the company. The only matter of discussion is the amount of my compensation.”

“Believe me, if it would be my decision we would have transferred the money to your account long ago. But I can only tell you that our top boss asks you to visit him this very day, if possible.”

One day more or less doesn’t make much of a difference, I thought. There was so much that I owed to the sheik who had offered me this marvellous job a few years ago. I had to smile when I thought of our first meeting and how much effort it had cost him to convince me that his plan to expand moon tourism did not just arise from the imagination of a megalomaniac.

“Ok, then just let us call him and arrange a date.” Linda smiled at me friendly and maybe even a little sadly as I entered the lush outer office the size of which seemed to be accounted for by her immense bust measurement. “I have heard you want to leave us, John?”

I shrugged. “Well, I have promised it to my wife.”

Linda looked at me thoughtfully and opened the door into the most holy place single-handedly. “Then I hope your marriage will not suffer when you break this promise.”

I was still mulling over her last remark when sheik Ali shook my hand with his usual cordiality. “Sit down, John. I think we have to talk about a lot of things.” I realized that my compensation was by far not the only point of discussion. My Arab boss just watched me too attentively for that. Of course he did not come down to business right away. Those guys regard this simply as rude. And that’s exactly why I regarded it as a highly alarming indication when he leaned back after only five minutes, sighed and fell silent. In the course of the years, however, I had learned to cope with this. I sighed too, leaned back into my three thousand dollar chair and fell silent myself.

“Have you followed the latest developments of the Desertec Consortium?” sheik Ali suddenly asked.

“Yes, at least marginally. As far as I know the first seven installations in Morocco and Algeria have been put into operation last year. In my estimation three or four gigawatt of power flow to Europe which, compared with the consumption there, is of course only a drop in the ocean. Especially now after almost all traffic has been shifted to electric vehicles.”

Sheik Ali drummed his fingers on the desk, something I had never seen before. “And at least twice as many installations are already under construction. If you like I can send you the last report. After all I’m also involved there with half a billion dollars. But that’s not the main reason for our talk.”

I already assumed that. After my exit from NASA and the takeover of the moon project, however, I had quickly learned how to deal with Arab business people and multibillionaires so that you earn their respect. Part of it is to be very attentive of the subtle and sometimes even sublime connotations of their remarks. So if the main reason of our talk was not the five hundred millions that sheik Ali had invested many years ago into the desert power project, this meant that we were already talking about a project of at least a tenfold volume - before even a single word had been spoken about it. The next sentences of my employer confirmed my worries.

“You know, John, as the German consortium announced the project in 2009, me and my colleagues here at the Gulf were pretty annoyed because we had not been informed beforehand with even a single syllable. A later entry would have amounted to a loss of face and this is why I invested only via straw men. Some weeks ago, however, I have been visited - I’m sorry that I cannot tell you at the moment by whom. Please understand.” I smiled as benignly as I had learned by watching him. “What would you say if I told you about a project that makes our moon project appear like a

kindergarten in comparison? Stop - don't answer yet. I know that you actually planed to retire from work and I really appreciate it. Nonetheless I reckon that you will even withdraw your promise to your wife when you know the details... And this is why you should decide beforehand whether you want me to tell you more or not. Because the whole matter is subject to strict concealment - and this means that you may not even breathe a word about the content of the project privately."

"You really expect me to agree without knowing what the whole thing is about?"

"Yes, John, because I think I know you well enough to anticipate exactly what will happen. When I present the project to you, you will not only forget your farm in Wyoming but perhaps the whole United States. But I don't want to stand in the way of your happiness. This is why I want you to confer with your wife as to whether she will have patience for further five years - since you will spend this time more or less on the moon or in orbit without visiting the Earth now and then."

I set upright involuntarily since this was the first time I'd heard of such conditions from sheik Ali. The media had made a great fuss about the project "Camel Race on the Moon" from the start. Each borehole and each completed installation of a solar sail had been celebrated as an epochal achievement. This is why I felt a little worried when I thought about what sheik Ali may have hatched this time and why it demanded such secrecy.

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"Ground control here. Can you hear me?"

"Buraq II here. I receive you clear and distinctly."

"Hello John, everything ok up there with you guys? We have some telemetry data that are not quite satisfying. Please bear the coding in mind when you send the material. I'll send the requirements directly onto your screen."

"Ok, I see what it is. The deviations have probably been caused by the giant sun flare last week but I guess the autonomous control units will soon get the hang of it. I will ask Moshe to have another look. He will contact you then."

"Many thanks, John. Over and out."

We'd been working for three years now, day and night, as they say on Earth. Of course, up here there is only one eternal day - or one eternal night, depending on the mind of a person. It was a giant project, a collaboration of several nations and some of the world's largest corporations. And like many other projects this one, too, had two sides - an official and a secret one. In the eyes of the public we were installing a whole field of solar satellites to send solar power without much transmission loss directly from space to any appropriately set up microwave reception antenna. With this, of course, we were in direct competition with the Desertec project that was now supported by almost all Mediterranean states. And of course there had been a lot of fuss about it in the beginning. On the other hand, the desert power plants delivered their power only into the grids of the installation countries and to Europe and even there they could not

completely satisfy the demand.

Sheik Ali and his consortium, however, would deliver the power of the solar satellites to almost every country on Earth that could afford the costs of a square-kilometre sized field of reception antennas - and the monthly power bill! After a talk with my wife that extended into the early hours, I had contacted my boss and agreed to oversee his new project. With the exception of a few visits to the moon, I almost spent the whole time in our stations that we had anchored at the Lagrange points early on. Of course I exercised regularly in the centrifuges to counteract muscle and bone atrophy but I started to crave for Earth, for white, open areas, for the gurgle of a creek or the twittering of birds that wasn't recorded. Considering the almost outrageous salary, however, that was transferred to my account each month; I didn't doubt that I would come through the rest of the time without any problems.

The construction of the reception stations on Earth also made great progress. Most of them were located on terraced mountains or in former agricultural areas with good connections to consumption centres. In two years at the latest the project would start to supply Earth with clean solar power from space. At this time, however, something else would happen that scarcely anybody expected. I, too, tried to think about it as little as possible: otherwise I would have turned about in my null-g bunk all night. I tried to silence my conscience with the argument that the secret part of our project, afterwards, would end all wars forever. Of course I deceived myself, but if we hadn't realized the project, sooner or later someone else would have done it. This is what it always comes down to...

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"And you think that we will get away with it?"

"Of course we will! After all, we hold all the aces. The only states with long-distance rockets that could be dangerous for us are in our team. The others will soon realize that they have no other choice but to fulfil our demands... and to pay."

I have to admit that the technological aspect of Sheik Ali's project fascinated me extremely. Of course it wasn't fair to the smaller states of our planet, but in the long run they would also profit from our project because it drastically reduced the risk of future climatic disasters. That the Desertec countries had to fork out money to us, too, was only icing on the cake. And believe me, the cake was enormous!

During a meeting on the moon sheik Ali told me something of the background. The whole thing had of course not been his own idea. They had contacted Qatar via various middlemen. Qatar's chief of state was a personal friend of my employer. During the next falconry session they had talked about it. And not long afterwards the first of several secret meetings took place that was also attended by the experts of the Israeli research institute which had originally developed the plan.

The decision was rather easy because the moon project was more or less completed for us and sheik Ali and me had long since realized that, among others, we had one thing in common: we detested routine of any kind. For me and my wife it was easy, too, because I had earned enough in these five years to assure our livelihood down to the

eighth generation. Apart from that I was entitled to one-tenth of a percent of the profits. In terms of figures it was almost impossible to spend the sums we expected.

And so we set to work. Two further years - 24 months, 104 weeks, 730 days, this was hardly worth mentioning. Time would fly - literally. The solar satellites were completed long since and could go into operation at any time. But, of course, there was the other, secret half of the project that still presented us with some challenges.

“And you don’t fear a vengeance on Earth?”

My boss laughed out loud. “You know, John, I expect that there will be some incidents now and then. But believe me, as soon as we cut off their power, the troublemakers will crawl on all fours and beg for mercy. You don’t have to worry.”

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We had good reasons to call the press conference at midday and the locality had also been very carefully selected. The Ecuadorian capital, Quito, is located in a basin almost three thousand metres high in the Andes, and after the Bolivian capital Sucre is the second highest capital city in the world. Much more important was, however, that it was only twenty kilometres south of the equator. The effects of our project would be noticed here strongest and fastest. Representatives of press agencies and Internet portals flocked into the largest stadium of the city since the early morning. The weather prophets we had engaged were worth their money. There was not a cloud in the sky.

At 11:00 the speeches began for which we had engaged some of the best-known scientists on the planet. There was much talk about a new era and I had to pull myself together not to wince each time. I noticed the first indications of unrest about half an hour later. The photographers and cameramen nervously fiddled with their equipment and had no explanation why the exposure values were so rapidly impaired. It wasn’t long until even the most retarded pressman realized that something had got out of hand. Sheik Ali who sat beside me on the VIP stand elbowed me and winked. Some minutes later it was my turn to stand at the microphone and to clear my throat a few times so that the journalists and reporters who excitedly looked up by now became aware of me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you listen to me for the next ten minutes, all your questions will be answered. I ask for a little silence.”

“But your live shot is not so good anymore. We didn’t bring along spotlights. Who would have thought that it suddenly could get dark at noon? Or is this a specially ordered solar eclipse?”

The caller, a young al-Jazeera TV reporter, even raised a few laughs. Most of the people present, however, were visibly anxious.

“I don’t think that much depends on getting a good shot. As head of the project Helios, I will rather give you enough information to fill your programs for a whole week. At least! It would be more appropriate if you turned your cameras upwards for as you see

the sunlight has diminished drastically by now. You already know that our consortium has installed a chain of solar satellites in orbit in the course of the past five years. Governments as well as globally active corporations have contributed to the project to provide enough clean energy for the demand of all people on our planet. And without any damage of the terrestrial environment. But now I want to report on another component of our project. This component is based on the scientific foundations of the Weizman institute in Israel, the University of Moscow and several research institutes of the US government.”

I made a small dramatic pause that I used to take a sip of water and to wipe the sweat from my forehead, seemingly casual. Not that I feared anything. After all, sheik Ali had engaged enough bodyguards to bring the two of us along with all guest of honours back into the limousines and to the airport where the private jets waited tightly packed for us. Nonetheless, I somewhat dreaded the reaction that my next words would cause among the waiting journalists.

“Of course we have prepared comprehensive press kits that will be delivered at the exits later. So let me summarize the matter in a few sentences: As the European and North African started in 2009 the, at this time, largest project for renewable solar energy that by now should be known to everybody under the name Desertec, another consortium was formed that consisted of countries and persons not involved in Desertec. We were convinced that competitive power could also be offered by means of solar satellites – and this is exactly what we have done. In the course of the next weeks all our customer will be ‘connected’ to the orbital stations and provided with their energy via microwaves. But this is only one side of the project.”

I noticed that the unrest increased and knocked a few times with my fingernail against the microphone.

“In the course of the project Helios we have also installed a giant shield that in these minutes is closed and will screen the Earth from direct solar radiation in the future. This way we want to ensure that the ever increasing climatic problems are once and for all a matter of the past. Furthermore we can allocate light so that only those states receive enough light for their agriculture who make an appropriate contract with us. Of course we hope that all governments will be so reasonable to think of the wellbeing of their citizens. After all we guarantee with our new technology also an end to any environmental pollution through fossil or nuclear fuels, a balanced climate all over the world – and, of course, enough energy and light for everybody who is willing to get it from us. Thanks for your attention...”

I had always said that oil sheiks should not be underrated. Sure, they would have bestrode their camels and rode into the desert without further ado if the oil had been exhausted one day. But who has ever held such a monopoly position in the energy sector would not be willing to be marginalized so easily – and far too few people had considered this.

Most of all, however, I was astonished how smoothly the Israeli-Arab collaboration within the consortium went, as if there had never been a Nakba. Sure, the whole world befell a far larger Nakba now, but this time we had a hand on the light switch...

and we would never take it down again!

Of course I have special terms for my farm in Wyoming so that I can walk around in bright sunshine free of charge every day, regardless of how dark it may be elsewhere - or how much people have to pay for a little light. "For god leads to his light whoever he wants" - as the 24th Sura of the Qur'an so aptly says...

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