

FALLEN ANGELS

David Drake

CHAPTER ONE

"Aspiring to Be Gods . . ."

High over the northern hemisphere the scoopship's hull began to sing. The cabin was a sounding box for vibrations far below the threshold of hearing. Alex MacLeod could feel his bones singing in sympathy.

Piranha was kissing high atmosphere.

Planet Earth was shrouded in pearl white. There was no break anywhere. There were mountain ranges of fluff, looming cliffs, vast plains that stretched to a far distant convex horizon, a cloud cover that looked firm enough to walk on. An illusion; a geography of vapors as insubstantial as the dreams of youth. If he were to set foot upon them . . . The clouds did not float in free fall, as was proper, but in an acceleration frame that could hurl the scoopship headlong into an enormous ball of rock and iron and smash it like any dream.

Falling, they called it.

Alex felt the melancholy stealing over him again. Nostalgia? For that germ-infested ball of mud? Not possible. He could barely remember Earth. Snapshots from childhood; a chaotic montage of memories. He had fallen down the cellar steps once in a childhood home he scarcely recalled. Tumbling, arms flailing, head thumping hard against the concrete floor. He hadn't been hurt; not really. He'd been too small to mass up enough kinetic energy. But he recalled the terror vividly. Now he was a lot bigger, and he would fall a lot farther.

His parents had once taken him atop the Sears Tower and another time to the edge of the Mesa Verde

cliffs; and each time he had thought what an awful long way down it was. Then, they had taken him so far up that down ceased to mean anything at all.

Alex stared out of Piranha's windscreen at the cloud deck, trying to conjure that feeling of height; trying to feel that the clouds were down and he was up. But it had all been too many years ago, in another world. All he could see was distance. Living in the habitats did that to you. It stole height from your senses and left you only with distance.

He glanced covertly at Gordon Tanner in the copilot's seat. If you were born in the habitats, you never knew height at all. There were no memories to steal. Was Gordon luckier than he, or not?

The ship sang. He was beginning to hear it now.

And Alex MacLeod was back behind a stick, where God had meant him to be, flying a spaceship again. Melancholy was plain ingratitude! He had plotted and schemed his way into this assignment. He had pestered Mary and pestered Mary until she had relented and bumped his name to the top of the list just to be rid of him. He had won.

Of course, there was a cost. Victories are always bittersweet. Sweet because . . . He touched the stick and felt nothing. They were still in vacuum . . . thicker vacuum, that was heating up. If there wasn't enough air to give bite to the control surfaces, a pilot must call it vacuum.

How could you explain the sweetness to someone who had never conned a ship? You couldn't. He relaxed in the acceleration chair, feeling the tingling in his hands and feet. The itching anticipation. Oh, to be useful again, even if for a moment.

But bitter because . . . That part he did not want to think about. Just enjoy the moment; become one with it. If this was to be his last trip, he would enjoy it while he could. If everything went A-OK, he'd be back upstairs in a few hours, playing the hero for the minute or so that people would care. A real hero, not a retired hero. Then back in the day-care center wiping snotty noses. It would be years before another dip trip was needed. He'd never be on the list again.

Which meant that Alex MacLeod, pilot and engineer, wasn't needed any longer. So what do you do with a pilot when pilots aren't needed? What do the habitats do with a man who can't work outside, because one more episode of explosive decompression will bring on a fatal stroke?

Day care. Snotty noses. Work at learning to be a teacher, a job he didn't much like.

Look on the bright side, Alex, my boy. Maybe you won't make it back at all.

Sure, he could always go out the way Mish Lykonov had in Moon Rat, auguring in to Mare Tranquilitatis. They'd have a ceremony—and they'd miss the ship more than him. Even Mary. Maybe especially Mary, since she'd got him the mission.

He straightened in his seat and touched the controls again. Maybe just a touch of resistance . . .

"Chto delayet? Alex!"

Something had prodded Gordon awake. Alex glanced to the right. "What is it?"

"I'm getting a reading on the air temperature gauge!"

"Right. There's enough air outside now to have a temperature."

Gordon nodded, still unbelieving.

Gordon had read the book. Come to that, Gordon read a lot of books, but books don't mean much. No one ever learned anything out of a book, anyway. This was why they always teamed a newbie with an old pro. Hands-on learning. The problem with on-the-job training for this job was that there was not a hell of a lot of room for trial and error. Alex moved the stick gently, and felt the ship respond. Not vacuum anymore! He banked and brought them up level, feeling the air rushing past just outside the skin. His eyes danced across the gauges. Here. There. Not reading them. Just a glance to see if something was wrong, or if something had changed since the last glance. Dynamic air temperature. Stagnation air temperature. The Mach number needle sprang to life, leaped from zero to absurdity, then hunted across the dial. A grin stretched itself across his face. No blues now. He hadn't forgotten at all; not a damned thing.

"What is funny?" Gordon demanded.

"Old war-horse heard the trumpet again. Now it's your turn. Take the stick." Fun was fun, but it was time for the kid to wrap his hands around the real thing. There was only so much you could do in a simulator. "There. Feel it?"

"Uh . . ." Gordon pulled back slightly on the copilot's stick. He looked uncertain.

He hadn't felt anything. "Take over," Alex growled. "You're flying the ship now. Can't you tell?"

"Well . . ." Another tentative move at the controls.

Piranha wobbled. "Hey! Yeah!"

"Good. Look, it's hard to describe, but the ship will tell you how she's doing if you really listen. I don't mean you should forget the gauges. Keep scanning them; they're your eyes and ears. But you've got to listen with your hands and feet and ass, too. Make the ship an extension of your entire body. Do you feel it? That rush? That's air moving past us at five miles per second. Newton 's not flying us anymore. You are."

Gordon flashed a nervous grin, like he'd just discovered sex.

"What's our flight path?" Alex asked.

"Uh . . ." A quick glance at the map rollout. "Greenlandupcoming."

"Good. Hate to be overNorway ."

"Why?"

Why. Didn't the kid listen to the downside news broadcasts? Gordon, this is your planet! Don't you care? No, he probably didn't. It was his grandparents planet.

"There's war in Norway . If we flew over, somebody would cruise a missile at us sure as moonquakes, and we'd never even know which side did it."

The new tiling was wonderful. In the old days, the ship's skin would be glowing; but now . . . Four thousand degrees and no visible sign at all. Still, they'd be glowing like a madman's dream on an IR screen, new tiles or no, and that was all the Downers would need to vector in on.

"Which side?" Gordon mused. "What are the sides?"

Alex laughed. "That's one of the reasons we can't be sure. When it started, it was what was left of NATO defending the Baltics." Non-nuclear, but it just went on and on and on. Alex didn't really care who won any more than Gordon did. "After a while, the Scandinavians and the Russians took a nervous look over their shoulders at the glaciers, and East versus West became North versus South."

"Silly bastards. Nye kulturni."

"Da." It didn't surprise him anymore. All the younger Floaters spoke Russian as automatically as English. Russlish? Ever since Peace and Freedom had pooled their resources, everyone was supposed to learn each other's language; but Alex hadn't gotten past "Ya tebye lyublyu." Hello was "zdravstvuiye." Alex thought there was something masochistic about speaking a language that strung so many consonants together. "Be fair, Gordon. If you had ice growing a mile thick in your backyard, wouldn't you want to move south?"

Gordon mulled it. "Why south?"

He couldn't help the grin. "Never mind. Let me take her again. Hang on, while I kill some velocity."

Watch what I do and follow me." He stroked the stick gently.

Here we go, baby. You'll love this. Drop the scoop face-on to the wind. Open wide. That's right. Spread your tail, just for a moment ... Alex realized that his lips were moving and clamped them shut. The younger ones didn't understand when he talked to the ship. Gordon was having enough trouble feeling the ship. "Okay," he said finally, "that's done. Take over, again."

Gordon did, more smoothly than before. Alex watched him from the corner of his eye while pretending to study the instruments. Piranha was a sweet little ship. Alex had flown her once, years before, and considered her the best of the three remaining scoopers. Maybe that was just Final Trip nostalgia. Maybe he would have felt the same about whichever ship he flew on his last dip; but he would shed a special tear for Piranha when they retired her. The scoopers were twenty-two years old already and, while there was not much wear and tear parked in a vacuum, screaming through the Earth's atmosphere like a white hot banshee did tend to age the gals a bit. Jaws was already retired. Here was Gordon at nineteen, just getting started; and the ships at twenty-two were ready to pack it in. Life was funny.

Alex ran a hand lightly across the instrument panel. Scoopships were pretty in an ugly sort of way: lifting bodies with gaping scoops that made them look like early jet airplanes. They could not land—no landing gear—but they didn't dip into the atmosphere deeply enough for that to matter. But they were the hottest ships around.

Piranha skimmed above the glare-white earth as hot as any meteor, but never too hot at any point. Humming, vibrating, functional.

Gordon was functional too. Alert, but not tense; holding her nose just right while flame-hot air piled through the scoop and bled into the holding tank. The velocity dropped below optimum on the dial and Gordon bled some of the air into the scramjet and added hydrogen until the velocity rose again. He did it casually, as if he did this sort of thing every day. Alex nodded to himself. The kid had it. He just needed it coaxed out of him.

"Alex?" Gordon said suddenly. "Why not Greenland?"

"Hmm?"

"Why isn't anyone in Greenland shooting missiles?"

Alex grinned. That was good. Gordon was flying a scoopship on a dip trip, sucking air at five miles per, and trying to make casual conversation. That's right, Gordo. You can't do this sort of thing all tensed up; you've got to be relaxed.

"Nobody there but Eskimos," he explained. "An Ice Age doesn't bother them any. Hell, they probably think they've all died and gone to Inuit Heaven."

"Eskimos I do not know. Gogol once wrote good story that speaks of Laplanders but I did not understand—" The sky had turned from black to navy blue. Wouldn't want to get any lower. Gordon glanced out the windscreen and said, "Shouldn't we be seeing land by now?"

Alex shook his head, realized Gordon wasn't looking at him and answered. "No, the cloud-deck off the pole . . ." He stopped. The white below them wasn't the cloud shroud any more. They must have gone past the southern edge or hit a hole in it. White on white. Cloud or ice. If you didn't actually look you, might not notice. "Damn, damn. The ice is still growing."

Gordon didn't say anything. Alex watched him a moment longer then turned his attention to the gauges. Gordon was nineteen. There had always been an Ice Age, so it did not surprise him that the glaciers had crept farther south. Alex thought he remembered a different world—green, not white—before his parents brought him upstairs. He wasn't sure how much of it was genuine childhood memories and how much was movies or photographs in books. The habitats had a fair number of books on tape, brought up when they still got along with the Downers.

The green hills of earth, he thought. Now the glaciers—not rivers of ice, but vast oceans of ice—were spreading south at tens of miles a year. Hundreds of miles in some places. In the dictionary, "glacial" meant slow; but Ice Ages came on fast. Ten thousand years ago the glaciers had covered England and most of Europe in less than a century. They'd known that since the sixties . . . though no one had ever seen fit to revise his schoolbooks. But what did that matter? To a school kid a century was forever anyway.

As for Gordon . . . He glanced again at his copilot. Well, what the world is like in our lifetimes is what it should be like forever. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. It was funny to think of groundside environmentalists desperately struggling against Nature, trying to preserve forever the temporary conditions and mayfly species of a brief interglacial. Alex looked again through the cockpit windscreen and sighed.

"We could have stopped it," he said abruptly.

"Eh?" Gordon gave him a puzzled glance.

"The Ice Age. Big orbiting solar mirrors. More microwave power stations. Sunlight is free. We could have beamed down enough power to stop the ice. Look what one little SUNSAT has done for Winnipeg."

Gordon studied the frozen planet outside. He shook his head. "Ya nye ponimál," he admitted. "I faked the examiners, but I never did get it. The what-did-they-call-it, polar ice cap? It stayed put for thousands of years. Then, of a sudden it reaches out like vast white amoeba."

All of a sudden, Alex's earphones warbled. He touched a hand to his ear. "Piranha here."

"Alex!" It was Mary Hopkins's voice. She was sitting mission control for this dip. Alex wondered if he should be flattered . . . And if Lonny was there with her. "We've got a bogey rising," said Mary. "Looks like he's vectoring in on you."

So, they don't shoot missiles out of Greenland? Find another line of work, Alex—boy; you'll never make it as a soothsayer. "Roger, Big Momma." He spun to Gordon. "Taking over," he barked. "Close the scoop. Seal her up. Countermeasures!"

"Da!" He said something else, too rapid to follow.

"English, damn your eyes!"

"Oh. Yeah. Roger. Scoops closed."

Piranha felt better. Under control. "Close your faceplate." Alex pulled his own shut and sealed it.

"Alex, I have something." Gordon's voice sounded tinny over the radio, or maybe a wee bit stressed. "Aft and to the left and below," he said.

Seven o'clock low.

"Constant bearing and closing."

"Drop flares." That wouldn't do any good. Piranha was the hottest thing in the sky right now. But like the lady said, while spooning chicken soup to the dead man, it couldn't hurt. "How are they seeing us?"

"K-band."

"Jam it."

"Am."

He sure enough was. Alex grunted. At least Gordo had read that book. Alex squinted at his radar. There was the bogey, sure enough. Small. Constant bearing and closing. "Hang on." He peeled off to starboard and watched the heat gauge rise. Piranha didn't have wings for a near miss to tear off. Just small, fat fins and a big, broad, flat belly to be melted, evaporated or pierced. Alex bit his lip. Don't think about that. Concentrate on what you can do.

The sharp turn pushed him against the corner of his seat. Alex relaxed to the extra weight and prayed that his Earth-born bones would remember how to take it. Decades of falling had turned him soft. The acceleration felt like a ton of sand covering him. He felt the blood start in his sinuses. But he could take it. He could take it because he had to.

Gordon sat gripping the arms of the copilot's seat. His cheeks sagged. His head bowed. Gordon had been born in free fall and thrust was new to him. He looked frightened. It must feel like he'd taken sick.

The turn seemed to go on forever. Alex watched the bogey on the scope. Each sweep of the arm brought the blip closer to the center. Closer. He pulled harder against the stick. The next blip was left of center. Then it arced away. Alex knew that was an illusion. The missile had gone straight; Piranha had banked.

"You lost it!" Gordon shouted. He turned and looked at Alex with a grin that nearly split his face in two.

Alex smiled back. "Scared?"

"Hell, no."

"Yeah. Me, too. Anyone flying at Mach 26 while a heatseeking cruise missile tries to fly up his ass is entitled to be scared." He toggled the radio. It was Management Decision time. "Big Momma, we have lost the bogey. Do you have instructions?"

There was a pause; short, but significant. "We need that nitrogen," said Mary's voice.

Alex waited for her to finish, then realized that she had. We need that nitrogen. That was all she was going to say, leaving the ball in his octant.

Of course we need the nitrogen, he thought. Recycling wasn't perfect. Gas molecules outgassed right through the walls of the stations. Every now and then someone had to take the bucket to the well and get some more. The question was when. When someone with an itchy finger was sitting in a missile farm somewhere below?

He could pack it home and be the goat; his last trip a failure. Delta vee thrown away for no gain. Or he could fly heroically into the jaws of death and suck air. Either way, it was going to be his decision.

He sensed Lonny Hopkins's spidery hand behind things. If Mary was performing plausible deniability on his bones, it must be because her husband was floating right behind her at the comm console, one hand gentle on her shoulder, while she downlinked to the stud who had . . .

Jesus, but some people had long memories.

Well, Mary was a free citizen, wasn't she? If the wife of the station commander wants a little extracurricular, it's her choice. She had never pushed him away; not until that last night together. We're hanging on up here by our fingernails, she had said then. We've got to all pull together; stand behind the station commander.

Right.

Nobody could stand behind Lonny Hopkins because he never turned his back on anyone. With good reason. Maybe he's right. He is good at the goddam job, and maybe our position is so precarious that there's no room for democratic debate. That doesn't mean I have to like it.

And it's decision time.

"Understood, Big Momma. We'll get your air." Take that, Commander Lonny Hopkins. He clicked off and turned to Gordon. "Open the scoops, but bleed half of it to the scramjets."

"Alex . . ." Gordon frowned and bit his lip.

"They say they need the air."

"Yeah-da." Gordon's fingers flipped toggled switches back up.

Alex felt the drag as the big scoop doors opened again. The doors had just completed their cycle when Gordon bean shouting. "Ekho! Ekho priblizháyetsya!"

"English!"

Something exploded aft of the cabin and Alex felt his suit pop out. His ears tried to pop, and Alex MacLeod whined deep in his throat.

He'd forgotten, but his nerves remembered. It wasn't falling he feared, it was air tearing through his throat, daggers in his ears, pressure trying to rip his chest apart. Five times his suit had leaked air while they worked to save Freedom Station. He wore the scars in ruptured veins and arteries, everywhere on his body, as if Lonny Hopkins had given him to a mad tattoo artist. There were more scars in his lungs and in his sinus cavities. A sixth exposure to vacuum would have his brains spewing through his nose. Alex couldn't come out to play; they had to keep him in the day-care center.

His fists clenched on the controls in a rigor mortis grip. He heard his own whine of terror, and Gordon's shout, and felt Piranha falling off hard to port. And his suit was holding, holding.

He fought the stick hard when he tried to steady her. Had he recovered too late? "Hold fast, baby," he said through clenched teeth. "Hold fast." Hold Fast was the ancient motto of the MacLeod. Alex wished fleetingly that he had the Fairy Flag that Clan MacLeod unfurled only in the gravest peril. Piranha vibrated and shuddered. Something snapped with the sound of piano wire. "Come on, baby. Steady down."

Incredibly, she did. "Good girl," he muttered, then tongued the uplink on his suit radio. "Big Momma, Big Momma. We've been hit." There was nothing for it now but use up all the air they'd scooped, and anything else, to light off the jets. Get back in orbit; out of the Well. When you're in orbit you're halfway to anywhere! Get in orbit and pickup would be easy. He toggled the switches.

The rocket wouldn't light. The rocket wouldn't light. Air speed was dropping steadily. The rocket wouldn't light. He suppressed the knot of panic that twisted itself in his gut. Time enough afterward, if there was an afterward. The scramjet alone was not enough to reach orbit again. It wouldn't be long before Piranha would be moving too slowly to keep the jet lit. She would become a glider.

And not a terribly good glider.

Alex swallowed. It looked awfully cold down below. And the rocket wouldn't light.

"Mayday," he said. "Mayday. Piranha has a problem." A part of his mind was detached, admiring the cool way he reacted after that one moment of terror.

"This is Big Momma. What is your status?"

Well, I'm just fine, Mary; and how are you? "We're going in, Mary. Tell my family. It's all in my file directory. Access code word is dunvegan." He glanced over at Gordon, but the teenager just shook his head. His face was white through the plexiglass face shield. "And the Tanner family, too." Gordon didn't have any children yet. He was the child. Damned near unwanted child at that: a stilyagi, a JayDee on parole. Some parole! "Watch where we land and get the message out. Tightbeam."

The phones hissed for long seconds. "Sure, Alex. We have friends on Earth. Maybe not many, but . . . We'll tell them. They'll take care of you. Can you—can you get her down?"

"I may not be good for anything else, but, by God, you paint stripes on a brick and I can fly her."

"Then that's two things you do well."

He felt warmth spreading outward from his belly. Was Lonny still there? Would he understand that message? Alex almost hoped he could. Mary said something else but he was too busy with the ship to hear her. Airspeed had dropped to near Mach 2, and he tilted her nose down to keep the scramjet lit and tried to turn south. Ice. Ice all around and the cloud deck closing in again. Piranha was shaped like the bastard daughter of an airplane and a cement mixer. The slower she flew, the more she acted like a cement mixer.

Not on the ice, baby. Not on the ice. Hang in there . . .

"Do you really fly that well?" Gordon asked tightly.

"I landed on Earth once before, Gordon. Who else do you know who can say that?" Tom Corbett, Space Cadet. That's me. Disguised as a washed-up day-care gopher, he is in reality Alex MacLeod, Hot Pilot. Lord, just let me get us down in one piece.

Fifteen miles up and the air was thick. Mach 3.5. The clouds below were puffy with turbulence. Piranha was diving into a storm. He wondered whether North Dakota was flat or mountainous.

Maybe an ice landing would be all right. Ice was smooth, wasn't it? Or was that only true in free fall? Piranha was hot from friction. She'd melt her own runway across the glacier.

Sure, but step outside afterward. Your eyeballs will freeze so cold they'll shatter when you blink . . .

The clouds closed in and he was flying by radar. Dropping. Dropping. Lose velocity in the turns. Mach 2.5 and falling.

Gordon couldn't lift his head against the acceleration. "At least we'll have life support," he said suddenly. "Life support for four billion people, my teacher told me. And it doesn't get really cold, right? Cold enough to freeze water, but not carbon dioxide."

Alex grunted. Cold enough to freeze water. Gordo, what is the human body made of? Another turn. "Right," he said. Gordon wasn't a distraction. He was just a voice. The last thing Alex wanted during his last moments was dead silence. There would be enough of that afterward.

Think positive, Alex boy. You'll live through the landing, so you can freeze to death on the ice.

Piranha shuddered as she dropped below Mach 1. The missile must have left some holes, creating turbulence in the airstream. Then the scramjet quit and she was diving at the ground. Ice crystals impacting on the skin created a rustling sound. When radar read a thousand feet up, Alex lifted the nose and waited.

Piranha didn't have wheels.

Friends on Earth, Mary had said. He wondered who she had meant. Earth's four billion hated the Peace and Freedom space stations with a passion. A dozen nations had declared war when the nitrogen dipping started; but they had no space capabilities, so it never meant anything but noise. Now Piranha was diving

into their hands.

Two hundred feet up and slowing. He dropped the nose, trading altitude for speed, and pretended that the scoopship had wheels. Wind battered the ship. She yawed and Alex fought with the stick. Once the ship dipped suddenly and Alex fought a moment of pure panic. Don't lose it now! Don't lose it now! The ground looked smooth on the radar. Gordon's hands were on the dash, his elbows locked. It won't be too cold, Gordo. Not cold enough to freeze carbon dioxide.

It was the second best landing he had ever made. Second by a long, long margin. Piranha hit the ice and skipped like a schoolgirl hit and skipped again. There was probably a third or fourth skip, too; but Alex never knew.

* * *

Soren Haroldsson had watched the flame from his steading. He was wrapped in his fur parka, heavy boots, mittens like bowling balls, but still he shivered. His breath was frosty steam in the evening air. He always took a turn around the house before they battened down for the night checking the gate, the wolf-traps, making sure none of the animals had been accidentally left outside.

It came just at dusk, a fiery stream low across the sky still large and burning as it touched the ice and sent up clouds of steam. Not a shooting star. Not a sky stone like he'd heard of. It had come in too shallow, too controlled. A ship of some sort.

Ah, surely it was Angels.

He shook his swaddled fist at the sky. "Be damned, you air thieves! We've got you now. Heh!" His breath froze on his graying blond mustache and beard. Tomorrow he would saddle up Ozzie and ride into Casselton to notify the authorities. They were probably hunting the Angels already; but only a fool went riding at night, and Ozzie, at least, was no fool.

Inside, bundled in the warmth of family and livestock, he told Lisbet what he had seen and guessed. Haughty, technomaniac Angels down on the Great Ice. Poetic justice, he said. Poetic, she replied and, smiling, quoted from memory:

"In pride, in reas'ning pride, our error lies;

All quit their sphere and rush into the skies!

Aspiring to be Gods if Angels fell,

Aspiring to be Angels men rebel

CHAPTER TWO

"One Moment in Childhood. . ."

The phone warbled and Sherrine Hartley pulled a pillow over her head, even though she knew it would do no good. She'd been allocated a phone precisely because they might want to call her in the middle of the night. Neither rain nor sleet nor snow nor cold of night shall keep the programmers from being roused out of bed to untangle every little glitch in operations. Didn't anyone know how to run programs anymore?

The phone warbled.

It was warm in bed, buried beneath the down comforter. The thermostat was turned down to 55, as the law required, and the last thing she wanted was to get out into the chilly air. Her arm snaked out from beneath the comforter, groped for the phone set and pulled it under the covers with her. The plastic was cold, but she was bundled in flannel and felt it only in her hands.

"Dr. Hartley here." She winced. It was like holding an ice cube to her ear.

"Sherrine?"

Not the University, after all. That really ticked her off. The 'danes who signed her paycheck bought the right to wake her up, sometimes and for some things; but ex-boyfriends did not. "Bob," she said, "do you know what time it is?"

"Certainly. Two-forty-three. Plus or minus three sigma."

She sighed. Never ask a physicist a question like that. "What do you want, Bob? And why can't it wait until morning?"

"I need you, Sherrine. Now."

"What? Look, Bob, that's all over." And why couldn't some men ever believe that?

"I'll be there in five minutes."

"Bob!" But she was talking into a dead phone.

She thought about staying put under the comforter. It wouldn't help. Bob Needleton was persistent. He was quite capable of standing on her doorstep all night, banging on the door until she opened. Sometimes that sort of persistence was invaluable. In the lab, for instance. Other times it was just a pain in the ass.

Damn him. She was wearing heavy flannel socks, and she kept a pair of woolly slippers under the sheets with her. She played contortionist for a while finding them and putting them on. Then she slipped out of bed, leaving the covers carefully in place so the bed would stay warm. A heavy housecoat hung over the

back of the chair next to the bed. She snuggled into it and shivered her way to the bathroom.

When she flipped the switch on the bulb glowed at about quarter-strength. Sometimes a brownout could be convenient. Real light would have blinded her just then. She brushed her teeth to get the nighttime fuzzies out. The water in the basin wasn't quite frozen, but it shocked her teeth when she rinsed. She spat out into the commode, because there was no sense in wasting the rest of the water in the sink.

"Conservation will see us through," the posters said. And when there's nothing left to conserve? She ran a comb through her hair. It needed brushing, but she was too cold.

"So what does Bob Needleton see in you," she asked her reflection, "that he's coming out in the dead of night?" The beanpole in the mirror did not answer. Big nose. Big mouth. Not quite pretty. She could explain why Jake left; but not why Bob wouldn't.

She opened the door on the first knock and stood out of the way. The wind was whipping the ground snow in swirling circles. Some of it blew in the door as Bob entered. She slammed the door behind him. The snow on the floor decided to wait a while before melting. "Okay. You're here," she snapped. "There's no fire and no place to sit. The bed's the only warm place and you know it. I didn't know you were this hard up. And, by the way, I don't have any company, thanks for asking." If Bob couldn't figure out from that speech that she was pissed, he'd never win the prize as Mr. Perception.

"I am that hard up," he said, moving closer. "Let's get it on."

"Say what?" Bob had never been one for subtle technique, but this was pushing it. She tried to step back but his hands gripped her arms. They were cold as ice, even through the housecoat. "Bob!" He pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair.

"It's not what you think," he whispered. "We don't have time for this, worse luck."

"Bob!"

"No, just bear with me. Let's go to your bedroom. I don't want you to freeze."

He led her to the back of the house and she slid under the covers without inviting him in. He lay on top, still wearing his thick leather coat. Whatever he had in mind, she realized, it wasn't sex. Not with her housecoat, the comforter and his greatcoat playing chaperone.

He kissed her hard and was whispering hoarsely in her ear before she had a chance to react. "Angels down. A scoopship. It crashed."

"Angels?" Was he crazy?

He kissed her neck. "Not so loud. I don't think the 'danes are listening, but why take chances? Angels. Spacemen. Peace and Freedom."

She'd been away too long. She'd never heard spacemen called Angels. And—"Crashed?" She kept it to a whisper. "Where?"

"Just over the border in North Dakota. Near Mapleton."

"Great Ghu, Bob. That's on the Ice!"

He whispered, "Yeah. But they're not too far in."

"How do you know about it?"

He snuggled closer and kissed her on the neck again. Maybe sex made a great cover for his visit, but she didn't think he had to lay it on so thick. "We know."

"We?"

"The Worldcon's in Minneapolis-St. Paul this year——"

The World Science Fiction Convention. "I got, the invitation, but I didn't dare go. If anyone saw me——"

"——And it was just getting started when the call came down from Freedom. Sherrine, they couldn't have picked a better time or place to crash their scoopship. That's why I came to you. Your grandparents live near the crash site."

She wondered if there was a good time for crashing scoopships. "So?"

"We're going to rescue them."

"We? Who's we?"

"The Con Committee, some of the fans——"

"But why tell me, Bob? I'm fafiated. It's been years since I've dared associate with fen."

Too many years, she thought. She had discovered science fiction in childhood, at her neighborhood branch library. She still remembered that first book: Star Man's Son, by Andre Norton. Fors had been persecuted because he was different; but he nurtured a secret, a mutant power. Just the sort of hero to appeal to an ugly-duckling little girl who would not act like other little girls.

SF had opened a whole new world to her. A galaxy, a universe of new worlds. While the other little girls had played with Barbie dolls, Sherrine played with LummoX and Poddy and Arkady and Susan Calvin. While they went to the malls, she went to Trantor and the Witch World. While they wondered what Look was In, she wondered about resource depletion and nuclear war and genetic engineering. Escape literature, they called it. She missed it terribly.

"There is always one moment in childhood," Graham Greene had written in *The Power and the Glory*, "when the door opens and lets the future in." For some people, that door never closed. She thought that Peter Pan had had the right idea all along.

"Why tell you? Sherrine, we want you with us. Your grandparents live near the crash site. They've got all sorts of gear we can borrow for the rescue."

"Me?" A tiny trickle of electric current ran up her spine. But . . . Nah. "Bob, I don't dare. If my bosses thought I was associating with fen, I'd lose my job."

He grinned. "Yeah. Me, too." And she saw that he had never considered that she might not go.

'Tis a Proud and Lonely Thing to Be a Fan, they used to say, laughing. It had become a very lonely thing. The Establishment had always been hard on science fiction. The government-funded Arts Councils would pass out tax money to write obscure poetry for "little" magazines, but not to write speculative fiction. "Sci-fi isn't literature." That wasn't censorship.

Perversely, people went on buying science fiction without grants. Writers even got rich without government funding. They couldn't kill us that way!

Then the Luddites and the Greens had come to power. She had watched science fiction books slowly disappear from the library shelves, beginning with the children's departments. (That wasn't censorship either. Libraries couldn't buy every book, now could they? So they bought "realistic" children's books funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, books about death and divorce, and really important things like being overweight or fitting in with the right school crowd.)

Then came paper shortages, and paper allocations. The science fiction sections in the chain stores grew smaller. ("You can't expect us to stock books that aren't selling." And they can't sell if you don't stock them.)

Fantasy wasn't hurt so bad. Fantasy was about wizards and elves, and being kind to the Earth, and harmony with nature, all things the Greens loved. But science fiction was about science.

Science fiction wasn't exactly outlawed. There was still Freedom of Speech; still a Bill of Rights, even if it wasn't taught much in the schools—even if most kids graduated unable to read well enough to understand it. But a person could get into a lot of unofficial trouble for reading SF or for associating with known fen. She could lose her job, say. Not through government persecution—of course not—but because of "reduction in work force" or "poor job performance" or "uncooperative attitude" or "politically incorrect" or a hundred other phrases. And if the neighbors shunned her, and tradesmen wouldn't deal with her, and stores wouldn't give her credit, who could blame them? Science fiction involved science; and science was a conspiracy to pollute the environment, "to bring back technology."

Damn right! she thought savagely. We do conspire to bring back technology. Some of us are crazy enough to think that there are alternatives to freezing in the dark. And some of us are even crazy enough to try to rescue marooned spacemen before they freeze, or disappear into protective custody.

Which could be dangerous. The government might declare you mentally ill, and help you.

She shuddered at that thought. She pushed and rolled Bob aside. She sat up and pulled the comforter up tight around herself. "Do you know what it was that attracted me to science fiction?"

He raised himself on one elbow, blinked at her change of subject, and looked quickly around the room, as if suspecting bugs. "No, what?"

"Not Fandom. I was reading the true quill long before I knew about Fandom and cons and such. No, it was the feeling of hope."

"Hope?"

"Even in the most depressing dystopia, there's still the notion that the future is something we build. It doesn't just happen. You can't predict the future, but you can invent it. Build it. That is a hopeful idea, even when the building collapses."

Bob was silent for a moment. Then he nodded. "Yeah. Nobody's building the future anymore, 'We live in an Age of Limited Choices.' " He quoted the government line without cracking a smile. "Hell, you don't

take choices off a list. You make choices and add them to the list. Speaking of which have you made your choice?"

That electric tickle . . . "Are they even alive?"

"So far. I understand it was some kind of miracle that they landed at all. They're unconscious but not hurt bad. They're hooked up to some sort of magical medical widget and the Angels overhead are monitoring. But if we don't get them out soon, they'll freeze to death."

She bit her lip. "And you think we can reach them in time?"

Bob shrugged.

"You want me to risk my life on the Ice, defy the government and probably lose my job in a crazy, amateur effort to rescue two spacemen who might easily be dead by the time we reach them."

He scratched his beard. "Is that quixotic, or what?"

"Quixotic. Give me four minutes."

She found five more fen waiting outside by Bob's van. Three she knew from an earlier life. She smiled and waved and they nodded warily.

That griped her, but she could see their point of view. She had been out of Fandom for a long time and they weren't quite sure about her.

Bob's van had less than half a tank of alcohol, so they topped it with the fuel from her car. She rolled her

eyes up watching them. Typical fanatic, she thought. Six people trying to work a syphon at the same time. Finally Thor took over the whole thing and Sherrine retired gratefully to the van with the rest and shivered while she waited.

Thor was outside, but he wasn't shivering. Sherrine watched him through the window. He was built like the god whose name he used, and nothing about him had changed since she had known him except for the beard.

Even with the last drop of alcohol sucked from the car's tank, the van had less than a full tank. Thor climbed into the van and slid the door closed. He still had the syphon. Sherrine poked her nose out of her coat.

"Keeping the syphon?"

His grin was lopsided and too wide. Siphoning alcohol . . . He held the rubber hose up like an Appalachian snake handler. "We can't make it to Mapleton and back on one tank. Might not be too smart to gas up at a public station. 'Specially after we collect Rafe and Cabe."

"Who?"

"The Angels."

"Oh. You know their names?"

"Those are code names." That was Mike Glider, grinning on her right. "Gotta have code names on a clandestine operation."

"Sure you do; there are standards to keep up."

She shook her head. Mike knew everything there was to know and had opinions on the rest. He'd been a county agricultural agent since quitting the IRS; but that was just cover for his true identity as Oral

Historian of Fandom. He was "tall and round and three hundred pound," in his own words. If they froze on the Ice, he'd freeze last.

Bob started the van and Sherrine felt that electric thrill surging deep and strong. Real spacemen. Oh, God, to talk to them! Space stations. Moon base. Angels down; fans to the rescue!

She looked around at her companions. "Thor, you look like a Mormon patriarch."

"The beard's for warmth. I shave the mustache off so snot won't freeze in it. Ever wonder why Eskimos don't grow more hair? Evolution in action."

"Hunh. No." Fans were a wellspring of minutiae, a peculiar mix of the trivial and the practical. Try asking about Inuit tonsorial practices in a group of mundanes! She tried to banish snot-encrusted mustaches from her thoughts.

"Welcome back, Sherrine." Bruce Hyde was riding shotgun. He twisted around in his seat to look at her. "We heard you'd gafiated."

"Fafiated." She looked him straight in the eye, daring him to disagree. She hadn't gotten away from it all; she'd been forced away from it all. She resented Bruce's probing. "The jobs I wanted I couldn't get if I were a known fan. My thesis advisor kept dropping subtle hints about getting down to earth and being realistic. So Jake and I went mundane."

Bruce was overweight, but not in Mike's league; and his bulk was more muscle than fat. He was stronger than he looked. His black beard was wild and bushy, wildly unlike Thor's silken, Nordic god look. "How is Jake these days?" he asked.

She dropped her eyes. "I wouldn't know."

Bob put in his two cents. "Jake left her for a New Cookie five years ago."

Thanks, Bob. You could hand out flyers! "Jake really did gafiate," she explained. "I became a 'dane because I had to; but he really wanted to. He kept making digs about 'sci-fi' and 'Buck Rogers stuff.' Trying to yank my chain. So . . ." A shrug. "We drifted apart." And in the end they couldn't even talk about it. The teasing turned into arguments; the arguments into fights. Eventually she had to watch what she said around him because she couldn't be sure that he wouldn't denounce her for fannishness to the University. And wasn't that a hell of a basis for a marriage?

Besides, that was certainly a better explanation for why he left than the one she saw in the mirror every morning.

"That's okay," said Bruce. "We couldn't have used him anyway."

She pulled her parka hood tighter around her face. That was like Bruce, to evaluate everything, even her personal life, in terms of its utility to the current fanac. "You never did like Jake, did you?"

He shook his head. "That's not right. But he had his chance, and he went mundane."

"So did I."

Bruce wasn't embarrassed at all. "Like you said, it was different with him."

She let it drop and looked at the two strange faces. "Hi. I'm Sherrine Hartley."

"I know." The man sitting to her left was massively built and had a shaggy mane of white hair circling his face. He looked like an elderly lion, or an Old Testament patriarch. "Will Waxman, from L.A. Bob told us we were stopping to pick you up." He dropped his hand onto the shoulder of the man next to him. "And this is Steve Mews. He's a Mean Dude."

Steve was sitting lotus position on the floor of the van. He was five-nine, black, and about the most perfect physical specimen she had ever seen. A moment ago he had been perfectly still, completely relaxed; but his name turned him on like a switch.

He grinned up at her, a wide white grin in a dark face. "Will exaggerates, as usual. I haven't maimed anyone in years." He reached up a heavily mittened hand that engulfed hers. A strong grip, but not overpowering. She had the feeling that, had he wanted to, he could have crushed the bones in her hand.

The van walls were insulated with blankets and comforters. Sherrine settled back into one. She loved car heaters. They were like blowtorches for warming up. The alcohol they burned would have been burned anyway, to move the car. In ten minutes she was warm and could stop huddling.

"I've been fafiated for years," she said by way of conversation, "but I keep hearing about the conventions. Weird ways. Cryptic notes in electronic bulletin boards, things like that. I think you guys really love playing undercover."

Mike grinned. "The word do get around."

"How's Worldcon?"

"It's Minicon. That's a pun. Minne-sota; but also 'mini-' because there's only fifty-four in attendance."

"Forty-eight," she corrected him. "You guys are here."

Mike couldn't just be clever; he had to know that you knew he was clever. A grin and a raised forefinger: "Wrong! This is a special Con Committee meeting, so we are still officially in attendance. In fact, counting you, there are now fifty-five."

"Anyhow," said Thor, "the Cruzcon was smaller. Only twelve people showed up in 2008. We camped out in pup tents on the lawn of the old Heinlein estate. So, if any con deserves the title Minicon—"

"Oh, sure, if you want to be numerical about it. But 'mini—' wouldn't pun with 'Santa Cruz' . . ."

Sherrine laughed. They were heading for the Dakota Glacier with less than a full tank of alcohol to

rescue two downed spacemen from the clutches of the government. All of them but Thor were putting their mundane jobs on the line. And . . . and they were arguing about what to name the convention! She had forgotten what it was like to be among fans. Her gut relaxed like a fist unclenching after many years.

"Who showed up?" she asked. "At the con. Anybody I knew?"

Thor cocked his head. "It's been a while since you've been around. Let's see. You know Chuck Umber. He's there; but he's not in on this. Too much risk he might let something slip into his fanzine. You know Tom Degler and Crazy Eddie. Wade Curtis is supposed to show. There are even rumors that Cordwainer Bird is in town."

"Real pros?"

"Yeah, I know. They try to keep a low Pro-file." He grinned and nudged Mike with his elbow. "Ever since Archcon in '06. Somebody on the Con Committee forgot to tell the Pro Guest of Honor that it was cancelled. You know Nat Reynolds, he showed up anyway and said the hell with it, let's have a party, and the police nabbed him. So the professionals have been staying clear of cons."

"Now, there," said Mike, "is the real Minicon. It was cancelled. You can't have less than zero attendance." Sherrine guessed he had forgotten which side of the argument he was on.

Thor shook his head. "I think there were twenty or so at the party in his hotel room—"

"That was a con party, not the con itself—"

"—before the cops busted us."

"Minicon is still going," Bruce said, breaking in. "It has to be going. The last thing we need is for the cops to find a broken convention and wonder where we all went."

"Hmm, yes." It was starting to hit her. She'd never been underground before. Now . . . One hint and her

job was done. A couple of slips and she'd be a wanted woman. "Thor, you've been hiding out for a while—"

"Eight years." He sounded proud.

"What's it like?"

A shrug. "Not too bad, if you have friends. And if the 'danes aren't hunting you too hard. There are folks in the midwest, farm country, who are only too glad for a hand with the chores; room and board and no questions asked. You try not to spend too much time in one place, though."

"No," she said. "I suppose not."

Bob glanced over his shoulder. "Having second thoughts?" he asked, turning back to his driving.

"Sure. And third and fourth." She took her mittens off and rubbed her hands together. "So. What are the plans once we get there?"

They all looked at her. "Plans?" said Mike in a simulated Mexican accent. "We don' need no stinking plans."

Sherrine snorted. Fans.

They sailed west on I-94, headed for the Dakota Glacier. Bob drove carefully, trading speed for certainty. On clear sections of the highway, he floored it; where roadside clutter and shrubbery provided cover for police cars, he slowed to a respectable sixty. After a while, the chatter died down and everyone settled into their own thoughts. Sherrine tried to imagine what they would need for a short trip onto the Ice. Her grandparents kept a lot of equipment in their barn.

Thor carried an Irish tin whistle because, as he put it, you never knew when you might need one. After a few miles had passed and the talk had died down, he pulled it from his pocket and began playing. His fingers fluttered through a few traditional tunes: jigs and reels and such; then he started in on some serious filking. Sherrine joined in the singing. Thor played "The Friggin' Falcon," "Banned from Argo," and the classic "Carmen Miranda's Ghost Is Haunting Space Station Three."

Just past St. Joseph, Sherrine stopped singing and stared north through the van's side window. One by one the others dropped out, their voices dying in mid-chorus, until Mike was singing alone.

"I wrote Dying Inside and you snubbed it! Son of Man's out of print totally! You'll be sorry you didn't buy Nightwings! No more damn science fiction for me!"

Mike trailed off. Following their gaze, he twisted and looked over his shoulder. "Great Ghu!" he said.

"Yeah," Sherrine said quietly.

The northern horizon glowed a pale, phosphorescent white, as if an artist had drawn a chalk line across a blackboard.

Steve hopped to the other side of the van and peered through the window. "I didn't know it was this far south," he said.

Mike peered out. "The Ice Line runs northwest from Milwaukee to Regina. It doesn't come as close to the big cities because of the waste heat."

The California fans had never seen the Ice. They stared in respectful silence.

Sherrine spoke up. "You can't live in the Twin Cities without feeling the weight of the Great Ice somewhere over the horizon, flowing toward you like crystal lava."

"Three years ago," said Bob, "you couldn't see it from the highway."

"And last year," she added, "you could only see it in midwinter." The Ice ebbed and flowed with the seasons, like tides on a hard, white ocean. But some of the snow that fell each winter failed to melt the next summer. The weight in the center of the pack forced the edges to flow outward, and the Line moved a few more miles toward civilization. She began to shiver uncontrollably, even though she was wearing a thick down coat and the car heater was running full blast.

Thor noticed and smiled. He blew a few plaintive notes on his whistle; then declaimed:

"Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire."

Everyone chuckled. "That's from 'Fire and Ice,' " Thor said. "By Robert Frost."

"Frost," said "Mike. "That's appropriate."

Will Waxman grunted. "Finish the stanza," he said.

Thor stopped smiling and looked out the side window at the shimmering horizon. After a while, he continued in a voice so soft she had to strain to hear him.

"But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice."

The farther west they drove, the closer the Ice came to the highway. What had begun as a distant white smear on the horizon crawled closer and closer. She knew that the movement was an illusion, that the Ice was not actually moving toward them. It was only that the highway and the Ice Line were converging. Still, it was creepy to watch that slow, implacable approach. Mike started singing "The White Cliffs of Dover," but no one joined in, and he soon fell silent.

CHAPTER THREE

"The Ice Was Here, the Ice Was There, the Ice Was All Around . . ."

Bob noticed the lights of a General Mills gasohol station shining like a baby's smile just off the highway. A barely legible sign proclaimed the town of Brandon. He turned onto the exit ramp and drove into town. Twenty-four-hour gas stations were on the endangered species list. The van was down to a quarter tank and he didn't want to pass up the opportunity.

The snow on the state road was a foot deep and unplowed. The van with its oversized tires was an ice breaker on a frozen sea. The snow made eerie crackling sounds in the night as the van drove through it.

Brandon was deserted. Everything in town was dark, except the few streetlights. The moon reflecting off the crusted snow cast a dim, pearly light over the blank houses. There was not so much as a porch light on. Sherrine didn't suppose that Brandon had ever been very lively at four-thirty in the morning, but this felt different. Not just sleepy, but empty.

Bob pulled into the General Mills station and honked the horn, but no one responded. After a minute or so, Thor said the hell with it and climbed outside. His boots broke through the crust and he sank into the snow to his knees. He waded through the snow to the row of pumps. "Premium okay?" he asked. He unhooked the hose and flipped the switch. "Power's still on." When he squeezed the pump handle nothing happened.

"Mechanism's frozen," he called out. He unscrewed the gas cap and stuck the nozzle in. Then he stood there squeezing and releasing, squeezing and releasing until the gasohol began to flow into the tank. Mike gave a huzzah and he and Bruce slapped each other's hand.

"Sherrine," Bob said, "there's a two-gallon Jerry can back there somewhere. Pass it up, would you? We might as well get as much gas as we can."

She rummaged around under the greasy blanket and tool kit and came up with a sturdy, red plastic container. She passed it up and Bob rolled down the window and gave it to Thor.

Thor climbed back inside a few minutes later. He handed the gas can to Steve, who stowed it in the back.

"Shouldn't we pay for the alcohol?" she asked.

"Pay who?" said Thor, clapping his hands together. "This town is dead. Everyone's gone. The Ice chased 'em out."

"There's still power," she pointed out.

"Yeah." He pulled his gloves off with his teeth and stuffed his hands under his armpits. "Ghu, but that pump handle was cold! I wonder how close the Edge is to town?"

Bruce turned around in his seat. "I think we should see if there are anymore gas cans inside the station. We should fill them up, too. We mightn't get another chance like this."

That was Bruce; a take-charge kind of guy, although she noticed that he didn't leap out into the snow himself. Thor gave him a disgusted look. Why think of it after he had gotten back into the van? Thor didn't volunteer, either; he had done his stint.

Steve shrugged and untwisted himself from his lotus position. Like Thor, he opened the sliding van door only wide enough to squeeze through. There was plenty of residual heat inside the van from the heater and from their bodies, and no need to waste it.

She watched him try the door to the station. It was open. Steve hesitated and glanced back at the van. Then he shrugged and disappeared inside. A few minutes later he emerged juggling five more gas cans, which he filled at the pump that Thor had unfrozen.

When everyone was back inside and the cans strapped in place, Bob started the engine and pulled back out onto the state road. Steve held his hands palm out over the car heater vent. "Thor was right," he said. "The town is abandoned. The gas station was stripped. All of the tools and most of the stock is gone." Steve bounced as he talked, rocking on the balls of his feet. "I found a couple of packing crates that had broken open. Empty; contents salvaged. When folks left here, they left in good order. No panic. No looting. I'll bet there's not a U-Haul or rental truck left in town."

"Good." Will Waxman crossed his arms over his chest and settled back against the quilted wall of the van. "That's the way it should be. A fighting retreat, not a rout. I'll bet the station owner left the lights and pumps running on purpose. For travelers like us."

Sherrine didn't say anything. She stared out the back window as the night swallowed the town. It was only Labor Day and already there was a foot of snow on the ground. By midwinter Brandon would be half-buried. By next winter it would be gone; and the shared memories that had given it life would be gone with it. No more bake sales. No more Harvest Queens or church socials. In a generation, its very name would be forgotten. As gone as if it had never been, more forgotten than Lake Wobegon . . .

"They took all their stuff with them," Steve continued. "But they didn't bother to lock things up or turn things off."

Bob shifted the van into high and pulled off the ramp onto the interstate. "They knew they'd never be back," he said.

The Edge was a faerieland sculpted by winds and summer meltings and the inexorable, constant pressure of the Great Ice behind it. For miles it ran along parallel to the highway, as abrupt and high as the Great Wall of China, glowing faintly with trapped moonlight. Then it would recede once more into the night. Sherrine saw great ice slides, where the vertical wall had buckled and collapsed to strew giant white boulders onto the desiccating prairie lands ahead. Landbergs, they were called. Those that were big enough would survive the summer and grow back into the glacier come winter, as if the Ice were a living organism casting its seeds abroad.

At Evansville, the Edge loomed close by the Interstate and she could see the caverns and crevasses that made up the wall of ice. A playground of the imagination. There were castles with battlements of crenels and merlons; cathedrals of buttresses and spires. Wormholes bored by fantastic creatures. Faerie pillars of gleaming crystal standing isolated like sentinels on the prairie, yards in front of the tidal wave of ice. In other places, the Edge was a gradual sloping ramp leading up to the frozen plateau above.

Steve and Will were entranced by the sight; and even Sherrine and the other hardened Northerners gazed in awe. It was one thing to live near the Ice, to see it in pictures and photographs. It was another thing to look upon it in all its cold and terrible beauty.

"I never thought it would be like this," said Steve. "I expected—I don't know. A solid wall. A slab of ice a mile thick sliding south. The boulder fields I can understand; but why does it slope upwards like a ramp in places?"

"The Edge is only two, three hundred feet high," Mike told him. "But it gets thicker toward the northeast. It's easily a mile thick over Ontario. Ice melts under pressure. There's actually a thin film of pressurized water underneath the ice. Acts like a lubricant. The bottom layers of the ice are less rigid than the upper layers; so they crack and slide along sheer planes. The top layers usually raft on the bottom layers; but if there's rotten snow in between, the weight of the top layers can extrude the bottom layers like toothpaste." He grinned.

Sherrine listened to the byplay. Mike so loved playing the expert; but she supposed most of what he said was nearly enough true to rely on. Rotten snow. The Eskimos had dozens of different words for snow and ice to describe its many different phases and properties. We'll have to learn them all by and by.

Just past the Fergus Falls exit, Bob grunted and hit the brakes. The van fishtailed and slewed across the road. There was a confusion of arms and legs and a great deal of shouting as Sherrine and everyone else tumbled around in the back. When the van had stopped, she untangled herself and gave Mike a dirty look. He spread his hands.

"Hey, I just grabbed something to keep from bouncing around."

She gave him another look to suggest he should be careful of what he grabbed in the future. "Bob, what happened?" she called.

"Take a look at this, you guys." Bob reached under the dash and flipped the switch for his outside flood lights. Sherrine crowded forward with the others and stared through the windshield. She sucked in her breath, and even Mike was uncharacteristically silent.

A great half-completed arch of ice was poised over the westbound lanes, like a tremendous wave frozen in the moment of breaking. "Shit," said Steve. It sounded like a prayer.

"Sometimes," said Mike, finding his voice at last, "the upper layers slide out over the bottom layers."

Bob kept the engine running, but he opened the cab and stepped outside. Sherrine followed. She pulled her parka hood closed as tightly as she could and stood in the glare of the van's floods. The others huddled around her. Beneath the hum of the engine the silence of the night was broken by muted sounds. The ice snapped; it creaked like an ancient door. A subsonic groan surrounded them, wrenched at their teeth. "The ice was here, the ice was there, the ice was all around—"

"Onk?" Mike asked.

Bob said, "The Ancient Mariner. Do you think the road to Fargo is still open?"

"Looks bad," Mike said.

"What do you think?" asked Bruce, scowling at this latest obstacle to his plans. "Can we make it through? How far does it go?"

Bob whirled on him. "How far? All the way to Regina! How the hell should I know? The people at AAA told me the road was open, but their last report was a week old."

A week old! Sherrine looked up at the star-studded night sky. The last weather satellite had reentered years ago. She remembered sneaking outside her parents' house in the middle of the night, bundled up against the chill (oh, to be that warm again!) and watching for the spark that marked its fall. The newsreaders played it up: the final remnant of discredited Big Technology was no more. The fact that all low orbits decayed from atmospheric friction and that all such satellites were temporary was somehow supposed to prove the folly of "spending money in outer space." Better to spend the money here on Earth relocating the people of Newfoundland, made homeless by "an unusually severe winter."

She remembered feeling as if the world had lost an eye. Time was, a celestial pickup truck could have climbed skyward on a pillar of fire and put the satellite back where it belonged. No longer.

Bruce scowled and pulled at his beard. "Do you want to take a chance driving under that, Bob? It looks strong enough."

Drive underneath several tons of unsupported ice? She thought only Crazy Eddie came up with notions like that.

And Bob was shaking his head. "Too chancy."

As if to punctuate his remarks, the ice moaned and the sound of far-off thunder rolled in their ears. A cloud of ice crystals as fine as mist billowed toward them out of the darkness. Somewhere farther down the road a part of the frozen wave had broken off.

She was starting to feel the cold. She gazed longingly at the van. The others stood around, shuffling their feet and looking at each other. She waited a moment longer. This has gone on long enough. "The eastbound lanes are clear," she pointed out.

Bruce looked shocked. "You want us to turn back?"

She rolled her eyes up. "For Ghu's sake, no!" It took them a moment longer to catch on, then Will began chuckling.

"For a gang of taboo-shattering imagineers," he said, "we sure do let the Accepted Customs of our tribe blinker us. Drive on the left side of the road? What a revolutionary notion!"

They drove more cautiously headed west in the eastbound lanes. Bob put the flood lights on blinker so oncoming traffic would notice. Not that he expected much oncoming traffic at six in the morning in rural Minnesota, not along the edge of the glacier, but it never hurt to be careful. A few miles farther on, Steve pointed silently out the side window at the westbound lanes and they saw where the ice had collapsed across the roadway, blocking it completely with landbergs. Bob and Bruce exchanged glances and Bob hunched his shoulders over the steering wheel. Sherrine's fingernails dug into her palms. Two Angels had been down on the Ice now for four and a half hours.

Past Elizabeth, the glacier had flowed entirely across the road, and the Army Corps of Engineers had blasted and dug a channel right through it.

Fargo Gap. Sherrine's heart beat slightly faster. A name of romance and bravery and determination. Fargo Gap. Minneapolis's last link to the ice-free West. Arc lights staged around the worksite made the area almost as bright as daylight. Portable generators chugged and men and women with picks and airhammers fought the encroaching ice. They didn't look heroic; they only looked tired. But wasn't that how heroes always looked? She saw a cadre wearing Army Corps of Engineer uniforms, but most of the workers were civilians, with only a brassard on the left arm to show that they had been drafted into the corvéé.

A state trooper stopped them well short of the work area. He walked toward the van and Bob rolled down the window and waited. The trooper wore sunglasses even though it was dark. For the glare of the arc lights, she supposed. Or for the macho look. He pulled a pad of traffic tickets from under his parka.

"Where do you think you're going," he said without preamble.

"Fargo, officer." Bob could be very sincere and submissive when he wanted to be. "Our friends here from California have never seen the Ice, so we drove them up here from Minneapolis."

Sherrine thought it was a pretty good story for having been made up on the spot; but the trooper just shook his head. "Ice tourists. Now I've heard everything." His face, what they could see of it, showed what he thought of Californians who drove to the Ice for kicks. "You're driving on the wrong side of the highway," he said. She wondered if he thought they didn't know that, and saw Mike bite his tongue to keep from making a smartass remark.

Bob explained about the ice wave that had broken over the westbound lanes and the trooper lowered his pad. "Ah, shit," he said without feeling. He turned and called over his shoulder. "Captain!"

A short, stocky man in an Engineer uniform broke away from a small knot of people and trotted over. His name tag read Scithers, and he was wearing a headset with a throat mike. The trooper had Bob repeat the story. The captain listened carefully and nodded. Then he keyed his mike and barked orders. Within minutes, a tank outfitted with a plow and carrying a work gang on its skirts had rumbled east. A conscripted civilian pickup truck followed, pulling a portable generator and work lights. Scithers watched them out of sight. Then he sighed. "We've kept the Gap open all summer," he said to no one in particular, "but this winter will kill the road for good."

The trooper didn't respond. He laid a hand on the door of the van. "You might as well turn around," he said. "We're going to be evacuating Fargo in the next couple weeks anyway."

Sherrine felt her stomach go into free fall. We can't turn around. We can't! The Angels were depending on them. But they couldn't tell the trooper that.

"Oh, let them through, trooper," said Scithers. "What the hell's the point of keeping the Gap clear if we don't let people through?"

The trooper shrugged. "Suit yourself. But stay on the right side of the road from here on. There's two-way traffic. And try not to freeze to death." Sherrine couldn't tell if his request was sincere or pro forma.

Mike, of course, couldn't leave well enough alone. "We heard that a spaceship crashed on the Ice earlier tonight. Do you know where that was?" She wanted to kick him, but he was out of reach. The trooper adjusted his sunglasses and Scithers, who had been turning away, stopped to listen.

"Where did you hear that?" the trooper asked.

Since Mike couldn't exactly mention a tightbeam downlink from Freedom, he was at a temporary loss for words. And while normally Sherrine might have enjoyed that, she didn't think a long, strained silence would be too smart. So she spoke up. "My grandparents live near Fargo," she said. "They saw a fireball go down on the Ice and called me and told me about it. As long as these guys were coming this way to sightsee, I thought I'd tag along and see if I could pick up some souvenirs."

The trooper rubbed a heavily gloved hand across his chin, and she wondered why he didn't wear a beard like most men did these days. Dress policy? "Yeah, we heard about it, too, at the barracks. Goddam Angels. A couple of planes from Ellsworth flew over a few hours back; though I don't know what they hoped to see at night. IR, maybe. Come daylight the glacier'll be crawling with helicopters and search parties. No rush. Those Angels will be froze dead by then."

"Froze," she repeated.

"And serves them right, too."

She noticed Mike's jaw twitch an instant before he spoke. "Why?"

Mike, she thought, don't let your mouth talk us into trouble. So far, they were just a van load of jerks out joyriding. If the trooper began to suspect that they were "Angel-loving technophiliacs," they would be in serious shit.

"Why?" The trooper waved his arm at the glacier. "Because they started this, asshole! They did it to us. Stealing our air until the Protective Blanket was too thin to keep us warm."

Captain Scithers nodded. "Damn right," he said. "All that air they took, hundreds of tons—" His voice was serious.

Sherrine nodded her head as if she agreed. So did Steve and Will. Thor said nothing, but he twisted his finger in his right ear as if to unplug it. She prayed to Ghu that Mike would take the hint and keep quiet.

Bob decided not to trust in Ghu. He put the van in gear. "We better get going," he said over his shoulder, "if we're going to reach your grandparents' house in time for breakfast. Thanks for your help, officer." He gave a wave that was half-salute.

The trooper turned away, but Captain Scithers lingered. He leaned an elbow on the frame so Bob couldn't roll the window up. "Thought you might be interested," he said. "The Red River is pretty much frozen solid north of Perley. Bad news for Winnipeg, but I heard you could drive a truck across without falling through." He straightened and nodded to them. "Good luck," he said.

Bob rolled the window up and pulled through the break in the median into the westbound lanes. Mike frowned and looked out the rear window, where the engineer captain was deep in conversation with his lieutenants. "Why the hell should we care about Winnipeg and the Red River of the North?"

"The Corps has been fighting a losing battle trying to keep I-94 and I-29 open," Bruce responded. "He probably hasn't thought about anything else but ice conditions for the last five years."

Thor ran his fingers through his beard. "Must be one hell of a dinner conversationalist."

"I don't know," said Bob. "Some of the strange stories I've heard about conditions on the Ice, he must have some weird tales to tell."

And with that they entered Fargo Gap, the ice on both sides of the highway rearing straight and high as canyon walls and sparkling with the reflections of the work lights behind them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eliza Crossing the Ice

He woke up hard, tried to move, and thought better of it. Memories flowed back slowly.

Consciousness was a mixed blessing, thought Alex MacLeod. It meant that he was alive; but it also meant that he hurt. His left arm throbbed with a dull ache. To draw breath took immense, frightening effort, and his rib cage burned every time he succeeded.

Groggily, he took inventory. He figured that if a bodily part hurt, he still had it. By that criterion he had at least come down in one piece.

He tried to lift his head to see how Gordon was doing.

He couldn't move. Paralyzed? A moment of panic washed over him as he imagined himself lying here slowly freezing to death, unable to do anything but wait. But, of course, it was only gravity. When he realized that, he laughed out loud, which was a mistake, because his ribs hurt worse than ever.

What difference did it make why he was unable to move? Helpless was helpless.

He tried the suit radio. "Gordon?"

Static for answer. Gordon must be dead or unconscious. In either case, there was nothing he could do for him. Come to that, there wasn't much he could do for himself. He tongued the uplink on his radio.

"Big Momma? Piranha here."

Hiss and crackle. Maybe the radio was broken. He tried again. "Big Momma, do you read me?"

Mary's voice came through the noise. "Alex? Is that you?"

Who did she think it was? . . . Churlish. "Big Momma, this is MacLeod, I am conscious. I do not appear to be seriously injured except that I cannot move. This must be due to gravity. Tanner does not respond, I say again, Gordon does not respond. Can you give me a reading on Gordon?"

"Roger your situation report, MacLeod. Alex, I'm glad to hear your voice. Stand by one for report on Tanner."

Alex waited while she scanned the medical monitors. Medi-probes were a pain in the ass—literally—but they had their uses. He wondered if Mary had been standing by in Mission Control the whole time he was unconscious, and whether it had been from duty or something else. That's right, Alex. Build yourself a few fantasies. You've got nothing else to do.

"Tanner is all right I say again, no serious injuries," she said. "He's all right, Alex. Unconscious, but his vital signs look good. I can't tell you about broken bones or such. Your readouts are okay, too. That was one hell of a landing, Alex. The book says you can't land a scoopship."

"The book's not far wrong. Where are we, Mary?"

"On what our contacts call the Ice. Not the Great Ice, but the vanguard glaciers. You're only a few hundred meters from the Edge. If the ship hadn't stopped, you'd have gone over a ninety meter ice cliff. Do you want your latitude and longitude?"

"Sure, but I don't see how that will help."

"Sorry. We're feeding the Navstar data to your rescue party, so—Oh, I forgot, you don't know."

"Rescue party?" He started to sit up, but gravity and his ribs kept him flat. He stifled a groan. "You mean you're coming to get us?"

"No," said Mary. "You know better than that." He heard the chill embarrassment in her voice. Some things weren't talked about. There was an etiquette to being marooned.

So much for fantasy, Alex thought. They say Love Conquers All; but it doesn't conquer the fuel-to-thrust ratio or the law of diminishing returns. Peace and Freedom were barely hanging on. There was nothing that could be spared; least of all the rocket fuel needed to land and take off again, even if there had been a ship capable of doing it. "I understand." He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. It wasn't her fault he was here.

It was not that they wouldn't come that bothered him. They wouldn't come to get him if he were Lonny Hopkins himself. But Station Chief Hopkins would never have been on a dip trip in the first place. You don't send indispensable personnel on potentially one-way missions. Dippers were folks the station could afford to lose. Good at what they did, but not particularly useful at anything else. Janitors, gophers, day-care fathers, stilyagi like Gordon. A brotherhood of mediocrity, he thought. The habitats would still function without him. Even the variety of the gene pool, small as it was, was unthreatened. Gordon and he had already made their deposits at the sperm bank.

"Then who is coming to get us?" he asked.

"I told you we have friends on Earth. There's a team heading for you right now. They have an illegal Navstar link, so they know your precise bearing. The government search parties are still wandering

around on the Ice thirty kilometers to the northwest. They don't have you located, yet. From what we can overhear of their radio traffic, they got a bum steer from a local peasant who couldn't estimate distances properly. But it won't be long before they expand their search pattern. With any kind of luck, we'll get you out of there before they read your position."

Alex grunted. Not with any kind of luck, he thought. It had to be good luck, currently in short supply. "How long before this rescue party arrives?"

"Make it half an hour. They got a late start onto the Ice. It took them a while to find enough bedsheets. Watch for them to the south of you. The team leader is code-named Robert."

Code name? Alex snorted. "Roger. I'll let you know when they arrive."

He saw no point in asking which way was south. He couldn't move, and all he could see through the windshield was a white wall of ice. They would get here when they got here. Staring southward would not make them come faster.

He closed his eyes. Maybe if he slept, he could forget how much he hurt. And how cold the cabin was growing. The space suit's heater ran on batteries. A half hour wouldn't exhaust them; but he wasn't sure how long he would need them. He decided to keep the heater on low. Just warm enough to remind him how chilly it was.

Lying there, he had the oddest sensation that Piranha was accelerating, hard; but that her engines were located under the deck rather than aft. It was gravity, of course. Gravity was acceleration and his body interpreted it as movement because one kind of acceleration felt like any other.

He reminded himself that Downers would say "up," not "forward." Crazy planet. Still, he remembered what gravity had been like. He would get used to it again. It would just take a little time.

His eyes jerked open. Bedsheets?

The second time, he was wakened by the muted sound of motors outside the hull. Alex listened carefully, holding his breath. Yes, definitely motors. He tongued the radio. "Big Momma?"

"I'm here, Alex." Her voice came faintly through the spitting and crackle. There was definitely something wrong with the radio. He prayed that the comm would not fail.

"I hear noises outside. Friendlies or government?"

"It's the rescue party. I think they just spotted you. Look, Alex, one thing.

"What?"

"Your rescuers. They may seem, well, a little strange at first. Just bear with them. They're good folks. Considering how things stand on Earth these days, they're risking a lot to help you."

And beggars can't be choosers. He hadn't known the space dwellers had, any friends on Earth; let alone strange ones. "Roger. Out."

He waited and listened uneasily to the sounds of feet moving around atop the scoopship. Strange. What had Mary meant by that? Sure, Downers were a different breed. Yet, how strange could they possibly be? People were people, right?

A face appeared upside down in the windshield and stared at him. Alex blinked. Someone atop the scoopship had leaned over the cockpit and looked in. A hand appeared by the face. It waved.

Alex raised his right hand as much as he could and wiggled his fingers. Greetings, Earthling. Take one to your leader.

The face turned away and he heard a faint voice shouting, "Told you so. They're half-buried in the ice!"

It turned back and waved again. It was an effort to return the gesture, and after a moment Alex lay back and waited for them to open the hatch. There was more banging and stomping over his head. Strange, Mary had said. So far they didn't seem strange. No stranger than anyone who could move about freely in this horrible gravity.

Scoopship cabins were built for two people and Alex marvelled that so many more had managed to crowd inside. It seemed as if they all wanted to talk at once. They asked questions about the ship, about the habitats and Luna City, about space travel. About everything. Finally, an older man with bushy white hair and beard hollered and drove them out.

"Let me apologize for my friends," he said as he crouched by Alex's side. "They're a little excited at the idea of meeting you."

"Me?" Alex was surprised. "Why should that excite anyone?"

The other man raised his shaggy eyebrows. "Not many spacemen stop here these days."

"Spaceman. I was born on Earth. Kansas."

The white-haired man grunted. "I don't think you're in Kansas anymore, Toto. He set a black bag on the deck and opened it. Alex twisted his head to look inside.

"Are you a doctor?"

"No, I'm a plumber. Lie still. Of course, I'm a doctor. Will Waxman, M.D. We're not irresponsible, you know. We knew you might be hurt; so I came along."

"Sorry."

"It was the house call that probably fooled you," he said, unfastening the space suit.

Alex watched him reach inside the bag and pull out a stethoscope. The black bag didn't float away like Newton said it should. It stayed put. Gravity field. He would have to remember that. Things wouldn't behave naturally groundside. His reflexes would be all wrong. He wondered how Earthlings could teach physics properly, hampered by gravity that way; then he remembered that they probably didn't bother anymore.

"Breathe slow and deep."

He did, and gritted his teeth at sudden pain. Waxman listened to whatever it was that doctors listened to when they did that. Alex had heard all the jokes about the cold feel of stethoscopes. This one had been carried across a glacier.

"Hurts when you breathe?"

"Yes." He tried to sound blasé.

"Couple cracked ribs." Waxman put the stethoscope away. "Don't worry, though. Lungs aren't punctured. We'll tape you up, and in a few weeks you ought to be good as new."

Alex grunted. Good news from all over. What the hell; he was due for some good news. "Doc, how's Gordon? Have you looked at him yet?" The stilyagi was his responsibility. He was the captain; and if it hadn't been for his stupid pride, Gordon would be sitting warm and snug and conscious back in Freedom.

"Gordon? Ah, your copilot. I checked him first. Concussion. No broken bones, no bleeding, no shock. Your people upstairs say there's nothing wrong internally, but we'll be careful until we can get you to a clinic. How does the arm feel?"

"What? Oh, a little numb. Is it broken?"

Waxman ran his hands down the left arm, squeezing gently. When he reached the wrist, Alex sucked his breath in. Waxman nodded. "Sprain, I'd say. We'll tape that, up, too. Sherrine, could you help me here with his ribs?"

A woman came around from behind the pilot's seat. Her parka was unzipped and its hood was thrown back, revealing the loveliest woman Alex had ever seen. Tall and thin, even under layers of sweaters, with prominent, fragile bones. "Hi. Sherrine Hartley," she said in a low, throaty voice.

"Alex MacLeod." He managed to reach up to take her hand despite the gravity. It was a hell of an effort, but worth it; but he couldn't hold it up long. She patted his hand with a firm but gentle touch.

"Welcome to Earth."

"Meeting you makes it almost worth the trip."

She blushed, as if unused to hearing such compliments. How could that be, Alex wondered? A woman as tall and gangly as Sherrine must hear them every day. He studied her as she helped the Doc tape him up. She leaned close into his face as she ran the tape behind his back. How did men and women do it in a gravity field, he wondered? They probably did not need to use Velcro. Gravity would keep everything aligned.

When they lifted him out of the scoopship Alex saw what had happened. Piranha had come in hot, melting an ever deeper trough across the Ice as she slowed to a halt. In the end, she had sunk into the glacier like a hot iron and rested now half-buried in a cave of snow and ice. The giant they called Thor was using a snow blower to put a light covering of ice on top of the scoopship.

Nearby were two sledges rigged to snowmobiles. That accounted for the motors he had heard earlier. Both sledges and snowmobiles were festooned with miscellaneous items of equipment and jerry cans exuding a chemical smell.

Sherrine was suited up now, hiding her figure. "That was a piece of luck, wasn't it?" she said, pointing to the half-buried ship. "Thor figured you'd be melted into the Ice; that's why we brought Pop—pop's snow blower. The 'danes will never spot your ship unless they're right on top of it. Even the landing path blends into the glare of the Ice if you're not looking for it."

"Danes?" Alex was startled. "We were nowhere near Greenland!"

"No, not Danes. Apostrophe—danes, as in 'mundanes.' People with no imagination. People who couldn't imagine space travel even after it had happened. The 'danes have inherited the Earth."

He sensed bitterness in her voice and gave her an appraising look while her friends strapped him into a sledge. He was already wearing her grandfather's parka. Now they wrapped him in blankets and covered him over with a white bedsheet. A pair of wrap-around sunglasses cut the intensely white glare.

"What now?" Thor said. "Those suits. You going to wear them?"

"No way," Bruce said. "One look at those and the dumbest cop would know where we got them."

"They're not easy to get out of," Alex said.

"They are if we cut you out." Thor had a huge knife in his hand.

Alex felt a moment of panic. His suit was not replaceable. Nor was Gordon's. When the suits were gone they weren't space pilots any more.

And so what? You can't go to space without a spaceship. We're not going back, not now, not ever, so we don't need pressure suits.

"All right. Be careful with Gordon—"

"We will," Doc said. "You worry about the gear. What are we taking, what do we leave?"

"Antenna," Alex said. He pointed to something that looked like a megaphone. "Directional. Not too well focussed, but good enough. Otherwise they'll hear us. When you cut Gordon out of his suit, be sure to get the radio system out of his helmet. And leave it turned off. Should I explain? The suit-to-suit radios broadcast all around; anyone listening will hear and can lock in to trace us. The suit-to-ship radio can be hooked up through the directional antenna so you'd have to be more or less in front of it to catch the signal—"

"Gotcha," Mike said. "Well get the stuff. You relax."

Relax while a giant named Thor cuts me out of my suit. Sure.

They wrapped them in blankets. Sherrine and Thor had to carry him to the sled. He couldn't walk, and could barely stand. Gordon was still out. They carried him over as well. Sherrine settled him onto the sled and put on more blankets, then a white sheet. "Should I?" she asked.

"Should you what?"

"Like the way the 'danes run things."

Alex tried to shrug under the blankets. "It's not my world; but they did try to shoot me down."

Mike Glider—he called himself "Mycroft"—loomed over him. "They did more than try, Gabe—boy," he said. "They did it."

"That they did." If I'd turned back, after the first missile— But damn all, we needed the nitrogen. "My name's Alex, not 'Gabe.'" Talking wasn't easy. The air was cold, horribly cold.

The fat man spread his arms out. "Code names. You're Gabriel; the kid is Raphael. Two angels. Get it?" He took his place on the sledge runners.

Alex wondered how any human being could become as fat as Mike. Perhaps it was an adaptation to the ice age. Heat loss was proportional to surface area; and the sphere had the lowest surface area to volume ratio of any solid.

"Saint Michael was an angel, too," he pointed out.

Mike brightened. "Hey, that's right. Do you think I could go up with you guys when they come to get you?"

Alex didn't say anything. MacLeod's First Rule of Wilderness Survival: Don't piss off your rescuers. But Lonny would never take someone like Mike aboard. Whatever Mike's intellect and training, he was just too damn big. It would take too many resources to fuel that much mass.

They're not coming down for us anyway. We are here for keeps, and Mike is a hell of a lot better adapted to local conditions than I am. "Where to now?" he asked.

"Back to my grandparents' place," Sherrine answered. "So we can return the equipment they loaned us. Bob's waiting for us there with the van." She shook out a bedsheet and hauled it over her head. A slit cut in the middle let her wear it like a poncho. Alex saw that the others were doing the same. But the sheets were too thin to give much warmth, so why—

"To hide yourselves," he said. "Right?"

She paused and grinned at him. "It was my idea," she said. "Camouflage. Not even Bruce thought of it. This way, if a search plane flies over, we'll be hard to spot. Gran said it would be worth the work sewing the sheets back up if it meant getting you two safely off the Ice."

"Your grandparents sound like good folks."

"They are. Gran was a plant geneticist before they outlawed it. Pop—pop was a farmer. They still do a little bootleg bioengineering in their basement. Developed a cold-resistant strain of wheat that let them bring in a crop for three years after their neighbors went under. They had to stop last year, though. Gran seeded a rust virus that killed off their crop."

"What? Why? If they'd continued—Sherrine, it's going to get a lot colder before it ever gets warmer."

She looked away; beat her mittens together. "Hungrier, too." Her voice was hard and angry. "But their neighbors—their good, kindly, salt-of-the-earth neighbors were starting to talk about witchcraft. They couldn't imagine any other reason why my grandparents' wheat thrived while theirs died. Peasants always believe in witchcraft." She seated herself on the snowmobile attached to his sledge. Her back was turned and he could not see her face.

Bruce Hyde, code-named "Robert," planted himself behind the other sledge. "Everybody ready?" he asked. Doc Waxman took the second snowmobile. Thor and Steve Mews, the black man, were on cross-country skis. They adjusted their sunglasses and waved. Bruce checked his Navstar transponder and circled his arm above his head. "Warp factor five, Mr. Sulu!"

The snowmobiles started with a roar. Searchers might find us hard to see, Alex thought, but we sure as hell would be easy to hear.

And, dammit, they would stick out for sure on an IR screen. Eight warm-bodied needles in a very cold haystack. And the two snowmobile engines would glow like spotlights.

Alex tried to scan the skies for search planes, but found himself oddly disoriented. The sky was white and the ground was white, and it was hard to tell which was which. "White-out," Mike had called it. "Sky" was "forward," the direction along the acceleration vector. Yet, the visual cues—the ice sliding past the sledge—were at right angles to his sense of acceleration. He began to feel dizzy. He closed his eyes. Give it time, he thought. Let the reflexes catch up to his intellectual awareness. The old-time astronauts had always readjusted quickly to gravity.

Except they hadn't been in free fall as many years as he had. The stations had drugs to compensate for calcium losses, and two tethered ships that spun to make a quarter gee, but it wasn't the real thing. Besides, everyone hated it.

Alex looked at his watch. "Aim this thing south." He indicated the antenna. "South and up. It's not too directional, just get it aimed in the right general direction. We have a relay in geosynch."

Sherrine nodded. None of them wanted to talk. It was too cold.

He tongued his uplink. "Big Momma, this is Piranha." More hiss and crackle. "Big Momma, this is Piranha." Sherrine looked the question at him. He shook his head. "Big Momma, this is Piranha."

"Piranha, da. Eto Mir. We relay you. Please to be standink by."

He waited. Freedom would be below the horizon. Fortunately, there was always something in the sky. The RCA communications satellites, capable of relaying half the long-distance calls of the world, only the world didn't want them anymore. Now this splendid system, capable of thousands of simultaneous calls, served the space stations and the few people on Earth who wanted to talk to them.

"Alex, this is Mary. What is it?" Alex thought she sounded tired, and who could blame her? She had been standing by in Mission Control ever since the launch. She must have been catnapping right at the console. Quickly and concisely, he told her of their IR visibility.

"I don't know what we can do about that, Alex, except to keep you posted on troop movements so you can avoid them. Their search planes have been quartering steadily southeast toward your position."

"Give them decoys."

"Say again?"

"Give them bogeys. I've got it scoped out. Have SUNSAT beam down a few hotspots here and there

around the glacier. If they're, looking for IR targets, let's give 'em their heart's desire."

Mary fell silent and Alex could sense her working through the calculations. Power was the one thing besides people that the habitats could spare. Space was full of power, supplied by a friendly, all-natural nuclear fusion generator. All you had to do was catch it . . .

SUNSAT did that. The U.S. government had nearly completed a demonstration power satellite before the Congress changed their minds and proxmired it. They'd needed the money for dairy farm subsidies or corporate bailouts or something else real useful. The entire space budget, start to finish, was less than what HEW had spent in a decade, less than the cost overruns at the Defense Department; but space was "frills," so they always cut there first. The station had floated in orbit, nickels and dimes away from being operational, until the crunch came and the habitats decided to cut loose from Earth.

Peace and Freedom had pooled their resources and finished SUNSAT, so light, heat and power were the few things that Mary never worried about. The space habitats might starve, or asphyxiate, or die in a solar flare; but they would have power.

"Roger, Piranha," Mary said finally. "I will check with Winnipeg Rectenna Farm on power demand and see how much we can divert."

Alex could tell when Lonny entered the comm room from the way Mary talked. When she was alone, he was Alex. When Lonny was there, he was Piranha. Piranha non grata.

"Winnipeg Rectenna is down, I say again, Winnipeg Rectenna will not be operational for three days." Knocked out by an eco-terrorist bomb thirty hours before Alex took the scoopship down. He'd read about it and wondered if that was significant to his mission. It wouldn't be operational yet. The bomb had done in some of the electronics.

Winnipeg was the only human habitation still functioning that far north, except along the ice-free Alaska Corridor. It had held out so long because of the powersat ground station, built by the Canadian end of the original staging corporation. They had heat and power in plenty, but they couldn't hold the Ice at bay forever; there were too many tons encircling them. And when Winnipe finally went under, would the U.S. take in the survivors. It was well known in orbit that the Last of the Canadians were also the last friends of the habitats, which did not make them popular in the U.S.A.

"Understood, Piranha. I will let you know."

Alex cut contact. So far, Lonny Hopkins, Grand El Jefe and Lord High Naff-naff of Freedom Station had not deigned to speak to him directly, which was fine by Alex. Lonny had a grudge against him and, in all fairness, if Mary had been his wife he might have felt the same way. But Lonny had no quarrel with Gordon, nor with Gordon's family, who had powerful connections on Peace; nor with the Earthlings who were helping out. So, while Lonny might not go out of his way to help, he would not stand in the way, either. Alex sighed. It wasn't so much that you could depend on him to do the right thing; but Lonny was very careful not to do the wrong thing.

Good old Lon. No wonder he loved him so much.

The first search planes broke the southwestern horizon to the right a half hour later. Tiny black specks in the white sky drifted slowly back and forth as they circled. Sherrine throttled back on the snowmobile and watched them.

They look like vultures," she said.

Alex wasn't sure what a vulture was, but it sounded unpleasant. "Are they coming this way?" He asked in a whisper, not because he thought the search planes could overhear, but because the cold air had made his throat hoarse.

"No," said Mike, the sledge driver. "But that's the good news."

"What's the bad news?" Alex asked.

"The search planes are moving west," said Sherrine. "Whether they know it or not, they've cut us off from Pop—pop's farm. Damn! Another half hour and we'd have been home."

"Can we go around them somehow? Or head somewhere else?"

She shook her head. "Bob and the van are waiting at the farm. If we go somewhere else, how will he know where to find us?"

Oh, that part is easy," Alex said. "Pick some coordinates—does Bob have a Navstar link too? No? Then pick a place that he'll know how to find. I'll tell Big Momma; and Big Momma can tightbeam the contact person—"

"The Oregon Ghost."

Whatever that meant. "And then this ghost can call Bob at your grandparents' place."

"That's easy?"

Alex grinned. "Sure. Maybe not straightforward, but easy. There's a difference."

"All right. I'll tell the others." She pointed to the other sledge. "Your friend's awake."

Gordon was watching Alex from within his cocoon of blankets on the other edge. Alex tried to grin, but his face was nearly frozen.

"We live," Gordon said.

"Da. How're you feeling?"

"Not good," Gordon said. "These are droogs?"

"Da. Good friends." And they can hear anything I say, so I can't tell him Mission Control says they may be a trifle weird.

"It was—almost good landing," Gordon said. "I read once that any landing you walk away from is good. But we do not walk."

"Not just yet."

"It is cold. I see why you laugh when I think that because it only freezes water it is not cold. It is very cold." With an effort Gordon pulled a scarf over his face.

"I didn't mean to laugh—" No response. Alex drew his own scarf over his mouth so that only his eyes, protected by sunglasses, were exposed, and turned his head away from the wind. Can't blame him if he's a bit surly. All my goddam fault we're here. But we needed the goddam nitrogen.

So what about the nitrogen that was already in the tanks? Eh, Lonny?

"Is difficult to move," Gordon said. Alex could barely hear him. "How do people live in this? I try to sleep now."

He didn't, though. Alex could see that. Gordon wrapped himself up, but he watched everything.

The conference ended and Mike and Sherrine returned to the sledge.

"Problem?" he asked.

"We have a place. I don't like it," Sherrine said. "But it's the only possible one."

Steve Mews and Thor set their goggles, dug their poles into the ice, and whisked forth. Their job was to scout ahead for crevasses and other obstacles. "So where to?" Alex asked Sherrine when she resumed her seat.

"Brandon."

"How far is that?"

"About a hundred fifty kilometers across the Ice."

Alex didn't say anything for a while, doing some arithmetic in his head. About ten hours' travel, assuming a reasonable pace. He glanced at the sun, wondering how many hours of daylight were left. It was already high in the sky, and the earth seemed to be spinning awfully fast. When was sunset for this latitude and season? He closed his eyes and tried to picture the globe as he was used to seeing it. What was it like on the Ice at night? Cold. Colder than it was already. "Don't fret," he said aloud. "It's only water ice."

When Alex reestablished the link, Mary wasn't at the comm anymore. It was a woman he did not know. Well, Mary had to crash sooner or later. Lonny might have suggested that she was spending too much time downlinking.

Talk was cheap. The delta vee might cost too much for a rescue trip; but the solar power for the comm links was practically free. He and Mary could talk until Hell froze over; which, judging by his surroundings, would be real soon now.

He let Gordo handle the comm. Not that he was sulking over Mary's absence, but he felt it was about time that the kid took a hand in his own rescue. Alex listened in.

"Skazhitye, Big Momma," he heard him say. "Team Leader 'Robert' points out that, uh, Fargo Gap is uzkiy—is a choke point, and sure to be roadblocked by now. He requests that you contact their driver, code-named 'Pins,' by secure channel and tell him to 'meet us at the gas station.' Tell 'The Ghost' that 'Pins' can be reached at 'FemmeFan's Gramp.' Katya, did any of that make sense to you?"

"Obkhodimiy, Gordon. As long as makes sense to you and to contact. We are letting you know transponder frequency soon."

Mike told Alex that "Pins" was Bob Needleton. "Pins and Needles get it? just like 'Robert is 'the Bruce.'"

Alex wondered what the point was of having code names if Mike kept explaining what they meant. Don't mean anything. It's a game to Mike. High stakes, but still just a game.

The decision to head for Brandon obviously pleased no one, but there was little choice in the matter. As Bruce explained it, they could not return to Mapleton; they could not risk running the road block at Fargo Gap; and they could not easily set up a rendezvous with Bob Needleton short of a landmark they all knew about. >From the glum expressions, they must know they'd still be on the Ice after sunset. Alex wondered if they were having second thoughts about the rescue.

Alex knew that rivers were free-flowing streams of water propelled by gravity rather than pressure. He had seen pictures. He could even close his eyes and remember them. He had swum in one once, a majestically slow stream with banks choked by trees, as close to weightlessness as he had come in those days. But memory did not prepare him for the sight of the Red River from atop the Dakota Glacier.

Sherrine stopped the sledge at the head of a vast ramp of ice while Thor and Steve probed ahead for crevasses. Mike pointed downward. "There she is," he said. "The Red River of the North. It carries warmer water from the south into New Lake Aggaziz. If it weren't for the river and the rectenna farm, Winnipeg would be under the Ice by now."

Alex looked where he pointed. The valley was partially filled in, with ice and snow forming a broad shallow U. The river itself gleamed a perfect silver, the sunlight dancing on it where it showed between

the choking ice floes. At first the river seemed merely large; but the nearby hills and ice banks gradually brought it into scale in his mind. The largest free-flowing stream he had seen in recent years was when the laundry basin in the daycare center had plugged up and the rinse water overflowed. He'd gotten three kinds of hell over it and spent a day and a half sponging loose globules out of the air. What he saw now was vast beyond belief. Hundreds of liters of water, at the very least!

He shivered, and not from the cold. Even the trip across the glacier had not prepared him for this sight. The white sky and white land had blended together, destroying all sense of distance. He had halfway convinced himself that he was in a small, sterile room. Now an immense vista opened below him, and—oddly—he felt more dwarfed than during an EVA.

Sherrine must have seen him studying the river because she asked him what he thought.

Alex shook his head. "I've never seen anything so big." He laughed nervously. "In fact, I'm feeling a touch of agoraphobia."

"You're kidding," said Mike. "You live in orbit. You should be used to wide open spaces."

"Well, yes and no," Alex answered him. He kept his gaze fixed on the panorama below him, forcing his mind to accept it. "Inside the habitats, everything is cramped; outside, everything is so vast you can't even relate to it. Life consists of things you can reach out and touch and things you could never touch in a lifetime of reaching. Somehow this intermediate scale seems much bigger.

Sherrine laughed. "You should see the Mississippi."

"He may," said Mike. "When the Great Ice builds up enough weight, it'll tip the North American Plate and the Mississippi'll start running north. I'd hate to be in California when that happens. The whole tectonic boundary'll go at once." He dismounted from the sledge and trudged across the Ice to where Bruce Hyde stood watching the skiers through a pair of binoculars.

Alex turned to Sherrine. "Is he always like that?" he asked.

"Mike? Sure. We call him the 'Round Mound of Profound.'" She was perched tailor-fashion atop the

snowmobile engine housing, taking advantage of the break to warm herself from the engine heat. "He'll talk about anything and everything. Sometimes he even knows what he's talking about."

Alex shook his head. "Why do you put up with it?"

She gave him a look of surprise. "Fen are a tolerant bunch. You'd be shocked at some of what we put up with. Besides, every now and then he comes up with something useful."

"So, were to now?" he asked. It was irritating to sit bundled in the sledge while others took charge. He knew he should be used to that. MacLeod do this. MacLeod do that. Don't forget to clean up. Help the kids put their toys away. Try to be useful for a change. But piloting Piranha had wakened something. For a short time he had been making the decisions. Poor ones maybe; but his decisions.

Sherrine twisted and faced the river valley. Directly east was the sheer wall of another glacier, higher than the one they were on. "Over there," she said, pointing. "The Minnesota Glacier." For a time she stared silently into the valley. Then, "When I was a little girl, the Red was a 'mean and cantankerous river.' It was either too high or too low. Mostly too low. Filled with sandbars and driftwood. And, oh God, the mosquitoes! They were this big!" She held her hands out an improbable length. "The riverbanks were lined with thick strands of chokeberry and pussywillow, some box elder and elm, even a little cottonwood here and there." She sighed. "It's all gone now. Living in the Minneapolis heat sink, it's easy to forget how much has already been swallowed up under tons of ice. The trees, the fish, even the damn mosquitoes. Whole environments. Soon, the river will be gone, too. It'll freeze and become just another tongue of the glacier."

"So fast," she said. "It came on so fast. Positive feedback. Once it gets started, it runs away before you know it's begun." She turned and looked at him over her shoulder; gave a little shrug. "Sometimes it gets me down, you know what I mean?"

Bruce and Mike were walking back to the sledges, waving their arms. Sherrine and Doc resumed their seats in the snowmobiles. "It's ironic, don't you think," she asked him before starting the engine, "that the biggest environmental disaster in history was caused by environmentalism?"

* * *

The Valley was as quiet as a Christmas postcard scene. Everything was shrouded in a blanket of light powdery snow. There were ghostly hummocks from which protruded the odd chimney or tree branch. Steve spotted an automobile embedded in the side wall of the glacier itself, its tail end protruding several

meters past ground level.

Alex remembered reading about the mammoths found frozen in the Siberian glaciers of an earlier ice age and wondered what future generations would make of this relic when and if the Ice released its grip.

Thor shucked his skis, climbed the ice wall, and pierced the car's gas tank from underneath with an ice pick. Using a funnel attached to a syphon hose, he refilled one of the depleted jerry cans with what gasohol remained in the tank.

So easy. With gravity to help, the fuel didn't have to be pumped; it just streamed toward the Earth's center. But why were Sherrine's fists clenched into tight balls while she watched Thor work?

He asked. She said, "If he slips, he could break his neck."

Right. It was just as well that he was strapped into the sledge. Free to help, he'd be worse than useless. He'd be an embarrassment. Thirty years of conditioned reflexes could not be forgotten overnight. If it had been him scavenging the gasohol, he would have tried to jump over to the car and stand on the ice wall. You can't stand on walls in a gravity field, Alex. The car didn't just drift there, it must have been lifted and held by the ice. And, if Thor lost his grip, he would not simply float away in a slow spin; he would accelerate to the ground. It did not seem a terribly long way to fall, but what did he know about falling?

When they set forth again, Thor lagged behind a bit as if reluctant to leave. He kept glancing back over his shoulder. Then he set his poles and pushed off hard, racing past Steve Mews, who had taken the point. Steve gave him a curious glance as he slid past, but did not quicken his own deliberate pace to catch up.

I-29 was poorly maintained. It had been plowed in places, but long stretches had been engulfed by the Dakota Glacier just as the car had been. Alex could see where another highway—US 83—had been cleared as an alternate route wherever the interstate was impassable.

"They don't spend as much effort on this road as they do on I-94," Mike explained. "There are only a couple of towns in the Valley still open"—he wave a mittened hand north—"and only Winnipeg at the dead end."

They halted at the riverbank. Sherrine turned off the snowmobile's engine and stared at the turgid water choked with "pancake ice and slush—an open expanse of water even vaster than Alex had imagined from the glacier overlook. The scale of the planet was just beginning to hit him. It was huge; everything in it was immense. And it was convex. He held on tightly to his boyhood memories. At one time he had regarded all this as normal.

He wondered how Gordon was taking it. The gravity and the scale were completely new to him. When Alex glanced over at the other sledge, he saw Doc Waxman was bent over Gordon. "Gordo?" Alex fumbled for a moment with the tongue switch, then thought better of it. No point in sending a beacon for someone to home in on. "Are you all right, Gordon?" he shouted.

"Nye khorosho, Alex. Leave me alone." He moaned.

"Doc," Alex called out. "What's wrong with Gordon?"

Waxman turned his bushy, white patriarch's beard toward him. "Motion sickness," he said. "He threw up and it froze all over him. He'll be fine once he gets used to things down here." He shook his head. "I've heard of people getting motion sickness in free fall. First time I ever saw it work the other way."

No one ever died from motion sickness; they only wished they could. Yes, Gordon would get over it, just as Alex already had. It was a matter of synchronizing the sense of balance with visual perception. Gordon was born in free fall and a constant acceleration frame screwed up his motion cues a lot worse than it did Alex's. Like everyone else, he'd gone to "Spinning Kiddies." The centrifuge sessions were required for children—for bone development, Alex thought. But stilyagi like Gordon generally dropped out, and most adults avoided spin exercises when they could. Alex considered his own condition. Gone to flab, with bones of rubber, and he'd been born down here.

"There's no way across that," said Mike, pointing toward the river of slush. "We'll have to turn south."

"Can't do that," said Bruce from the other sledge. "South takes us to the interchange at Fargo Gap. There's a police barricade there now. Besides, Bob is waiting for us at Brandon."

"Pins," Mike corrected him. "Use the code names, like we agreed."

Bruce gave him a look. "There ain't nobody here but us tribbles; so who gives a—"

"And Gabe can call Big Momma and change the rendez—"

"The code name idea was stupid, anyway—"

Doe Waxman stepped between them. "This isn't helping us cross the Red," he said.

They both fell silent. Thor and Steve shuffled their skis back and forth across the ice. "We can't stay here," Thor said. "We'll freeze." He looked back the way we had come.

Mike studied the river. "Maybe we could leap from floe to floe. You know. Like Eliza crossing the ice in Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"Why, Mike," said Bruce, "what a wonderful idea. Did you hear that, Alex? You can leap from floe to floe."

Alex smiled weakly. "I'm game, but I don't think the snowmobiles are up to it."

"Well, now, wait," said Mike. "Sure the plan has a hole in it, but—"

Sherrine: "Not just a hole, Mike. A black hole."

Thor: "Yeah, the plan sucks."

Mike stuck his chin out. "You have a better plan, maybe?"

Steve Mews interrupted. "I do. Head north."

They all looked at one another. "North," said Bruce. "You mean go to Winnipeg? But that's a dead end."

Steve clapped his mittens together. "Hey, maybe I'm wrong. I don't know the local geography. But didn't that Engineer captain at Fargo tell us that the Red was frozen north of Perley? Well, that's gotta be north of here, right?"

Alex never saw so many mouths hang open at once.

Crossing the Red was easy Alex thought, if you didn't count holding your breath while doing it. The river was frozen; but the ice was ragged and cracked. A rough ride, and if the ice had given way—

Well, he didn't want to think about that. He supposed he was in less danger than he had been in Piranha. A hot ship, miles high, hypersonic speeds. Even without a missile up the arse, there were a million things that could have gone wrong. But it was one thing to face danger with your hands around the stick. It was another thing to face it while bundled into a sledge, dependent on another's skills. It was the impotence, he decided; not the danger.

The glaciers on both sides of the river growled and popped as they flowed south—an odd and disconcerting sound. Every snap made him jerk, thinking it was the river ice breaking up beneath them. He had not expected sounds. But then, he didn't suppose a mountain range of ice could slide across the landscape in silence. He wondered whether, if the glacier sounds were recorded and played back at high speed, they would sound like a rushing river.

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CHAPTER FIVE

"In the Hands of Crazy People"

Bruce called a rest break atop the Minnesota glacier. Satellite recon had located a path up the side, but it had been an arduous climb. Thor and Steve were winded. The others stood around the two snowmobiles, slapping themselves with their arms, warming themselves with the meager engine heat. Everyone seemed drawn and introspective.

"I tell you," said Bruce, "that Engineer captain had to be a closet fan. Why else would he have told us about the river being frozen?"

"That doesn't make sense," Mike said. "How would he have known what we were up to?"

"He might have guessed from your questions about the Angels. One fan knows another."

Warmly wrapped and trundled by sledge, Alex chafed at his helplessness while others did the work of rescue. "I'm just not used to being so useless," he told Sherrine. Actually, I'm here because I was expendable. He thought of telling her that, but he didn't want to.

Sherrine laughed. "Alex, sitting in that sledge, you've done more to help us than anyone standing up."

The Angel flushed. "I'm a link to Freedom, that's all. They do the work."

Sherrine shook her head. "Don't be modest." Was Alex serious, she wondered, or was it just the usual macho self-deprecation? It seemed as if the older space pilot never missed a chance to put himself down, since putting himself down on Earth. And the kid spent most of his time in a kind of sullen silence. And these were space heroes?

Be fair, she chided herself. They were injured and in shock. Give them time to recover.

She said, "Who had Big Momma beam down the IR decoys? Who arranged the rendezvous with Bob when we couldn't go back to Mapleton? Who had the old Hubble pinpoint the best route up onto this glacier?"

"It was a rough climb anyhow. Almost too steep for the snowmobiles."

"It would have been rougher if we'd had to find our own way up, or just climb straight up the sheer wall."

Alex grunted. "We also serve who only lie and wait."

She patted him on his shoulder. "That's the spirit. Don't worry. Steve will have you on your feet in no time once we get off the Ice."

"Steve?"

"Steve's a bodybuilder. Didn't you notice his muscles?"

He had. Steve seemed grotesque, thick and bulging, like a creature from another world; but they all looked like that, more or less. "What's he going to do? Lend us a few?"

He liked the sound of her laugh. "You'll have to ask him."

"Hey!"

"What?"

"You're breathing rainbows!"

"I'm what?"

"Breathing rainbows!" She was. Sparkling circles of color came out of her mouth every time she exhaled. They reminded him of radar pulses. He said, "You're magical."

"So are you!" She bent closer to his face. "Hey, guys, look at this! Rainbow smoke rings."

Soon, everyone was laughing and puffing rainbows into the air. Even Gordon was smiling, for the first time since the crash. Steve tried to make patterns in the air by moving his head around.

"We're a lot higher here than on the Dakota," Mike announced. "It's so cold that the moisture in our breath freezes as soon as we exhale. That creates a cloud of millions of tiny ice particles." His own beard glistened with frost as he spoke.

Bruce made a snowball and threw it at Mike. Sherrine grinned and made a rainbow ring. "A lot of my mundane friends," she said to Alex, "think that explaining a phenomenon 'ruins the magic.' I think the explanations just make it more magical than before. 'Danes live in a world where everything happens on the surface; where everything is a symptom—like the rainbows. But a cloud of microscopic crystal prisms is as magical as an unexplained rainbow any day.'"

When they set out again, Bruce and Mike took the skis to give Steve and Thor a rest. The tall, brawny Thor took over as Alex's sledge driver. He seemed drawn and introspective. He was the only one who had not joined in the rainbow making. His breath sparkled with colors the same as everyone else's, but it didn't seem to delight him.

After a few minutes of riding, Alex leaned his head back and studied Thor's face. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong?" Thor wouldn't meet his eyes.

"You've been acting distracted ever since we left the Valley."

The hum of the snowmobile motor and the hiss of the sledge runners over the ice were the only sounds, until Thor said, "There was a family in that car."

Alex remembered tail fins protruding from an ice wall. "People? Dead?"

"Sure, dead. I got a look in while the tank was draining. The front seats had filled in with snow and ice, but I could see the shoulders and the backs of the parents' heads. The back seats—" He paused and swallowed.

"The back seats were clear. There were two kids there. A boy and a girl; maybe six and four. I don't know. They were lying there with their eyes wide open, as white as parchment, coated with frost. There was ice around their eyes where they'd been crying."

"Nothing decays in this endless cold. If it weren't for the frozen tears, I might have thought they were staring back at me."

Alex glanced at Sherrine driving the snowmobile. She did not seem to be listening. He remembered thinking about mammoths earlier. He pitched his voice low. "You didn't tell the others."

"No. Would you a have?"

"We should have done something."

Thor nodded thoughtfully. "See if you can describe it."

"I don't know. Dig them out. Bury them?" On Earth, he'd heard they buried their dead. It seemed a waste of organics to Alex, but "custom is king of all."

"The glacier will bury them," said Thor. "The job's half done."

"It doesn't seem right to just leave them there."

"No, it doesn't. But what could we have done? Broken our necks trying to get them out? What would we have dug the graves with inside the car, at least they're safe from wolves. You know what bothers me the most?"

"No, what?"

"The accident must have happened ten, twelve years ago, when most of these towns were evacuated. Hundreds of cars must have driven past. My mother told me that this country once spent millions of dollars to free two whales trapped in the Arctic ice. Why didn't anyone stop to help those people back then? Those children might have still been alive!"

Alex couldn't think of any way to answer him. It wasn't his planet. He hadn't been there. He wondered what the evacuation had been like. A panicked flight? A black, depressing recession? A car skids off the gassy roadway and plows into a snowbank. No one stops. No one cares enough to stop. The country has turned its back on technology. Small is beautiful but small is also poor; and the country could no longer afford to care.

As the sun dropped toward the horizon, a curious green tint came over everything. The ice and the clouds, perfect white but moments before, glowed like emeralds. To the right, the sky itself was green from the horizon halfway to the zenith. Sherrine and Doc stopped their snowmobiles and everyone stared.

"The sky looks like a lawn in spring," said Sherrine.

"Yeah," said Thor. "And the clouds look like bushy summer treetops. It's a floating forest."

Green was not a color Alex was used to seeing. Black, white, silver, yes. But green was the color of control panel lights; of shoulder patches; the plant rooms, of course, and the spider plants in every compartment; and a few corridor walls here and there. Still, of all the places he had thought to see green, the heart of a glacier was not one.

He asked Sherrine, "Is sunset always like this?"

She turned in her saddle. "No. Sunsets are normal, red. I'd heard it was different when you got far enough onto the Ice. Nobody knows why."

Mike was uncharacteristically silent. He muttered something about static discharge, but neither too loudly nor too confidently. Finally, Bruce shouted. "Come on! This isn't getting us any closer to Brandon." His voice was harsh and had a ragged edge to it. When the others looked at him, he turned his head and looked abruptly away.

"Right," said Steve. "Doc, rev it up. It'll be dark soon." The other sledge pulled out ahead and Sherrine fell into line behind.

"Alex?"

For a moment, Alex could not figure who had called him. Then he realized that it was Gordon on the comm link. The kid was finally communicating. He tongued his radio. "Yeah?"

"How much farther must we go?"

Alex shook his head; but Gordon couldn't see him from his sledge. "I don't know. I've lost track. Should we be broadcasting?"

"Is low power. Carries how far?"

"Don't know. I guess it's all right. We're a long way from anything."

"I think the one they call Robert is worried."

"Yeah." Alex thought he knew why. Bruce had been keeping track of their progress. The others might get distracted by rainbows and green skies, but Bruce always kept the goal firmly in mind.

"I'm cold," said Gordon. "But my readouts tell me it's only minus fifteen degrees Celsius. That doesn't make any sense. Neg fifteen isn't very cold."

"Ever hear of wind chill, Gordo?"

"Wind chill. No, what is?"

Oh, Gordo, Gordo. Of course he didn't know. The only wind in Freedom was Lonny Hopkins making a speech. "Gordon, the human body cools by convection, right? We dump excess heat into the surrounding air."

"Yes? Is why we need radiators on the station."

"Uh-huh." The main problem in the habitats was to keep from roasting. No one ever heard of too cold. "Well, what if the air around your body was constantly moved away and replaced by fresh, unheated air. It would seem colder, wouldn't it?"

Gordon thought that one over. "I guess so."

"Look, as your body heat warms the surrounding air, it reduces the heat fall and the rate of heat loss slows. So you feel warmer. But keep the cold air coming in and you'll dump your excess calories faster.

It's—What did you say, minus fifteen degrees Celsius? The wind is enough to lift granular ice particles. Call it forty kilometers per hour. So the temperature feels as if it were, oh, minus thirty seven degrees Celsius."

"Alex."

"What?"

"Well, it doesn't help me feel any warmer, but at least when I freeze to death, I'll know why."

Okay, Gordo, be a snot. But he's right. We are not going to make it. It was too cold, and Brandon was too far. The space suits, with their heaters, had been left behind with the scoopship. They would have been incriminating, too hard to dispose of; and the trip was supposed to have been a short one. The suits wouldn't have saved them anyway. Sherrine and the others would freeze; Gordon and Alex could wait on their backs until the batteries gave out. Better that they all go together.

It was getting colder and the wind was picking up. And it wasn't just Gordo depending on him. There were these Downers as well. It was his fault they were out here. Sure, he was going to freeze along with them; but do passengers really feel better because the captain went down with his ship? Soon enough, he and his friends would be frozen as solid as those children in the car.

"It's not a bad way to go," Thor said softly.

Alex looked up. Thor knew. He had the most experience with the Ice, and he knew.

"You get sleepier and sleepier. Then you don't wake up," Thor said. "They say it's even easier if you don't fight it."

"And do you give up?"

Thor shrugged. "I probably won't. But I won't last much longer than you do."

The glacier at night was as dark as the leese of Freedom Station. But Freedom Station could turn on the spotlights for EVA work. Alex didn't think any of the rescue party had realized how dark it would be. They hadn't expected to still be on the Ice come nightfall; so he couldn't blame them for not bringing any flashlights. They had only the two that Sherrine's grandfather kept in the kits strapped to each sledge, and a small trouble light salvaged from Piranha. They didn't make much light; but, with them and with ropes tying everyone together, Bruce could hope that no one would get lost in the dark. If only there were some way to turn on the spotlights.

Spotlights. By God!

"Something interesting?" Thor asked.

"Damn right, if I can raise the ship. You don't need the Sun to get heat from the sky."

"Onk?"

"You'll see. I hope. Aim the antenna for me, due south. Big Momma. Big Momma, Big Momma, this is Piranha. Priority One. Mayday."

Sherrine looked around with a frown.

"Alex—"

"Shut up, Gordon! Big Momma, Big Momma, this is Piranha. Mayday."

* * *

Captain Lee Arteria relaxed in a chair well to the side of the meeting room, the better to watch the proceedings. One should always have a clear field of fire, just in case. Several of the other attendees threw repeated glances in that direction. Arteria, returning their gazes, could almost read their minds. Slim

and fine-featured, pointed chin; short-cropped red hair; noncommittal first name, and a grip like a Junkyard dog. Gay man or butch woman? They couldn't tell. It made them uneasy.

Arteria parted her lips in a thin faint smile. They were bothered less by the thought that she might be skew than by not knowing the direction of skew. They liked to put people in categories, even unorthodox categories. It was more comfortable than dealing with individuals and their idiosyncrasies. Deny them that and you put them at a disadvantage. Arteria liked to leave it like that. It was always sound tactics to leave your opponents at a disadvantage.

"Can we take it then," said Ike Redden, "that the subjects have died on the Ice?" Redden represented the INS on the Special Task Force. He was also the chair. Inter-service wrangling and high-level compromise had left the Immigration and Naturalization Service in nominal charge of the search. The space stations had declared their independence almost a generation ago; so their residents were, ipso facto, aliens. And illegal immigration was, according to counsel, the most impeccable grounds for apprehension of the stranded astronauts. Still, Arteria was sure that all the task force members were looking for ways to bend the mission to their own advantages.

The State Police captain shook his head. "I don't see how they could have gotten off the Ice before nightfall without being apprehended."

Arteria could think of three or four ways. She kept her peace. The others were paid to do the thinking.

"There was no one aboard the spacecraft when we found it." Air Force was reluctant to mention finding the craft; no doubt because it had taken so long to do so. Never mind that the shuttle was painted a reflective silver; that it blended into the surrounding ice; that it had apparently been deliberately buried. The failure to achieve instant results was always ammunition for one's opponents. "We assume that the astronauts wandered out onto the Ice and froze. We've done IR scans of the immediate area and found no trace of them. So their bodies must have cooled to ambient. We may never find them."

"They are not dead."

Captain Arteria sighed quietly. Staff meetings were always tedious, especially to the worker bees; but even tedium was better than listening to Shirley Johnson. Redden sucked on his lips and exchanged glances with the State Police and Air Force representatives. "Why do you say that, Johnson?" he asked.

"Ice is a crystal, and crystals focus the life power. Yes, yes, I know people have frozen on the Ice in spite of that; but all sickness comes from negative thinking. One must be open to the life-affirming powers of the crystal."

"The aliens are technophiles, pointed out Jheri Moorkith, the Green representative, and therefore life-denying. However, I agree that they have escaped. Why else would the techno-scientific elite in their artificial worlds have beamed their death rays at the search teams?"

"There were tracks in the snow," State Police admitted, "weren't there, Captain Arteria?"

"There certainly were." Arteria's voice was a husky contralto. No sexual clues there, either. Nor clues of any sort. Arteria intended to participate as little as possible in the conference. The Angels weren't any threat to the United States, and tracking them down was using resources better employed for something else.

"The tracks came to the spaceship from the south. We lost them on the hard ice," State Police continued. "But they were headed toward the interior. There's no chance of finding tracks at night, but come morning we'll start a search pattern around the projected route. The tracks looked like dogsleds, though.

Air Force spoke up. "One of our IR searches turned up a bogey to the east, on the Minnesota Glacier; but close overflight positively identified it as an Eskimo band. Those dogsled tracks are probably another band that saw the ship come down and munched over to investigate."

State Police: "There have been a number of Eskimo sightings around here over the last few months. There was a fight over poaching out by Anamoose. The white folks chased them off."

"Eskimos," said Moorkith, rubbing his chin. "Good. Native Americans live close to nature. They respect the other lifeforms with which we share this fragile planet. I'm sure they will help us locate the polluting technocrats."

The Angels had help, thought Arteria. Someone came up from the south and took them away to the east. Probably not Eskimos, if they came from the south. That should be obvious, even to this crowd. So. If not Eskimos, who? Given the timing involved, it had to have been impromptu. And, if they had been caught—

People who would risk anything to rescue spacemen, instantly, knowing the government would be searching, too. People who could head straight for the spacecraft without aerial spotters. People who could call down power beams from the stations.

People who thought they could improvise a rescue on the Ice on the spur of the moment and pull it off without getting caught.

Fanac! It had to be fanac.

And if you could think like a fan again, Arteria thought, you might figure out where they'd show up next. She smiled wolfishly.

* * *

The response was faint, almost lost in the hiss of static. "Da, we readink, Piranha. Chto khochesh? What want?"

"Thank God. Big Momma, it's cold here. We're going to freeze, all of us. We need heat. Can you give us a microwave spotlight? Have SUNSAT lock one of its projectors onto our transponder frequency and track us across the ice."

"Skazhite. One moment." Alex waited while Big Momma conferred—probably with the Peace Station chief and the SUNSAT engineer. Sherrine asked him what he was doing and he told her. She and Thor exchanged glances.

"Is that possible?" she asked. "To beam enough microwave energy down to keep us from freezing?"

"Sure."

"It won't be, uh, too much, will it?"

Alex grinned. "I'll have them set it for thaw, not bake. Seriously, the beam density is only twenty-three milliwatts per square centimeter at the center of the rectenna farm. I figure if we keep it to a couple of milliwatts, it will take the edge off the cold without cooking us. We'll have to take off whatever rings or jewelry we're wearing, wrap them in cloth maybe pack them in snow. Belt buckles. Anything metal. Microwaves penetrate meat, wood or plastic, but metal absorbs them. If you kept your ring on, Sherrine, it would probably burn your finger.

Thor grinned. "I'm not sure I'd mind—if it did cook us." He looked over his shoulder. "Ever since we found that car. When Bruce raised this expedition, it sounded like good fanac. The ultimate sercon. A quick dash onto the ice and, back off. They'd be filking about it for generations."

Alex made a mental note to find out later what language Thor was speaking.

"The trouble was, we didn't make any contingency plans. Heck. We didn't make any plans." Thor grinned. Well, Ghu takes care of idiots, small children, and fen. Who knows what the Great Roscoe has in store for us next?"

"Roscoe?" Alex asked, but they didn't hear him.

Alex barely managed to confirm the beam density with the Angels before losing contact completely. They must have been at the very fringe of the scoopship relay's range. When he had completed the message, Alex sighed and spat out the tongue switch. "Well, that's that, he said.

"Do you think they got the message?" Sherrine asked. "About the microwaves?"

Alex's eyes were dull with exhaustion and the endless acceleration. "I hope so. They're supposed to lock onto the transponder location and track it all the way to Brandon. We should be warm as toast in a while. If not—" Shrugging would be too much effort.

As they picked their way across the ice, Sherrine waited for evidence of microwave warming. She worried about their equipment. The sledges contained little metal. Her grandfather had made them of wood poles and hide lashings. The two snowmobiles were largely fiberglass, but she wondered what

microwave heating would do to the metal engines. Probably nothing. Engines run at high temperatures anyway. But suppose they can't take it? Better than freezing. . .

After a while, began to feel warm. Was it the microwaves? Or was it only her anxiety? Or just the heat from the snowmobile engine? She saw a crevasse that Mike had flagged and steered around it. Cans of gasohol. What will microwave heat do to those?

The moon rose, half full, over the eastern horizon, creating a startling amount of light on the icy landscape. The crust of snow, reflecting the moonlight, seemed to glow from within itself. She breathed out slowly and saw the flickering rainbow of her breath. She was happy. Even if they died here, it had still been worth the attempt.

Astronauts down. Crashed. She loosened the collar on her parka. Hunted by the government. What else would a trufan have done? Fen loved their bickering and fannish politics. Pohl and Sykora still wouldn't talk to each other; but take a few years off them and they would both have been here on the Ice together, because it was the right thing to do. Fandom, after all, was a Way of Life.

She unzipped her parka. 'Tis a proud and lonely thing to be a fan. She was glad to be back. When she thought of all the years she had wasted in the "danelaw" . . .

"Sherrine?"

"Yes. Alex?" She kept her eye glued on Mike's back where he broke trail ahead of her.

"Could you take a blanket or two off me?"

She turned around. "What? Oh!" Alex's face was dap with sweat. She realized that she was perspiring heavily herself. She brought her snowmobile to a halt just as Will stopped his and jumped off into the snow and began stuffing ice in his mouth. Now what?

"Fillings," Will mumbled. "Gold caps, teef." He settled back on his heels and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry," Alex said. "The calculations must have been off slightly."

"Can you do something about it?" Will asked. "It's like using hot coffee for mouthwash."

Thor rubbed his jaw and agreed. Mike, who had returned from the point and overheard, grinned. "Makes me glad I have, plastic fillings. No metal in my mouth."

"Me neither," Sherrine agreed. "But I'm glad I'm not wearing braces anymore." The others laughed.

"Very funny," said Doc, chewing on a snowball. Thor and Bruce were sucking in cold air. Sherrine winced. Whenever she did that, it hurt her teeth.

"No good," said Alex, spitting out his communicator once more. "Damn thing's hot. I can't raise them. Either we're out of range or the radio finally went kaput."

"No big deal," said Doc. "I'll just keep a mouth full of snow." He took off his parka. "Meanwhile," he said, "it's a little warm for this."

The layered look, Sherrine reflected as she removed her own parka had its advantages. She unstrapped Alex and pulled a blanket off him. Microwaves created heat by friction. They agitated the molecules of an object, penetrating to a certain depth, depending on the material. When the microwaves were shut off, the object continued to heat by conduction to greater depths. She suspected that she would be removing another sweater or two as the night went on.

"Say," said Mike, "you know what we forgot to bring?"

Thor gave him a suspicious look. "What?"

"Beach umbrellas. Aluminum beach umbrellas. In case it gets too hot."

Doc studied the snowball in his hand, looked at Mike, shook his head and stuck the snowball back in his mouth. Sherrine grinned. Mike had a point. Later, they might wish they had a means of reflecting the microwaves. They laughed and moved on.

"Hey, guys," said Bruce. "Don't look now, but we got company."

Sherrine looked to the sky. "Oh, God—"

"No," said Bruce. "Not up there. Over here."

She looked. Eskimos.

In retrospect, it was probably something she should have expected. Eskimos lived on the ice and the ice was flowing south, so why shouldn't there be Inuit in Minnesota? She said as much to Mike about the small, ragged band that had appeared suddenly in the ghost-light created by the flashlights and the ice-reflected stars and moon. Mike shrugged, scratched his beard and dug into his limitless store of miscellany.

"Maybe," he said. "But the Inuit are a coastal folk. Except for the caribou-hunting bands, they don't live inland. If anything, the Ice should have driven them west along the coast into Alaska, not south into the heart of the glacier."

Krumangapik's face was a deep copper, creased into a permanent squint. He had thrown back the hood of his parka showing straight-cropped black hair. His own sledge and dog team waited nearby with his partner and their families. Krumangapik grinned, showing the gaps in his teeth.

He smiled at Bruce and the others. The Angels, he wasn't sure of. He kept giving them quick glances from the corners of his eyes.

He said, "You must not thank for the meat. It is bad manners to thank."

Bruce seemed flustered. "I didn't mean to give offense," he said.

"It is our people's custom to thank for gifts," said Sherrine.

Krumangapik did not look at her. Sherrine thought he wasn't sure if she was a woman or not. By his standards, she was too thin to be female; but he evidently had no wish to take chances. Bruce had facial hair and was obvious the leader, so he spoke exclusively to Bruce.

"We do not give gifts. I know that it is different among the upernatleet; but in this land, no one wishes to be dependent upon another. 'With gifts you make slaves; as with whips you make dogs.'"

"Then why," asked Mike, "have you shared your meat?"

The old inuk seemed puzzled by the question. "You have shared your magical heat so that we are all wonderously warm." His breath made frosty clouds in the icy darkness, so Sherrine guessed that warm depended on what you were used to. "What could I offer in return but these poor scraps of meat. Offal that has been dirtied by the dogsled. I am ashamed to offer it to such excellent guests."

Mike and Steve looked thoughtfully at the skewers in their hands. Sherrine hissed at them. "Not literally! If gift-giving makes slaves, you have to disparage the gift." They looked relieved and Steve took a bite and chewed.

"It is really very good meat," he said. "Tasty. What is it, walrus?"

"Dog," said Krumanepik. "But it was a very sick dog," he added hastily. "Mangy. We have lost most of

our team on this journey."

Steve gave a journeyman grin. "Delicious," he said.

Krumangapik's band had intended to camp, but when Bruce told them that he was going to press on to Brandon, they elected to join up. "It is safer to travel together," he said. "You carry the warmth with you; and the sooner we get off this wretched ice, the better."

"Get off the Ice?" Steve seemed surprised. "This is your world isn't it? The land at the top of the world."

Mala, the other hunter, laughed and the old man shook his head. "It is ours because neither the Indians nor the whites want it. The legends say that when we first came into this country, many ages ago, it was already inhabited by those you call Indians. In the white man's school, we learned that these folk were called the Athabascans and the Crees. We fought mightily to take the land from them. The grass ran red with their gore. Ah, there were massacres to whet even the wildest fancy! Even today, to cry! 'Indians!' among the Greenlanders is enough to throw everyone into a panic; even though the word has long lost its meaning there. But the Indians were crueler and wiser in the ways of war than we; and, even though the forests were spreading north, there was not room in them for both peoples, and we retreated before them. Soon we came to a strange, white land where the Indian would not follow. Life here became a contest with death, but we learned that if we followed the proper customs, we could live. Later, we found that Sila had arranged all this to harden us against the day of our vengeance. Now, the ice is bringing us back again into the land that was ours." The old man scratched his chin and asked in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice, "You have not seen any Cree, have you?"

Sherrine could not be sure whether old Krumangapik was putting them on. By his own admission, he had been to the white schools. He would have learned there about the ice ages and about ancient folkways. How much of his tale was genuine Inuit legend and how much embellishment to entertain guests? "Why did you say it would be safer if we traveled together?" she asked.

Once again, the old man spoke to Bruce and not to her. It was irritating. "Because of the cannibals," said Krumangapik.

Even Mike was speechless.

"Cannibals?" asked Bruce in a strained voice.

"Yes. Two hunters named Minik and Mattak who accompanied us at first from Baffinland. They were the strongest, so they always took bigger portions of the food than they were entitled to. Every day as we crossed the ice they grew more savage. Several days ago, while we were hunting, Minik and Mattak returned to the camp and attacked the women and children. Oomiliak, my son, fought well and lost an eye." He put an arm around a small boy with an empty eyesocket who stood beside him. "But his sister and mother were stabbed to death and dragged away to be eaten. When Mala and I returned to camp and learned what had happened, we tried to take vengeance, but the dogs were too weak to chase them across the ice."

Bruce swallowed and looked out into the surrounding night. "Where are they now?"

The old man shrugged. "Somewhere out there. Perhaps they are following us. Or perhaps they have gone elsewhere." His face closed up and he looked away, into the night.

For a man, one of whose wives had been killed and eaten along with his daughter, Sherrine thought Krumangapik was taking his loss remarkably well. She wondered if Eskimos felt tragedy differently than other folk.

And the Angels? Alex did not appear shocked at Krumangapik's casual attitude. Why not?

Bruce let the Eskimos take the point. They knew more about traveling on the Ice and would be more aware of dangerous conditions, especially in the dark. Sherrine thought Bruce was more than a little glad to have someone else shoulder the responsibility for a while. Now and then he consulted the transponder and sent word to Krumangapik to alter course. The old Eskimo never revealed what he thought of these directions; but Sherrine suspected that if he ever disagreed with them, he and his band would simply strike out on their own.

Two hours later, they stopped again to shed clothes. The heat, mild as it was, was working its way

through their bodies. Sherrine tried to balance the heat and the clothing against the windchill and found, much to her surprise, that she was dressed for a walk on a brisk spring day.

We're in the heart of the Minnesota glacier, she thought, and I'm dressed lighter than in my own home. If only there were more SUNSATs in orbit.

When Krumangapik and his band began stripping, Sherrine's jaw dropped. The Eskimos shed their parkas and even their undergarments. She noticed that all of them, hunters and women, wore long johns from Sears. Krumangapik was not the unspoiled savage he liked to pretend. Soon they were standing in the buff.

The two women strung a clothesline between two light poles and hung the discarded clothing to it with pins made of walrus bone. Sherrine had to admit that the younger hunter, Mala, was rather well-hung. Naterk, his wife, was—Well, round. She had curves in places where other women did not have places. Sherrine saw Alex and Gordon staring at the woman and turned away. Sooner or later, she knew, they would run into a woman who was not a stick; but they did not have to make such a spectacle of their interest.

Krumangapik invited them to air out their own clothing as well. 'Normally, we do this only in the igloo. It is usually not warm enough outside. But with this wonderful heat—' He raised his arms and turned slowly, as if basking in the sun on Miami Beach.

"Aren't you even a little chilly?" she asked.

Krumangapik grinned his gap-toothed grin again. "Better to be chilly," he quote "and also be alone inside one's clothing."

Then she noticed that the women were picking through the furs for lice. It figured. There wouldn't be too many opportunities to change on the glacier. They must spend a great many days wearing the same clothes.

Sherrine looked at Thor, who looked at Mike, who looked at Steve, who looked at Doc, who looked at Bruce. No one moved. Then Steve grinned and pulled his sweater over his head. He cried, "Gentlebeings and sapients all, how can you resist? How often do you get a chance to sunbathe on a

glacier?"

They stripped down practically to the buff. Sherrine and Doc both drew the line at shucking their underwear.

Thor and Steve did not; but looking at them they seemed less a pair of naked males than a pair of Greek statues, one in ivory, one in ebony. Nude, not naked. Naterk kept throwing glances at them, like she was inspecting livestock. Thor gave her a look back and ran his fingers through his beard.

"Don't even think it," Mike told him.

Thor raised his eyebrows and leered. "Think what?"

You know. Adultery is the major cause of murders among Eskimos. He jerked his head at Mala, who had watched the byplay with no expression.

"All the cartoons—"

"This isn't the suburbs. They don't give gifts, remember? Wife-swapping is the way they seal bargains. If Mala makes the offer—and remember that he has to make the offer—then you have to help him when he goes hunting. Either that or you have to offer him your wife."

Sherrine was arranging Alex atop a pile of discarded clothing. Alex was trying to smile hard enough to mask the wincing caused by the pain in his ribs. She pulled the strap snug, but not tight.

"Thor," she said, "don't even think it." And she whipped around with a snowball in her hand and blasted him on the chest.

Then all fandom was plunged into war. Even the Eskimos joined in. It was such a relief to know that they would not freeze! Sherrine wondered if she might even get a tan out of it. She was laughing and dancing and dodging snowballs when the spotlight from the helicopter caught them dead center.

* * *

Lieutenant Gil Magruder studied the shapes dancing in the spotlight below. There were two sleds piled high with clothing and blankets. Nestled in the clothing, he saw two naked corpses, long dead of starvation by the looks of them. Cavorting around them in some sort of ritualistic dance were a dozen naked and near naked men and women, including at least two children. When the light hit them, they froze in place and stared up at the helicopter. Magruder pivoted the copter, keeping the beam centered.

"Sergeant. What do you see down there?"

Staff Sergeant Emil Poulenc looked and swallowed his gum. "It looks like some kind of funeral, sir," he said in a Louisiana drawl. "Those are Eskimos, aren't they? But—"

"But they're naked, aren't they, Sergeant. They're on the Ice at thirty below and they're naked."

"Well, that lady there, she has a brassiere and panties on."

Magruder gave him a stare.

"I mean, she's not completely naked." Poulenc's voice sounded wistful.

"Sergeant, what possible difference can a pair of pink panties make at thirty degrees below zero?"

Poulenc scratched his chin. "Well, sir, since you put it that way."

Magruder stared at the group on the ground. "HQ ain't never gonna believe this," he muttered. He straightened and adjusted the rotor. "You know what I think we saw, Sergeant?"

"Sir, I can't imagine."

Magruder turned off the spotlight and banked the copter away to the west. "Nothing, Sergeant. I think we saw absolutely nothing at all."

* * *

The General Mills station at Brandon was a gleaming beacon in the dark for the last few miles of the trip. Alex sighed. The madcap trip across the Ice was nearly over. Sherrine drove the snowmobile down the state highway toward the station, where Alex saw a man—presumably Bob Needleton—sitting in a lawn chair reading a magazine beside a blazing fire he had built in an oil drum. When he heard them coming, he folded the magazine and stood up.

"It's about time you got here," he said. If he thought there was something extraordinary about a procession of naked people coming off the glacier, he did not say. Instead he gave directions for loading the van.

Alex and Gordon were trundled into the back of the van and laid out flat on a pair of old mattresses. The last sight Alex saw before they slid the door closed was a bunch of naked Eskimos dancing around the blazing oil drum. It was probably a measure of how accustomed he had already become to Earth, that the sight seemed perfectly natural. So far, all the Earthlings he had met had behaved oddly.

Maybe gravity pulled blood from the brain . . .

Bob climbed into the pilot's seat. "That's that," he said. "Sherrine, honey, your grandparents stayed behind in Mapleton just in case you managed to get back there after all. As soon as we find a working telephone we'll call and tell them you're okay and where to find their equipment. Your pal Krumangapik agreed to wait here until they came by, if I would let him have the fire I built in the oil drum." He started the engine. "I guess that takes care of everything."

"Not quite everything," Alex said. "It's going to get cold. We told SUNSAT to turn off the beam when we got to Brandon."

"Sigh," Thor said. "I suppose we'd be too easy to locate if we kept it. But it was nice to be warm."

There was a mad scramble in the back of the van as everyone hastened to don clothes. Conditions were crowded with seven people in the back of the van. Alex didn't mind the occasional elbow or knee as the others pulled on sweaters and pants, because their body heat warmed the place nicely. He supposed that was how Krumangapik and his friends could sit around naked in a house made of snow bricks. Besides, Sherrine took charge of dressing him, and he rather enjoyed it.

* * *

Alex relaxed to the rhythm of the van over the highway. He closed his eyes. The rescue was over. For the first time since he'd seen the missile on the radar, he knew he would live for one more day.

A couple miles farther on, he felt a hand shake his shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw Steve's dark face above him.

Steve grinned. "It's too close in here to run through any asanas; and you're not up to it physically yet. So let's begin your conditioning with some pranayama. I want you to practice breathing."

Alex wondered what it was that his lungs had been doing all his life. "I already know how to breathe," he told him.

"I don't want you to breathe from your diaphragm. I want you to breathe from your little potbelly." He set his hand on Alex's stomach. "Make your stomach go in and out, not your chest."

Steve wasn't kidding. Alex looked at Gordon and Gordon looked at him and he shrugged with his eyebrows. Didn't everyone breathe from their stomachs? He studied the Earthlings surrounding him and, yes, it was indeed their chests that rose and fell. He watched Sherrine's chest more closely, just to make sure. Maybe their rib muscles were better developed. Gravity again, he supposed.

"That's very good!" Steve seemed genuinely surprised and delighted. "Now I want you to breath using only your left nostril."

He still wasn't kidding. Alex looked around the van, but Mike and Sherrine and even Doc Waxman showed no reaction to Steve's bizarre request; and Thor was trying to follow his directions.

"Come on," Steve said in an encouraging voice. "Practice along with me. In through the left nostril. Out through the mouth." When he breathed out he chanted, "Om mane padme om."

Hot damn! thought Alex. We're in the hands of crazy people. He had never felt safer.

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CHAPTER SIX

" A Way of Life"

Where in hell was the Con Committee?

Tradition told that a convention committee could win the bid and then vanish. The Worldcon would happen anyway. Chuck Umber believed it. He'd seen conventions, like Nolacon in New Orleans, where the committee's disappearance would have saved the convention. But he didn't believe that this committee could hide in a crowd of less than sixty!

The Con was ready to go. Fans had been arriving for several days and the official program had already started . . . but Bruce Hyde and the rest of the Con Committee seemed to have vanished into thin air, all but one or two and they weren't talking. Something was up . . . and even Crazy Eddie seemed to be in on it.

Chuck Umber had published fandom's most successful news magazine for more than twenty years, in formats growing gradually more cryptic and secretive for an audience growing gradually smaller. He'd always kept secrets that had to be kept. He smuggled copies of Hocus to closet fans with mundane jobs. He knew where Thor hid out.

He was even pretty sure he knew where the Oregon Ghost was hiding. What kind of secret was it that Edward Two Bats could be trusted with it and Chuck Umber couldn't?

He stalked down the first-floor hallway of the Fielding Mansion, counting the doors as he went. Crazy Eddie had said to try the third door on the right in the west wing. Ordinarily he rated Crazy Eddie's reliability as no better than that of a network newsreader; but so far he was the only person who allowed as how he might have seen Bruce Hyde around the mansion.

He opened the third door and stepped inside. "Bruce?"

A semicircle of femmefans twisted in their chairs to stare at him. They were variously dressed in gossamer robes and chain mail bikinis, a sight in which he might ordinarily have shown more interest. Instead, he looked left and right around the room. He stuck his goatee out. "Is Bruce Hyde here?"

The panel moderator, with her short-cropped hair and 15th century breast-and-back plate armor, looked like Joan of Arc as played by Ingrid Bergman. She shook her head. "You want the Con Suite I think it's on the third floor, south wing. This is a panel on medieval and barbarian costuming. You're welcome to join us, if you want."

"Uh, no, thank you." Chuck apologized for interrupting. He was revising his estimate of Crazy Eddie's reliability.

When he left the room he noticed Fang lounging against the opposite wall of the corridor. Five-eleven, muscular, tough as old leather, Fang was batting a rubber ball tethered to a wooden paddle. He wore a small propeller beanie on his head.

At last, Chuck thought. Someone reliable. "Fang!"

"Hey, Chuck." The ball was a blur of motion. Fang frowned at it in concentration.

"Have you seen anybody on the Con Committee?"

"Saw Crazy Eddie."

Arrgh. "How about Bruce? He's the Chair. He's gotta be around someplace."

"Think I saw him. North wing. Second floor." Fang missed a swat on his paddle and the tether ball Zigzagged crazily. He fumbled with it for a moment, then tucked paddle and ball into the back pocket of his jeans. "Library? Yeah, the library. I'm sure that was him."

"Thanks, Fang. I owe you one." Chuck turned and strode off toward the stairwell. Fang watched him walk out of sight. When Chuck was gone, Fang rapped three times on the door beside him. Crazy Eddie stuck his head out.

Edward Two Bats was a lean, hawk-faced old man, at least part Indian—although from what tribe he had never said. He had been writing science fiction forever, and movie scripts before that. He wore a allow nylon~jacket and a red bandanna tied around one leg just above the knee. His beard was stringy like a Chinese mandarin's.

His voice was gentle. "Where d you send him?"

"Library. North wing."

Crazy Eddie ran his hand across his jaw. He had odd hands. The fingers were bigger at the tips than at the knuckles. "Good," he said. "Good. Who's waiting up there?"

"Rowland Shew."

Eddie gave Fang a sham look. "You didn't tell Shew about this, did you. He isn't very reliable."

Fang shrugged. "He's kept Throop hidden for donkey's years . . . I didn't tell him anything. Too many in on it already. Shew's helping out because Chuck gave him a bad review once."

Crazy Eddie gazed toward the stairwell. "How long can we keep this going?"

"Not much longer. You know how sharp this crowd is. I feel bad about giving Chuck the runaround. He should be in on it."

Eddie clapped him on the shoulder. "Sure, he should. And Wade Curtis and Dick Wolfson and 3MJ and everyone else, including fen who couldn't make it to the con. It's just until the committee decides what to do. More than three people can't keep a secret for very long."

Fang sighed. "There's ten of us already."

* * *

Chuck Umber stepped aside to let the tall, lanky femmefan past. She pushed a wheelchair bearing an even more gaunt-looking fan, a thin young man with a vaguely Swedish look. Chuck wondered briefly if the poor kid had myasthenia gravis, like Waldo in Heinlein's story. Then he looked again at the femme and wondered if they were brother and sister. Who was she?

He searched through the back of his mind. Ah. A computer programmer, hiding out, gafiated years ago, even dropped her subscription to Hocus. He'd remember her name presently.

As he turned to continue his mission, his arm was grasped by Chuck. a thin man with long, wild brown hair.

"Hi, Chuck. I'm Anthony J. Horowitz the Third," the man said. "Remember me? I've got two books out on the samizdat network. My latest is a volume of critical essays, Vampire Unicorns from Planet Thraxisp. And I have a novel, Living Inside. About the first spaceship to Venus. Would you like to interview me for Hocus? I do wonderful interviews. And I did Trash World. It's the ultimate synthesis between science fiction, cyberpunk, and horror."

The book or the interviews? Chuck shook his head. "Not now, Tony. I don't have time."

Horowitz said, not too forcefully, "Anthony, please. I gave up trying to write as Tony . . ."

Umber left Horowitz and entered the foyer by the main entrance. The foyer had a floor of Mexican tile and was brightly lit through the tall windows that flanked the front door. A great crystal chandelier hung from the two-story cathedral ceiling. A three-foot model of the space shuttle hung from the chandelier, and below that, an antique tin Buck Rogers spaceship. Chuck smiled when he saw that touch. Sometimes dreams did come true. If you made them.

Three hallways branched off into the three wings of the mansion and a grand staircase curved up to the balcony on the second floor. No question about it, Chuck thought, the Tre-house was a fantastic place.

Without Tremont J. Fielding—3MJ as he was known to all trufans—and his sprawling mansion, Minicon might not have come off at all. A public venue was naturally out of the question; and very few fen owned homes large enough to house even a small con. Chuck marvelled, as he often did, that the Fantasy Fund had ever had enough equity to help buy this place. It didn't hurt that 3MJ had inherited some money. Maybe a lot of money.

The Tre-house often served as a station on the Underground Fanway. It was stuffed with SF and fantasy memorabilia, usually hidden in secret vaults in the sub-basement, but they'd brought out a lot of it for the Con. The walls were hung with paintings: the usual ones of dryads and wood elves and other fantasy scenes, but now many of them sported a second picture hung to cover the First. There were prints of old Astounding covers, suns and starwisp nebulas in wild colors spaceships, men in fishbowl helmets and women in brass brassieres menaced by bugeyed monsters. It was so beautiful Chuck wanted to cry.

Much of the mansions treasure had been reduced to holograms. Without a projector, they were not incriminating. What was on display here were prints; but Chuck knew that Tremont would never have thrown away the originals. He remembered what the place had been like in its glory days, when everything was out, when you couldn't look anywhere without seeing another marvel. Original paintings. Movie posters for long-forgotten B pictures. The little paperweight made from one of George Pal's models for War of the Worlds. The Lensman costume. George Pal's pen.

And once—once Chuck had seen the original typewritten manuscript for Fahrenheit 451. That would be well hidden now! He looked around, but they hadn't put out the movie poster. Too dangerous—but

sometime over the weekend they'd certainly show the film. Could that be the big secret? But nobody would cause Chuck to miss that. Chuck was Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land! He had two-thirds of the book memorized perfectly, and could recite most of the rest.

In that far corner had been the original Gort robot from The Day the Earth Stood Still. A tyrannosaur model from King Kong was there now. There had been so much. Now—now they did their best, but the walls and alcoves seemed empty and forlorn.

And Thor was coming down the east wing, pushing a wheelchair. Another crippled stranger. What was going on?

Hey, Thor!" Chuck moved to intercept them.

Thor froze in mid-stride. "Hi, Chuck."

"Where have you been?"

A blank look. "Here and there."

"Haven't seen you."

A shrug. "You know how it is. The Tre-house is a big place."

"Yeah. It reminds me of a scaled down Noreascon III. Remember that one? Seven thousand fen rattling around a convention center bigger than the Ringworld." He extended his hand to the man in the wheelchair. "Hi. I'm Chuck Umber. I publish Hocus."

"Gabe," said the other. "Gabe dell'Angelo."

Gabe's arm was coming up in a help less jerky wobble. Chuck dropped his own hand. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know—" He coughed to hide his embarrassment. "Er. . . dell'Angelo, you say. You don't look Italian." In fact, this Gabe looked kind of Swedish, despite the dark hair. Gaunt and thin, with prominent facial bones. Like Max von Sydow without the beard. "Where are you from?"

"I came here from North Dakota."

That explained the Swede look, Chuck thought. A lot of Scandinavians had settled the upper Midwest. "I saw another guy in a wheelchair a few minutes ago. Younger. Looked enough like you to be your brother."

Gabe looked uncomfortable. He seemed to be breathin&, funny. "That was Rafe. We were in a flying accident."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

Gabe shrugged philosophically. "With a little therapy, they tell me we should be up and walking in no time."

Chuck nodded. "That's good. So, you're a friend of Thor's, are you? I haven't seen you around before. At cons, I mean. Fandom is a small world these days."

"It seems like a big world to me. I just dropped in recently."

A neofan, then. Chuck grinned and gestured broadly. "And how do you like things so far?"

"Everything is very heavy."

Chuck laughed. "Sercon," he explained. "'Serious and constructive activities.' Not 'heavy.' You'll have to learn the language if you're going to stay with us. Don't worry. You'll find plenty to entertain you. Not every fan activity is sercon." Chuck looked the question at Thor. Is this guy all right? There had been a

time when fandom had few secrets, but no more. Can we trust him?

"Gabe and his brother haven't been able to get to cons," Thor said. "Too close to high tech. But they've lived in the future."

Chuck smiled. Thor was an undergrounder. Thor knew a lot of people who couldn't let fan sympathies show. And dell' Angelo wouldn't be their real names, either. "You've known them a long time, then?"

It was Thor's turn to grin. "Long enough."

"Great." He put his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Really good to meet you. Have you met 3MJ yet?"

Gabe looked puzzled. "Not yet. Thor told me that this is his house."

"We call it the Tre-house. Wait'll you see his collection. Movie posters. Props. Costumes. Books. Original manuscripts. You know what 3MJ's greatest attribute is? He's got no taste at all."

The man in the wheelchair blinked his eyes rapidly and said, like a good straight man, "That's good?"

"Yes." Chuck waved an arm down the hallway. "See, he saves anything and everything. He doesn't pick and choose what suits one particular clique or literary style. His whole life is dedicated to SF."

Thor nodded agreement. "Maybe we'll have time to look at some of the collection." His grin faded. "Hope you don't have to, though."

"Uh?" Gabe grunted.

"Vaults. Hidden places," Thor said. "High tech priest holes."

These guys must be as hot as Thor! Wish I"—Chuck suppressed his curiosity. It was hard to remember that there were some things he really didn't need to know. He knew he'd never tell, but—

If the Feds could declare you homeless, they could help you. Help included all kinds of things: psychotherapy, drugs, electrical brain stimulus. Chuck had seen Henry Stiren after the Department of Welfare caught him hitchhiking with a half-done manuscript in his day pack. He'd been a hell of a promising writer before they helped him. Now he read what he'd once written and asked people if they liked it, and when they said they did, he cried.

Chuck shuddered. "Well, I hope you don't have to see it, but if you do get a chance to visit the collection, you'll see cyberpunk next to space opera; hard core next to New Wave. Science fiction, fantasy and horror. This is as close to its 'national archives' as the Imagi-Nation comes. Thor, have you seen Bruce Hyde around anywhere?"

Thor stroked his beard. "Not lately. But I'm sure he's around someplace."

"Then I better be going. Someone thought he saw him upstairs in the library. Glad to have met you, Gabe." He patted the invalid on the shoulder. "Not many neofans drop in on us these days." And he hurried off.

* * *

Alex watched Chuck climb the stairs. "Can't we trust him?" he asked Thor. The roly-poly man looked like a baby-faced Mephistopheles, complete with goatee; but he had seemed pleasant enough.

"Sure, we can trust him," said Thor. "But it's one more risk. He runs Hocus Pocus, the biggest fanzine around. The authorities tolerate it because it's focused on fantasy, but Chuck manages to slip in some good old, technophile SF propaganda now and then."

"So, he's on our side, is he?"

Thor twisted a strand of his beard around his finger. "As much as anybody here. But you guys are Big News, and the Library Advisory Boards all read Hocus. Thor's face turned ugly. "I don't know how they

get copies. Somebody sold out. But the fewer who know, the better. That minimizes the risk. Not Just to us but to Chuck Umber." He chuckled. "One day he'll realize that you answered his every question literally and kick himself."

"What did he mean by the 'Imagi-Nation'?"

Thor released the brake on the wheelchair. "The danelaw is where the mundanes rule. Downers, you called them. The Imagi-Nation is us."

"I see." A small group, persecuted by its government, forced to hide its treasures and meet in secret. Arguably crazy, every one of them he'd seen, except for Sherrine. And they had risked everything, all their treasures, to rescue him from the Ice. It would hardly be polite to let them know that they were Downers, too.

Alex said, "I'm starting to realize what Mary meant."

"Eh?"

"Mission control told us we had strange friends on Earth."

"None stranger," Thor agreed.

"Now I see what you're up against. It's like David facing Goliath."

Thor grunted, disparagingly. "Big deal. Remember who won that fight?"

"But why—" He wanted to ask, why would someone like Sherrine do it? These others he could understand. Thor, running away, looking for some way to hit back. The others, some losers, none of them ding anything important—but Sherrine with her looks and brains could do anything. He couldn't say any of that. "Why do you do it?"

Thor shrugged his massive shoulders. What else can we do? We believe in the future. We don't turn our backs on it, like the 'danes, and pretend that everything will always be the way it is today. Have you ever read science fiction?"

Alex shook his head. "A little."

"Well, you can see it in our stories. Mainstream literature is about Being. For character studies, it's probably the best genre around; but nothing happens, nothing changes. Imaginative literature is about Doing. About making the future, not just bemoaning it. We'll all be living in the future by and by. Some of us like to scout ahead."

"You make it sound like more than just a hobby."

"FIAWOL. Fandom is a way of life."

Alex opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment a small crowd of people emerged into the foyer from the west wing. They were pushing a large cardboard carton on a handcart. Inside the carton sat a burly, bearded man wearing a snorkle. He was grinning while the others poured styrofoam packing chips into the carton, chanting, "Kill Seth! Kill Seth!"

The parade circled the base of the staircase, flowing around both sides of the wheelchair, and disappeared down the east wing. Silence descended. Alex had trouble finding his voice for several seconds. Finally, he croaked, "Er, Thor?"

"Hmm?"

He turned around and looked at the Nordic god. "What was that?"

Thor checked his watch. "They must be getting ready for the book auction. Hunh. I didn't think they'd scheduled it this early in the program."

"Book auction? Who were those lunatics?"

They turned right, into the north wing. Thor said, "No no no. Lunarians. A New York fan club. They raffle off books at the auction. Seth always wins, so now they kill him at every con so he can't buy any tickets. Last year, they made him 'The Wicker Man.' "

Alex didn't ask him what "The Wicker Man" was. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

When they arrived at the meeting room, Alex saw Sherrine evicting a group of young women dressed in outlandish robes and armor. "Costumers," Thor told him, "preparing for the Masquerade." Neither the fabric nor the chain mail concealed very much and he noticed Gordon staring at the women with considerable interest. Alex stared, too.

The women were not grotesquely fat; but they may have massed as much as 60 kilos each. Parts of them bulged and hung in unusual ways. Gravity, he supposed. Their breasts and hips were nearly as rounded as those of the Eskimo women. They needed special clothing to hold their breasts in place. Some wore their hair so long that it hung to their waists in back.

Only one, a woman dressed in armor, wore hers sensibly short. In fact, if he pretended the armor was a space suit, she looked halfway normal. All in all, he admitted, Earth women did have a vague, exotic appeal. But true beauties like Sherrine were apparently rare down in the Well.

"I'm sorry," Sherrine told the costumers. "There's been a program change. Didn't you get the update? All costuming panels have been moved to the north wing, third floor."

"Third floor! No, we weren't told," the panel leader said. "How disorganized is this Con Committee anyway? People have been looking for them all day. If they're hiding, I don't blame them!"

"I'm sorry," Sherrine said again. She pointed to Gordon and Alex. "It's a question of handicapped

access. If you'd like to help keep the programming on course, I'll pass your names on to Ops——"

"No thanks. We didn't come here to run errands for Bruce Hyde and his elitist gang." The costumers gathered themselves together and left in a billow of robes.

They settled into the meeting room and waited. The others dribbled in by ones and twos. Eve one behaved so furtively that Alex was sure they would draw attention to themselves. Bruce arrived grinning. "This is the one room," he announced, "where Chuck won't look for us."

Soon most of the rescue party was present. Doc (Sherrine told him) was a costumer himself and was busy on one of the panels; and Bob had to make a guest appearance at his mundane job at the University. Two strangers had joined them; Sherrine introduced them as Fang and Crazy Eddie.

Bruce rapped his chair arm with his knuckles. "Let's get this show on the road. First order of business is: What do we do with our guests, now that they are here?"

Fang tilted his head back. "Excuse me, Bruce; but let's follow form. I'm Con-Guest-of-Honor Chair, so I'd better lead this discussion."

"Find your egoboo on your own time," said Bruce. "The Con Committee rescued the Angels; so the Con Committee is in charge."

Crazy Eddie frowned. He turned to Fang. "Besides, the Angels aren't Guests of Honor, so your subcommittee's jurisdiction——"

"Sure they're GoH's," Mike interjected. "Who could be more honored at a Worldcon than a pair of spacemen? And they are our guests, Ergo: Guests of Honor."

"Spoken like a faaan, said Edward Two Bats. "Can't you understand? This is big. Bigger than Worldcon."

His eyes lit up, as if he had had a vision of the Holy Grail. There was a moment of hushed silence.

Alex spoke into it. "Excuse me. Do Gordon and I have any say in this?"

No, Fang replied after a moment's thought. "You aren't convention members. You don't get a vote."

"Say, that's right," said Mike. "They haven't paid the membership fee."

"That's silly," said Thor. "I'll lend them the ten bucks."

"We could DUFF them," Bruce suggested. "Plenty of money in the Down Under Fan Fund."

Fang shook his head. "No, that's to help Australians come to Worldcon. You guys aren't Australians, are you?"

Gordon looked bewildered. Alex shook his head.

Mike tried to look serious. "Well, but at the moment they are Down Under."

This announcement was greeted with respectful silence. Bruce nodded his head slowly. "I like it. I like it." He rapped the arm of his chair. "They are officially the DUFF members of this convention. As Con Chair, I so rule."

Three people spoke at once. "You can't do that! We have to take a vote."

Alex sighed and closed his eyes. Do they ever settle anything? He breathed in through his left nostril and out through his right. It didn't help, but he was fascinated to learn he could do it, and it seemed at least as constructive as anything he was watching.

"Look," Crazy Eddie said, "this is serious!"

And yet—things were being settled. It was always a pleasure to watch a master craftsman at his job. Alex began to enjoy the way Bruce ran the meeting. Bruce played the committee the way a jazzman played his sax.

He played Mike and Fang against Eddie Two Bats and against each other. He worked subtly and indirectly, only rarely resorting to direct action. Bruce ran the show. Crazy Eddie tended to forget this every now and then, but nobody made an issue of it. Alex made a whispered comment to Sherrine.

"Bruce is food at this."

She said, Bruce is SMOF-Three."

"A what?"

"A SMOF is a Secret Master of Fandom. Fen are a quirky and individual bunch and there aren't many who can handle them. Bruce is one. Benjamin Orange is another. Thank goodness he isn't here. Could you imagine two SMOFs at one con?"

Incredibly enough, he could. My God, he thought. I actually understood her.

"The first order of business," said Bruce for the fourth time in an hour, "is what do we do with the Angels."

Alex seized the opportunity. "Now that we re members of this committee—"

Fang cut him off. "Only of the Convention, not the committee. But of course as guests you can—"

"This is serious," Crazy Eddie protested. His big eyes were nearly filled with tears. "Can't you understand that?"

"You have a suggestion?" Bruce prompted.

Alex looked around helplessly. I guess not. We can't really do anything for ourselves until we can move around better."

"Steve's helping them," Sherrine said. "Teaching them asanas. For older people."

"Appropriate," Alex said. "We feel old."

It is an ancient mariner, he stoppeth one of three—" Gordon said.

"Lousy fielding average," Mike said. "No long gray beards, either."

"You have read it!" Gordon exclaimed. "Coleridge and Pushkin, no one reads any more. You have—"

Bruce bellowed, "QUIET!" For an instant the room was shocked silent.

"What's the problem anyway?" Thor asked. "We just keep them hidden until the other Angels send a ship. Then we whisk them off to the rendezvous."

"Well, sure," said Steve. "But how do we keep them hidden? And where? Here in Minneapolis? What if the pickup ship has to land in Arizona? Can we get them there in time?"

Alex glanced at Gordon, who bit his lip and lowered his eyes. No point putting this he thought. He took a deep breath—from the stoma and through the left nostril. "There won't be a pickup ship," he told the committee.

Sherrine nodded to herself. Bruce's expression didn't change.

"Why not?" Fang demanded.

"They won't come down the Well."

Everyone spoke at once. "Gravity well, Earth is deep in it." "Niven's Belters called planets 'holes.'" "Come off it, they'll come, these are ANGELS!" "I knew we needed contingency plans——"

Bruce made a whistle of his fingers. Into the silence that followed he asked, "What do you mean? The Angels won't come to get you?"

Alex looked around the circle of faces. Angels. A sulky adolescent stilyagin and a construction worker who can't go Out anymore. Maybe I should have said to hell with it, work EVA until my brains pour out through my nose. Why not?

"It's impossible," he said.

Sherrine nodded again, a tiny movement. "I thought so. Jesus, I'm sorry."

"But you're space pilots," Crazy Eddie said. "They need you——"

Gordon laughed. Everyone looked at him. "What's funny?" Fang demanded.

"Alex is hero. They would come for him, but there is no way."

"They don't need me," Alex said. "And it doesn't matter anyway. There is no way for them to come get us."

"Coming down is no problem," Mike said. His voice lost the bantering tone. "Going back up—"

"Exactly," Alex said. "Going back up. We don't have any ships that will land and take off again. We never did."

Sherrine was looking at him strangely. "You knew it all along."

"There here never was a time to tell you."

"Why is Alex a hero?" Edward Two Bats demanded.

"Eddie—"

"I'm a novelist, damn it! I'm not sure I ever met a hero before. Gordon?"

"Flare time," Gordon said. "Solar flares expand atmosphere. Mir became unstable. Major MacLeod brought a crew from Freedom . . ." He sensed incomprehension in the background murmur and the twisted frowns. "I start over."

"Flare on the sun. Too much energy floods day side of Earth. Top of air becomes hot. Atmosphere inflates like vast balloon, reaches far into space, wraps ghostly tendrils around Mir. Mir Space Station, made to fall free through vacuum, begins to slow and drift closer to Earth."

"Major MacLeod brought a crew from Freedom. They attached booster rockets to lift Mir to higher orbit without disruption. With Mir safe, he had to return to bolt rockets onto Freedom, because Freedom was endangered, too. His suit blew out. Had to patch it and use it again. Pressure suit, it must fit more closely than wife. Cannot borrow someone else's." Alex choked back a laugh. Gordon never noticed. "Once, twice, five times his suit spewed air. One can live through that, but not many times.

"Now he cannot go outside again. Alex MacLeod cannot live in vacuum, even short time will kill him."

"But you flew the scoopship!"

"Dipping takes a good pilot," Alex said. "I'm that. Paint stripes on a brick, I can fly it." He liked the look that Sherrine gave him. But— "Dipping wants an expendable pilot. I'm that, too. Look, everyone knew we might not come back."

"So you're here for the duration," Bruce said.

"Looks that way."

Everyone was quiet. Alex looked from face to face. It was beginning to sink in: This wasn't just a short jaunt. These . . . fans hadn't signed on for a long haul. Pretty soon the novelty would wear off. Some already had second thoughts. And I can't blame them.

Sherrine put her hand on his arm. "So you volunteered knowing it might be one way."

He shook his head. "No, this is the first time like this. Usually nothing happens to dippers."

"Except sometimes they don't come back," Mike said. "Yeah, I can see it."

Sherrine hugged them, first Alex, then Gordon. "Orphans of creation," she said. "At least you're stuck among friends." Steve put a hand on each of their shoulders and squeezed gently but didn't say anything.

Alex could feel the impression of Sherrine's ribs and cheekbones where she had pressed against him. Careful, he cautioned himself. Sherri is Bob's girl, like Mary was Lonny's. Like borrowing another man's space suit. Look where it got you.

Bruce looked thoughtful. "This changes things."

"Sure does," Crazy Eddie said.

"Look, I don't blame you," Alex started to say.

Bruce cut him off. "We'll have to find you both a niche here on Earth. Not going to be easy on you. We all read Heinlein's story."

"'It's Great to Be Back,'" Sherrine said. "Yes. It must be that way. Living among the stars and then stranded on Earth."

Mike said, "First thing you need is Social Security and driver's license."

Gordon looked puzzled. "Driver license? For what, mass driver? Disk drive?"

Mike sighed. "Never mind."

"Identity papers," Alex said.

"Why do we need identity papers?" Gordon asked. "We are all droogs here, no?"

How they knew that "droog" meant "friend," Alex couldn't guess; but Mike actually, smiled. "Sure, we're all droogs," he said. "Illegal droogs."

"You need an ID," said Thor, "because 'the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave' has become 'the Land of the Fee and the Home of the Slave.' "

"Do you have ID?" Alex asked him.

He smiled. "Sure. Three or four."

"Phony?"

"Free enterprise. They're the best kind."

"Sherrine?" Bruce asked.

"Risky. It was easier when I set things up for Thor. Now they have programs to watch for hackers."

"You probably wrote them," Steve said.

"Well, Ted Marshall and I worked on the Bytehound program, and we left a backdoor in, so I can probably manage it—Sure. We can do it, maybe, but it's going to take some time at my terminal and I have to get hold of Ted."

"He's not coming," Bruce said. "Thinks he's being watched."

"It's important we don't give him away," Crazy Eddie said.

"So we make do until then," Fang said.

"Tricky, though," Thor said.

"What is this Eye Dee?" Gordon asked. "May I see?"

Fang took out a driver's license and handed it to him. Gordon looked at it carefully, turning it over and over in his hands. He read the form on the back. "It says here consent to have organs recycled. You can refuse, then? Very rich place." He held the card up to the light. "Does not look difficult if you have photograph. You do not have scanner and laser printer?"

"No, we have those," Mike said. "Just making a card isn't the problem. Everything's cross-linked now. If we make a bogus drivers license for Alex or Gordon, the IRS computer looks into the DMV computer and wonders why they never paid taxes before." He looked at Alex.

"But it can be done," Bruce said. "Just not easy anymore."

Alex frowned. "Computers are high technology. I thought everyone down here—except you—I thought most Downers hated technology."

Thor laughed. "They hate it all right. Computers, too. But they still use them."

"For themselves," Steve said. "They don't like others having them."

"Is illegal to own computer?" Gordon frowned.

"How do—how can people read what you write? Like poetry? Stories?"

"It's illegal to own an unlicensed computer," Sherrine said. "But there are a lot of licensed ones, and—well, the licensing laws are hard to enforce. So there are networks, and some private boards "

""There are still publishers," Bruce said. "A few good books get out. And like Sherrine says, there are private boards—"

"Boards?"

"Computer bulletin boards," Thor said.

"People exchange files. Not so common as they used to be, now that the phone system keeps crashing. But FAPA is still going," Sherrine said.

"I was in line for full membership in the Cult until I had to drop for missing deadlines," Fang said. "But Bruce is—"

And disks are harder to get," Mike said. "But I still manage to publish File 880. . . "

"He's won twelve Hugos," Fang said.

For one glorious minute I thought I understood them—

Crazy Eddie raised his hand and waved it. "I've got an idea."

Bruce looked worried, but nodded at him. "The Chair recognizes Eddie Two Bats."

Crazy Eddie stood and looked across his blade-like nose. "There are still technophiles in Southern California," he said. "Enclaves clustered around the old, defunct aerospace centers. I say we take the Angels there."

There were nods of agreement. "Makes sense," said Steve. "Angels would be welcomed there. Some places."

"That's right, you still live down there," Fang said. "Do you ever get to the Denny's on—"

Bruce tapped his ring on the desk. "Edward Two Bats has the floor."

"I bet it would work!" Sherrine said.

Crazy Eddie nodded vigorously. "Damned straight! Then, after building our strength, we stage a coup! Take over in Sacramento, install the Angels as symbolic governors, and devote the State's resources to building a space shuttle to take them home again."

"So the question is how to get them to California," Bruce said.

"The Angels have to go underground," Fang said. "Work off the books. Doesn't pay so well as out front, but with no taxes you keep more, and nobody checks ID and credit cards." He and Thor exchanged glances. "It ain't so bad."

For a moment Alex felt panic. Then he realized that they took the good parts of Crazy Eddie's ideas and simply ignored the rest. And we don't have many choices anyway. "You're used to living underground," Sherrine said. "They're not. Look at them! No, I'll do something—"

"The Greens lynched a hacker in Chicago," Mike said carefully. "Last month, but I think the boy's still ban&in&, from the old Water Tower. Of course you know that."

"That was Flash. Flash couldn't resist letting his friends know what he did. So I'm more careful, that's all," Sherrine said.

"No, we can't let you risk that," Alex said. "I mean—"

"Work underground, off books," Mike said. "Great. What can you do?"

Alex grunted. "I fly spaceships."

Bruce grinned. "Right. We'll send out your resume. But what did you do between flights?"

"I write poetry," Gordon said. "I would like to write science fiction."

"So would everyone here," Steve said. "Do you know how many people make a living writing science fiction? There weren't thirty in the whole country, at peak. Now, none."

"There's Harry Bean—" someone said.

"He's a whore. He writes for the Greens," Bruce said. "Odd jobs. Alex? What can you do besides fly ships?"

"Construction engineer." He looked at his emaciated limbs. "And if Steve's right, I'll be able to do that again in about nine years."

"He is also teacher," Gordon said.

"Kindergarten. I was a day-care father," Alex admitted. The main advantage of the truth was that you didn't have to remember a lot of details. There were other advantages, too, he supposed.

Sherrine looked at him closely. Now she knows.

Thor shook his head. "Too bad. They do background checks on day-care workers, ever since the witch

hunts. Even the centers who pay 'off the books' have to be careful. Lot of work for Sherrine, and you sure can't do that until she sets it up."

In the lengthy silence that followed, everyone looked at each other, but no one said anything. Finally Sherrine sighed.

"I'm not sure I can do it," she said. "Thor's right, they're paranoid about child molesters. I'd have to build you a whole history, everything, traffic tickets, education—Look, it won't work. We can't fit them in, and we can't hide them." Fan and Thor started to object, but Sherrine overrode them. "We've just been over that. Short term, sure; but sooner or later they'd be discovered. No, there's only one option, and it took Crazy Eddie to find it. We've got to find a way to get them back into space."

"We?" said Bruce.

"Sure, Fandom!"

Mike beamed. "Of course. We'll get them high with illegal droogs."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"Black Powder and Alcohol . . ."

"You're going to send us back to space," Alex said.

"Perhaps I don't wish to go," Gordon said.

"Shut up. Look, with all great respect, how do you propose to do this? As far as I know, the only rockets left on Earth are military missiles." And I can't see sticking one up my arse and riding it out—

"Exactly! We hide out until we build strength and take over in Sacramento. Then—"

"There's a Saturn Five in Houston." Fang asked, "Will that do?"

Alex blinked and tried to sit up. "Saturn? Damn right." With a Saturn we could reach the moon. But—I didn't know there were any left."

"There aren't," Bruce said. "NASA took a full man-rated Saturn and laid it down as a monument. Alex, that bird will never fly again."

"Oh."

"It's right in front of the old Manned Space Center," Mike said. "Leetle hard to work on without attracting attention."

"Could steal it," Crazy Eddie said.

Bruce closed his eyes. "Steal it, Eddie? Do you know how big those suckers were?"

"Three hundred and sixty three feet high. Weighed three kilotons."

Bruce spoke patiently. "And you say we should steal it?"

"If we could round up enough pickup trucks," Eddie Two Bats said thoughtfully. "Of course it will be hard to stand it up again. I think we need an engineer."

"I see how it works," Alex said quietly to Sherrine.

"How?"

"It's Crazy Eddie's job to come up with nutty ideas, and Bruce's job to chop him down. Do any of Eddie's notions ever work?"

She shrugged.

"I could cry."

She frowned. "Over Crazy Eddie?"

"No, the rocket. The Saturn Five was the most powerful rocket ever built—Sherrine, it was the most powerful machine ever made!"

"A fire in the sky," she said. "I know the song."

"And now it's a lawn ornament."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Monument! They didn't want competition for the shuttle. They even tried to burn the blueprints—"

"It wasn't your fault."

"I know that, but I'm sorry. Sorry that anyone could ever have been so stupid. And that was NASA! We gave the space program to NASA, and they, and . . . Damn."

"Does anyone else have an idea?" Bruce asked. "No? Then we carry on as before. The fewer who know about the Angels, the safer they'll be. Don't tell anyone without consulting me. The cover is that they're closet fans from North Dakota, people Fang and Thor have known for years. All agreed? Good. So ordered. Do I hear a motion to adjourn? Meeting is adjourned. Next meeting is in Hawkeye's room about nine. Now it's time to enjoy the convention."

* * *

The room had perhaps been a small ballroom when the house was new. Now it looked crowded despite its size. There were windows along one wall, with couches under them. The window sills were covered with brick-a-brack, photos of people in odd costumes, strangely painted coffee mugs, vases that held improbable plants. That fur rug, patterned in yellow and orange, was neither the shape nor the colors of any of Earth's life forms. A grand piano stood down at one end of the room. It was covered with photographs and paintings and drawings and plastic objects. Books lined two of the walls, and the spaces between the large archways set into the fourth wall.

A large bear of a man with a sunburst of hair encircling his face stood next to the grand piano, one hand resting on it. He was making a speech, and his free hand waved in time with his words. Other people were talking, too, which seemed impolite.

The man stopped in midsentence when Sherrine and Thor wheeled the Angels into the room. People looked around and opened a path, some of those on the floor moving aside, some standing to move chairs, until Alex and Gordon were moved right up front near the speaker. The others moved back again. It looked choreographed.

"See you," Thor said. He seemed in a hurry to leave.

The speaker was in no hurry at all. He struck a pose, as if waiting for something.

Ritual? Alex wondered. Whatever. Pavana mukthvsan could be practiced as easily in a wheelchair as elsewhere. Alex used both hands to bend his right leg and tuck it into his crotch against the pubic bone. Then he folded his left leg and laid it atop the right. He made circles of his thumbs and index fingers and rested his hands on his knees. He breathed in slowly through his left nostril, repeating the syllable yam six

times. He wondered when Steve would graduate him to siddhasan, or even padmasan. Anything was better than the savasam "corpse position" he had practiced in the van during the ride across Minnesota. He hadn't known that relaxing was such hard work; but according to Steve, the first order of business was to make his muscles stop fighting the gravity.

Gregor Lutenist cleared his throat. "The Thirty-Sixth Ice Age," he said formally. His voice was strong, easily heard throughout the room.

Alex breathed in. Yam, he thought to himself. Yammm.

"We live in an ice age—" began Gregory Lutenist. When he got to the words "ice age" three people had joined him, speaking in unison with him. Then came a voice from the crowd: "No shit!"

"—and we always have," he continued, imperturbably adjusting his glasses. "During the last seven hundred thousand years there have been eight cycles of cooling and warming. The glaciers retreat, but always they come back; and the warm, interglacial interludes last for only about ten thousand years. Since Ice Age Thirty-Five ended fourteen thousand years ago, the next one must have started four thousand years ago. Most of human history has been lived in an ice age. So why did no one notice?"

"It was too warm!" someone suggested.

Lutenist beamed at him. "Just so. It's hard to convince a man in Bermuda shorts that he's living in an ice age. But consider the halcyon, interglacial world of 4500 BC!" He waved a forefinger in the air.

"In Scandinavia the tree line was above 8000 feet." Three voices again joined him, speaking in unison, as Lutenist continued. "And deciduous trees grew all the way to the Arctic circle. The Sahara was a rain-watered, grassy savannah crossed by mighty rivers and even mightier hunters. We remember that age dimly as a Garden in Eden." Lutenist paused and removed his glasses. He polished the lenses and set them back upon his nose. He paused, sighed, and said, slowly, so that everyone in the room could join in, "But then the sun went out."

Gordon looked to Alex. "Shto govorit"? The man is mad, the sun has not gone out."

Lutenist beamed at Gordon. "Ah—"

"Fresh meat!" someone yelled.

"Tell me, my young friend," Lutenist said. "What lights up the sun?"

"Is trick? Fusion. Hydrogen to helium."

"And when the fusion ends, what then?" Lutenist asked.

"Uh—but how can fusion end? There is plenty of hydrogen."

"But it did end," Lutenist said. "And no one noticed." Bob Needleton stuck his head in between Alex and Gordon. "Where have all the neutrinos gone? Long time passing . . ." He gave Sherrine a quick kiss on the neck.

"Hi, Pins," Alex said. "Welcome back."

"I didn't want to miss Greg's spiel." Bob cupped his hands around his mouth. "There'll be a neutrino scavenger hunt tonight after the program," he announced. "Bring your snipe bags and your Chlorine-37 tanks." The audience responded with boos and catcalls. Lutenist waved to him and Bob waved back. "Hi, Greg. Still thumping the same old drum, I see."

"Excuse me," Gordon said, "but what means spiel about neutrinos?"

Bob pulled a chair up and set it beside Sherrine between the two wheelchairs. He straddled it backwards. "It's simple really."

Alex braced himself. When a physicist says, "it's simple," it usually meant it was time to duck.

"You see, when two protons fuse into a deuterium nucleus they yield a neutrino. There are two ways that can happen, but. . . Well, the details don't matter. Sometimes the deuterium hip-hops through beryllium into lithium and spits out another neutrino, and there are a couple of other reactions that also produce neutrinos; but that's about the gist of it. Fusion spits neutrinos. Get it?"

Gordon looked puzzled. "I get. So?"

Bob held his hands out palms up. "The problem is we never found the neutrinos. A Chlorine-37 detector should register a neutrino flux of eight snew, but all they ever get is two snew."

Gordon's frown deepened. "What's 'snew'?"

Sherrine hid her face in her hands. Bob said, "I dunno, not much. What's snew with you?"

"Thank you for sharing that with us—"

"Sorry, I've never been able to resist that one. Snew is SNU, Solar Neutrino Units. One snew is one neutrino event per 1036 atoms per second."

There was a commotion at the other end of the room. A dozen fans, maybe more, came in. "Is this the pro party?"

Lutenist said. "I'm not through."

A large man in a bush jacket waved a salute with a bottle beer. "Go right ahead, Greg. Don't mind us."

"What's up?" Lutenist demanded.

The man shrugged "Con Committee said to come here, this will be the 'Meet the Pros' party."

"Aw crap," Lutenist said. "This is my lecture!"

"What's to lecture?" Needleton demanded. "It was all simple, and known before 1980. The sun is not producing enough neutrinos. Ergo, it is not fusing. Yet, according to the technetium levels in deep molybdenum mines there were plenty of neutrinos passing through the Earth during interglacial and preglacial periods."

"Excuse me, Bob," said Gregory Lutenist, "are you leading this discussion or am I?"

Bob waved a hand. "Sorry, Greg. Go ahead." In a near-whisper, "Gordon, it's a cycle. Fusion stops, the sun cools a bit, shrinks a bit, the core gets denser and hotter, fusion starts again, the new warmth inflates the sun. See? Is that a relief, or what?"

"Maunder Minimum!" someone shouted.

Lutenist beamed. "The sun goes through sunspot cycles. Lots of sunspots, it gets warm here. Few sunspots, colder weather. An astronomer named Maunder recorded sunspots and found that the last time there weren't any the planet went through what was known as the Little Ice Age, the Maunder Minimum." He paused dramatically. "And in the 1980s it became certain that the planet was going into a new Maunder Minimum period."

"Yes, yes, we know this," Gordon said. "Sunspots are important to us. But if so important to Earth, why do they not know cold is coming?"

"Bastards did," the man in the bush jacket growled. "But they said Global Warming."

"Grants," Bob said. "There's money in climate studies. All the Ph.D. theses. All that would go if things were so simple—"

A short blond woman, slender by local standards, came in with a large tray. She carried it up to the piano as if thinking to set it down there, looked at the clutter, turned helplessly— "Ah. You're Gabe?"

He smiled and nodded. She said, "Laurie. Hold this while we get a table." She set the tray across the arms of his wheelchair and was gone.

It was covered with small dishes, each with a couple of slices of vegetables. Cucumber, carrot, a bit of lettuce, some cabbage. A stalk of broccoli. Alex felt his mouth begin to water. Fresh vegetables! Of course the people here would be used to them—

Bob Needleton stopped talking about neutrinos and stared at the tray. He gave a long, low whistle. "Dibs on a carrot stick!"

Gregory Lutenist said, "Broccoli for me. Now. It is important to realize that the sun has always burned hotter or cooler during different eras of our planet's history. Greenhouse or Icehouse."

A fan spoke up. "Carrot for me, too. The dinosaurs lived during a greenhouse era, didn't they?"

A voice spoke from the doorway. "Pros get first choice. This is the Meet the Readers Party, right?"

Lutenist nodded as if there had been no interruption. "Dinosaurs, and the Great Mammals, too. In fact, prior to the Pleistocene the world was quite warm. Hippopotami wallowed in the Thames."

He paused a moment. When he continued, half a dozen voices spoke in unison with him. "Then, in the blink of a geological eye, they were replaced by polar bears."

Lutenist beamed.

Alex looked to Sherrine. "What—"

She laughed. "Some of us have heard Gregory before."

Cucumbers, celery, carrots, luxuries beyond his wildest dreams were cradled in Alex's arms. He couldn't eat; he had to share this with the whole room; and he couldn't get his hands on any of it without dropping the tray. Little dark red spheres, little bright red spheres with white inside, were displayed on big green leaves. Where were they with that damn table?

Badges were showing on various chests. Here were tiny oil paintings of alien creatures and landscapes and starscapes, or wheel-shaped and band-shaped artificial habitats infinitely more sophisticated than Mir and Freedom. A few badges bore angular cartoon faces and elegant calligraphy: CLOSET MUNDANE. KNOWS HARLAN ELLISON (evil smirk. HAS READ MUCH OF DHALGREN (bewilderment).

Lutenist continued. "Human history is so short that, living between the hippopotamus and the polar bear, we thought those conditions were 'normal.'

"After the sun went out, the interglacial ended and the world grew colder and drier. The Sahara rivers dried up, one by one, until only the Nile was left. By 1500 BC, the Scandinavian tree line had dropped to six thousand feet, and broad-leaf trees had disappeared from the Arctic.

"The weather changed. The North African coast was the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. It began to dry up. Great migrations began, Huns, Arabs, Navajos, Mongols. There were Viking colonies on Greenland, but the Greenland Glacier began to move south, until it covered them all."

"Tell you another one," the man in the bush jacket said.

"Go ahead, Wade," Lutenist said.

Sherrine looked around. "Wade Curtis. A pro."

"Writer?" Gordon asked. She nodded.

Curtis's voice boomed even in the large room. "In the American Revolutionary War, Colonel Alexander Hamilton brought cannon captured by Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga down to assist General Washington in Harlem Heights. He brought them across the ice on the frozen Hudson River. By the twentieth century, the Hudson didn't freeze at all, let alone hard enough to carry cannon on!"

Lutenist smiled agreement. "Right! The Little Ice Age was coming to an end! In fact, a warming trend had started around 1200, and lasted for eight centuries. Anyone know why?"

"Hey, let's eat!" someone called.

"Let him finish," Curtis growled. He drained his beer. A bearded man behind him silently handed him another.

Lutenist stabbed a hand into the air. "Why?"

Someone in the audience responded. "Because a farmer doesn't give up his land."

"That's right, Beth. Farmers! Hunters run, which is what our ancestors did during the Thirty-Fifth Ice Age. But the five hundred million settled and civilized humans of the thirteenth century were not going to pull up stakes and move elsewhere. London, Copenhagen, even Moscow were too valuable to abandon. So what did they do?" He used and stared around the audience.

Several responded in unison. "They threw another log on the fire!"

Lutenist beamed. "Exactly! They fought the cold with heat, soot and CO2. Air pollution!"

"Smudge pots," Curtis growled.

Right, Lutenist shouted. "Smudge pots! Greenhouse effect!"

"Pollution, poll-ooo-tion," someone sang.

Everyone shouted. "Jenny! And Harry!"

"The moonbeam's here!"

Alex painfully twisted around to see. The two people who came in through the archway were matched in clothes and height, but in nothing else. The man was enormous, broad of shoulders, large of chest, and much larger of belly. He wore a battered slouch hat, and an oil-stained denim jacket. His boots clumped on the floor. Over one shoulder was slung a huge guitar case. In his hands he carried two nylon bags that clinked as he walked. He set the bags down and opened one, took out a jar, opened it and sipped at the clear liquid. "Finest corn squeezin's Kansas ever produced!" He handed the jar to Curtis.

The woman called Jenny was as tall as Harry, but thin. Her skin might have been leather. Her hair was long and straight, and dead silver-gray. The eyes burned brightly out of the wrinkles. She carried a guitar, but she wasn't playing it. "Don't drink the water, and don't breathe the air!" she sang.

Mike got up from his place on the floor. "We'd given upon you two," he said.

"Bike broke down in Wyoming," Jenny said. "Had to sing for our suppers. Some things you can't sing, though . . ."

Harry struck a chord. "It's minus ten and counting, and time is passing fast, it's minus ten and counting—"

"O God, don't," Curtis said. The room was still for a moment.

"Yeah," Jenny said. "And you can't sing 'A Fire in the Sky'—"

An older man went over to her and eyed her belligerently. "I know you. Jenny Trout."

"We do NOT use real names," Jenny said.

"You're a goddamned feminist," the man insisted. "What the hell are you doing here—"

He was interrupted by Wade Curtis, who roared with laughter. "Adams, you know Jenny! Sure, the feminists won, they're running the government along with—God almighty. But think about it, she's too damn much anarchist to be inside the government! Any government. Even a Green-Feminist government."

"I'm no goddam Green," Jenny said.

"Sorry." Curtis actually sounded apologetic. "Anyway—"

"Anyway, Adams," Harry said, "she knows who her friends are. So do I. Have a jug of corn. Real moonbeams."

"Jenny likes to feel wanted," Fang said. "She's not comfortable unless she's wanted by the law."

Jenny grinned, and sang,

"Wanted fan in Luna City, wanted fan on Dune and Down,

Wanted fan at Ophiuchus, wanted fan in Dydeetown.

All across the sky they want me, am I flattered?

Yes I am!

If I could just reach orbit, then I'd be a wanted

fan."

". . . and in the midst of the Thirty-Sixth Ice Age, we were lighting global smudge pots. Wood-burning during the Middle Ages was so intensive that the forests of Europe were actually smaller than in the twentieth century. Coalburning, which began in the fifteenth century, saved the forests and put even more gunk into the air. By the late nineteenth century, most homes were heated by coal furnaces." Lutenist paused and rubbed his hands together, as if imagining heat vents and radiators.

A line had formed. Veggies disappeared as they moved past Alex. Almost everyone who passed put something in Alex's mouth. Dark red was miniature tomatoes; Alex feared the implications. The red-and-white spheroid burned.

Jenny sang,

"Wanted fan for mining coal and wanted fan for

drilling oil,

I went very fast through Portland, hunted hard

like Gully Foyle.

Built reactors in Seattle against every man's advice,

Couldn't do that in Alaska, Fonda says it isn't

nice."

"Nice touch, Jenny. They'll be expecting you to rhyme it with 'ice.' "

"You don't really think the nukes could have saved Alaska, do you Jenny?"

Alaska had been beneath the Ice for fifteen years.

". . . Then, beginning in the 1950s, we began to clean up our environment. Household coal furnaces gave way to centralized electric heating; and pollution was confined to the power plant areas, instead of belching from every chimney in the city. The famous pea-soup fogs of London disappeared."

Lutenist smiled wanly. "But so did the warm, rainy British winters. Heavy winters became the norm. In 1984 and '85 several campers froze to death when a blizzard struck the Riviera. Atlanta, Georgia, had a week of zero temperatures. Winter snow became common in the southlands. Meanwhile, the Sahara resumed its southward march and Ukrainian grain harvests became less and less reliable. Raindrops need tiny particles around which to condense. So, when you eliminate air pollution, what happens?"

"Less rain!" cried the audience.

"And less cloud cover means the ground loses heat faster. And that means?"

"The Great Ice!"

"Ice day is a'comin'," Jenny and Harry sang softly. "Hey sinner man, where you gonna run to—" It made a nice background, now, for Gregory's litany.

"Yes, my friends." Lutenist was walking back and forth in front of the piano. "The elimination of air pollution did not start with the Greens. It started with the Big Power Companies back in the fifties—as a by-product of their program of clean, centralized electrical power generation. But it accelerated with the environmentalist movement. Soon, we were not allowed to burn the leaves we raked off our yards. We had to bag them, in plastic bags, of course! And have them hauled away by trucks to landfills hundreds of miles away. The Green Laws became more and more stringent at the same time that interest in and support for science was waning—not a coincidence, I might add. Even today, with the Great Ice and the Sahara both sliding south, we are not allowed to throw another log on the fire!"

"Damned good thing!" Jenny Trout shouted.

Everyone looked at her.

"It's got to fall," she said. "All the way. We don't like this world we made! Bring it down! Bring it down!"

Harry had taken out his guitar. He struck a chord.

"Black powder and alcohol, when your states and cities fall, when your back's against the wall—"

Alex shuddered.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"Black Powder and Alcohol . . ."

"You're going to send us back to space," Alex said.

"Perhaps I don't wish to go," Gordon said.

"Shut up. Look, with all great respect, how do you propose to do this? As far as I know, the only rockets left on Earth are military missiles." And I can't see sticking one up my arse and riding it out—

"Exactly! We hide out until we build strength and take over in Sacramento. Then—"

"There's a Saturn Five in Houston." Fang asked, "Will that do?"

Alex blinked and tried to sit up. "Saturn? Damn right." With a Saturn we could reach the moon. But—I didn't know there were any left."

"There aren't," Bruce said. "NASA took a full man-rated Saturn and laid it down as a monument. Alex, that bird will never fly again."

"Oh."

"It's right in front of the old Manned Space Center," Mike said. "Leetle hard to work on without attracting attention."

"Could steal it," Crazy Eddie said.

Bruce closed his eyes. "Steal it, Eddie? Do you know how big those suckers were?"

"Three hundred and sixty three feet high. Weighed three kilotons."

Bruce spoke patiently. "And you say we should steal it?"

"If we could round up enough pickup trucks," Eddie Two Bats said thoughtfully. "Of course it will be hard to stand it up again. I think we need an engineer."

"I see how it works," Alex said quietly to Sherrine.

"How?"

"It's Crazy Eddie's job to come up with nutty ideas, and Bruce's job to chop him down. Do any of Eddie's notions ever work?"

She shrugged.

"I could cry."

She frowned. "Over Crazy Eddie?"

"No, the rocket. The Saturn Five was the most powerful rocket ever built—Sherrine, it was the most powerful machine ever made!"

"A fire in the sky," she said. "I know the song."

"And now it's a lawn ornament."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Monument! They didn't want competition for the shuttle. They even tried to burn the blueprints—"

"It wasn't your fault."

"I know that, but I'm sorry. Sorry that anyone could ever have been so stupid. And that was NASA! We gave the space program to NASA, and they, and . . . Damn."

"Does anyone else have an idea?" Bruce asked. "No? Then we carry on as before. The fewer who know about the Angels, the safer they'll be. Don't tell anyone without consulting me. The cover is that they're closet fans from North Dakota, people Fang and Thor have known for years. All agreed? Good. So ordered. Do I hear a motion to adjourn? Meeting is adjourned. Next meeting is in Hawkeye's room about nine. Now it's time to enjoy the convention."

* * *

The room had perhaps been a small ballroom when the house was new. Now it looked crowded despite its size. There were windows along one wall, with couches under them. The window sills were covered with brick-a-brack, photos of people in odd costumes, strangely painted coffee mugs, vases that held improbable plants. That fur rug, patterned in yellow and orange, was neither the shape nor the colors of any of Earth's life forms. A grand piano stood down at one end of the room. It was covered with photographs and paintings and drawings and plastic objects. Books lined two of the walls, and the spaces between the large archways set into the fourth wall.

A large bear of a man with a sunburst of hair encircling his face stood next to the grand piano, one hand resting on it. He was making a speech, and his free hand waved in time with his words. Other people

were talking, too, which seemed impolite.

The man stopped in midsentence when Sherrine and Thor wheeled the Angels into the room. People looked around and opened a path, some of those on the floor moving aside, some standing to move chairs, until Alex and Gordon were moved right up front near the speaker. The others moved back again. It looked choreographed.

"See you," Thor said. He seemed in a hurry to leave.

The speaker was in no hurry at all. He struck a pose, as if waiting for something.

Ritual? Alex wondered. Whatever. Pavana mukthvsan could be practiced as easily in a wheelchair as elsewhere. Alex used both hands to bend his right leg and tuck it into his crotch against the pubic bone. Then he folded his left leg and laid it atop the right. He made circles of his thumbs and index fingers and rested his hands on his knees. He breathed in slowly through his left nostril, repeating the syllable yam six times. He wondered when Steve would graduate him to siddhasan, or even padmasan. Anything was better than the savasam "corpse position" he had practiced in the van during the ride across Minnesota. He hadn't known that relaxing was such hard work; but according to Steve, the first order of business was to make his muscles stop fighting the gravity.

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"We live in an ice age—" began Gregory Lutenist. When he got to the words "ice age" three people had joined him, speaking in unison with him. Then came a voice from the crowd: "No shit!"

"—and we always have," he continued, imperturbably adjusting his glasses. "During the last seven hundred thousand years there have been eight cycles of cooling and warming. The glaciers retreat, but always they come back; and the warm, interglacial interludes last for only about ten thousand years. Since Ice Age Thirty-Five ended fourteen thousand years ago, the next one must have started four thousand years ago. Most of human history has been lived in an ice age. So why did no one notice?"

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Lutenist beamed at Gordon. "Ah—"

"Fresh meat!" someone yelled.

"Tell me, my young friend," Lutenist said. "What lights up the sun?"

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"What's up?" Lutenist demanded.

The man shrugged "Con Committee said to come here, this will be the 'Meet the Pros' party."

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"What's to lecture?" Needleton demanded. "It was all simple, and known before 1980. The sun is not producing enough neutrinos. Ergo, it is not fusing. Yet, according to the technetium levels in deep molybdenum mines there were plenty of neutrinos passing through the Earth during interglacial and preglacial periods."

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Lutenist stabbed a hand into the air. "Why?"

Someone in the audience responded. "Because a farmer doesn't give up his land."

"That's right, Beth. Farmers! Hunters run, which is what our ancestors did during the Thirty-Fifth Ice Age. But the five hundred million settled and civilized humans of the thirteenth century were not going to pull up stakes and move elsewhere. London, Copenhagen, even Moscow were too valuable to abandon. So what did they do?" He used and stared around the audience.

Several responded in unison. "They threw another log on the fire!"

Lutenist beamed. "Exactly! They fought the cold with heat, soot and CO2. Air pollution!"

"Smudge pots," Curtis growled.

Right, Lutenist shouted. "Smudge pots! Greenhouse effect!"

"Pollution, poll-ooo-tion," someone sang.

Everyone shouted. "Jenny! And Harry!"

"The moonbeam's here!"

Alex painfully twisted around to see. The two people who came in through the archway were matched in clothes and height, but in nothing else. The man was enormous, broad of shoulders, large of chest, and much larger of belly. He wore a battered slouch hat, and an oil-stained denim jacket. His boots clumped on the floor. Over one shoulder was slung a huge guitar case. In his hands he carried two nylon bags that clinked as he walked. He set the bags down and opened one, took out a jar, opened it and sipped at the clear liquid. "Finest corn squeezein's Kansas ever produced!" He handed the jar to Curtis.

The woman called Jenny was as tall as Harry, but thin. Her skin might have been leather. Her hair was long and straight, and dead silver-gray. The eyes burned brightly out of the wrinkles. She carried a guitar, but she wasn't playing it. "Don't drink the water, and don't breathe the air!" she sang.

Mike got up from his place on the floor. "We'd given upon you two," he said.

"Bike broke down in Wyoming," Jenny said. "Had to sing for our suppers. Some things you can't sing, though . . ."

Harry struck a chord. "It's minus ten and counting, and time is passing fast, it's minus ten and counting—"

"O God, don't," Curtis said. The room was still for a moment.

"Yeah," Jenny said. "And you can't sing 'A Fire in the Sky'—"

An older man went over to her and eyed her belligerently. "I know you. Jenny Trout."

"We do NOT use real names," Jenny said.

"You're a goddamned feminist," the man insisted. "What the hell are you doing here—"

He was interrupted by Wade Curtis, who roared with laughter. "Adams, you know Jenny! Sure, the feminists won, they're running the government along with—God almighty. But think about it, she's too damn much anarchist to be inside the government! Any government. Even a Green-Feminist government."

"I'm no goddam Green," Jenny said.

"Sorry." Curtis actually sounded apologetic. "Anyway—"

"Anyway, Adams," Harry said, "she knows who her friends are. So do I. Have a jug of corn. Real moonbeams."

"Jenny likes to feel wanted," Fang said. "She's not comfortable unless she's wanted by the law."

Jenny grinned, and sang,

"Wanted fan in Luna City, wanted fan on Dune and Down,

Wanted fan at Ophiuchus, wanted fan in Dydeetown.

All across the sky they want me, am I flattered?

Yes I am!

If I could just reach orbit, then I'd be a wanted

fan."

". . . and in the midst of the Thirty-Sixth Ice Age, we were lighting global smudge pots. Wood-burning during the Middle Ages was so intensive that the forests of Europe were actually smaller than in the twentieth century. Coalburning, which began in the fifteenth century, saved the forests and put even more gunk into the air. By the late nineteenth century, most homes were heated by coal furnaces." Lutenist paused and rubbed his hands together, as if imagining heat vents and radiators.

A line had formed. Veggies disappeared as they moved past Alex. Almost everyone who passed put something in Alex's mouth. Dark red was miniature tomatoes; Alex feared the implications. The red-and-white spheroid burned.

Jenny sang,

"Wanted fan for mining coal and wanted fan for

drilling oil,

I went very fast through Portland, hunted hard

like Gully Foyle.

Built reactors in Seattle against every man's advice,

Couldn't do that in Alaska, Fonda says it isn't

nice."

"Nice touch, Jenny. They'll be expecting you to rhyme it with 'ice.' "

"You don't really think the nukes could have saved Alaska, do you Jenny?"

Alaska had been beneath the Ice for fifteen years.

". . . Then, beginning in the 1950s, we began to clean up our environment. Household coal furnaces gave way to centralized electric heating; and pollution was confined to the power plant areas, instead of belching from every chimney in the city. The famous pea-soup fogs of London disappeared."

Lutenist smiled wanly. "But so did the warm, rainy British winters. Heavy winters became the norm. In 1984 and '85 several campers froze to death when a blizzard struck the Riviera. Atlanta, Georgia, had a week of zero temperatures. Winter snow became common in the southlands. Meanwhile, the Sahara resumed its southward march and Ukrainian grain harvests became less and less reliable. Raindrops need tiny particles around which to condense. So, when you eliminate air pollution, what happens?"

"Less rain!" cried the audience.

"And less cloud cover means the ground loses heat faster. And that means?"

"The Great Ice!"

"Ice day is a'comin'," Jenny and Harry sang softly. "Hey sinner man, where you gonna run to—" It made a nice background, now, for Gregory's litany.

"Yes, my friends." Lutenist was walking back and forth in front of the piano. "The elimination of air pollution did not start with the Greens. It started with the Big Power Companies back in the fifties—as a by-product of their program of clean, centralized electrical power generation. But it accelerated with the environmentalist movement. Soon, we were not allowed to burn the leaves we raked off our yards. We had to bag them, in plastic bags, of course! And have them hauled away by trucks to landfills hundreds of miles away. The Green Laws became more and more stringent at the same time that interest in and support for science was waning—not a coincidence, I might add. Even today, with the Great Ice and the Sahara both sliding south, we are not allowed to throw another log on the fire!"

"Damned good thing!" Jenny Trout shouted.

Everyone looked at her.

"It's got to fall," she said. "All the way. We don't like this world we made! Bring it down! Bring it down!"

Harry had taken out his guitar. He struck a chord.

"Black powder and alcohol, when your states and cities fall, when your back's against the wall—"

Alex shuddered.

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CHAPTER NINE

"Please, Sir, May I Have Some More?"

Alex dreamed he had been strapped down in a runaway centrifuge. The module spun faster and faster. G-forces sat on his bones like mountains. Under the steady pull his face dripped away and pooled around his naked skull. He kept trying to cry out that he wanted off now; but he couldn't speak.

Then he heard drapes slithering, and sunlight warmed his face. "Wake up!" a cheerful voice insisted. "Time for soorya namaskar!" Alex kept his eyes closed and practiced the savasam pose. Go away, Steve, I'm dead.

But the man would not be put off. He shook Alex by the shoulder. "Come on, you two. Discipline is the key. You've got to work at this every day."

Alex opened one eye. Steve stood between the two beds, legs akimbo and hands balled on his hips. He reminded Alex of a coiled spring. If the Downers could only find a way to tap Steve's energy, they could use it to melt the glaciers.

Beyond him, Alex saw Doc setting up two trays. Tall glasses of milk. A high-calcium diet. "Whatever happened to privacy?" he asked.

"Alex," said Gordon. "It snowed last night."

He opened both eyes and turned to see Gordon standing (standing!) with his hands braced on the window sill. His breath made little clouds in the air and steamed the glass. Alex stifled a groan. If Gordon could do it . . . He pushed the comforter and the blankets off his body. With that much weight removed he felt as if he could float out of bed. Careful, Alex. Watch those reflexes. Slowly, he swung his legs out over the edge of the bed and pushed himself to a sitting position.

"That's very good," said Steve, and Alex felt like one of his day-care charges who had just gotten a star on his forehead.

"They tell me it snows a little every night up here," said Doc. He brought the milk over. Even during the summer. It's colder in California than it used to be; but L.A. only gets snow a couple times a year. Here, drink this. It's good for you."

Alex took the glass with both hands and drank. Milk was good stuff. Too bad they didn't have milk in the habitats. That mix-it-with-water powder didn't count, and they would run out of it sooner or later. Sooner or later they would run out of everything, including time. He clenched his fists around the glass. He was probably better off on Earth. You could still run out of things on Earth, you could still die; but the margin for error was not nearly so thin.

There was a knock on the door. "Come on in," Alex called. "Everybody else has."

It was Mike Gilder. He waved. "Good morning, all." He found the most comfortable chair in the room and sank into it. "Bad news," he announced. "Bruce tried to contact Ron Cole last night through the Oregon Ghost. No go. The Ghost says Cole is reachable only through the Museum switchboard and no one wants to say anything over a line where there might be listeners. The Ghost says he can't vouch for the Titan, either. He says he heard the stories, too, back in the old days; but he doesn't know how close to the truth they were."

Doc looked up. "What are we going to do, then?"

Mike shrugged. "Bruce wants to take Bob and me down to Chi to check things out in person."

Alex grunted and noticed how his breath smoked. It was not cold, exactly; not like it had been on the glacier. But it was chilly. Pleasantly cool, actually. More comfortable than the shirtsleeve warm habitats. There was no problem dumping waste heat on this habitat! "Is it always this nippy in the morning?" he asked. Yesterday, he had been too groggy from the van ride to notice.

Steve struck a pose. " `To conserve, we all should strive. Thermostats at fifty-five,' " he quoted. "It'll warm up later. Body heat from fifth-odd fans."

"Some of them very odd," said Mike. "Steve, who was that fellow who used the thermostat law to commit murder? What was it . . . two, three years ago?"

"Don't recall his name anymore. Papers on the Coast didn't play it, up very big. Massachusetts?"

"Hyannis."

"What are you two talking about?" Gordon demanded.

"There was a rich old man and an impatient young heir," Mike explained. "The old man had pneumonia. EPA said to turn our thermostats down; so the nephew did it. He was just being a good citizen." He scratched his beard thoughtfully. "He must have inherited enough money to hire a good lawyer, because it

never came to trial."

"Government wouldn't want it to come to trial," said Steve. "Good-intentioned laws aren't allowed to have bad spin-offs."

Mike shrugged. "Whichever. The DA was really frosted, though."

Steve led them through their asanas. Stretch. Bend. Rest. Stretch. Bend. Rest. "I am your transcendental drill sergeant," Steve declaimed. "Meditate, you slugs! Yam, two, three, four!" As Alex came out of the Eight-Pointed Repose, he noticed that Doc was performing the asanas along with them.

He had to admit that he felt much better afterward. However, he and Gordon were so exhausted by the mild workout that they took refuge once more in their wheelchairs. "Don't worry about it," Steve told them. "Each day you'll be able to stay on your feet a little longer."

"That's right," said Doc. "You should have seen me before Steve took me in hand." He squeezed his left bicep with his right hand. "Muscles had gone soft. I tired easily. Now, I've never felt better."

Steve looked at him. "There's more to yoga than physical conditioning."

"Breakfast time," said Sherrine. She pushed her way through the door backward, her hands gripping a tray stacked with steaming dishes. Alex admire the view. Then he noticed Gordon watching and scowled. Neither of them were up to that sort of exercise; but Gordon would beat him to it.

Sherrine set the tray on the lamp table. Mike tried to look over her shoulder to see what she had brought. "The kitchen is a madhouse," she said. "Ol' 3MJ is down there flipping flapjacks himself. But Shew and Wolfson and Curtis and a couple of others are helping out, too.

"Damn," Sherrine said.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Just remembering. Nat Reynolds used to make Irish coffee at conventions. Long time ago. What happened to him?"

"Exiled," Steve said. "After he got busted and they were all set to charge him with subversion—"

"Subversion how" Alex asked. "I thought— isn't the Constitution still in effect?"

"For most things," Mike said dryly. "There's freedom of speech for politics and so forth. But no one has the right to deceive people. Back in the '90s one of the Green organizations sued the publisher of a science fiction book and won. Didn't cost the publisher much, but the author was held liable as well. So after Reynolds wrote *The Sun Guns*—"

"I read this," Gordon said. "About satellite power plants to stop the Ice?"

"Yep, that's it," Mike said. "Well, Friends of Man and the Earth sued him. Class action suit for fifty million bucks for deceiving the people. Got a preliminary judgment suppressing publication of the book. Reynolds wouldn't take that and let the book be published anyway and that was contempt of court, so then they wanted him on criminal charges."

Sherrine shuddered. "And once you're a criminal, they can do anything to you. Reeducation. Community service."

"Well, they caught him, but he and his lawyers worked out a deal. Reynolds gave up U.S. citizenship and was deported to Australia. The Aussies always did like him. He didn't want to go, but he didn't really have much choice."

"Things are pretty rough down there, too," Doc said. "But better than here. Hell, everywhere is better than here."

They were quiet for a moment, then Mike said, "The important thing is, is anybody making waffles?"

Sherrine held a plate out to him. "Here. I brought you some." She gave plates to Alex and Gordon. Alex studied his meal and nearly wept. These people had no idea how wealthy and fortunate they were. Eggs. Real eggs from a real hen. And porridge made from cereal grain. None of it powdered or freeze dried or reconstituted or resurrected or derived from a vat of green slime. He savored a spoonful of oatmeal.

"That's one of the things I missed while I was fafiated," Sherrine continued.

Mike looked puzzled. "What? Crowded kitchens?"

"No, it's the way fans pitch in and help spontaneously. 3MJ didn't have to ask a single person for assistance."

Doc nodded. "They seen their duty and they done it."

"Out in the danelaw, nobody helps out unless there's something in it for them. I always had to watch my back at the University. You wouldn't believe the bureaucratic in-fighting that goes on there, and the goddam union laws—"

"I would," said Mike, wagging an impaled fragment of waffle. "That's why I left the IRS. The grunts at the P.O.D.'s were okay. They were just trying to do their jobs—almost impossible, considering how convoluted the law is—but the political hacks . . ." He shook his head.

Alex could sympathize with him. Lonny Hopkins was a son of a bitch; but, to give the devil his due, he was a perfectly sincere son of a bitch. And up there, you did your part or you died. If you screwed up, maybe you killed someone whose relatives resented it, maybe you killed yourself, maybe something else, but the margins were too thin for drones.

Down here they were rich enough to support useless people, but there were so many! All concerned

about their own careers and perks in the midst of the struggle for survival.

"Fen are different," Doc said. "At least since the fringe fans gafiated. That was one benefit of government intimidation. A lot of the cuttle fish are gone." His voice took on an edge. "You know the ones I mean. The exhibitionists. And the so-called fans who abused 3MJ's hospitality by stealing his memorabilia. Nowadays the camaraderie is more like it was during First Fandom. It's a smaller group, but closer knit."

"The Few, the Proud, the Fen," said Mike.

Steve nodded. "FIAWOL," he agreed.

Alex held up his bowl. "More gruel, please."

Gordon laughed. "No, no, it is 'Please sir, may I have some more?' "

Mike roared. "You like that stuff? Don't you have 'gruel' where you come from?"

"Oh, sure," Alex retorted. "We make it from the wheat we harvest on our limitless acres."

"Well, if it's cereal you want," said Sherrine, "you've come to the right place. What Wall Street is to junk bonds, Minneapolis is to cereal grain."

Mike scratched his beard again. "Take some home with you, why don't you? I'm sure we could stick a case of Quaker Oats or Cream of Wheat into the Titan with you. A gift from Earth."

"Hey!" said Sherrine. They all looked at her and she spread her arms apart. "Why not?"

"Why not what?"

She stood up and bounced to the center of the room. "If we're going to loft a rocket we should pack it with gifts. As much as it will take. Not just oatmeal, but . . . Oh, everything. Anything! Anything we've got down here that the Angels need!"

Doc raised his eyebrows. "That's a great idea, Sherri. It'll show the Angels that they've still got a few friends down here. What sort of stuff do your folks need, Alex?"

"What do we need? What don't we need?" Alex wondered how well-informed the fans were about conditions in the habitats. Not very, he suspected. "Bacon and eggs. Meats of any sort. Milk. Carrots, broccoli, everything you were serving at the Meet the Readers Party Hell, any vegetable. You have foodstuffs down here that some of our folks have never seen, let alone eaten."

"Chitlins and collard greens?" asked Steve.

"Sure."

"You guys must really be desperate."

"Have you ever lived on a diet of lettuce and mustard greens? Zucchini, sometimes. We do grow vegetables, but there are never enough. You can't eat spider plants! And some of our plant species have died off. We synthesize a lot of vitamins, but nutritional deficiencies are one of our biggest worries." Along with solar flares, nitrogen outgassing, shortages of metals and plastics, and you name it. But let's not disillusion anyone.

"Food, then," said Mike. "Geez, we should name the ship The Flying Greengrocer."

"Seeds, Mike," said Sherrine. "Not live plants. Call it Johnny Appleseed." She went to the small lamp table and rummaged in its drawer, emerging with a pencil and a small pad of note paper.

Mike scowled. "I knew that. I am the county ag agent, you know. Not that I know a damn thing about it—"

"Then how the hell did you get the job?" Doc demanded. "As if I didn't know."

"Seniority, of course. I was able to bump out someone else. Helps that I can claim minority ancestry."

"What kind of minority, white man?" Steve asked.

"Yes, just so. Native American," Mike said. "Doesn't show, does it?" He shrugged. "But we can claim it, so I do. The point is, I may be able to get stuff, and I can sure get access to the library records."

He pushed himself out of his armchair and paced the room, rubbing his fist with his hand. "You'll want plants to satisfy three needs," he continued, thinking aloud. "Hot damn! Who would ever have thought that a county agent and the space program . . . Well, okay, nutrition is one. You want maximum food value for minimum energy input. Oxygen production and CO2 scrubbing is another. And radiation hardening. So . . ." He paused and rubbed his face. "I should sit down and put together a list, balancing all three needs. But for a start . . . Sherrine, write these down: green leafy vegetables and yellow vegetables. Sweet potatoes, carrots, spinach."

"Why them?" asked Gordon.

"They're great sources of vitamin A," Doc told him. "Important for bone growth, and radiation resistance."

"Tocopherol, vitamin E. That's good for radiation, too," said Steve.

"Sure. We can include a couple of bulk bottles of concentrated multivitamins."

"And tomatoes," Mike added. "Rich in vitamin A and they're easy to grow hydroponically."

"We have some of those," Alex said. "But they went bad. Started making people sick. We still grow tomatoes, but we make fertilizer out of them, mulch for the moon rock soil."

"Tomato seeds. Several varieties." Sherrine wrote rapidly. "You must need hydroponic chemicals, too. Even with closed loop recovery, there have to be losses. What do you need for that?"

"Nitrogen, for one thing," Alex said.

"Potassium nitrate," said Gordon. They all looked at him in surprise. "Potassium nitrate," he repeated. "You know. Saltpeter."

"Flower seeds," said Steve.

Alex looked at him in surprise. "Can't eat flowers," he said.

Steve shook his head. "Not for food. But as long as you need plants to produce oxygen, some of them might as well be pretty."

"Pretty is fine," Gordon said. "But pretty takes time, too." He shrugged. "Here you are rich. So much to eat. Not made of algae."

"Green slime," Alex said. "Good stuff. Bubble waste water through a vat of green slime. Takes out the ketones. Dissolve the carbon dioxide. It grows, and you can bake it into bread . . ."

"Okay," said Steve. "We send up everything we can get, though. Why not? Seeds are small. They weigh next to nothing; and they'll keep practically forever."

"Is good," Gordon said. "When we know how much mass we can take up, we can ask station commander what is needed. I think is not proper to ask until—"

The room fell silent. "Until you believe in this," Sherrine said. "Don't get their hopes up."

"Something like that," Alex said. "I mean—we're grateful, and you're risking everything, and—"

"But it's pretty mad to talk about finding an old Titan, fueling it up, and lighting it off," Doe said. "Of course it is. But—" He held up a finger. The others joined in unison as he said, "It's the Only Game in Town." Doc's eyes lit. "Spices. Pepper. Thyme. Savory. Oregano. Sweet Basil. Dill—parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme . . ."

Alex's mouth watered. Mythical flavors from childhood. "Ketchup," he remembered. "And mustard. Peanuts. Gordon, you have never tasted peanut butter. And not just foodstuffs, either." As long as he was daydreaming, why not daydream big. "We could use all sorts of materials. Machine tools, too."

"Plastics," said Gordon. "They can be shredded and remolded. Could always use more."

Alex shook his head. "Plastics would be too bulky to lift in useful quantities. We need things that are small and valuable."

"Don't rule anything out, yet," said Sherrine. "We're brainstorming."

"Too bad you can't grow plastic from seeds," said Doe. "Like you can plants."

"But you can!" Mike said suddenly.

"What?"

"Well, not quite; but . . . There was an experimental field—in Iowa?—where they grew plastic corn. *Alcaligenes eutrophus* is a bacterium that produces a brittle polymer. Eighty percent of its dry weight is a naturally grown plastic: PHB, poly-beta-hydroxybutyrate . . ."

"Contains only natural ingredients!" declared Steve with a grin.

"Researchers found they could coax the bug into producing a more flexible plastic by adding a few organic acids to the glucose 'soup.' They cloned the polymer producing enzymes—oh, 1987 or so—and spliced them into E. coli. Later, they spliced them into turnips, and finally corn. That was the bonanza. The mother lode of plastic. The corn grew plastic kernels. Think of it: plastic corn on the cob," he chuckled. "Shuck the cobs and you get pellets. Perfect for melting in a forming machine hopper."

Doc frowned. "And you plant some of the plastic seed corn and grow more? That doesn't sound right."

Mike shook his head. "No, that was the problem, plastic seeds don't germinate. So you'd still need the original bugs, but you can breed them in vats and harvest the polymers directly. Not as efficient as the corn, but. . . They were this close to cracking the sterility problem when the National Scientific Research Advisory Board halted all testing."

"It sounds fantastic," said Alex. "Where can you find this bug?"

"A. eutrophus? In the hold of the Flying Dutchman. It's just a story that agents pass around. The test plot was abandoned when genetic engineering "was outlawed. Later, it was burned by a Green hit squad."

Doc grunted. "Hunh. Burning plastic corn? I'll bet it released a toxic smoke cloud."

"Sure. But that was the fault of the scientists, not the arsonists. They burned one of the scientists, too."

"My grandmother would know," said Sherrine.

Heads turned.

"My grandmother. She's a genetic engineer, remember? If anyone knows where we could lay hands on a

culture of this *A. eutrophus*, she would."

Alex felt a tingle in his limbs. They weren't just joking around any more. They could make it work. Foodstuff. Seeds. Vitamins. Spices. Plasi-facient bacteria, for crying out loud! They could actually make it happen. They knew where to find the stuff. Or they knew people who knew. He glanced at Gordon, who was looking straight at him, reading the hope in his eyes.

Sure. Make the payload valuable enough and Lonny Hopkins himself would fly out and grab it, Alex MacLeod and all.

"How would you handle meat, though?" asked Doc. "No seeds. No pills."

"Small animals. Rabbits. They breed fast and they're relatively meaty for their size."

"Guinea pigs? The Incas used those."

"Chickens."

"Hold it. Hold it. This rocket is starting to sound like a Central American bus."

"Forget the chickens," said Mike. "Take fertilized eggs. They take up less space. Hatch 'em in an incubator. Use the hens for egg production. Keep a rooster or two for breeding stock and use the rest for meat."

"But we don't have a chicken incubator," said Gordon.

"Build one. We can put the design and operating manual on a disc."

"Hell's bells," interjected Doc. "Give 'em a whole library on disc. SF, too, of course. They must be

getting tired of reading the same books over and over. As for the rabbits and guinea pigs, just take the germ plasm. You have a sperm bank, don't you?"

"Well, uh, yes. For humans."

"Good. Frozen sperm, then. Frozen ova, too. Mix 'em in vitro. Though you'll still want to take a few females along, just in case. Ova are more delicate than sperm."

"Is diversity problem in sperm bank," said Gordon thoughtfully. "Gene pool is limited."

"Mars Needs Women!" shouted Mike. Sherrine looked up from her notepad and blushed a deep crimson. Before she could say anything, Bruce Hyde spoke from the doorway.

"Do I want to know what this discussion is about?"

Sherrine and the others told him, all talking at once. He looked at Alex. "Will it work?"

Alex shrugged. "Why fly an empty truck? As long as we have enough fuel to lift the mass." And that would be a pretty problem! Trading altitude for cargo. There had to be enough cargo to make a rendezvous cost-effective. The more, the better. But more cargo, less altitude; and Lonny would have to use more fuel to match orbits, and . . . Where was the break-even point? It was a question of minimizing the rendezvous costs while maximizing the cargo value. A minimax problem. But it wouldn't do any good to try and calculate an answer. Too many indeterminates—Lonny would be making his own decisions anyway.

"Alex?" Steve was waving a hand at him.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked about spare parts and fittings," said Steve.

"We can fabricate most of what we need," Alex told him, "if we have the materials and the machine tools." Maintenance was the one activity in the habitats that was absolutely crucial. "We can scavenge and salvage most materials, although we're always short and more would always be welcome; but machine tools and dies for the machine shop are essential. Some of our blades and drill bits and molds have been reground or resharpened until they're useless."

"Machine tools would be small," said Mike, "but heavy."

"No critiques, yet," Sherrine reminded him as she wrote. "What else?"

"Surgical implements," said Doc. "I'm sure people up there still suffer injury and illness." He shuddered. "I'm trying to imagine resharpened scalpels and hypodermics."

Alex nodded. "You're right. I'd forgotten. Shots hurt."

"And medicines," continued Doc. "All sorts. You must have to ration what medicines you have mighty close."

Doc might as well have pierced him with one of his scalpels. Rationing . . . In a society of scarcity there was always rationing; and some people were on top of the rationing list and others were at the bottom. If Lonny or Mary or hydroponics chief Ginjer Hu fell sick, there would be medicine available. "Essential personnel." If Alex MacLeod fell sick . . .

And if he did climb back into orbit with a rocketful of goodies, would his name move up the list? More to the point, how much could they realistically take with them in a Titan, anyway? Brooding, Alex dropped out of the brainstorming session.

"Not only medicines," said Sherrine, "but other chemicals, too. 3MJ has chlorine for his pool right here. He might let us have some."

"Metals, too," said Gordon ". . . Nah. Too heavy. We would not lift enough metal to matter."

Bruce laughed. "What do you suppose the Titan is made of? If we can loft it hard enough, we can put the booster into a recoverable orbit. Then your people can mine it to their heart's content."

Later, when they were alone for a few minutes, Gordon looked at him with widened eyes. "It cannot work, but they believe—do you believe, too?"

Alex arranged the blanket around his legs. He smoothed the green paid cloth, tucking the folds out of sight. Experimentally, he pulled on the chair's wheels and was pleased to see that he could roll himself across the room. As Doc had told him, the upper body strength would come first. It was the muscles needed for standing and walking that needed the training. That and replenishing the bone calcium. He looked at Gordon.

"I think it could work. The essence of trade is 'Cheap here; dear there.' Make the cargo valuable enough and get the rocket close enough and, yes, it damn well could work." Gordon's blanket was a dull monochrome, which secretly pleased Alex.

"But, there are so many things that could go wrong . . ."

Alex slashed the air with his hand. "Of course there are! Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs—"

"Sorry, Alex."

"—We don't even know if we have a ship. Or whether we can fuel it. Or a thousand other things. We don't know how much cargo we can load; or what kind and how much will convince the station to bring us in. It's got to be the right stuff. And we can't ask Big Momma without tipping our hand and maybe losing the fans' help. There are a thousand details, and if any one of them fails, the whole idea collapses like a burnt-out star. So what do you want to do? Give up and stay down here in the Well for the rest of your life?"

"No, but you don't have to prove—"

"What do you know what I have to prove?"

Gordon pressed his lips together and looked away. "Nichevo."

"Damn right." Alex turned his wheelchair away. So, why was he being so hard on the kid? Deep down, he knew that they were cut off from home forever. This business with the Titan was just half-baked wish fulfillment. What did the shrinks call it? Denial? Crash a scoopship, did you? Stupid dipper fell into the Well? Hey, no problem. We'll just patch together an old derelict missile; stuff it with a cornucopia of wonderful goods, and sail home to triumph. Lonny Hopkins will be humiliated, and Mary will be so enchanted that she will finally leave him and we will all live happily ever after.

"Ah, cheer up, Gordo," he said. "The damned rocket will probably blow up on the launch pad anyway."

"Blankets."

He turned his head. "Hunh?"

Gordon tugged at his lap warmer. "Blankets. Cloth. How many times can you repatch worn-out shorts or halters?"

"Oh. Sure, sure. Tell Sherrine when she comes back."

"Alex?"

"What?"

"I didn't want to ask before, but what is corn on the cob?"

A flicker of images like an old silent movie. Golden corn glistening with melted butter. Picnic table spread on a bright summer's day. The merest of chills in the air, the distant kiss of infant glaciers. Hot dogs on the barbecue. Mom and Dad laughing to each other across the picnic table. The tangy smell of baked beans.

"Don't worry about it. We'll have a picnic and you'll see for yourself. Spread a blanket and . . ." He stopped suddenly and studied his lap blanket. Not just plaid. Light and dark green, with yellow and red pinstripes. It was the MacLeod tartan. And Gordon Tanner's blanket was ... a solid tan.

He laughed suddenly and Gordon gave him an odd look. So, launching them back into orbit involved thousands of details, did it? He felt a sudden illogical surge of optimism. These fans were people who cared about details. "Gordo," he said, "we've got to approach this whole thing in a more positive frame."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, there are a thousand things that could go right!"

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CHAPTER TEN

" . . . One of the Forces of Nature"

Sherrine held the door of the van open while Bob rolled the tub of powdered chlorine inside. He put it in place against the wall and mopped his head with a kerchief, glancing back over his shoulder at the tarp-shrouded swimming pool. "This is stupid."

"Tremont said we could take as much as we wanted. He doesn't think it will ever be warm enough to use the pool again." She followed his gaze to the pool. A layer of ice encrusted the tarp. One day soon, it would never melt. It was sad, knowing that the pool was doomed, that no one would ever laugh and splash in it again.

"That wasn't what I meant."

Sherrine folded her arms against the chill. "So?"

"Lugging this crap all the way to Chicago. It's the kind of thing Crazy Eddie would come up with."

"Alex told us that the Angels need all sorts of chemicals. The space stations aren't perfectly closed systems. You know that. They were never designed for permanent, isolated habitation—and there's no chlorine on the moon. You're just jealous because you weren't there and you didn't think of it." And why did Bob have to throw cold water on her idea? He himself had pulled her into this.

He leaned back against the van and stuffed his hands in his jacket docket. "We don't know yet if Cole even has a rocket," he said. "And if he does, we can't just climb aboard and take off from downtown Chicago with a bucket of chlorine powder aboard. So, we don't have to load up—on chlorine or anything else—right now."

She shrugged. "Where's the harm?"

Bob rubbed his shoulders. "It's heavy."

She didn't answer him. She huddled deeper in her coat, squinting at the snow flurries stirred up by the wind. The breeze hummed like a tenor pipe where it blew across the archway between the main building and the garage and parking apron. Like a ghost, she thought. The Ghost of Minneapolis Past.

"Cold?" asked Bob.

"No," she said.

His mouth twitched and he stuck his hand back in his pocket. "Me neither." After a few beats, he spoke again. "Is Bruce going to tell the rest of the Con what's going on? I had to teach a thermo class this morning, so I missed whatever you decided at the meeting. The traffic was tied up around the fraternity houses. They're getting ready for some sort of Greekfest."

"Call in sick, like I did."

He shook his head. "I owe them."

"Who, the University?"

"No, my students. It takes a lot of guts to sign up for a science course these days. To put up with the taunts and harassment. As long as they show up, I'll show up."

"I'm glad I'm staff, not faculty."

"The Dean insists that we add creationism and crystal theory and spiritualism to the curriculum."

"They already have those—"

"Not as equal time in the physics and chemistry departments."

Sherrine whistled low.

"Yep," Bob said. "The science departments are resisting—we had a meeting after my class—but it's a

question of marketing and sales. Of putting warm bodies behind desks. We told the Dean that there was no objective evidence for any of that crap. You know what he said?"

The sky was a slate gray; the cloud deck, low and oppressive. Sherrine stared up into the gloom. "No. What?"

"He said that the alleged objectivity of materialist science was an invention of heterosexual, white males, so we shouldn't use that as a basis for judgment."

She looked sharply into his face. For a change, he was not laughing. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing."

All the fire had done out of him, even the anger. Ominous. She said, "And?"

"I said nothing. It was like I'd been caught explaining something to a door, or a telephone recording. I felt like such a fool."

"That's why I love working with computers. They're logical. Rational. They do exactly what you program them to do. And that forces you to be logical, too." She shook her head. "But the anthropomorphic nonsense I have to put up with from users . . ."

"I thought you were happy in your little niche."

She gave him a fierce look. "I was, damn you. I was happy! Thank you, Robert K. Needleton, for prying me out into this cold, mean, miserable world."

"Do you want to go back?"

She shook her head. "You can never go back. As long as you keep your eyes shut tight, you can pretend whatever you like. But once you open them, all your pretenses are gone. Even if you shut them again, you know. I was getting along, day by day. Nothing was too right; but nothing was too wrong, either. Now, you and your Angels and—" She waved an arm at the Tre-house. "—all this. It's reminded me how gray and awful things have become. People ask me what my 'sign' is. It used to be a joke; but they're serious. We have a Supreme Court justice now who consults the stars instead of the Constitution. And the Luddites. Anytime someone suggests doing anything, it's 'this might happen' and 'that might happen' and 'think of the risks involved.' But you can't do nothing, either. Oh, sometimes I just want to shuck it all. Go somewhere else."

"Where?"

She looked back up into the sky and hummed softly. "And that was one small step, and afire in the sky . . ."

"Sorry, all those trains have been cancelled."

"Except one."

"Maybe." He placed one mittened hand on her shoulder. "Sherrine. People like us, we should stay here and fight."

"And lose."

"Losing is better than running."

She jerked her shoulder away from him. "I wasn't talking about running." Yes, you were. "I'm not like you. I can't laugh about it. I can't make jokes. It depresses me. You'll be making wisecracks about crystal-heads and proxmires until the day they hang you for technophilia—"

"They don't hand you for that. They send you to reeducation camps."

"Whatever. But, for me . . . I can't go back; so I've got to go on."

He nudged her with his elbow. "Here comes Chuck. You never did tell me what you guys decided this morning. What do we tell the others?"

"Oh. It's still a secret. Just us and the Ghost. What they don't know can't get them in trouble." She straightened and stepped away from the van. "Hi, Chuck."

Chuck Umber was agitated. His beard jutted out. "The Con is busted," he said. "The cops are on their way."

Sherrine stiffened. The police were coming? They would catch her here, among fans. She would lose her job. She would . . . "How do you know?" she asked.

"Secret source."

A closet fan in the police department. She remembered a civilian analyst who'd been active before. Probably a secret Hocus subscriber—

"Look, you've got to leave now," Umber said. "There's still time before they get here."

She turned to climb in the van. Bob grabbed her arm. "Wait! Gabe and Rafe!" She looked into his eyes. "We've got to find them," he said.

"They're with Thor and Steve," she told him. "They'll get them out."

"Gabe and Rafe," Chuck said. "Dell 'Angelo. A pair of angels?"

"Chuck—"

"Don't worry," Chuck said. "I didn't hear a thing. We'll get them out. Now go! The fewer people in your van, the less suspicious you'll look at the roadblocks."

"Roadblocks?"

"Yeah. This isn't any ordinary bust. The 'danes are out in force. They're looking for something. This isn't just the cops, the Air Force is in it."

Again she traded looks with Bob.

"But I still don't know how the Air Force knew where to look," Umber said. "Hey, get going! Now. And get the badge off, Bob!"

The Rotsler cartoon badge. Bob dropped it in a pocket. "Don't have it on you," Chuck said.

Sherrine said, "How will we find our friends?"

"I said don't worry," Chuck told her. "I've got it all scoped out. Always map escape routes first thing. Head for River Road just south of the big curve near the Bell Museum. Your friends will meet you there."

"Can you get them out in time?"

Chuck grinned. "Did I ever fail to get Hocus out on time? Then I won't fail to get this issue out, either."

She climbed into the passenger seat and Chuck slammed the door on her. Bob started the van and they pulled out of the parking apron. "Sherrine, where's your badge?"

"My—? Back at the apartment."

"Good thing," Bob said. He pulled on the radio panel. It opened, and he dropped his badge into the cluttered cavity.

SHERRINE HARTLEY, her badge said, and the little William Rotsler figure looked fondly up at the letters, thinking, "Infatuation Object." It wasn't hidden in her apartment. She'd thought it too dangerous. She'd thrown it away.

The chlorine buckets in back rolled and thumped.

Sherrine twisted in her seat and looked out the back window at Chuck. He was already running back toward the Tre-house. She straightened and stare through the windshield. Her hands were clenched in her lap.

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"Nothing," she said. She was thinking of all the times her issue of Hocus had come late.

* * *

The Tre-house was in confusion. Fans grasping duffel bags and knapsacks scampered up one corridor and down another. Tremont J. Fielding stood in the tiled foyer giving directions, dividing the flow of fannish refugees so that they did not bottleneck at any one exit. He wore a long, flowing cape—his trademark—and indicated one corridor or another with his malacca walking stick. Wolfson was at the far end of the west hallway, near the carport entrance, hustling them along. Some of the fans were still in their hall costumes: elves, warriors, ancient gods, aliens and spacemen.

3MJ allowed himself a moment to appreciate Pat Davis's mermaid. The tail was split so she could walk. She seemed to swim along the corridor. Much skin was showing, and much more implied. Her fine blond hair bobbed and waved almost as if she were underwater.

Priorities. Who had to run, who could stay? The nature people were safe. The Greens didn't hate them, except for their association with technophiles. The kids were all right, too young to worry the cops. Students would get lectures, maybe some remedial reading on Ecodisasters, but students could get away with a lot.

People with mundane jobs were in trouble. Get them out first, since even if they weren't arrested, they could lose their jobs. And the pros. Most of them had judgments hanging over their heads. They could be sentenced to "community service" for not paying their debts.

Wolfson raised a circled thumb and forefinger. Good. All the pros were hidden in the vaults below. So far no one had ever found those. Of course, there's a first time for anything.

OK. The people are safe. Now our treasures. Most of the high tech posters were already gone, leaving the paintings of wizards and elves and witches and fairies. Over there! A medal, stamped in aluminum from the original Apollo 11 capsule and given to people who had worked on the program! Priceless. He plucked it and put it in his pocket. None of this stuff was worth dying for, but this—The bell rang insistently. 3MJ took a deep breath and opened it.

There were at least a dozen cops, eight blues and several greens. Behind them was a squad of Air Police at parade rest, and behind them were more airmen with rifles. An Air Force captain was pointing to a group of students who had run away. "Catch them and check their ID. You know what we're looking for." The sergeant nodded grimly and led four men at double time.

Tremont pretended not to notice the Air Force and Greens and turned to the leader of the local police. "Yes, Officer?" he said politely. The name badge read Sergeant Pyle.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. Are you the householder?"

Tremont smiled grimly. "You know who I am, Sergeant. Yes, I'm Tremont Fielding."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Fielding, we're serving a complaint."

He pulled a warrant from his jacket pocket and handed it over. "Public nuisance. One of your neighbors complained about the noise from the party."

Tremont studied the warrant. "I see. Yes, this is all in order. But, Sergeant, I know the noise wasn't loud enough to disturb my neighbors."

Pyle exchanged looks with his Green partner, a Sergeant Zaftig. ' And how do you 'know' that, sir?" asked Zaftig.

3MJ spread his hands guilelessly. "I throw a great many parties, officer. Charity affairs. All those bodies, it's an easy way to warm the house. As you know, I'm a firm supporter of the Patrolman's Benevolent Association. Hope you liked the party last month—"

"Yes, sir." Pyle frowned. "So?"

"Like everyone else, I am concerned about pollution; especially noise pollution from my many affairs. So the edge of my property is ringed with sound meters that record the noise levels. I checked them earlier tonight, and the decibel readings have been no higher than normal background noise. Certainly not as high as they were during the PBA benefit last month."

"Sound meters," said Zaftig. The Green looked triumphant.

"Yes. I rent them from the EPA through the local Nader franchise. I have them calibrated there every two months." He turned to Pyle. "I'll be glad to apologize to any neighbor who has been offended, but really, any disturbance must have come from somewhere else. Is there anything else, Sergeant?"

Pyle sighed. "Yes, sir—" He fished in his uniform pocket and pulled out a second warrant and unfolded it carefully, then held it out for Tremont to read. "All right, then. Suspicion of harboring dangerous fugitives."

"Fugitives. May I ask who these fugitives are?"

"Read it."

Tremont adjusted his glasses. He took hold of the warrant in one hand but the policeman refused to relinquish it. Tremont raised an eyebrow, Spock-fashion.

"Sorry, Mr. Fielding," Pyle muttered. "I've got to show it to you, but I can't let you have it."

"I see." Tremont took his time reading the warrant. The longer he stalled, the better for everyone. "There's nothing about who the fugitives are."

"Classified."

"Oh. And the space for the judge's signature is blank," he observed. "Just an X."

"The judge's name is classified, too." Zaftig looked triumphant. "The mark on the warrant is witnessed," the Green sergeant said, "and the signature is on file at the courthouse."

"I knew we had literacy problems—"

Pyle looked uncomfortable. "There's precedent," he explained.

Tremont nodded. "The Steve Jackson affair. Yes, I understand." Jackson's game company had been seized by the Secret Service under just such an unsigned warrant. His computers, modems, files. Even his printers. Suspicion of hacking. And private ownership of unregistered modems had been legal back then.

"Move aside," Zaftig said. "We'll be searching this place."

Pyle looked at him. "He knows that."

Tremont knew he had stalled long enough. He stepped away from the door. "Very well, Officers. But please be careful. As you know, I have a number of valuable and fragile objects d'art about the house."

Zaftig smirked. "Yeah. I heard."

Tremont sighed and resigned himself. There would certainly be vandalism and pilferage. It was grand larceny that worried him. Fortunately, most of the things he considered valuable would be thought trash by the Greens.

The Greens never had liked him, but then they didn't like anybody; they reserved their affection for animals and birds and plants, constituencies that couldn't vote them out of office. They'd steal what they could, and destroy other stuff on general principles. The local police would try not to cause much damage unless they found something truly criminal going on. Tremont J. Fielding had worked for years to raise his standing in the community. His charity balls and fund-raisers helped a lot. Still, he was a known technophile. So were some of the police. But not the Greens, and they had seized control of much of the bureaucracy.

It was the Air Force that worried him. Why were they here? Just who were these fugitives they wanted? He had a pretty good guess. The dell 'Angelo brothers. Wheel chairs, neofans made into instant guests: it had to be them. What were they wanted for? He edged closer to the Air Force people.

It was clear that they were really in charge. They'd let the local cops speak for them, but when it came to giving orders—The Air Force captain stepped forward.

The name tag said ARTERIA. The officer was tall, thin, with long muscles. The helmet strap was buckled, hiding part of the face. The hands were gloved. The grips on the holstered pistol had been customized, and the weapon seemed well worn.

Arteria faced the troops. "We'll conduct this search systematically." The voice was a slightly fruity contralto. "Start on the third floor and work your way down. Remember what the description flyer says: 'spectrally tall supermen.' So be careful." Arteria handed out sketches which Tremont recognized from the television broadcast the night before. "And remember, the Government wants them intact and unharmed."

Spacemen. Dell 'Angelo. Angels. Of course. For a moment Tremont felt hurt that the Con Committee hadn't told him. What difference would it have made? They were welcome here, whatever the cost.

The soldiers clattered up the stairs and fanned down the three wings. Tremont could hear them stamping about overhead. He sighed, but did not leave the foyer. The head cops—Air Force blue, darker police blue, and green—huddled together and argued in fierce whispers. Tremont shook his head as he watched them. Probably arguing about jurisdiction. He could not overhear and did not want to appear nosy.

Wolfson approached and, tugging at his sleeve, drew him aside. Tremont bowed his head so Wolfson could whisper into his ear. "They're all gone or in the hideaway, except, for the Lunarians and the two neos in the wheelchairs. There wasn't enough room down below."

Tremont raised his head and blinked rapidly. "Oh, dear." The Angels! And no one had known to put them below first.

"Shew and Curtis volunteered to give up their slots in the vault; but, hell, Tremont, those guys are published. The cops have their names and pictures on their list."

Tremont touched his arm. "Don't worry. Tell the Lunarians to execute Plan Two. They'll know what to do. Chuck Umber laid it all out before he left."

Wolfson licked his lips. He watched the police barking into their wrist coms. "All right," he said. "I won't worry."

* * *

When they hauled out the Pierson's puppeteer skeleton, Tremont kept his face stoically composed; but inwardly his heart cracked as he wondered what he would say to Will Waxman. The puppeteer was his prize possession. Tremont pulled his cape closed and changed his grip on his walking stick. Will knew the risks involved in attending a con. He would buy Doc a drink the next time their paths crossed and they would both shake their heads over their losses.

"Look at that crap," said one of the cops, pointing to the puppeteer.

And that really was too much. He turned to the policeman. "Crap, sir? Crap? Do you comprehend the creativity and art that went into the fashioning of that artifact? An anatomically correct and self-consistent realization of an imaginary beast." Careful, he told himself. It's a Monster, not an Alien. Fantasy was still marginally acceptable; but just barely so. He hoped the policeman would not read the provenance plaque. Maybe Will had managed to pocket it.

"Art," the cop grunted. "I don't see no NEA sticker."

"It was made before—before NEA approval was necessary. Even today not all art is government subsidized." And the National Endowment for the Arts had never given a grant to fantasy or science fiction art.

"Some of the stuff you got here glorifies technology," the Green cop insisted. As if Tremont did not already know it. "You don't want to glorify technology, do you?"

"Maybe he needs some education," another Green said. "Community service."

"Mr. Fielding is all right," a policeman said. "Good law and order man. Come on, lay off."

And I should leave it at that—He couldn't. "Do you dislike all technology? Such as the technology that made the cloth for your uniforms, or developed the electric cars you drove here?"

The Green looked surprised. "That's appropriate technology," he said.

* * *

The foyer was empty again, except for the three head cops, when the Lunarians made their move. Most of the searchers were still scattered across the two upper floors, but Arteria and the two sergeants stood in a cluster at the foot of the grand staircase taking reports from their squads over their wrist coms. Those, too, were "appropriate." As were the guns they carried.

The rumble of casters caught their attention, and they turned just as Hal Blandings and three other Lunarians emerged from the north wing pushing a handcart with a large cardboard box on it. They headed straight across the—foyer toward the front door. Tremont was stunned. The sheer audacity of it! Lunarian fanatic always inspired a certain amount of awe among the more circumspect folk. But this . . . He realized that his fingers were crossed and quickly uncrossed them. When he saw the tip of the snorkel protruding from the styrofoam, he held his breath. Did they have both Angels in there?

The three cops stared for a moment, then Zaftig shouted. "Hey, you four!"

The Lunarians halted just at the front door. Zaftig grabbed Hal by the arm. "Got you, you technomaniac." He pointed at the cardboard box. "That there's styrofoam," he announced. "You know better than that. Wasting valuable resources." He grinned. "Or maybe you don't know better. You will, though."

"Sergeant Zaftig," said Arteria, "that is not why we are here." The Green turned to the Air Force captain. "You stay out of this, Captain. Environmental laws are my jurisdiction. Anyplace, anytime." He faced Blandings. "What've you got to say for yourself, techie?"

The west hallway door opened on cue. Pat Davis emerged into the foyer crossed to the east hallway. Since she was still wearing her mermaid costume, every male eye in the foyer followed her progress—except Zaftig, who was reading the Lunarians their rights, and Arteria, who evidently did not care for that sort of thing. Pyle took after her.

"Sergeant Pyle!" Arteria snapped.

Pyle muttered something about the Helms Law and kept going. Tremont smiled thinly. Enforcing the obscenity statutes was tricky business. The courts had imposed intricate guidelines. Pyle would no doubt have to study the costume for a considerable time and from many angles before he could decide what to do.

Meanwhile, back at the front door, one of the Lunarians was showing Zaftig a certificate proclaiming that the styrofoam in the box was 100 percent recycled material. So was the box. "Recycling! It's important! The paper they use in some of those fast-food places, that's from trees! They cut down trees for that! And we can recycle styrofoam. You know how much energy it takes to recycle styrofoam? Not much. But trees, it takes a long time to grow trees! Owls roost in trees! Trees are important. Sergeant, aren't

you for ecology?"

The tip of the snorkel sank deeper into the chips.

Zaftig sprang. "There's someone hiding in this box."

Arteria stiffened and looked at Tremont. "Smuggling out a fugitive, are you? That was a pretty clumsy maneuver."

The way the AP captain said it, it sounded almost like a rebuke and Tremont wanted to apologize. We didn't have time to be particularly clever. Arteria walked to the carton just as Zaftig grabbed the end of the snorkel.

Wolfson tapped his arm and pointed silently to the top of the staircase. Tremont looked and saw Anthony Horowitz tiptoeing down. He scowled. If there was no room in the cellars for Harry and Jenny, there sure wasn't for a neopro like Horowitz. He'd been left to take his chances—but Tony might just make it. He must have evaded the AP's on the second floor. The two cops in the foyer had their backs to the stairs and the west wing.

Harry and Jenny. Where were they? Jenny was sure the police were after her. She never quite said what for. Tremont didn't know about Harry. No room for them in the hiding holes, and their bike wouldn't start. They'd gone toward the kitchen . . .

Horowitz made it to the bottom of the stairs. No one had noticed. He'd never have a better chance. Tremont shook his head. It was a helluva con. Better than Nycon I.

Zaftig yanked on the snorkel and its wearer emerged dripping plastic chips, a fish hoisted from the styrofoamy sea. The burly bushy-haired Seth looked around the foyer, wide-eyed. He took the snorkel from his mouth. "Is the book auction over already?"

Zaftig grabbed him by the wrist. "Is this one of them?" he asked Arteria.

The AP captain scowled. "Does this look like a 'spectrally thin superman' to you?" A grunt of disgust, but before Arteria could turn away, Horowitz had blocked the way.

Horowitz stuck out his hand. "Hi, do you do interviews? I'm Tony Horowitz. I'm an up-and-coming pro science fiction writer. I've got several books out already, but I need to boost my circulation."

"A sci-fi pro?" said Zaftig. He grinned. "I think your circulation just dropped to zero. His eyes dropped then, and the grin went away.

Horowitz smiled beatifically. "Yes, but think of the notoriety. Jailed writers always sell more."

Zaftig's eyes were locked on Horowitz's badge. A sly and dissolute cartoon face, and HAVE SEX OUTSIDE MY SPECIES. The cop was unlikely to recognize a literary reference and if he took it at face value . . . the law wouldn't permit him to take it into consideration.

With visible effort Zaftig wrenched his eyes off the badge. "You ain't no writer. You do sci-fi."

"We'll let The New York Times decide."

Jenny and Harry came in from the kitchen. Jenny had found the maid's uniform. When Tremont's wife was still alive he'd employed a housekeeper who liked wearing uniforms because that way Tremont paid for her work clothes. Now Jenny was wearing it, a conventional black and white pinafore that looked ridiculous on someone of Jenny's age and bearing. She'd even put on the silly bonnet.

Harry was wearing his own clothes, except they were dirtier and more torn than Tremont remembered.

"I'm sorry, sir," Jenny said. "I'd let this poor man out the back door, but the soldiers won't let me. Here, it's this way—" She led Harry toward the front door.

"Where the hell are you going?" one of the soldiers demanded. "Who is this dude?"

"He's homeless," Jenny said. "I gave him a hot meal."

"A bum, you mean," the corporal said.

"Homeless! Are you a monster?" Jenny demanded. She turned to Arteria. "Sir, how can you let your men talk that way? I think there are laws. Don't the racism laws cover this? They can't say such things—"

Pyle was off chasing mermaids. Arteria was buttonholed by Horowitz. Jenny was screaming at the Greens. Zaftig was encumbered with Seth and the Lunarians. Everyone was shouting at the top of their voices—and everyone but Tremont had their backs to the foyer. The north wing door opened, and two wheelchairs rolled swiftly and silently down the ramp. Thor and Fang pushed them into the west wing.

Toward the carport.

3MJ saluted with his walking stick. Fang waved back and vanished out the door with the others. Then Tremont swung his stick up and rested it jauntingly across his shoulder. He turned a military about-face and watched the ruckus by the door. He smiled at the back of Arteria's head. We had just enough time to be just clever enough.

* * *

Sherrine rolled down the passenger window of the van and looked behind, up River Road. From where the van was parked she could see the Bell Museum of Natural History. The University buildings lined the left side of the road, while the Mississippi—this far upstream, a human-scale river—curved past on the right in a gentle crescent. Directly upstream, she could see St. Anthony Falls. University students, bundled against the chill, stood in knots along the roadside laughing and talking and swigging beer. Ice patches glistened in the afternoon sun.

"Roll the window up," said Bob. "You're wasting heat."

"I don't see them yet." She faced forward and rolled the window back up. Crossing her arms over her

chest, she stuck her hands under her armpits. Bob had turned the motor off; there was no heat. "It's not that cold, anyway," she said.

"Cold enough."

"Where I was, it was so cold our breath turned colors." She cocked her head and watched the side mirror. No one. The students were waiting for something, but what? Not the Angels, surely.

"Sherrine, someone had to stay with the van. We thought it would just be a short run on and off the Ice. So—"

"You don't have to make excuses."

"I'm not making excuses, dammit!"

"What if they can't find us?"

He paused and groped for the conversational tennis ball. "They'll find us. Chuck arranged everything."

She turned and looked at him. "And who is Chuck Umber that we should put our faith in him?"

Bob draped one arm across the steering wheel and half turned in the seat. "What's bothering you, Sherrine?"

"Nothing. I just don't know if this fanatic is going to come off."

"You don't like running off and leaving the Angels behind."

"I noticed you jumped into the van mighty quick." But it wasn't that way at all, she remembered. Not at all. Chuck had come running out with the news and her first thoughts had been for herself; and for her job; and that she mustn't be found here, among fans. It was Bob who had asked about the Angels, when she was already halfway into the passenger's seat. And now . . . What if she'd lost them? What if she'd lost them?

Bob shrugged. "I trust Chuck. It's that convoluted, intricate mind of his. He knew there wouldn't be time to find Alex and Gordon and load them and their wheelchairs in the van and leave before the police arrived. It was a near thing as it was. The roadblock on University Avenue would have had them." He shook his head and looked stubborn. "No, we could not and should not have taken them with us. Chuck has something else in mind. Something to disguise the Angels' feeble condition in a way the police won't question."

"It's not that. It's . . ."

"What?"

She closed up. "Never mind." But it doesn't matter what I could have done or should have done. It's what I didn't even think of doing. Damn it all, when Bob had called that night, she should have stayed in bed.

Like those students coming down River Road.

She blinked and hunched forward, staring into the side-view mirror. What the hell? She cranked down the window once more.

"What is it?" asked Bob.

"Look behind us." She popped the passenger door and jumped out. The students who had been waiting along the roadside were lined up now, cheering and clapping. Some of them were waving pennants with gophers and Greek letters on them. Farther up the road she saw a fleet of beds, a flotilla of four-posters and brass rails weaving toward her, white sheets flapping like spinnakers.

She went to the rear of the van for a better view. Bob joined her there. "It's a bed race," he said.

The student crowd was growing thicker. Spectators were running alongside the street to keep abreast of the racers. They were yelling and shouting encouragement. She could see now that each bed had a passenger and was being pushed by a crew of three. Did that make them triremes, she wondered? The bedsheets flaunted more Greek letters than a math convention.

"It must be a fraternity event," Bob decided.

"Why, Holmes, how clever of you!"

"Alimentary, my dear Watson. I had a gut feeling."

She stamped her feet. How would the Angels find them in this crowd, local guide or no local guide? Chuck was from the Bay Area, he wouldn't have known about this. So, should she go looking for them or should she stay put?

One of the beds hit an icy spot and skidded, forcing the bed next to it to swerve. The other racers shouted epithets and laughed as they sprinted by. Sherrine imagined the beds cartwheeling and bursting into flame like stock cars going out of control. Then she realized that the two stray beds were headed straight toward her. The students around her parted and fled.

"Hey!" She grabbed Bob by the sleeve and yanked him aside. They tumbled to the frosted grass together, rolling tipsy-topsy in a snarl of arms and legs, and Bob naturally contrived to wind up on top. There was a crash of metal and a few shouts. Plastic crunched and Bob leapt up, leaving her prone.

"That's my van!" he cried. "They smashed the tail light!"

"Thanks for helping me up, Bob," she said.

"What? Oh. Sorry." He hoisted her to her feet and watched while she brushed herself off. "I always said I wanted to die jumping into bed with you; but this wasn't quite what I had in mind. Damn, that light's broken. Hey, you bloody vandals!"

She laughed. When he gave her a look, she said, "I'm sorry. A hit-and-run accident with a brass bed? What'll your insurance company say?"

The race had passed by, with most of the spectators; but the two wrecked beds and their crews remained. They were hunched over the beds, tending to the occupants. "All right," Bob said to them, "what do you think you're up to?"

One of them turned around. It was Bruce. "We think we're making a getaway. What do you think?"

Sherrine's knees almost gave way. Alex grinned up from his place in one of the beds. "Hi, pretty girl," he said. "Is that the way fraternity kids talk?"

"We are all droogs here," Gordon said.

"Yep," Mike said. "We didn't have enough money to bribe the cops. But droogs will get you through times of no money much better than money will get you through . . ."

They loaded the Angels into the van. "I was sure they'd caught you," Sherrine said.

"Not a chance," said Bruce. "Chuck had it all scoped out. I don't know how he knew about the race—"

"Fans are everywhere," Crazy Eddie said. "Actually, it was fun. How'd you guys like the race?"

Gordon smiled weakly. "I wish I was back in the scoopship, where it is safer."

Alex grimaced. "We crashed that one, too, remember?"

Gordon's smile flickered. "Third time lucky?"

"Come on," said Bruce. "Thor, Steve, Mike. Help me load them into the van before someone comes back to find out what's going on."

"You should have seen it," said Thor, as he and Mike lifted Gordon into the side door. Fang and Eddie were inside, helping. "It was the slickest fanac you'd ever hope to see. Dick Wolfson and 3MJ orchestrated it like a goddam ballet. With a little help from the Lunarians and Tony Horowitz and Jenny."

Mike chuckled as he helped Alex into the van. "It's like 3MJ always says. "You've got to use your Imagi-Nation.!"

Bruce nodded. "Or like Wallace Stevens wrote. 'In the world of words the imagination is one of the forces of nature.'"

Fang and Eddie hopped out of the van. "All secure," said Fang. "We figure to stay here and dismantle the beds. Shlep the stuff back to the frat house. You guys can put the Angels up for the night. Tomorrow we'll head for Chi-town."

Bob shook his head. "Whatever. You know you could have hurt Sherri and me, ramming into the van eke that."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Didn't you see us coming?"

"Not until you were headed right for us."

"No. You mean you didn't read the frat logo on our sail?"

Bob's eyes went round in horror, even as he whipped around toward the beds.

Mike grabbed the edge of a sheet. He flapped it ("Olé!") and the breeze lifted it from the bed and spread it out like a flag. Sherrine read the letters and laughed. Of course, she should have known. Who else would belong to the Psi Phi fraternity?

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