

Power to Power

by James R. Hardin

Now I'm living in hiding, in—well, you don't need to know where, and my signal is going through enough fake IDs and VPNs to keep anyone from tracing it, I hope. All because I single-handedly saved the world. Oh, and caused the biggest energy crisis the world has ever seen.

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The world's energy shortage and greenhouse gas abundance had continued to increase until even the naysayers couldn't ignore the effects. The nine wealthiest men in the United States proposed a bold, over-and-done-with solution. They would combine their resources and build an enormous solar energy collection satellite. Of course, they'd want tax exemptions and government funding from all the nations that could afford it, but they'd largely finance the construction.

The Power1 Platform would orbit the Earth in a high polar orbit, so it and the Earth would never shade each other. Its enormous solar collector, a thin square membrane more than 600 kilometers on a side, would gather enough energy to provide all that the entire world needed. It would beam that energy to various collection points on the Earth in turn, charging huge batteries at each. Energy for everyone, developed and undeveloped countries alike, would be cheap and abundant.

The political party currently in power in the US, known as the Beaver Party, saw an opportunity to take credit for a grand solution and to eliminate the criticism of their lackluster efforts to address energy and global warming, so they endorsed this proposal enthusiastically. The Mongoose Party therefore had to oppose it, of course. They brought up the Isaac Asimov story "Reason," in which characters worried about what would happen if such a high-energy beam deviated from its intended collection point on Earth.

Well, in the story, things worked out even with a crazy robot at the controls, so I

figured that nine wealthy humans with their personal fortunes riding on this would find a way to keep the beam properly aimed.

Other nations had a different worry: the beam could move from its intended collection point on purpose instead of by accident. The Power1 Platform appeared to have great military potential. A think tank in Africa proposed building several smaller power platforms and giving control of each to different entities, as a system of checks and balances. This would also provide coverage for the entire Earth all the time, reducing the required battery storage considerably.

But the billionaires pointed out that they were a business, not a government, and they'd have no financial interest in flaming any of their customers. Furthermore, building one big power platform would be cheaper than building several smaller ones, so they weren't interested in changing their plans.

Those arguments made sense to me. After all, any powerful technology can be dangerous if misused. Imagine if some terrorist pulled all the control rods from a nuclear reactor, for example. Or flew an airplane into a building—we can't ban all airplanes!

Cynics pointed out that Vic Link, the wealthiest and best-known of the billionaires, had invested heavily in battery manufacturing, so he might have his own reasons for requiring the collection points to need huge banks of batteries.

After the requisite debates had been held, and the complaints from other nations had been heard, discussed, sympathized with, and ignored, the Beaver Party approved the plan without any Mongoose votes, and construction began. Other nations, realizing they had to pay now to get the energy later, grudgingly chipped in. The nine financiers maintained control of the new consortium they formed as the Board of Directors of MultiSpace Power (a name that made no sense but sounded great in press releases).

How did I fit into all this? I was an astronaut and repair technician who'd been hired away from NASA by one of the Directors' space cargo and tourism companies. I immediately applied for a transfer to MultiSpace Power, eager to advance this magnificent solution to two of the world's biggest problems. I was accepted, which

turned out to be a good thing, though not for the reasons I thought at the time.

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A few months after construction of the Power1 Platform began, I met and started dating Ann, an intense and pretty young woman in the public relations department. She drafted me to appear in some of the company's promotional videos as the stereotypical hardworking guy laboring to get you the energy you need. My face became recognized as the face of MultiSpace Power as much as Vic Link's, the most outspoken of the Directors.

One evening Ann called me. Her excitement seemed to burst beyond the edges of the phone's small screen. "Have you heard about the match demonstration?"

"The what?"

"Oh. Well, you know how some of the Mongoose Party die-hards have been stoking up fears about the safety of beaming the energy to Earth?"

"Yeah. I saw where they even claimed a test had gone bad and sunk a company ship in the Pacific."

"Well, the Directors got tired of these conspiracy theories. You know we've built a couple of satellites with high-powered lasers onboard to protect the Power1 Platform from space debris and meteors and stuff. They're going to use one of those to demonstrate the accuracy we've achieved. They're going to have somebody hold a match and let the satellite light it, like the William Tell story!"

I chuckled. "Wow. What poor fool are they going to get to do that?"

She frowned. "Um, we kind of thought it would be you."

My eyebrows popped up. "Say what?"

"You'll be perfect! Everybody already knows you as Marcel the MultiSpace guy! And my department head thinks it'll help showcase the company's commitment to diversity."

It sounded more to me like maybe they just wanted to put the expendable Black guy out there. Which also made me wonder just why they'd chosen me for their ads.

Better not to think too much about it. I liked my job and wanted to keep it. And

as a practical matter, I figured I was a pretty small target, so if they missed, they probably wouldn't hit me. So after I made Ann commit to getting me a really good bonus for this, I agreed.

And that's how I found myself standing in the headquarters parking lot a week later, holding a long fireplace match (not long enough!) at arm's length, trying to look confident, and pretending the wobble in the match was me wiggling it for effect instead of my arm trembling. They wouldn't let me use a pair of tongs to hold the match farther away—would ruin the image, the PR guys said. Right on schedule, the end of the match lit—no, really it exploded with a flash and a loud pop, and a smoking hole appeared in the asphalt below the match.

As I gazed at the white wisps drifting from the stub of my match, I began to think more about the military potential of the Power1 Platform.

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A few years later, with much fanfare, the Power1 Platform went online. It began beaming energy to Earth, fulfilling its technical goals and financial commitments flawlessly.

For a while. After about eight months, the growing pains common to new technologies manifested themselves, and some problem on the platform caused the output to drop by about 20 percent. Power had to be rationed while the engineers planned a repair. I read that this caused considerable hardship in some countries, especially the undeveloped nations that were paying the least for their power, but the United States continued receiving its full allocation, so most people here didn't pay it much attention.

MultiSpace needed someone to fly one of their spaceplanes to the Power1 Platform and replace the failed parts. Well, who better than an astronaut/technician who was already known as the face of MultiSpace? This time I didn't argue with their choice. I hadn't gotten to fly anything for quite a while, and those little spaceplanes handled like a dream. The mission was a success, full power was restored, and I looked like a hero for just doing a straightforward maintenance job.

The Directors decided there should be a routine maintenance checkout at the platform annually, just to make sure. I volunteered even before they asked me.

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Everyone was glad to have the power back, but other nations were not so happy about how the power had been allocated during the cutback. Russia and China announced that they were starting to build their own power platforms. Vic Link soon issued a statement reminding them that MultiSpace Power had an exclusive agreement to provide space-based solar energy. The other nations protested that the agreement had been signed by only the US government, and they didn't feel bound by it.

Vic issued a warning to evacuate their platform manufacturing facilities within 24 hours, a warning that was fortunately taken seriously. Both facilities burst into flames and were reduced to molten metal sinking into fresh holes in the ground.

Other nations were outraged and began threatening various economic and military actions against the United States. Vic assured them that MultiSpace's action had no involvement of the US government at all and suggested that other nations might want to reconsider their threats. He also reminded everyone that MultiSpace had intelligence assets and several reconnaissance satellites not under any government's control, so they would know if anyone started manufacturing forbidden materials again.

The Mongoose Party began running ads with the basic message "We told you so." The Beaver Party remained silent.

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"Don't you think it's odd," I said hesitantly, gazing at my half-eaten salad instead of Ann, "that the other Directors haven't weighed in on this?"

She set her coffee cup down on the little table we were sharing at one of the company cafes. "What do you mean? Vic's always been the spokesperson for the Directors."

"Yeah, but the others haven't been total recluses. Destroying other nations' property is a pretty big deal; you'd think they'd have something to say."

"Why should they? Remember, the other Directors issued a joint statement just

last week saying Vic was handling policy and they'd stand behind him no matter what he did."

"And wasn't that a strange thing to say? There are rumors that ... Vic has somehow taken control of the Power1 Platform and all the other MultiSpace satellites, and is using them to threaten the other Directors. Some even say the sudden death of Arvin yesterday wasn't a coincidence. That maybe he disagreed with Vic about this. That there were mysterious burn marks on his body, but all of a sudden his family and even the local police won't talk about a cause of death."

Ann leaned forward and jabbed her finger at me, not noticing that her cuff dipped into her coffee. "You've been listening to those extremist Mongoose podcasts again! Look, do you really think this giant energy beam that can melt entire factories could shoot one person and just leave a 'mysterious burn mark'?"

I sighed. "I guess not." *But I know they have at least one satellite that can light a single match.* "I didn't say I actually believed the rumors. Still, it makes you wonder."

"The Directors simply took a necessary step to protect their legitimate business interests. It's not as big a deal as some people make it out to be."

"Yeah." I didn't add, "I guess."

She settled back in her chair and smiled. "It's a good thing you're cute. I won't mention this conversation to our new employee morale team leader."

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Apparently even some of the Beavers felt that attacking other nations and causing them to threaten the United States qualified as a "big deal." A few of the Beaver senators suggested that the US should break the contract with MultiSpace and provide our own power the old-fashioned ways. Vic gently reminded them that the contract specified a minimum of 20 years, to ensure MultiSpace made a net profit, and he wasn't interested in terminating it. The same senators, incensed at their rejection, began lobbying for a boycott of MultiSpace Power.

Vic issued an evacuation warning for all energy production facilities in the world. Power plants, dams, mines, distribution centers, you name it; everyone was to get out

within 24 hours. No one hesitated.

The next day, facilities all across the globe began burning, melting, or exploding. Of course Vic couldn't get them all. Also, he had the good sense to not destroy nuclear power plants or dams that threatened communities downstream, settling for taking out their distribution and transmission centers. Even so, he eliminated about half of the world's energy production capability. This time, he didn't spare the United States.

MultiSpace didn't issue another statement. It didn't need to. It was obvious that everyone was now completely dependent on MultiSpace Power.

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"I couldn't do it!" Ann sobbed, her dripping tears making spots on my sofa pillow she was hugging.

"You mean because your conscience wouldn't let you?"

She looked up and glared at me. "No, you moron! The Directors did what they had to do!" She still believed all eight Directors were involved, and I'd learned to stop questioning that. "And look how careful they were to avoid deaths—no, I don't believe the reports about people being killed! But every time I rewrote the copy for the press release, it all just sounded worse and worse. Finally my supervisor told me I didn't have the right attitude and fired me on the spot!"

"Ann," I said gently, "there's a reason you couldn't make it sound good. I think deep down, you realize—"

"No!" She flung the pillow in my face, snatched up her coat, and ran for the door. As it swung shut behind her, I heard her shout, "You Mongoose!"

She broke up with me by text that night. But then, she'd always been one step ahead of me.

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I was no Mongoose. Actually, I've never had any enthusiasm for Mongooses, Beavers, or either of the large animals that preceded them. There are animal-following fanatics, but there are also multitudes of us who don't care which cage of the zoo you live in.

But apparently even the Mongooses weren't Mongooses anymore. Perhaps sensing a new weakness in their adversaries, many of them began complaining loudly about what those foolish Beavers had forced the Directors to do. They said all this destruction was really the Beavers' fault.

The Beavers, feeling honor-bound to oppose whatever the Mongooses said, became more vitriolic in their attacks on MultiSpace Power.

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China protested to the World Court about the destruction of its property, demanding compensation and some kind of punitive action against MultiSpace Power. The World Court doubted it had jurisdiction over an organization that wasn't a government. MultiSpace simply stopped delivering any power to China for three days. No one complained after that.

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Someone—probably a Beaver who wanted credit for at least trying—leaked that the National Security Agency had teamed up with some of the best hackers in Russia's Intelligence Directorate and tried to take control of the Power1 Platform.

But Vic had hired the best, and his security appeared ironclad. He recommended that they not try that again, and casually mentioned that he knew where the headquarters for both organizations were located.

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The military launched a barrage of missiles at the Power1 Platform. That must have been ordered by a politician; any of us who knew anything about space travel would have told them not to bother. To their credit, I think they were planning the missiles' final approach to be in front of the solar collector, where the energy beam couldn't reach them. But it takes several hours to reach the platform in its high orbit, so the platform's energy beam swatted the missiles like so many annoying flies long before they got that close.

The Mongoose Party howled about how those crazy Beavers had tried to destroy our only source of energy. They said the in-power Beavers clearly cared only about

maintaining their power and they should simply let MultiSpace Power handle energy-related issues on its own, which it was doing well, by the way.

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The next day, Vic issued an order—an *order*, not a suggestion—that all Beavers be removed from office and replaced with Mongooses. Obviously he knew where the capitol and all the legislator's and president's homes were. The transfer of power occurred peacefully.

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The New York Times published an investigation into Director Arvin's death, along with an editorial condemning Vic and the whole MultiSpace Power concept, arguing that this current de facto government was a disaster for the United States and the world. Vic issued an evacuation order for the New York Times headquarters, and the building was gone the next day. Vic warned all news sources not to publish similar material. After all, he might forget to issue an evacuation order.

Well, I'd never subscribed to the New York Times anyway, but I soon found that all the other news coverage had turned rather vanilla.

A week later, Vic issued guidelines on how the histories of world energy and MultiSpace Power, the savior of the formerly doomed world, were to be taught in schools.

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Vic issued another decree closing the US/Mexico border completely. No one dared try to cross it to find out how serious he was. The Mongooses said this was probably good for the economy.

Vic soon decided that the rebels in the current Libyan civil war were in the right, and the government must step down. The Mongooses pointed out how many lives he must have saved by ending the war.

Vic began making rare public appearances, to give a speech or congratulate some government official. Any time he was out somewhere, throngs of Mongooses showed up to cheer him on. Those were the only times anyone saw him smile.

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I looked at the recent news articles on my screen and shook my head. Every one of them praised the bold and insightful Vic Link for his clear-headed, decisive actions. But what really struck me was that Vic's actions were no longer limited to subjects that had anything to do with MultiSpace Power. He was just dictating his own opinions to the world.

I didn't know anyone who'd crossed the US/Mexico border. But my grandfather had emigrated from Ethiopia.

I had no idea who should've won the conflict in Libya. But I didn't like the idea of one guy just deciding a civil war. What if he'd chosen the South in the American civil war?

But in the end, weren't wars decided not by who was right, but who had the most and biggest guns? Vic just happened to have the biggest gun the world had ever seen. Was it better to kill a lot of people in a normal war first to see who won?

Maybe. At least the people would decide, however messily.

Trying to untangle the ethics only made my head hurt. I just knew Vic had to be stopped. But every attempt had been thwarted. Who was in a position to stop him now?

I could think of only one person.

#

I was still in good standing with MultiSpace Power. Apparently my track record as Marcel the MultiSpace guy outweighed my association with Ann the discredited PR hack. I had to wait most of a long year, pretending to still be happy and loyal while watching the world go to hell. Maybe it was as well; the delay gave me time to plan.

An eerie silence settled over the Internet. We weren't hearing much from the Beavers or the Mongooses anymore. People seemed to be getting used to the rule of Vic. Some pundits openly wondered whether this situation was really any worse than what we'd had from democracy with those two parties gridlocking everything.

Finally, it was time for the scheduled maintenance visit to the Power1 Platform. As soon as I arrived at MultiSpace's Texas launch facility, I picked up the package I'd had

sent there and added its contents to the replacement parts crate I was bringing. I let out a sigh of relief. Apparently no one had questioned an unusual requisition from the famous maintenance technician among the mountains of purchases made by the company every day.

The hours flying to the platform felt like days, especially since I had to slow the trip to get the timing the way I needed it. I arrived right on schedule—my schedule—completed the docking, and, spacesuit-clad, crawled through the port into the Power1 Platform's small central module, pushing my new bundle ahead of me.

Satellites are made to be lightweight, not strong. I'd estimated that one stick of typical industrial dynamite should do the job. So I'd brought six.

As I was attaching them to the vulnerable locations I'd selected, Vic's face appeared on a monitor mounted to a bulkhead. I'd never met Vic, of course, but his hair looked grayer and his face more gaunt than I remembered from previous videos. Despite being only an image, his eyes seemed to bore into mine. I turned back to my next stick of dynamite.

Vic's gravelly voice came through my spacesuit radio. "What are you doing, Marcel?"

He knew my name! How touching. "Nothing you need to bother with, Vic."

"Are those what I think they are?"

"Probably."

He stared for a moment, his mouth a thin line. "You know the energy beam is still online right now. And I know where your parents and your brothers all live."

"Yep." I began attaching the detonator wires to the sticks. "And I know I've timed this job so they're all on the opposite side of the Earth at the moment, where your little space gun can't reach them." I looked at Vic's image again. "I bet you wish you'd gone for two platforms now, so you'd have complete coverage all the time."

"I can cause a lot of damage before you can stop me. All those deaths would be on your conscience."

"No, on yours, if you have one. And I think that once the world realizes you no

longer have your giant bug-zapper to protect you, you might wish you'd made more friends instead of making more enemies at the last second. Now if you'll excuse me, I really have to leave."

I shinnied back into the spaceplane and departed quickly. I headed in the opposite direction from the space gun, where it couldn't reach me. I could correct my course later.

No atmosphere, so no ka-boom and no flames, but I saw the central module fly apart and the giant, flimsy collector begin tearing and flapping outward from the center.

The return trip seemed even longer, as I worried about what kind of reception I would get when I landed.

At the last moment, I turned the spaceplane away from MultiSpace's facility and dropped it onto an open runway at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport. Apparently, word of my exploit hadn't spread yet, and I was able to convince the airport security people that this had been an emergency landing and I needed to get back to MultiSpace right away. They were offering to give me a ride even as I was running toward the terminal.

I hopped into a ride-share car, went to the bus station downtown, and began making random-seeming trips and connections, paying with cash.

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So here I am, lying low in—wherever. There's just enough power to run this computer, as long as I keep the lights turned off. In a few hours, the next rationing brownout will shut it down completely until tomorrow.

The Beavers and Mongooses finally found things to agree on. They both take credit for bringing Vic Link to justice, and yet both want to arrest me for destroying the Power1 Platform. The Beavers seem to have forgotten that they tried to do the same thing.

Among the general population of non-party-animal-lovers, there are those who consider me a hero and others who would probably shoot me on sight. Maybe someday it'll be safe to show my face on the street again.

Even with all the problems, MultiSpace Power showed it was possible. If we can

persevere through some lean years, we can—theoretically—build a system that'll provide all the clean energy we want. The African proposal to deploy multiple power platforms under the control of different entities is being seriously considered at the United Nations. It would take unprecedented financial commitments and cooperation.

Cooperation. Historically, that hasn't worked out so well for resources, pandemic vaccines, global warming, or much of anything else. But maybe this time we'll be sufficiently desperate to pull it off. Maybe.

We can do it—if we just will.