

*"The Unlikely Discovery of Jubal Seeker"*

*William Hrdina*

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Jubal Seeker sat cross-legged on his only chair. It was an ascetic, straight backed wooden torture device; bereft of padding or even a hint of comfort. Even though he was over 70 years old, Jubal didn't mind the pain in his back - his mind was focused elsewhere. A remarkably eclectic pile of wires, cannibalized computer parts, tools, delivery food containers, soldering guns, microprocessor boards, and empty fluid bottles lay scattered around him like leaves ripped from a tree in a hurricane. A carefully crafted tin-foil hat sat perched on the top of his bald head, his liver spots reflected in the hat's shiny surface.

Crammed into every space not covered with food or electronics were books; the old-fashioned paper kind you couldn't find anywhere anymore. Jubal remembered the purging- when the men had come door to door, collecting everyone's books for mandatory recycling. He remembered the trucks, monstrous things painted black with flames lapping up from the bed and the men in black masks pouring out of the vehicles like roaches. He remembered the screams of those foolish enough to resist. But they didn't get his books- he was too smart for them; even if he couldn't quite remember what he'd done to keep his precious tomes safe.

Jubal paid the messy state of his apartment no mind- he was barely aware it was there. His gaze was almost always locked on the far end of his small living space, where the congested and chaotic mish-mash of the room ended abruptly at a thick white line painted on the floor. Beyond this line was a small area, maybe five feet square, that Jubal thought of as his temple.

The temple floor was painted flat black- as were the walls and ceiling. In the center of this space, carefully measured to be equidistant from every wall, was a box, painted with the same black paint as the walls. A product of odd and hazy dreams, the box was two feet square, with a silver antennae poking out of the top. A single wire came out of the bottom and snaked over to the wall where it sat unplugged next to the electrical outlet.

Jubal had taken long weeks in illegally hooking up the plug to the neighbor's electrical supply. He did this in the hope the authorities would be delayed in their search for him when he finally plugged the box in.

According to his calculations, a slew of complicated equations written in the margins of the pages of his books; a few minutes was all he was going to need. Whether he succeeded or failed, he expected the retribution from the men in black masks to be swift and brutal. THEY didn't look too kindly on unauthorized science experiments and Jubal knew it. Finding himself nervous and agitated in a way he didn't know he was still capable of, Jubal walked to his room's one small window and peeked out. The world outside whizzed and rushed, flowed and bumped with the raging temperament of humanity and the mere sight of it nearly caused him to have a panic attack.

Cars whizzed by his tenth story window and individual commuters floated by in their jetpacks. It still made Jubal shiver to see people hanging in the air like insects. No

matter how many times he saw it, the entire process just struck him as wrong. Perhaps this was because he could still remember the time before the change.

Jubal didn't know how old he actually was, but he could remember the time before the war- before the rebuilding. Before the New Crusades swept across the planet like a wildfire; the angels and demons in open warfare over humanity.

It was a horrible affair, and Jubal understood when people didn't want to talk about it; but he didn't understand why they didn't even want to admit it had happened at all. It didn't matter though, he could remember the time before the powers-that-be decided the non-believers must be culled, trimmed back from the shrub of humanity- and no amount of denials would make him forget.

Looking out of his small window, Jubal remembered watching the demons flying around and above the armies who carried the banner of God. The same armies that would find him, torture him, kill him, if his box didn't work.

He shivered and adjusted the tin-foil hat on his head.

Jubal Seeker saw himself as a monk and a scientist- a source for the enlightenment of God. Not THEIR God, HIS God. The true God, the God of his dreams. Jubal saw it as his destiny to use science to bring an awakening to the world- to do what science had hitherto been unable to accomplish. Jubal was going to prove the existence of God by building a device to speak to him directly. A radio to God, a device to crush faith, to give experience.

To realign the world. The box was his salvation.

Sometimes, it bothered Jubal that he didn't understand how the box worked. He'd studied hard, the books piled up around him were testament to his dedication. But in truth, Jubal was working blind. There were days when he did nothing but pace through the detritus of his room and wonder if he'd gone mad, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror with the crinkled reflection of his tin foil hat.

Insanity stalked the elderly, and Jubal knew it.

Jubal had even heard it sometimes. He'd even seen it; stalking the hallway outside of his room. Sometimes it would even knock, the insidious 'shave and a haircut.' But Jubal never let insanity in.

He wasn't crazy.

The real worry was THEM. The men in the black masks. No matter how many people told him he was crazy, Jubal could see THEM. Late at night they came. Jubal had last seen them driving up behind some poor unsuspecting soul in one of their windowless vans. The person was walking along and all of a sudden the door to the van swept open and whoosh- gone.

No. He wasn't paranoid. They really were out to get him. You weren't paranoid if they were out to get you. Jubal was a man under siege. A heretic of the mind. He was afraid and alone. He felt like he was trapped in the belly of a horrible machine. Some days Jubal wanted to end it all, and he'd even gone so far as to twice sit in his bathtub, hip deep in the warm water, shaving razor to his wrist. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. The first time he'd only managed a nick. The second wasn't even that successful.

He'd given up hope. But, then the dreams started.

Bright dreams. A tornado and being swept up, and then, oddly- schematics. A full set of three-dimensional electrical schematics floated in the air all around his head like a cloud of gnats.

It was the first time he saw the box.

He would see the box again the next night. And the night after.

After the third straight night, Jubal decided he would try to build it. He went out of his sanctum for the first time in years, a knit cap pulled over his tin foil hat. No one paid him any mind. He walked on the ground with the rest of the poor and forgotten. The important people, the ones who mattered, buzzed around far over his head. Occasionally, the loud rumble of an interplanetary shuttle would draw his eye, but such adventures were far beyond his economic status.

Jubal was an old man, walking alone. His hands cold. What became of him was beneath interest- so long as he believed. So long as he didn't get on THEIR radar- he counted on his poverty to insulate him from the machine's attention. Poverty, and his tin-foil hat.

Eventually, he found what he was looking for- the forbidden book warehouse, a large building on a deserted side street. The skeleton limbs of light poles stood along the road, but their lamps had long ago gone dim. Jubal peered through a dirty window into the vast dark room beyond. The outlines of the books were everywhere; identifiable even in shadow. Jubal looked around. There was no one out on the street.

It only took a few seconds of looking before Jubal spied a large rock. He picked it up, took one more glance around, and chucked the rock through the window. There was a loud crash and a rain of glass. When it was over, Jubal climbed in, careful not to cut himself on the glass. He cast around until he found the technical manuals and took as much as he could carry.

He would return to the forbidden warehouse many times, the window he broke was never repaired. But even after a year of visits without a single challenge, Jubal was still frightened every time.

Little by little he gathered the information and the components he needed. He never worked in the same part of the city twice and sometimes he took weeks off just to be safe. Jubal dreamt about the plans, and when he woke up he would sketch as much as he could remember. Over time the jigsaw puzzle of schematics began to fall together. He laid them out as small as he could onto a single slip of paper he kept in a small cut out panel in the floor. When he wanted to study them, he had to use a magnifying glass.

He worked on his box and he studied and he slept so he could dream. Time passed.

And now it was finished.

Jubal unwound his feet and placed them on the floor, his back straight against the chair, his held high. He could feel his heart beating in his chest, it felt like a bird, panicking, racing around and beating helplessly against the walls of its cage. Everything in Jubal's vision fell away, all that existed was the box.

After nearly 4 years of work, the time had finally come.

Without looking at the mess around him, Jubal stepped deftly across the room, his feet finding the open spaces in the junk with a Zen-like coordination. He stopped with his toes on the edge of the white line.

Jubal's breath came in small, hurried gusts. With a loud crack of his knees, the old man knelt, and stretched his hands out towards the box. Even with the electricity disconnected, the box seemed to thrum with power. He could see it like an aura. Around him the angels spun, singing their praises to his accomplishment.

Jubal folded his hands and prayed. He spoke slowly, each word an exaltation to God. He stayed like this for two hours, praying and observing the army of angels flying past his windows, around him and through him, guarding him; as natural in their flight as the people in jetpacks were unnatural.

When Jubal was finished, he rose up again, took a deep breath, and removed the tin foil hat from his head for the first time in years. The skin underneath was translucently pale. He crumbled the foil into a ball and dropped it onto the floor on the messy side of the white line.

With the hat off, Jubal moved quickly. He walked to the wall, picked up the wire and plugged it in. The potential energy became kinetic and a loud hum began to emanate from the box. Jubal's eyes grew wide as the antennae began to glow with a white light.

Without hesitation, Jubal fell again to his knees. The light was warm on his face, the brightness so intense a black hole grew in the middle of his vision. The hole grew until all he could see was darkness. But Jubal was not afraid. Blinded, but still thinking clearly and calmly, Jubal shuffled forward on his knees. The angels around him began to sing. He couldn't see them, but hearing their voices, he knew they were still there.

With a deep breath of anticipation, Jubal wrapped his hands around the glowing antennae.

There was an amazingly loud popping sound. And in the next moment he knew he'd succeeded.

The men in black masks would never be able to find him.

Jubal Seeker was finally with God.

Two days later, the door to Jubal's apartment was kicked in by a team of police responding to reports from Jubal's neighbors of a particularly bad smell coming out from under the door. They found him dead on the floor.

The coroner's report found that he'd electrocuted himself. By interviewing the neighbors, the police discovered that Jubal was known as a crazy old man, tormented by visions many said were probably linked to the fact that his entire family had been killed in a car crash several decades earlier.

But no one noticed when two days later, two men, dressed identically in dark clothes, wearing black masks, broke into the yet to be emptied apartment and took only one thing before disappearing into the night.

A certain black box.