Variable for Hire

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A young boy once asked his father, a mathematician, to explain algebra to him. "It's like a game of spies," explained the father. "The spy, X, disguises himself by hiding with other numbers. By tracking him down step by step, with fixed rules, we can unmask him and learn his true identity."

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The name's X. I used to be 2746, but that was when I was an Even number. Now I'm a Variable.

I always felt out of place when I was an Even. Like all Evens, my family was poor, but we managed. In a crazy Matrix like ours, you have to.

Now, the Odds, on the other hand, they had it all together. They were rich, powerful, and secure. Not like us Evens.

I always wanted to be an Odd, but I knew, ever since my Value was increased from 1478 to 2746, that the only way for a down-and-out Even like me to ever reach Odd status was to be a Variable. So I joined the Variable Corps.

I still remember the Variability tests. First, the competency tests: they rounded up all the prospective Variables in a room, and tested our counting. A series of Values would be shown to us; we had to tell their sum. Piece of cake.

Next came the "cleverness" test: they gave each of us a 9 and asked us how we would disguise ourselves if we were on a mission. I tried to use it exponentially, like they do on TV, and almost Devalued myself. I ended up doing simple multiplication, and ended up passing by the skin of my Bit.

After all the testing was done, they rounded up all those who passed in the induction center, where we took our oaths and were stripped of our Values. I still remember that moment: one second I was 2746, your run-of-the-mill Even; the next, I was X, a Variable.

It was the proudest moment of my life. If only I knew what lay ahead.

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Of course, the first few missions are just practices. My first was a little addition number. My assigned Value was 6, and I was to hide myself with a 3. I chose to do a little addition, and ended up making the equation $3 + X = 9$. Of course, it was solved immediately; but that's not the point of a practice run.

From there I went to the upper echelons: division, multiplication, exponents, the works. I was ready for my first big mission as a Variable (grade A). And then I resigned my commission.

Why? Because the Odds were against me, that’s why. While on leave, I had a short fling with a cute little Number named 8083. Boy, did she have some curves on that Figure!

Anyway, it turned out that she was the daughter of a high-ranking Odd, and it was hinted to me by my superior officer that if I didn’t resign quietly, I would be court-martialed. So I quit.

There I was: an out-of-work Variable. So I did the only thing I could do.

I became a Private Variable--an 'X' for hire.

* * *

When she walked in, time stood still. A big, beautiful blonde with a Figure that wouldn’t quit. And she needed my help.

She came right to the point. "I want you to transport a Value for me," she said. I was stunned; the voice was as beautiful as the figure.

"That's what Variables are for," I assured her. "Of course, I'll need some details."

There was hesitancy in her voice. "How much do you need to know?"

"Well, for starters, what is the Value?"

She thought about it. "All right. It's--you'll keep this confidential?" Seeing my nod, she continued, "It's a Universal Truth."

(If you don't understand Variable jargon, I'll have to explain this one to you. A Universal Truth is a Value that relates in some way to the nature of the Universe--like the number of atoms in the cosmos. They are usually delivered by government Variables to a Person, who then "discovers" them. I knew why she was hesitating.)

I let out a low whistle. "That's more like a government job, isn't it?"

"I don't have time for red tape. Besides, you've got a good reputation."

I wondered where she had heard about me. Probably from that cute little Number who got me kicked out of the Corps. Of course, it didn’t really matter.

"What about the fee?" I asked.

"You'll be taken care of." I could interpret that as either a threat or a promise. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.
I took a deep breath, and replied, "You’ve got yourself a deal. Where and when?"
She handed me a card. "Go to this address at five o’clock. Knock on the door three times, then ring the bell. Knock four more times and wait. Someone will come out and give you the Value, along with further instructions."
"It’s 4:30 now. I’d better get going."
"Goodbye, Variable."
"Call me X."
She smiled for the first time since she walked into the office. The room lit up with her sheer beauty. "All right, X. You can call me 4739."
An Odd! I’d have been stunned, but I was all stunned-out. Maybe this wouldn’t be too bad...

* * *

The address was a Home for Irrational Numbers. I went through the Knock-ring-knock-and-wait routine, and was greeted by a hunchbacked servant who let me in. I began to feel like I was in a movie—and a bad one.

On the way to the office we passed an old, old woman. Her Value must have been something like 96400. I mean, this woman was OLD. I could tell she was Irrational by the way she kept babbling, on and on, never terminating, never repeating.

"You can call me Grammaw call me Grammaw call me that but if you call me Grammaw remember I’m not your Grammaw no no not yours not yours but I’m somebody else’s Grammaw someone else’s and I’m in a Home for Irrational Numbers and I like it here except that nobody ever talks to me never ever never..." I walked away, leaving her babbling.

I entered the office, and a man at the desk handed me the Universal Truth. It was sealed; I couldn’t tell what its Value was.

"For this mission, you will need to change your Variable Designation from X to M." I was put off a bit by his brusque manner, but I could adjust. After all, sergeants in the Variable Corps aren’t known for their sweet dispositions, either.

"No trouble. But I really prefer X." A moment’s concentration changed my designation. That’s the great thing about us Variables: we’re so flexible. "Now, what’s the scoop?"

"That Value in there is of vital importance. You are aware that it is a Universal Truth. You also know that it is to be delivered to a Person. You are to deliver it to this address,"—he handed me a card—"without getting caught. Can you do it?"

"No problem. How much time do I have?"
"Six hours. Oh, by the way... try to resist the temptation to look at the Value, if you can."

Within fifteen minutes I was on the road.

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When a Person--a Human Being, I mean--discovers a Universal Truth, watch out! The last one had been the time Sir Isaac Newton learned the Universal Constant of Gravity. The repercussions shook the entire Matrix; the sky lit up with fire, and everyone's Value temporarily increased by 1000. Nobody's ever seen a Person, of course, and People have never seen us Numbers... but they're real, just the same. As real as us.

I was on my way to the drop-off address on the card, when I noticed I was being tailed. By a real pro, too; the small Figure hid among the crowd well, blocked from my sight. but I've been trained in these things; I noticed him right off. I figured it was time to create a diversion, so I broke the seal on the U.T. to disguise myself.

The Value inside wasn't a Value at all; it was a Variable expression. I couldn't tell what it really was, but it was represented by a 'C-squared.'

It didn't look like much, but then you can never tell with a Variable. I ought to know. So I multiplied my Variable Designation (M) by the U.T. (C-squared). Together, our total Value was E. There was just one little hitch.

It seems that C-squared is worth something quite a bit more impressive than it seemed; its actual Value was approximately 9 x 10-to-the 20th. Next thing I knew, there were nine hundred sextillion (a nine and twenty zeroes) of me sitting around. My shadow would never be able to tell which was the real me.

Turns out he didn't need to. The 9 x 10-to-the-20th of me kind of blocked traffic. We were stuck.

I turned and found myself looking into the eyes of... Grammaw. Look, a Variable, of all Numbers, should know not to judge by appearances; Lord knows I've had my face rubbed in it enough. But then, I never said I was very bright. It took me a while to realize that Grammaw was now completely Rational--and that she had never been otherwise.

She hauled out a Divider-gun. I guess she planned to Divide and conquer, because she sprayed all nine hundred sextillion of us with Divider radiation. "Erg!" we moaned. It's hard to believe that one Grammaw could yield 900,000,000,000,000,000,000 "ergs," but that's what happens when E = M C-Squared. I didn't have time to think about all these things, though; suddenly the ground came rushing up at me very, very fast, and then everything went black.
When I came to, I was in a cold, damp cell. I felt funny for a minute, but then I realized it was because (a) there was only one of me, and (b) my Variable Designation was X again instead of M.

"I wondered when you'd wake up." I swung around, and there was Grammaw, just out of reach. I ran through all my alternatives and finally came up with one I liked: I cussed her out.

"You illegal, unprintable, highly improbable, vulgar, biological impossibility," I said calmly. "I delete all over your censored." For good measure I went into detail on her ancestry, heritage, home and sexual habits. Unfortunately, I forgot to mention her personal hygiene, but I was a little bit preoccupied.

She took it in stride. "Not nice," she chuckled, "you'll make your neighbor blush. Bye now," and she left. I looked down the hall to the only other occupied cell to see who my "neighbor" was, and got the umpteenth surprise of the day. It was the blonde.

"4739!" I called.

"X! Oh, what are we going to do? We've got to deliver the Universal Truth!"

It took me a while to remember what she was talking about; I had other worries on my mind. "We've got to get out of here first. Don't worry; I've got a plan." I did, too: I changed my Designation to Y, inserted my V-shaped upper half between the bars and shifted to T. As the V-shape straightened out, the bars spread; soon I was free. There are some advantages to being a Variable.

After I sprung the blonde, I was rewarded with a kiss that almost Devalued me. Like I said, there are some advantages to being a Variable.

We searched the place up and down. Apparently our dear old Grammaw had decided that we were no longer any threat, and had gone out for the day--after destroying the Universal Truth. We found its charred remains in the fireplace.

"What are we going to do?" cried 4739 again. "The U.T. is gone!"

I laughed. "You don't know much about Variables, do you, Beautiful? Any Value that I come in contact with gets permanently stored in here," I said, tapping my head.

"But we're not clear yet," I added. "We've still got to deliver the blasted thing, and to do that we've got to find the drop-off point, and to do that we've got to find out
where we are... and I was unconscious when they brought me in. We could be right next
door to the drop-off or halfway around the Matrix."

"Oh, I know where we are!" cried 4739.

I surprised myself by proving that I still had the ability to be stunned: it had not
occurred to me that inside that beautiful Figure there could be a brain. "Huh?" I asked
intelligently.

"I was still conscious when they brought me in. We're in the Home for Irrational
Numbers."

It had a crazy sort of logic to it. I decided that Grammaw had a sense of humor.
"Let's get out of here!"

And we did.

*   *   *

And that was that. We found the drop-off, made it in plenty of time, and left. On
the way back we met Grammaw, but when she realized that she was too late she decided
to let bygones be bygones... for now. Personally, I think she just didn't want to risk a
murder (or attempted murder) charge.

4739 and I got hitched. We were wealthy (from my payment for the case) and
we were together. What more could we want?

Oh, yes, I finally made it to Odd status.

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The young boy at the beginning of the story grew up to be
Albert Einstein, the world's greatest physicist. His famed
equation, E = MC-squared, which states that one gram of
matter can be converted into 9 x 10-to-the 20th ergs of en-
ergy, brought his name into the public mind. Yet he was rela-
tively unknown... until his Number came up.

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