

Waterfall

By John Simpson – Germantown, Maryland

"If we don't get this under control, the Old Man's gonna replace us both with robots!"

Peters grunted by way of reply, more than the comment deserved. No robot ever made could replace human experience, or be flexible enough to adapt in an emergency -- which is what they were in right now. Absent a great deal of luck, the whole system would collapse. God only knew what might happen then.

A veteran spacer at forty-two, Jock Peters was Station Engineer, and the last thing he needed was to be told his job: not by the trillionaire whose cost-cutting layoffs and sub-spec construction methods had caused this mess, and certainly not by some snotnosed college boy pretending to be his superior.

Kid's not completely wrong, though, he thought. Things are FUBAR. At least lives aren't at risk. Then, reconsidering, he grimaced. I hope.

Aloud he said, "Check the pressure on number three dehumidifier."

His downy-faced boss did so. "Thirty-eight and dropping. When it gets below dew point, atmospheric moisture will start condensing." The kid's voice cracked. "All the roots will get wet, mildew and rot. We're gonna lose this whole crop!"

The least he could do is give me a hand, Peters thought unfairly. It takes skill to trace an electrical fault in even a simple device, and this orbital station, with ten miles of solar panels, a quarter million grow lamps, a hundred times as many underground irrigators, and perhaps ten billion individual support components all working together in an intricately balanced system,

was anything but simple. The lad's degree was in agricultural management. Damned college kid. An electrician's ticket would at least have been useful.

Peters worked steadily, testing one circuit at a time manually until he reached the next short. Sparks showered as the whole panel tripped -- again. "Fault in Circuit 32," he said laconically as he worked his way back down the resets, stopping at 31. More cross-wiring, dammit! I'm getting too old for this. For a moment he glared resentfully at the burnt-out hulk that had once been the computerized controls. Then he shook his head and got back to work.

"How long 'till night?" he asked, marking 32 and starting again at 33. His so-called manager mumbled unintelligibly and he asked again, louder.

"How should I know?" whined the boy.

With that, the long-suffering engineer finally ran out of patience. He stood, marched to where his nominal superior sat sulking, and... gently placed his hands on the young man's shoulders. Boy's trembling. Terrified. Their eyes met, locked. "Listen, kid. There's exactly two people on this whole station: you and me. Sink or swim, we're in this mess together. You can choose to help, or else you're part of the problem. Get me?"