MATTHEW HUGHES

NOT A PROBLEM

Bunky Sansom was the kind of man who knew that the time to say yes was when all around him were saying no. Or vice versa. That's how he got to be a multi-billionaire.

When he heard the United Nations Secretary-General say, "Climate change is now a reality. Nothing we can do in our lifetimes can reverse it," Bunky's answer was, "I don't buy it, lady. Something can always be done."

The Secretary-General's image was superimposed on video of the last dike failing on the last of Kiribati's storm-swept chain of islands. Bunky watched the remaining few thousand of the now drowned nation's population forming forlorn lines and wading out to the UN flotilla that would take them to join the rest of their compatriots huddled in Australian and New Zealand refugee camps.

He told the hi-def to turn itself off and stepped out onto the balcony of his mountainside eyrie, with its grand-scale view of Vancouver's golden towers, crowded together within the confines of the massive seawall that had been one of Canada's bicentennial projects. But instead of looking down at the place where he had made his wealth, he looked up and saw the stars.

That's when he got the idea. "We need help," he said. "It's gotta be out there, somewhere."

Bunker Hill Sansom—though he told everyone to call him Bunky, and God help any who didn't—had made his billions by finding new ways to do old things. Inarguably, his ways were better ways, provided your definition of "better" was "more fashionable." He had pioneered the genetic redesign of key elements of the human genome—well, not the actual redesign, but the marketing of the application, through a world-wide string of franchise clinics that sold the fruits of his genius to the eager masses.

So while others were eliminating hereditary disease or enhancing intelligence, Sansom was making it possible for parents to bear children with huge, dark eyes the size of silver dollars—you couldn't look at them without saying "Aw"—or with the silky blue hair that, this year, was all the rage in Japan. He was already taking pre-orders for next year's sensation: feathers!

As soon as he received his inspiration about help from the stars, Bunky put some people on it. They reported back that scientists had been scanning the stars for intelligent signals for about a century.

“And what have they got?” he said.

“Well, nothing,” said his number-one baby-strangler. Actually, Bunky had never happened to need a baby strangled, but if he ever did, Number-One was there to take care of it.

“Nothing? A hundred years and they’ve got nothing?”

“They don’t have much money.”

“How much is not much?” Bunky said. He didn’t believe the number his people gave him. It was less than he’d spent on media alone when he’d launched the modification that let people have babies that produced excrement in about the same quantity and conformation as a rabbit’s. “Chicken feed,” he said. “Put a coupla billion into it.”

His people went away and put a couple of billion into the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Every month, he got reports; every month, progress was skimpy. Like the time his team reported that they’d overheard signals from deeper in the galaxy that were definitely coherent, but the scientists decoding the transmissions concluded that the senders were insectoids.

“Insectoids?” Bunky said. “You mean, like, bugs?”

“Yes, sir,” said Number-One.

“Big bugs?”

“Yes, sir.”

Bunky shivered. “Give ’em another billion but tell ’em they gotta look somewheres else. Bugs ain’t gonna help us.”

More months went by. The sea barriers protecting lower Manhattan cracked, then collapsed under the continuous battering from Atlantic waves. “I told ’em they shouldn’ta let the Mob finesse those construction contracts,” Bunky said. He called Number-One and said, “Whatta we hear from space?”

The man had just been about to call the boss. “Something good,” he said.

“Not bugs?”

“Not bugs. More like slugs, but smart slugs.”

“What’s good about smart slugs?” Bunky said.

“They sent through the schematics for a different kind of communicator. We can talk to them in real time, no more waiting years for messages to go out and come back.”

“That’s sounds good.”

A week went by. Number-one called back. “We made contact.”

“Excellent. Can they help us?”

“There’s a problem.”

“What problem?”

“Well, we established communication, but the only thing they wanted to know is did we have any fafashertzz we wanted to get rid of?”

“Fafashertzz?” Bunky said. “What’s fafashertzz?”

“They sent another schematic. It appears to be what our scientists call a transuranic element, but way heavier than anything we’ve ever conceived of. You’d need a cyclotron the size of the moon to make it.”

“So our guys told these slugs we were all out of fafashertzz?”

“They did.”

“And?”

“Dial tone. No answer. Nada. Mukwoy.”

“Buncha jerks!” Bunky said. “Still, whatta ya expect from slugs?”

“But there’s good news,” said Number-one.

“Tell me.”

“The communicator works on other frequencies. Our brainiacs say it looks like we can start calling around, see if we can find someone not so single-minded.”

Bunky had built his business partly on an aggressive telemarketing campaign. “Put another billion into it,” he said, “build a few million of those things and hire India to make the calls.”

To himself, he said, This works out, I could rule the world. And when Bunky Sansom talked to himself, he never indulged in hyperbole.

“It’s looking good, boss.”

“It better,” Bunky said. For the umpteenth time, the worst-case global warming scenarios had proved to be too optimistic: now the UN climatologists were predicting that everything from the Gulf of Mexico to the Black Hills was going to end up as a warm, shallow sea. “So whatta we got?”

“We’re talking to about twenty civilizations, maybe half of them within bluberiskint distance.”

“What’s this bluberiskint?”

“Seems to be the main purpose of fafashertzz—some kind of interstellar faster-than-light drive.”

“So, we’re talking to ten or a dozen kindsa space aliens,” Bunky said. A thought occurred to him. “How many of them are bugs?”

“Big bugs?”

“Size don’t matter.”

“Three.”

“And the rest? Can they help us?”

Number-One made an it-ain’t-good-news face. “Most of them first want to know if we’ve got any fafashertzz.”

Bunky looked at the ceiling, which was painted with scenes of triumph from his long contrarian career. “Give me somethin’ here,” he said, “’fore I drown.”

Number-One said, “There’s one good prospect.” He caught his boss’s sideways look and added, “And they’re not bugs or slugs. They look like big birds, although they’ve got teeth.”

Bunky tried it out in his head. “Birds aren’t so bad. How big?”

“Pretty big. Hard to tell. Maybe twenty feet high.”

“That’s some bird,” Bunky said. “And with teeth yet.”

“The thing is,” Number-One said, “they said they were glad we got in touch. They’re familiar with our world. When we told them it was heating up, the answer came back: ‘Not a problem.’“

“Not a problem?” Bunky said the words again, slowly. “I like their attitude. And they’re within whatsit distance?”

“They can be here in a month.”

Bunky didn’t get where he was by procrastinating. He slapped one plump hand down onto the marble top of his decision desk. “Sign ’em to an exclusive contract. Give ’em whatever they want.”

“Already done,” said Number-One. “Everything we proposed, they said, ‘Not a problem’.”

“I like these birds,” Bunky said. “Get the PR and media people in here. We gotta plan the announcement.”

The world took Bunky Sansom to its bosom like never before. He had more honorary citizenships, keys to cities and propositions from hot celebrity babes than he knew what to do with. Not only did Not a problem become his signature phrase, but three countries and seven states adopted it as their official mottoes. Privately, he was already negotiating the protocols that would see him become de facto ruler of the world.

Three weeks after he made the big announcement, the first of the expected spaceships were detected decelerating out beyond the orbits of the gas giants. Two days later, the lead ship eased itself into orbit and then, after circling Earth a few times, descended gently into the atmosphere and came to hover over the coordinates Bunky’s people had sent. For his convenience, the contact site was the roof of the Sansom Enterprises’ head office, a vast, truncated pyramid overlooking the sea-girt island that was all that now remained of Vancouver.

The roof was huge, but even so the ship was too large to land on it. It was too large to land on the shrunken city. Instead it hovered a few yards above where Bunky waited with the Secretary-General, a flock of Presidents and Prime Ministers, a few kings and queens, and one ayatollah.

From the ship’s flat base, a long, wide ramp uncurled itself. There was a pregnant pause, then the first of the arrivals came down the sloping gangway.

“That’s some bird,” Bunky said to Number-One. “Twenty-feet, nothin’—that thing goes thirty.”

“I don’t think it’s a bird,” Number-One said. “It’s got feathers, all right, but those are arms, not wings. And those teeth—”

The Secretary-General was speaking. She offered a welcome from all the people of the Earth, and thanked the newcomers for their kindness in coming to help with the problem of global warming. Bunky stepped up proudly beside her, carefully prepared speech in his hand.

The huge feathered being opened its mouth in a kind of smile, revealing dozens of teeth shaped like curved daggers. Its voice was a series of hisses and squawks, but Bunky heard a translation from an earpiece that connected to a device that was also the result of the communicator schematic the slugs had sent through. He had already made a fresh billion from manufacturing it.

“We keep telling you,” the creature said, “it’s not a problem—it’s a solution.” It cast its plate-sized, yellow-irised eyes across the crowd of dignitaries then focused on the King of Tonga. A clawed hand as wide as an armchair scooped up the portly monarch. Then, almost before the king could scream, the foot-long teeth bit off his top half.

The jaws crunched. A spray of blood, bone flakes and meat scraps speckled the heads and shoulders of the dignitaries as they turned and fought each other to reach the roof’s single exit. Bunky heard the voice in his ear say, “Hey, didn’t I tell you they’d taste just like sheeshrak? Come on, try one!”

Then the claws closed around Bunky’s torso—he was the plumpest specimen still uncaught—and he was carried to the edge of the roof. He saw the big three-toed feet sink deep into the tar-and-gravel surface with each step. From behind his captor he heard a cacophony of screams and feeding sounds, while the translator conveyed the squabbles over the choicer morsels.

Soon it grew quiet. He twisted in the thing’s scaly grip and saw it looking out over the warm sea, its nostrils distending as it breathed in the thick and sultry air. Above it, the sky was now full of immense ships.

The great voice hissed and clacked, the translation duly fed into the billionaire’s ear: “It’s so good to be back. It’ll be like we never left.”

“Listen,” Bunky gasped, as he was lifted, and the blood-stained jaws opened wide.

A moment later, the translator said, sliding down the dinosaur’s gullet, “Or maybe not sheeshrak. Maybe chikkichuk.”