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Engineering Reality
by Jeff Hecht
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Science Fiction

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Ping, ping, ping, went the power supply for the laser. At each ping, a surge of current triggered the laser to fire a pulse of light at a detector just a few inches away. The detector turned the light into an electrical signal, which travelled through a thin cable to a module plugged into the latest in signal-processing electronics.

"Still 50.2 millijoules a pulse, dammit," muttered the older of the two engineers, pointing to a digital readout.

"But we're getting close to the repetition rate, Ravi," said the younger, pointing to a screen that showed the shape of the light pulse. "The contract says 100 pulses per minute, and we're up to 48 now."

"That's not good enough, Jose. We might get away with 48 if we could meet the pulse energy specification. But the Air Force wants 500 millijoules a pulse at 100 pulses per minute. And Col. Labrowski is coming for a performance review tomorrow!"

The younger engineer looked uneasily at the clock and saw it was after 1 a.m. His sense of precision got the better of his discretion. "Er, Ravi," he gestured toward the clock. "She's coming today. In just under nine hours."

Ravi swore what Jose assumed must be an obscenity in his native tongue. "We're going to have to try cranking this thing up." He put his safety goggles on and walked back to the optical table. "How much more can this power supply take?"

"I don't know. We're 70% over rated capacity already."

Ravi switched off the laser, and began making adjustments. "I hope they were conservative in designing it."

"Er, I don't think so, Ravi." One reason they were behind schedule was that the electrical engineering section had been late getting the power supply ready.

"Well, they better have been conservative." Ravi jammed the safety interlock so he could leave the case open, then stepped back. "Watch the screen and see what this does," he said, turning the key interlock to start the laser.

Ping, ping, ping, ping, BANG! went the laser.

Jose hit the floor. Ravi swore more foul-sounding words. Something bounced off the ceiling tiles and onto the floor. The room smelled of the ozone of an electric discharge and the smoke of something electrical burning. There was no more pingping.

"What was it?" asked Jose, looking up from the floor.

There was no answer.

Frightened, Jose looked under the optical table to see if something had happened to Ravi. He saw the other engineer's legs, running. Then he heard the whoosh of a fire extinguisher.

"That is the end of that," sighed Ravi.

Jose stood up, slowly and carefully. Halon foam covered the remains of the power supply and the laser head. "That was the best laser rod we had," he sighed.

"And it only gave us fifty lousy millijoules a pulse. The colonel is going to blow her top. Six months late, and now we don't have a working system to show her."

"At least we've got the data stored in memory. I'll put it on disk and..." Jose stopped cold as he glanced at the blank screen. The instruments must have been on the same circuit breaker as the laser. With the power gone, the data was gone forever. "Oh no!"

Ravi took off his safety goggles and stared silently at the dead instruments. "Gone?"

The younger man nodded grimly.

"If anything can go wrong, it will," Ravi muttered, tossing his goggles onto the table, where they slipped into the foamy mess. "What was the best you recorded this afternoon?"

"It wasn't very good. Maybe ten millijoules." Jose hoped it was that much.

"And what about another demo? Do you think we have enough pieces? I can't remember what we did with that other laser head..."

"It had optical damage to the rod. I sent out for repairs last week."

"We have to do something," Ravi pleaded. "They fire project managers for things like this. I have kids in college!"

"Maybe we could pray?"

"Pray? For what? For mercy from management?"

A glimmer of an idea tickled the back of Jose's mind. "You're a Hindu aren't you?"

Ravi gave the younger man a strange look. The two had never talked about religion, and it seemed a strange time to start. "Well, yes, sort of." It was something he hadn't thought about in quite a while.

"So you've got lots of gods, right?"

Ravi nodded slowly.

"Is there a god of engineering?"

The older man's eyes opened wide. "I never heard of one. The Hindu religion is thousands of years old; it goes back before there were engineers."

"But maybe there is one and you can pray to him even if you don't know his name?"

"Maybe that's all that's left for us to try," Ravi sighed, then had his own thought. "You're Catholic aren't you? You've got lots of saints, don't you?"

"Yes, but there's no patron saint of engineering."

"So pray to the unknown saints that they will have mercy on us in the morning."

"The Church has an All Saints' Day." Jose tried to remember the special prayers to unknown saints. He slipped to his knees and closed his eyes to pray. He was surprised how well he remembered the words from childhood lessons. He heard Ravi praying in his own tongue. The prayers made him feel better, until, just as they finished, the lights went out.

"It figures," muttered Ravi. "We'll have to feel our way to the hall."

"Hello," came a strange voice.

Ravi and Jose were very still. The fluorescent lights flickered briefly, and they saw the shadow of someone else in the lab. The lights flickered again, then came back on.

A short bald man with a round, red face stood beside the table. The foul stench of his stubby cigar wafted through the air. His white shirt was open at the neck, with sleeves rolled up beyond the elbows; a necktie hung

loose about the collar. A pencil was perched precariously on his glasses, leaning on one ear and his whitish hair. "You called me?"

"We did?" asked Jose.

"You asked for the god and the patron saint of engineers."

Ravi and Jose nodded uneasily.

"That's me," the newcomer said. "Sorry if I'm a bit rushed, but I've been putting in a lot of overtime at NASA. The name's Murphy."

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