

Among the Stars

by Ted Boretti

The observatory was a bump on a hill. There were no trees up there. They had all been cleared away long ago.



Chuck climbed the hill by foot. He could see his hot puffs of breath. The air was cold. The night sky was very clear. It was April 7. It was the night of a new moon. Which meant that there was no moon in the night sky. It was pitch black. The moon was on the opposite side of Earth, on the same side as the sun. Conditions were perfect for stargazing. The darker the heavens, the easier it was to spy faraway objects: stars, planets, comets, meteors, whole galaxies.

Chuck aimed his flashlight at the ground. He found rocks and boulders. At last a paved path. It led to the observatory and its small laboratory. Chuck hurried. He knew the lab would be heated. On cold nights they offered hot tea to visitors.

The observatory was open to the public on the first Thursday of every month. How lucky that tonight was the darkest night of April. Above Chuck, the sky was lit with a million tiny stars. Had someone poked the entire heavens with a pin? Was light shining through a million pinholes?

Chuck saw the lighted windows of the laboratory. The black dome of the observatory rose nearby in shadow. He had arrived. But he wanted to stand outside a moment longer. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. He held his breath so that

the white puffs would not interfere with his view.

Chuck knew some constellations. Ursa Major, the Great Bear. Leo, the Lion. Hydra, the Sea Serpent. Crater, the Cup. He knew where to find some planets, too. Brilliant Venus. And Jupiter (though that planet was often brightest after Chuck's bedtime). Even now Chuck could see the Milky Way, that glowing band of stars that arced across the sky like a cosmic cloud. With a nice pair of binoculars, Chuck could even find the Andromeda galaxy, the nearest galaxy to our own Milky Way.

Chuck shivered. He let out a big puff of breath. It was easy to lose himself in the vast universe. A hot cup of tea sounded nice. He entered the laboratory.

“Hey there, Chuck!” Dr. Eidon, the astronomer, poured himself a cup of tea. “I was wondering if you would make it.”

“There’s no one else here?” Chuck asked. The laboratory was empty.

“The cold weather must be keeping them away,” Dr. Eidon said. He stirred some milk into his tea. “Perhaps we’ll open the dome for the Ritchey.”

Chuck’s eyes popped. The “Ritchey” was the observatory’s massive and powerful Ritchey-Chretien telescope. Looking through the telescope, one could view Saturn’s rings, clouds on Jupiter, or meteors glowing like fireballs.

“I have been observing a cluster near the Beehive,” Dr. Eidon said. “Tonight’s

conditions are so perfect, I think we need to take a look.”

Chuck was not an astronomer. But he knew the “Beehive” was a group of stars in the Cancer constellation.

Chuck stood by as Dr. Eidon readied the observatory. Gears churned as the great dome rotated. The dome parted, revealing the sky beyond. Then the massive telescope rose.

“Take a look,” said the astronomer.

Chuck peered through the viewfinder. All he saw was a mishmash of colored dots. But the longer he watched, the more the dots sparkled. Chuck could practically see the stars burn. It was glorious.

“Could you count them for me?” Dr. Eidon asked.

“Sure,” replied Chuck. There were so many. Chuck counted. Then recounted.

“Take your time,” said Dr. Eidon.

Chuck counted again a third time. He removed his eyes from the viewfinder.

“Sixty-four,” he said. “By my count.”

Dr. Eidon looked at him. The astronomer nodded. He said, “Sixty-four by my count, too. The problem is that there’s only supposed to be sixty-three.”

“So what does that mean?” Chuck asked.

“What it means,” said Dr. Eidon. “Is that tonight we’ll name a new star. How does the name ‘Chuck’ sound?”

The End