

Our Human Gods

by Vincent Rupp

ONE

“Is it true?” Samyan asked me before I’d finished sitting down. I couldn’t pretend I didn’t know what he meant; rumors had been circulating since the empty lab was set up with no one assigned to it. This morning, we’d all noticed the blank space at the top of the computing priority list.

All talking at the table had stopped when I approached, and now with forks and knives held resting on plates, all eyes were on me.

“Yes, they’re waking him this afternoon.”

This in itself was news, but didn’t generate much response. Someone must have noticed my name jump up a bit too. “And?” Samyan continued.

“I’ll be there and I’ve been assigned to the project.” Now there was a little astonished muttering. Having nothing more to add, I brushed back my hair, looked down at my tray, and started spooning the food around. Josh was polite enough to address the issue directly.

“So how is he?”

I put down my utensils before turning my head to look directly at him. “How is who?”

“Dr. Kevar – I assume you’re sleeping with him.” He said it like a joke, but of course it wasn’t funny.

My eyes rolled reflexively. “Ugh, you know, Josh,” Then I smiled happily “He’s great, fantastic really, by far more satisfying than anyone at this table.”

His smile evaporated and his eyes narrowed. Before he could elevate the conversation to direct hostility, Lin interrupted.

“I doubt it.” Everyone looked at her as she continued. “For one, he’s kinda old. And second, he’d be the only one enjoying it.”

Everyone laughed and started talking again.

“Hey he’s only twice her age.”

“Only is plenty!”

“And there are drugs for that.”

“Well he’s still arrogant.” Lin defended.

“He’s in charge; he’s allowed to be.” Josh counter-defended.

“Not that much.”

“Well at any rate,” Samyan said to me, “I’m wondering almost the same thing. Why did he pick you?” And then everyone was looking at me again though this time they kept eating.

“I don’t know. Maybe because I’m not really assigned to anything right now.”

No one seemed to think that was likely, and Josh cut the foolishness short with an energetic “Bullshit.” He added “You know they’d pull whomever they wanted off any project for the amazing Dr. Tenaka.”

“Yeah they probably would.” I agreed, but hastily added “But I’m sure it’s not just up to Dr. Kevar.”

Someone else contributed “Dr. Tenaka just can’t work without a couple of these.” He held up his hands in a completely unnecessary cupping gesture.

“I’d certainly work faster.” Samyan grinned.

“You should put in a request.” I said helpfully.

“That’s how I got mine.” Lin added seriously.
 “What’s the project anyway?”
 “I guess I’ll find out this afternoon.” I didn’t think I’d be able to talk about it anyway.
 “It’s probably another virus.”
 “Yeah a really nasty one!”
 “No, that’d be on the news.”
 “Maybe they’re keeping it quiet.”
 “How? Anyone could report on it.”
 Everyone else was talking around me. I tried to ignore them and focus on eating, but they had a lot of the same thoughts I did.
 “Maybe it just hasn’t hit the main feeds yet.”
 “‘Mysterious Deaths in China!’ would get high ratings.”
 “Maybe it kills everyone so there’s no one left to report.”
 “Ooo scary!”
 “I heard it took him only two weeks to stop the Pandemic.”
 “Another month to get everyone inoculated.”
 “The inoculation was a placebo anyway just so the government could save face. The quarantines and martial law really stopped it.”
 “Oh that’s the worst conspiracy theory ever.”
 “No, it’s true. A bunch of people supposedly inoculated still died.”
 “Less than one in ten thousand though; that’s way lower than the overall mortality rate.”
 “You know how many people that adds up to though?”
 “Well sure, but-“
 Before the sides started palming their flatware, Samyan interrupted “If there were some new disease on the loose, the PM would say” and he imitated the Prime Minister “‘Verily hath we awakened from the illustrious Laboratories the magnificent Dr. Tenaka. Commence the rejoicingment.’” It was a pretty bad imitation, but of course that was the point because everyone laughed.
 Even Josh looked amused and declared “I can’t argue with that.”

The plaque outside the library quoted Dr. Andrews, the original head of the International Laboratories. His voice convinced the world to collectively build and fund an institute of pure knowledge with results to be shared with all of humanity, free of the constraints of nationalism and wealth accumulation.

His dream was for the library to be a place where researchers would gather to discuss the ideas of their work or literature and contribute to both personal and world knowledge. The plaque itself was far more eloquent, but it was the sort of thing a person my age would read once before making a joke about preferring television and moving on.

The library was always quiet in the afternoons. My assignment since I started had been listed as “Research.” That meant I was supposed to be learning more in my area of expertise, but I didn’t yet have one. Usually, the time went by pretty quickly; I could start reading a journal and then track back the references when it became too complicated.

After checking the sources of sources of sources, I'd end up searching through one of the many large textbooks on hand.

"Start at the beginning." my supervisor had said when I started, adding "It's an excellent place to begin." Then he gave me a hand-written list of possible topics and began a six-month sabbatical.

Then this morning, I was surprised to see Dr. Kavar come in and then happy but puzzled when he asked me if I'd mind a reassignment.

I tried to find out more about Dr. Tenaka, but he hadn't published a single paper in the last two hundred years. He'd only worked intermittently, but from his mind came some of the most important intellectual discoveries of the last ten generations. Or so we were told.

There were several books written about him, but he was still alive whereas most biographers were not, so they were mostly about events he was part of, not about him specifically. His lack of close friends for such a long time probably didn't help either. Without facts, it was no wonder rumors spread so easily.

I was really looking at the clock more than the texts. Finally, when it was close enough to three o'clock, I started walking slowly to Dr. Kavar's office.

"Please come in; I'll be just a moment. Have a seat and look this over." He was sitting at his desk going through his messages and barely looked up as he handed me some forms. They looked like standard confidentiality agreements; I signed them quickly and looked around at his tastefully full bookshelves and matching framed certificates. He finished typing with a flourish and stood up. "Okay! Ready to go?"

We walked briskly down long bright corridors.

"This must be rather exciting for you." He said it with a knowing smile.

"It's a little weird, but yeah." I answered.

"Yes, I expect it would be, but do well here and you'll have your pick of assignments. Not many scientists your age can list assisting Dr. Tenaka on their résumés."

I didn't know any scientists who could at all, regardless of age. "I'll try my best." I said in a low tone.

"Well don't worry about it too much; you're not expected to keep up with him so try to enjoy the work if you can."

These probably seemed like good words to say, but they didn't help me much.

At the elevator, Dr. Kavar pressed "B."

"Have you ever visited the basement?"

My credentials didn't allow me access, and he must have known this so I answered simply "No, this is my first time."

"We keep some very interesting things down here."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"There are the infectious diseases, parasites, and other nasty things we've removed from the world at large. Of course, all that's in a much more secure area than we'll be visiting. Only a handful of people in the world have access to that area."

He didn't need to add that he was a member of that handful. The elevator doors opened to a surprise. Replacing the uniformly clean light on off-white corridors of the labs above was a hallway filled with arched doorways, plastered walls, and hardwood

floors lit by incandescent lightbulbs set on wall fixtures. Everywhere was rich shadow and colors; even the floors creaked as we walked along.

Dr. Kavar took no notice of the surroundings. "By now, he'll be awake and ready to listen to the brief. I'll give him the facts and answer his questions. His time is valuable and he'll be anxious to work, so we won't trouble him with any unnecessary words."

This was obviously code for me to remain silent, but I didn't know where he got his assumptions so I asked "Have you worked with Dr. Tenaka before?"

"Oh no. The last time he was working, I was about your age." We'd stopped at a wooden door. Before he turned the knob, Dr. Kavar added "It really was a lifetime ago."

Dr. Tenaka was seated at a table with a cup of tea. He looked like his pictures – old, black hair mostly faded to gray, his face creased and wrinkled in a very scholarly manner. On his face he wore wiry silver eyeglasses.

He rose to meet us. Dr. Kavar introduced himself and shook Dr. Tenaka's hand.

Then he indicated me with one hand "This is Dr. Maki. She'll be available to assist you for as long as you require."

I'd graduated less than a year ago. The only people who seriously called me "Doctor" were my family. "Hi, you can just call me Kira."

As Dr. Tenaka gently clasped my hand in his, his black eyes focused quiet intelligence completely on mine. As he spoke "It's a pleasure to meet you", I heard a slight accent, crisp but old, like our surroundings.

"It's quite an honor to meet you. Is there anything you require?" Dr. Kavar hadn't seemed nearly this respectful with me alone.

Dr. Tenaka shook his head. "Mr. Murphy was kind enough to prepare tea." Then, after we'd all sat down, with a slight inclination of his eyebrows, he added "You have something interesting for me?"

"Oh yes." Dr. Kavar took a small datapad from his pocket. "During routine excavations, some biological material was discovered. The computer took longer than usual to analyze it, but we were able to reconstruct the organism's genome."

Dr. Tenaka listened though this patiently and calmly, fingers wrapped around his cup. He nodded his understanding, and Dr. Kavar continued.

"The sample is a little unusual; it contains over a hundred thousand encoding regions and almost ten billion base pairs." He said it with some emphasis, but it didn't mean much on its own. "That wouldn't be unusual except some of it matches up perfectly with something very familiar."

He pressed a button on the datapad and a small hologram, rotating slowly, sprang a familiar shape to life.

"It's a man" Dr. Tenaka exclaimed somewhat quietly.

I looked questioningly at Dr. Kavar, but he was obviously serious so I kept quiet and looked back to Dr. Tenaka. The human genome contained only three billion base pairs, so this clearly was not a man. But Dr. Tenaka wouldn't be woken up for something normal so I concentrated on looking confident and collected, like I knew this all along. Dr. Tenaka put down his cup, leaned forward in his chair, and said "That *is* interesting."

"Indeed it is. You can see here" He pressed again. The hologram of the man vanished and a bunch of small squiggly lines appeared. "all our usual chromosomes, though somewhat larger, plus these few extra."

“Fascinating.” Dr. Tenaka said quietly as he leaned closer to the image and stared raptly at it.

“As far as the human portion goes,” Dr. Kavar continued “he’s perfectly normal. He’d be rather muscular and a bit hairy, but no genetic susceptibilities or anything unusual.”

At this point, I held back the desire to blurt out questions. This just wasn’t possible. In my most professional voice, I asked “And we’re sure the computers didn’t make a mistake?”

Dr. Kavar turned to look at me and, without his voice betraying any of the reprimand I felt in his words, said “Quite sure. We’d not have woken Dr. Tenaka if there were even the slightest chance.”

I’d recognized this in advance, of course. As I went on, Dr. Tenaka looked at me in a very patient manner. Dr. Kavar, on the other hand, looked to have a finite store of patience, so I spoke quickly. “Right. It’s just that a computer is only as good as its programming and if the programming never was meant to encounter this situation...” Unfortunately, I didn’t have a good way to end the sentence and just trailed off.

Fortunately, Dr. Tenaka was now looking at Dr. Kavar with a look that seemed to say “What about it?” Even better, Dr. Kavar glanced at Dr. Tenaka and noticed; his response was therefore probably more tolerant than he would have liked.

“That’s an interesting possibility. It’d be very strange to end up with this result though.” Then he quickly added, turning to Dr. Tenaka, “But there’s all the extra encoding, with potentially significant effects. We’ve asked for your assistance because, while we could use the very fine minds already on staff, the magnitude of this discovery seemed to warrant your level of thinking and expertise.”

Dr. Tenaka nodded graciously. “I’m honored for the opportunity to be of assistance.”

“We’ve constructed the finest lab possible for you, and of course you’ll have priority on computer time. Dr. Maki here will be at your disposal as long as you require.”

Dr. Tenaka nodded respectfully. “Your hospitality exceeds your station, Dr. Kavar.” He waited for Dr. Kavar to accept the compliment before continuing. “Perhaps you could show me to my lab.”

So we stood and walked from the world of wood and warmth back to the realm of science. Dr. Kavar talked about the other relevant details.

“We’ve given you access to the research notes. This project is classified A1. That’s the highest level of administrative classification; this is not a military project. Still though, only perhaps a dozen individuals know of the project’s existence, so it goes without saying that we shouldn’t discuss it.”

He looked at me when he said the last part. I replied with a professional “Of course.” At that moment, I didn’t care why I was here; it was going to be exciting and little else mattered.

The lab contained sleek hardware at each of several workstations. There was a sink, a coffeemaker, a refrigerator, and Dr. Kavar showed the cabinets were stocked with food. They’d really gone out of their way.

On our way out, Dr. Kavar used his sleeve to polish a spot off the shiny nameplate on the door reading “Dr. Tenaka” in big letters, and underneath, slightly smaller, “Special Researcher”.

The morning was cool when we exited the black car stopped on the side of the road. The sky was just turning a light blue with orange in one direction. On the drive, I'd been asking questions and trying to talk with Kazuo and Kira, but they were quiet so I'd been quiet too.

My new boots felt heavy on my feet and made crunching noises in the dirt. I picked my legs up and down, feeling their weight. The land was flatter here, and there weren't many trees. I could have seen for miles, but there was so much dust in the air that the horizon was hazy.

Kira was standing slightly behind Kazuo, looking at the ground. She must have been noticing how dry it was too. Kazuo came close and put his hand on my shoulder. It felt light and insubstantial. He was so much less happy than he'd been before. "David, we haven't told you half of what you need to know. But you can do it. And afterwards, I hope you'll come back to us."

He was so serious. I put my hand on his shoulder and parroted his seriousness. "I will."

He put his arms around me, and I hugged him back. Kira stepped forward and hugged me too. Her arms were firm, and her back was warm and soft; the skin on her neck smelled like lavender, chamomile, honey, almond, and a just a tiny little bit of cinnamon. It must have been shampoo, conditioner, soap, and lotion all mixing together. Using so many things explained why her hair was always so shiny and smooth and her skin always looked so soft and perfect.

I liked holding her like that, with one arm over her shoulder and my other arm underneath her other shoulder, with my hands pressed against her back. There was a thin horizontal ridge there; I didn't know what it was, but she was so serious too I knew it wouldn't be polite to ask.

As she pulled back, she wiped her eyes and said "Take care of yourself."

I smiled and nodded. "Of course! See you soon."

Kazuo indicated down the street. "There's a town about three miles down the road. It's a good place to start." He nodded again and wiped his eyes too. He handed me my backpack, and they got back in the car.

I waved my arm at them as they turned around and drove away. No one had introduced me to the driver, and the glass panel had prevented me from saying hello during the drive. He was hiding behind dark glasses. I waved at him too with the fingers of my other hand, but I don't know if he saw me.