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# POWER PLAY

**BEN BOVA**

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POWER PLAY

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## JAMES A. VAN ALLEN MUSEUM OF SCIENCE

MHD?” asked Jake Ross. “What’s MHD?”  
Leverett Cardwell smiled his enigmatic little smile and replied, “It stands for magnetohydrodynamics.”  
“Oh, like Alfvén.”

Jake was walking with the older man along the Hall of Planets, which ran the length of the museum’s planetarium. They were passing beneath the model of Mars, a rust-red globe dotted with long-dead volcanoes. He had first introduced himself to Dr. Cardwell at almost this exact spot, more than a dozen years earlier.

“Alfvén dealt with astrophysics. The branch of MHD I’m talking about now is a way of generating electricity very efficiently,” Cardwell went on, his tenor voice soft but perfectly clear. “An MHD generator can produce a lot of power in a relatively small piece of equipment.”

Jake nodded. Lev was up to something, he knew. The old man didn’t just chat to pass the time of day. He had some purpose in mind.

Jacob Ross had first come to the Van Allen museum on a mandatory class trip when he’d been in middle school. None of the guys wanted to go to a geeky science museum, Jake included. But once the teachers got the kids settled into the strange, round, domed room that housed the museum’s planetarium, the lights dimmed slowly until the place was pitch black. And then they turned on the stars. Thousands of stars sprang out of the darkness, with the faint glowing ribbon of the Milky Way arching among them. Young Jake got turned on, too. Sitting in the darkness, watching the stars wheel in stately procession overhead, he became hooked on astronomy for life.

He rode city buses to the museum every weekend. He scraped together enough money from his after-school jobs to buy a student

membership. He attended the planetarium shows so often he began to learn the lectures by heart.

And he discovered that the soft, clear voice that explained the stars in the darkness belonged to Dr. Leverett Cardwell, the planetarium's director. With some trepidation, Jake fumblingly asked Dr. Cardwell a question about his lecture one Sunday afternoon, out in the hallway under the model of Mars, while the rest of the audience streamed past after the planetarium show had ended.

"You've been coming pretty regularly, haven't you?" Cardwell asked the youngster.

Surprised and pleased that the director had noticed him, Jake stuttered, "Y . . . yessir."

Thus began a lifelong friendship. Cardwell took Jake under his wing, opened the planetarium's library to him, and helped him win a scholarship to the state university.

And now Lev was talking about something called MHD.

"Magnetohydrodynamics, huh?" Jake said.

Walking slowly toward the bright yellow globe of the Sun glowing above the museum's entrance lobby, Cardwell said, "There's a group of people in the university's electrical engineering department who are working on MHD power generation."

Why's he telling me this? Jake wondered. But he knew he wouldn't have to ask; Lev would explain it to him in his own time.

Jake had grown into a reasonably healthy young man. Scrawny as a child, picked on by the neighborhood bullies, he'd worked hard on homemade exercise equipment to build himself up. Now he stood just short of six feet tall, still on the lean side, but solid. His hair was dark and unruly, his face too long and horsy to satisfy him. Even so he'd been fairly popular with women, and married his high school sweetheart. But since his wife's fatal car accident he'd kept to himself.

Leverett Cardwell was a tiny man, round-faced, balding, so neat and carefully groomed that some thought him effeminate. His large, round, slightly protruding owl-gray eyes always seemed to Jake to be searching, inquisitive. Jake had never seen Lev wearing anything but a gray wool suit, winter or summer, and a jaunty little bow tie.

"I've been invited to a cocktail party by one of Frank Tomlinson's

people,” Cardwell said as they walked slowly toward the museum’s entrance.

Frowning at the seeming change of subject, Jake asked, “Isn’t he the guy they say might run against Senator Leeds?”

Cardwell nodded, his smile turning almost impish. “If Tomlinson decides to run, he’s going to need somebody on his staff to advise him about science. I think you could do the job very well, Jake.”

“Me?” Jake’s voice squeaked with surprise. “I’m just an associate professor. I don’t even have tenure yet.”

“Aren’t you up for tenure this year?”

Nodding gloomily, Jake answered, “Along with five other people, including a Hispanic woman. Besides, I’m the youngest. They’ll give it to one of the others this time around.”

Nonchalantly waving a hand in the air, Cardwell said, “Maybe not. Maybe they’ll surprise you.”

Jake made an unhappy grunt.

“I think it would be a good idea for you to attend the Tomlinson party,” Cardwell said. “Meet the man. Let him meet you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’ve been keeping to yourself too much, Jake. I know Louise’s death was a blow, but that was more than a year ago—”

Jake stopped walking. He could feel his guts twisting. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Nothing matters much anymore. It’s just . . . Lev, nothing’s any fun anymore.”

“You can’t have any fun sitting by yourself watching old movies on television.”

“I don’t just watch television.”

“What else do you do?”

“Prepare my lectures. Do my research. I’m working on a proposal for the imaging team on the next Mars lander.”

“You need a social life, my boy.”

Jake looked down at the man who’d been his mentor for so many years. Mentor? Hell, Lev’s been more of a father to me than my old man ever was, he told himself. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him. I’d still be back in the ’hood, in those narrow streets and row houses, working some dumb-ass job and dodging the wiseguys.

Reluctantly he asked, "I won't have to wear a tux, will I?"

Cardwell laughed. "Heavens, no. This is just a cocktail party, not a formal occasion."

Jake capitulated. "Okay, I'll go, if you think I should."

"I do indeed, Jacob."

"When and where? What time should I pick you up?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, I'm not going!"

"You're not?"

"No. This is an opportunity for you, Jake. They're not interested in an old geezer like me."

Jake felt stunned. Lev was past sixty, he knew. But that's not old! he told himself. There must be some other reason why he wants me to go without him.

## TOMLINSON RESIDENCE

The afternoon was sultry, so glaringly hot and humid that Jake was sweating by the time he'd walked from his curbside parking space up the gently rising bricked driveway to the front door of the Tomlinson mansion. It was a quietly imposing house that spoke of old money, in a part of the city that Jake had never been in before. He saw a pair of youngsters lounging by the Bentleys and Porsches parked along the driveway and realized they would have taken his old Mustang and parked it for him. It'd look great, he thought, his beat-up old gray ghost alongside all those luxury cars.

An actual butler in a dark suit opened the glass-paneled front door and looked at him questioningly. Jake could hear muted laughter and the hum of many conversations coming from inside the house.

"Um, I'm Jacob Ross," he said. "Dr. Cardwell—"

"You are expected, Dr. Ross," said the white-haired butler, allowing himself a minimal smile. He opened the door wide and gestured Jake through. It was blessedly cool inside, cool and dry.

The foyer was bigger than Jake's apartment. Marble floor. Broad staircase. Big windows with brocaded drapes shutting out the August heat. The sounds of the cocktail party were coming from a half-open door across the way, between two large paintings of soft green landscapes.

Jake felt mildly puzzled. Lev had told him to be there by four P.M. It was still a few minutes before four, yet the party seemed to be in full swing already.

"This way, sir," said the butler in a quiet voice, not much above a whisper.

He led Jake across the foyer and pulled the half-open door all the way. The room beyond was crammed with people talking, laughing, drinking. Somewhere in the crowd someone was playing a piano. The men were mostly in suits, although Jake noticed some blue jeans and denim jackets among them. The women were young, fashionably dressed, glowing with jewelry and the self-assurance of wealth.

Feeling slightly shabby in his old gray slacks and navy blazer, Jake stepped into the crowd. At least I'm wearing a tie, he said to himself. A dark-suited waiter appeared at his side.

"What can I get for you, sir?"

Thinking about the drive back across town, Jake asked, "Do you have any ginger beer?"

"Of course." The waiter disappeared into the chattering crowd.

A young woman smiled at him. "You're Dr. Ross, aren't you?"

Surprised to be recognized, Jake replied, "Jake Ross, yes."

"I'm Amy Wexler. One of Mr. Tomlinson's volunteers."

She was pretty, with a lively smile and fresh, sparkling eyes. Like a cheerleader, Jake thought. Slim figure, strong cheekbones, beautiful honey blond hair cascading to her shoulders. Floor-length skirt of swirling blues and greens, soft blue sweater over a white blouse. Bracelets clattered on her wrist as she extended her hand to Jake.

Are those real gold? he wondered as he took her hand.

"Mr. Tomlinson wants to talk with you in private, so don't leave before the two of you have had a chance to chat, okay?"

Jake nodded, wondering what he should say, what he could say. The waiter reappeared with a tall glass of ginger beer on a silver tray and Amy Wexler melted back into the crowd. Jake looked around for a familiar face, knowing that there couldn't be anybody he knew in this bunch. These people come from money, he knew. They wouldn't be caught dead in my neighborhood.

"Some party, isn't it?"

Jake turned to see a man in a suede jacket and jeans grinning at him. Instead of a tie he wore at his throat a bolo with a jet-black chunk of onyx set in intricately worked silver.

"I'm Bob Rogers," the man said, extending his hand.

Jake shook hands with him. “Jake Ross.”

Rogers was about ten years older than him, Jake judged. His face was seamed, as if he’d spent a good deal of his life out in the open. He had a lean, leathery look to him, emphasized by the suede jacket and bolo. Crinkly pale blue eyes and wispy sandy hair. He held a tapered pilsner glass in one hand, nearly empty.

“You think all these people will support Tomlinson if he runs?” Rogers asked.

Jake hesitated a moment. Then he replied, “If he runs, I guess they will. They must be his friends.”

His grin widening a bit, Rogers said, “If Tomlinson decides to run for the Senate, he’ll ask them to open their checkbooks. Then we’ll see how many of them are really his friends.”

Jake grinned back. “Yeah, I guess it’s easy to be a friend when the guy’s handing out free drinks.”

Rogers pointed toward the big French doors on one side of the room. “Looks a little less crowded over there.”

Jake edged through the crowd alongside Rogers. Through the tall glass doors Jake could see green hedges baking in the afternoon sunshine and a corner of a swimming pool.

“Bet that’s an Olympic-sized pool,” Rogers said. “Nothing halfway about the Tomlinsons.”

“You know them?” Jake asked.

“I’ve met him and his father a couple of times. At university functions. They’re big donors.”

“Are you at the university?”

“Electrical engineering department.”

Feeling relieved, Jake said, “Astronomy.”

“No kidding?”

“Do you know—”

Jake felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning, he saw Amy Wexler standing beside him.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she said, beaming that cheerleader’s smile at him. “Mr. Tomlinson would like to see you now, Dr. Ross. In the library.”

Jake gave Rogers a rueful look. Rogers hoisted his nearly empty glass of beer and said, "I'll see you later, Jake."

"Right." And he let Amy Wexler lead him through the oblivious crowd toward the library and his private chat with B. Franklin Tomlinson.