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AUTHOR'S NOTE:::Science fiction is basically a fantastic genre of writing. Let's not deny it. And no matter how much we push the concept that "it's as real as tomorrow" and that "the s-f writers have to hustle to keep ahead of progress", still, if we removed that element of sheer flying fantasy, then we would soon lose interest in it, for it is that outrageous unbelievableness that makes science fiction science fiction and not, say, western adventure.

In this story there is a basic flaw, only partially explained. You will notice it. You were intended to notice it. It was intentionally placed in the story, else there could not have been a story. It is a necessary evil. Call it literary license if you will, or just admit that if we wish to enjoy the story, we just put up with the one incongruency. Bear with me as a story unfurls itself. A story of a man whose life was waste, but a waste upon which rested the future of a Universe, as he endlessly conducted his

Night Vigil

HARLAN ELLISON

Darkness seeped in around the little quonset. It oozed out of the deeps and swirled around Ferreno's home. The automatic scanners turned and turned, whispering quietly, their message of wariness unconsciously reassuring the old man.

He bent over and plucked momentarily at a bit of foreign matter on the carpet. It was the only odd color on the rug, reflecting the old man's perpetual cleanliness and love of neatness. The racks of books were all binding to binding, set flush with the lip of the bookshelf; the bed was made with a tightness that allowed a silver dollar to bounce thrice; the rug was spotless, with not a speck of lint or dust on it. Save for the piece Ferreno stopped and deposited in the incinerator, the place was immaculate.

It reflected twenty-four years of watching, waiting, and living alone. Living alone on the edge of the Forever, waiting for something that might never come. Ferreno blinked, his deep-set grey eyes seeking out into the blackness for something he never knew.

There had been no warmth, no women, no feeling, no emotion, almost

for twenty of those twenty-four years. Ferreno had been a young man when they had set him down on The Stone. They had pointed out there and said to him, "Beyond the farthest spot you can see, there is an island universe and in that island universe, there is an inimicable enemy. One day he will become dissatisfied with his home and seek yours. You are here to watch for him."

And they had gone before he could ask them.

Ask them: Who were the enemy? Where would they come from? Why would they come? What could he do if they came? What were the huge silent machines that bulked monstrous behind the little quonset? Would he ever go home again?

There at first, he had thought he would go out of mind. It was monotonous. Monotony personified. The ordeal of watching, watching, watching. Sleeping, eating from the self-replenishing supply of proto-foods in the green tank, reading, sleeping again, re-reading the books till their binding crackled, snapped and the pages fell silently on the floor. First filth and throwing things against the curving walls and ceiling, then extreme neatness, then a moderation, and finally back to the neat, prissy fastidiousness of the old man wanting to know where everything was at any time.

No women. That had been a problem. Then he had solved it. He was sterile.

But they had picked him well. He clung to his sanity, for he knew it was his only escape. He swung back over the line and soon grew content with his world in a shell. He waited, and in his waiting grew a contentment out of restlessness. He began to think of it as a jail; then as a coffin; then as the ultimate black of the Final Hole. He would wake up "nights" choking, his throat constricted tight, his hands claws that crooked themselves into the foam rubber of the sleeping cot with fierceness.

The time was spent. He could not go back and tell you how--just that it was spent. His life was so dust-dry he hardly knew he was living.

And ever and ever the huge, dull, sleeping eye of the warning buzzer stared back at him, veiled, from the wall.

It was hocked up with the scanners. The scanners in turn were hooked up to the net of tight cosmic rays that interlocked each other out to the farthest horizon in which Ferreno might ever conceivably search out. And the net in turn joined at stop-gap junctions by doggie-guards, also waiting, watching for that implacable alien that would someday come.

Ferreno at first watched the thing constantly, waiting for it to make the disruptive noise he was sure it would emit. Breaking the perpetual silence of his bubble. He waited for the bloodiness of its blink to warp

fantastic shadows across the room and the furniture. He even spent five months deciding what shape those shadows would take when they came.

Then as time progressed, he grew unaware of it, forgot it existed for long periods, till it had finally come to where the knowledge of its existence was a dim thing, nearly unremembered, but there, waiting to be used if need be.

For Ferreno never forgot why he was there. He never forgot the reason they came and dragged him off the front porch where he sat, arms tight, around his girl, on a creaking porch glider that smacked up against the wall every time it went too far back. He remembered the taste of the acidly lemonade in his stomach as they said, "Are you Charles Ferreno, age nineteen, brown hair, blue eyes, five feet ten, 150 pounds?"

"Y-yes," he recalled stammering, the intrusion of strangers on a thing so private as a love-making session, causing him to falter. Then they had grabbed him, flashed a card at Marie, and taken him howling into a helicopter--black and silent--that whirred off to a plastic block in the desert, that he was told was Central Space Service Headquarters.

Chosen best out of forty-seven thousand possible cards in the files. Best by selection. Infallible machine. Some other he could not now recall. And then the ship.

The nose of the beast pointed straight up, up into a cloudless sky, blue and unfiltered as the best he had ever known, and then a rumble, and a scream, and a pressure as it raced into space and an almost imperceptible wrenching as it slipped off scud-wise into some other space. Then the gut-pulling again and off there to the right through the port that bleak little asteroid.

When they set him down and told him about The Aliens, he screamed at them, but they pushed him back into the bubble and left, locking the airlock so he could not take his own life that way. They left him then, rushing up till they popped out of sight as if around a bend in the road.

He bloodied his hands and the resilient plastic around the door and the vista windows for two weeks before he found they were sealed tightly.

He never forgot why he was here.

He tried to conjure up the Aliens. Were they horrible slug-like creatures from some dark star, spreading a ring of poisonous viscous fluid inside Earth's atmosphere, poisoning all; were they tentacled spider-men who drank blood; were they perhaps quiet, well-mannered beings who would sublimate all of Man's drives and ambitions; were they---

He went on and on till it did not matter in the slightest to him. Then he forgot time. But, he remembered he was here to watch. To watch and wait. A sentinel at the Gate of Forever, waiting for an unknown enemy

that would streak out of nowhere, bound for Earth and destruction.

The enemy would not stop at any little colonies along the way. It would strike deep and fully, right for the heart of the spawning Man-culture.

Ferreno hated them for a while. Then, even that passed.

Thoughts played leap-frog with themselves. Ferreno was thinking. For the first time in ten years, actually thinking. He sat in the chair which had conformed itself to his posture, the muted strains of some long-since forgotten piece of taped music the only sound---even that compressed into a corner of his mind through horrible repetition---and thought. Beads of perspiration coursed freely, dotting his upper lip and the receding arcs of sparse hair at his temples.

What if they never came? What if they had gone already and through some failure of the mechanisms he had missed them? Even the sub-hearing persistence of the scanners revolving was not assurance enough. For the first time in years he was hearing the scanners again, and did they sound right? Didn't-they-sound-a-bit-off? They didn't sound right! Migod, ALL THESE YEARS AND NOW THEY WEREN'T WORKING! OH-MIGOD, all these years here nowhere and they've stopped running and no good damned things without a behind them aliens have slipped through earth's gone I'm no good here and all and Marie and everything...

!!!

He grabbed control of himself suddenly, lurchingly. The machines were perfect. They worked on the basis substance of the Universe, they couldn't go wrong, once set together on the pattern, if they had wanted to do so.

But the uselessness of it all remained.

What good could one puny man serve here, away from all and everyone? He knew that two men might have killed each other out of sheer boredom, and the same for a man and woman, and that one man was the only thing that could remain, intelligent enough to relay that message from the blinking light to Earth.

The only intelligent thing, because a robot brain equipped to perform only that simple task, including any possible ramifications that might crop up in a period as long as Ferreno was expected to stay--fifty years--would have had to be something like five hundred miles long by three hundred wide, with tapes and condensers and punch checks and the like that, if laid end to end, would have stretched to a point close to Galactic Center and back.

He knew he was necessary, which had stopped him from somehow wrecking the whole bubble and himself during those twenty-four years, but still it

all seemed so sad, so helpless, so unnecessary. He didn't know, but he was certain the bubble would inform them if he died--to be replaced.

He knew, deep inside himself, that it was a gesture of survival to the peoples of Earth. They wanted to live. But did they have to sacrifice a man for their survival?

Yes, it was inevitable.

It just happened he was the man.

Here at this junction of the Galaxies; in this spot of most importance and this key to the battle that someday would have to be fought.

But, what if he was wasted. What if they never came? What if there never were any Aliens? Only supposition by the learned ones, tampering with a human being's soul and life?

What if---

A soft buzz accompanied the steady ruby glow from the warning light on the wall.

Ferreno stared, open-mouthed. Here it was. Was this it? No strident noises, no flickering urgency of red light. Only a steady glow and a soft buzz. And at the same time he knew that this was far more effective, and that it had prevented what would have been a sure-death from heart attack, had a warning gone off such as he had envisaged.

He froze in the seat.

He couldn't move. His hands could not respond to the multiple keys set in the underside of the armrest that would signal Earth. He was totally incapacitated. What if this was a dud? What if the machines were breaking down from constant twenty-four years (plus how many men before him) of use? What if this was all a hallucination? What if---

Then he knew it was not. Far out in the dark dark of the space beyond his asteroid he could see a point piercing the tapestry of the void and he knew. A calmness covered him. He was worthwhile, he knew now. This was the culmination of all the years of waiting, and he knew, now that it was worth it all. The privation, the hunger for companionship, all of it. It was worth it. He reached and let his fingers flicker momentarily over the keys in the well-remembered pattern that would warn Earth.

He settled back and let his thoughts rest on the calm surface of his mind. He was content. He would die soon, his job was finished. It was worth all the years without. Without. Without anything he would have known good on Earth. But it was worth all of it.

The Aliens were coming at last.