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LAST OF THE WILD ONES

By Roger Zelazny

Spinning through the dream of time and dust they came, beneath a lake-cold, lake-blue, lake-deep sky, the sun a crashed and burning wreck above the western mountains; the wind a whipper of turning sand devils, chill turquoise wind out of the west, taking wind. They ran on bald tires, they listed on broken springs, their bodies creased, paint faded, windows cracked, exhaust tails black and gray and white, streaming behind them into the northern quarter whence they had been driven this day. And now the pursuing line of vehicles, fingers of fire curving, hooking, above, before them. And they came, stragglers and breakdowns being blasted from bloom to wilt, flash to smolder, ignored by their fleeing fellows

Murdock lay upon his belly atop the ridge, regarding the advancing herd through powerful field glasses. In the arroyo to his rear, the Angel of Death--all cream and chrome and bulletproof glass, sporting a laser cannon and two bands of armor-piercing rockets--stood like an exiled mirage glistening in the sun, vibrating, tugging against reality.

It was a country of hills, long ridges, deep canyons toward which they were being driven. Soon they would be faced with a choice. They could pass into the canyon below or enter the one farther to the east. They could also split and take both passages. The results would be the same. Other armed observers were mounted atop other ridges, waiting.

As he watched to see what the choice would be, Murdock's mind roamed back over the previous fifteen years, since the destruction of the Devil Car at the graveyard of the autos. He had, for twenty-five years, devoted his life to the pursuit of the wild ones. In that time he had become the world's foremost authority on the car herds--their habitats, their psychology, their means of maintenance and fueling--learning virtually everything concerning their ways, save for the precise nature of the initial flaw that one fatal year, which had led to the aberrant radio communicable program that spread like a virus among the computerized vehicles. Some, but not all, were susceptible to it, tightening the disease analogy by another twist of the wrench. And some recovered, to be found returned to the garage or parked before the house one morning, battered but back in service, reluctant to recite their doings of days past. For the wild ones killed and raided, turning service stations into fortresses, dealerships into armed camps. The black Caddy had even borne within it the remains of the driver it had monoed long ago.

Murdock could feel the vibrations beneath him. He lowered the glasses, no longer needing them, and stared through the blue wind. After a few moments more he could hear the sound, as well as feel it--over a thousand engines roaring, gears grinding, sounds of scraping and crashing--as the last wild herd rushed to its doom. For a quarter of a century he had sought this day, ever since his brother's death had set him upon the trail. How many cars had he used up? He could no longer remember. And now...

He recalled his days of tracking, stalking, observing, and recording. The patience, the self-control it had required, exercising restraint when what he most desired was the immediate destruction of his quarry. But there had been a benefit in the postponement--this day was the reward, in that it would see the passing of the last of them. Yet the things he remembered had left strange tracks upon the path he had traveled.

As he watched their advance, he recalled the fights for supremacy he had witnessed within the herds he had followed. Often the defeated car would withdraw after it was clear that it was beaten; grill smashed, trunk sprung, lights shattered, body crumpled and leaking. The new leader would then run in wide circles, horn blaring, signal of its victory, its mastery. The defeated one, denied repair from the herd supply, would sometimes trail after the pack, an outcast. Occasionally it would be taken back in if it located something worth raiding. More often, however, it wandered across the Plains, never to be seen mobile again. He had tracked one once, wondering whether it had made its way to some new graveyard of the autos. He was startled to see it suddenly appear atop a mesa, turn toward the face that rose above a deep gorge, grind its gears, rev its engine, and rush forward, to plunge over the edge, crashing, rolling, and burning below.

But he recalled one occasion when the winner would not settle for less than a total victory. The blue sedan had approached the beige one where it sat on a low hillock with four or five parked sports cars. Spinning its wheels, it blared its challenge at several hundred meters' distance, then turned, cutting through a half-circle, and began its approach. The beige began a series of similar maneuvers, wheeling and honking, circling as it answered the challenge. The sports cars hastily withdrew to the sidelines.

They circled each other as they drew nearer, the circle quickly growing smaller. Finally the beige struck, smashing into the blue vehicle's left front fender, both of them spinning and sliding, their engines racing. Then they were apart again, feinting-advancing a brief distance, braking, turning, backing, advancing.

The second engagement clipped off the blue vehicle's left rear taillight and tore loose its rear bumper. Yet it recovered rapidly, turned, and struck the beige broadside, partly caving it in. Immediately it backed off and struck again before the other had completely recovered. The beige tore loose, and spun away in reverse. It knew all the tricks, but the other kept rushing in, coming faster now, striking and withdrawing. Loud rattling noises were coming from the beige, but it continued its circling, its feinting, the sunlight through the risen dust giving it a burnished look, as of very old gold. Its next rush creased the right side of the blue vehicle. It sounded its horn as it pursued it and commenced an outward turn.

The blue car was already moving in that direction, however, gravel spewing from beneath its rear wheels, horn. blasting steadily. It leaped forward and again struck the beige upon the same side. As it backed off, the beige turned to flee, its horn suddenly silent.

The blue car hesitated only a moment, then sped after it, crashing into its rear end. The beige pulled away, leaking oil, doors rattling. But the blue car pursued it and struck again. It moved on, but the blue swerved, ran through a small arc, and hit it yet again upon the same side it had earlier. This time the beige was halted by the, blow, steam emerging from beneath its hood; this time, as the blue car drew back, it was unable to flee. Rushing forward, the blue struck it once more upon the badly damaged left side. The impact lifted it from the ground, turning it over onto the slope falling away sharply to its right. It rolled sideways, tumbling and bouncing, to be brought up with a crash upon its side. Moments later its fuel tank exploded. The blue car had halted, facing downhill. It ran up an antenna from which half a dozen spinning sensors unfurled, a fairy totem pole shimmering in the fume-filled air. After a time it retracted the sensors and withdrew the aerial. It gave one loud blare of the horn then and moved away to round up the sports cars.

Murdock remembered. He put his glasses in their case as the herd neared the turning point. He could distinguish individual members now, unassisted. They were a sorrylooking lot. Seeing them, he recalled the points of the best that he had come across over the years. When their supplies of parts had been larger, they had used their external manipulators to modify themselves into some magnificent and lethal forms. Kilo for kilo, the wild ones had become superior to anything turned out in the normal course of production.

All of the car scouts, of course, went armed, and in the early days a number of them had experimented. Coming upon a small herd, they would cut out a number of the better ones, blasting the rest. Disconnecting the think boxes, they would have their partners drive them back. But attempts at rehabilitation had been something less than successful. Even a complete wipe, followed by reprogramming, did not render the susceptible individuals immune to relapse. Murdock even recalled one that had

behaved normally for almost a year, until one day in the midst of a traffic jam it had monoed its driver and taken off for the hills. The only alternative was to discard the entire computational unit and replace it with a new one which was hardly worthwhile, since its value was far greater than that of the rest of the vehicle.

No, there had been no answer in that direction. Or any other but the course that he had followed; track and attack, the systematic destruction of the herds. Over the years his respect for the cunning and daring of the herd leaders had grown. As the wild ones had dwindled in number, their ferocity and guile had reached the level of legend. There had been nights, as he lay sleeping, that he dreamed of himself as a wild car, armed, racing across the Plains, leader of a herd. Then there was only one other car, a red one.

The herd began its turn. Murdock saw, with a sudden pang of regret, that it was heading into the far eastern canyon. He tugged at his white-streaked beard and cursed as he reached for his stick and began to rise. True, there would still be plenty of time to get over to the next canyon for the kill, but-

No! Some of them were splitting off, heading this way!

Smiling, he drew himself upright and limped rapidly down the hill to where the Angel of Death waited for him. He heard the exploding mines as he climbed into the vehicle. It's motor began to hum.

"There are a few in the next canyon," came the soft, well-modulated, masculine voice of his machine. "I have been monitoring all bands."

"I know," he answered, stowing his stick. "Let's head over that way. Some will make it through." Safety restraints snapped into place around him as they began to move.

"Wait!"

The white vehicle halted.

"What is it that you wish?"

"You are heading north."

"We must, to exit here and enter the next canyon with the others."

"There are some connecting side canyons to the south. Go that way. I want to beat the others in."

"There will be some risk involved."

Murdock laughed.

"I've lived with risk for a quarter of a century, waiting for this day. I want to be there first for the end. Go south!"

The car swung through a turn and headed southward.

As they cruised along the arroyo bottom's sand, Murdock asked, "Hear anything?"

"Yes," came the reply. "The sounds of those who were blasted by the mines, the cries of those who made it through."

"I knew some would make it! How many? What are they doing now?"

"They continue their flight southward. Perhaps several dozen. Perhaps many more. It is difficult to estimate from the transmissions."

Murdock chuckled.

"They've no way out. They'll have to turn sooner or later, and we'll be waiting."

"I am not certain that I could deal with a mass attack by that many-even if most lack special armaments."

"I know what I'm doing," Murdock said. "I've chosen the battleground."

He listened to the muffled thuds of the distant explosions.

"Prime the weapons systems," he announced. "Some of them could have located the sideway we'll be taking."

A twin band of yellow lights winked out on the dashboard and were replaced by a double row of green ones. Almost immediately these faded and were succeeded by two lines of steady, red points.

"Ready on rockets," came the voice of the Angel.

Murdock reached out and threw a switch.

A larger light had also come on-orange and pulsing faintly.

"Cannon ready."

Murdock threw a larger switch beside a pistol grip set in the dash below it.

"I'll keep this one on manual for now."

"Is that wise?"

Murdock did not answer. For a moment he watched the bands of red and yellow strata to his left, a veil of shadow being drawn slowly upward over them.

"Slow now. The sideway will be coming up shortly. It should be up there on the left."

His car began to slow.

"I believe that I detect it ahead."

"Not the next one. It's blind. There's one right after it, though. It goes through."

They continued to slow as they passed the mouth of the first opening to the left. It was dark and angled off sharply.

"I've become aware of the next one."

"Very slowly now. Blast anything that moves."

Murdock reached forward and took hold of the pistol grip.

Angel braked and made the turn, advancing into a narrow pass.

"Dim the ready lights. No transmissions of any sort. Keep it dark and quiet."

They moved through an alley of shadow, the distant explosions having become a pulsing more felt than heard now. Stony walls towered on either hand. Their way wound to the right and then to the left.

Another right-hand twisting, and there was a bit of brightness and a long line of sight.

"Stop about three meters before it opens out," Murdock said, not realizing until moments later that he had whispered.

They crept ahead and came to a halt.

"Keep the engine running."

"Yes."

Murdock leaned forward, peering into the larger canyon running at right angles to their own. Dust hung in the air-dark, murky below, sparkling higher above, where the sun's rays could still reach.

"They've already passed," he reflected "and soon they should realize they're in a box -a big one, but still a box. Then they'll turn and come back and we'll open up on them." Murdock looked to the left. "Good place right over there for some more of our people to lay up and wait for them. I'd

better get in touch and let them know. Use a fresh scrambler this time."

"How do you know they'll be coming back? Perhaps they'll lay up in there and make you come in after them."

"No," Murdock said. "I know them too well. They'll run for it."

"Are you sure there aren't any other sideways?"

"None going west. There may be a few heading east, but if they take them, they'll wind up in the other trap. Either way, they lose."

"What if some of those others cut down this way?"

"The more, the merrier. Get me that line. And see what you can pick up on the herd while I'm talking."

Shortly after that, he was in touch with the commander of the southern wing of the pursuers, requesting a squad of armed and armored vehicles to be laid up at the point he designated. He learned that they were already on their way to the western canyon in search of those vehicles observed entering there. The commander relayed Murdock's message to them and told him that they would be along in a matter of minutes. Murdock could still feel the shock waves from the many explosions in the eastern canyon.

"Good," he said, and he ended the transmission.

"They've reached the end," the Angel announced a little later, "and are circling. I hear their broadcasts. They are beginning to suspect that there is no way out."

Murdock smiled. He was looking to his left, where the first of the pursuing vehicles had just come into sight. He raised the microphone and began giving directions.

As he waited, he realized that at no time had he relaxed his hold on the pistol grip. He withdrew his hand, wiped his palm on his trousers, and returned it.

"They are coming now," the Angel said. "They have turned and are headed back this way."

Murdock turned his head to the right and waited. The destruction had been going on for nearly a month, and today's should be the last of it. He suddenly realized just how tired he was. A feeling of depression began to come over him. He stared at the small red lights and the larger, pulsing orange one.

"You will be able to see them in a moment."

"Can you tell how many there are?"

"Thirty-two. No, hold it . . . thirty-one. They are picking up speed. Their conversations indicate that they anticipate an interception."

"Did any come through from the eastern canyon?"

"Yes. There were several."

The sound of their engines came to him. Hidden there in the neck of the ravine, he saw the first of them -a dark sedan, dented and swaying, half of its roof and the nearest fender torn away-come around the canyon's bend. He held his fire as it approached, and soon the others followed-rattling, steaming, leaking, covered with dents and rust spots, windows broken, hoods missing, doors loose. A strange feeling came into his breast as he thought about the more magnificent specimens of the great herds he had followed over the years.

Still, he held his fire, even as the first in line drew abreast of him, and his thoughts went back to the black and shining Devil Car and to Jenny, the Scarlet Lady, with whom he had hunted it.

The first of the pack reached the place where the ambushers waited.

"Now?" the Angel asked, just as the first rocket flared off to the left.

" "

Yes.

They opened up and the destruction began, cars braking and swerving into one another, the canyon suddenly illuminated by half a dozen blazing wrecks-a dozen-two.

One after another, they were halted, burned. Three of the ambushers were destroyed by direct crashes. Murdock used all of his rockets and played the laser over the heaped remains. As the last wreck burst into flame, he knew that, though they weren't much compared with the great ones he had known, he would never forget how they had made their final run on bald tires, broken springs, leaking transmissions, and hate.

Suddenly he swiveled the laser and fired it back along the canyon.

"What is it?" the Angel asked him.

"There's another one back there. Don't you pick it up?"

"I'm checking now, but I don't detect anything."

"Go that way."

They moved forward and turned to the right. Immediately the radio crackled.

"Murdock, where are you going?" This came from one of the ambushers to the rear.

"I thought I saw something. I'm going ahead to check it out."

"I can't give you an escort till we clear some of these wrecks."

"That's all right."

"How many rockets have you got?"

He glanced again at the dash, where the only light that burned was orange and pulsing steadily.

"Enough."

"Why don't you wait?"

Murdock chuckled. "Do you really think any of those clunkers could touch something like the Angel? I won't be long."

They moved toward the bend and turned. The last of the sunlight was striking the highest points of the eastern rim overhead.

Nothing.

"Picking anything up?" he asked.

"No. Do you want a light?"

.. " No.

Farther to the east the sounds of firing were diminishing. The Angel slowed as they neared a wide slice of darkness to the left.

"This ravine may go through. Do we turn here or continue on?"

"Can you detect anything within it?"

"No."

"Then keep going."

His hand still upon the grip, Murdock moved the big gun slightly with each turn that they took, covering the most likely areas of opposition rather than the point directly ahead.

"This is no good," he finally announced. "I've got to have a light. Give me the overhead spot."

Instantly the prospect before him was brightly illuminated: dark rocks, orange stands of stone, striped walls almost a coral seascape through waves of settling dust.

"I think somebody's been by here more recently than those we burned."

"Don't tired people sometimes see things that are not really there?"

Murdock sighed.

"Yes, and I am tired. That may be it. Take the next bend anyway."

They continued on, making the turn.

Murdock swiveled the weapon and triggered it, blasting rock and clay at the corner of the next turning.

"There!" he cried. "You must have picked that up!"

"No. I detected nothing."

"I can't be cracking up at this point! I saw it! Check your sensors. Something must be off." ,

"Negative. All detection systems report in good order."

Murdock slammed his fist against the dash.

"Keep going. Something's there."

The ground was churned before them. There were too many tracks to tell a simple tale.

"Slowly now," he said as they approached the next bend. "Could one of them have some kind of equipment or something to block you. I wonder. Or am I really seeing ghosts? I don't see how-"

"Gully to the left. Another to the right."

"Slower! Run the spotlight up them as we pass."

They moved by the first one, and Murdock turned the weapon to follow the light. There were two side passages going off the ravine before it turned.

"Could be something up there," he mused. "No way of telling without going in. Let's take a look at the next one."

They rolled on. The light turned again, and so did the gun. The second opening appeared to be too narrow to accommodate a car. It ran straight back without branching, and there was nothing unusual in sight anywhere within it.

Murdock sighed again.

"I don't know," he said, "but the end is just around the next bend -a big box of a canyon. Go straight on in. And be ready for evasive action."

The radio crackled.

"You all right?" came a voice from the ambush squad.

"Still checking," he said. "Nothing so far. Just a little more to see."

He broke it off.

"You didn't mention-"

"I know. Be ready to move very fast."

They entered the canyon, sweeping it with the light. It was an oval-shaped place, its major axis perhaps a hundred meters in length. Several large rocks lay near its center. There were a number

of dark openings about its periphery. The talus lay heavy at the foot of the walls.
"Go right. We'll circle it. Those rocks and the openings are the places to watch."
They were about a quarter of the way around when he heard the high, singing sound of another engine revving. Murdock turned his head and looked fifteen years into the past.
A low, red Swinger sedan had entered the canyon and was turning in his direction.
"Run!" he said. "She's armed! Get the rocks between us!"
"Who? Where?"
Murdock snapped the control switch to manual, seized the wheel, and stepped on the gas. The Angel leaped ahead, turning, as fifty-caliber machine guns blazed beneath the darkened headlights of the other vehicle.
"Now do you see it?" he asked as the rear window was starred and he felt the thudding impact of hits somewhere toward the back of the vehicle.
"Not entirely. There is some sort of screen, but I can estimate based on that. Give me back the controls."
"No. Estimates aren't good enough with her," Murdock replied, turning sharply to place the rocks between himself and the other.
The red car came fast, however, though it had stopped firing as he entered the turn.
The radio crackled. Then a voice he had thought he would never hear again came over it: "That's you, isn't it, Sam? I heard you back there. And that's the sort of car the Arch engineer of Geeyem would have built you for something like this-tough and smart and fast." The voice was low, feminine, deadly. "He would not have anticipated this encounter, however. I can jam almost all the sensors without its knowing it."
"Jenny . . ." he said as he held the pedal to the floor and continued the turn.
"Never thought you'd see me again, did you?"
"I've always wondered. Ever since the day you disappeared. But it's been so long."
"And you've spent the entire time hunting us. You had your revenge that day, but you kept right on-destroying."
"Considering the alternative, I had no choice."
He passed his starting point and commenced a second lap, realizing as he began to draw away that she must no longer be as finely tuned as when he had known her earlier. Unless-
An explosion occurred some distance ahead of him. He was pelted with gravel, and he swerved to avoid the fresh crater before him.
"Still have some of those grenades left," he said. "Hard to estimate when to drop them, though, isn't it?"
They were on opposite sides of the rocks now. There was no way she could get a clear shot at him with her guns. Nor he at her, with the cannon.
"I'm in no hurry, Sam."
"What is it?" he heard the Angel ask.
"It speaks!" she cried. "Finally! Do you want to tell him, Sam? Or should I?"
"I'd a feeling it was her, back there," Murdock began, "and I'd long had a feeling that we would meet again. Jenny was the first killer car I had built to hunt the wild ones."
"And the best," she added.
"But she went wild herself," he finished.
"How's about you trying it, Whitey?" she said. "Leak carbon monoxide into the air vents. He'll still look live enough to get you out of here. You answer any calls that come in. Tell them he's resting. Tell them you didn't find anything. Slip away later and come back here. I'll wait, I'll show you the ropes."
"Cut it out, Jenny," Murdock said, circling again, beginning to gain on her. "I'll have you in my sights in a minute. We haven't that much time to talk."
"And nothing, really, to talk about," she responded.
"How about this? You were the best car I ever had. Surrender. Fire off your ammo. Drop the grenades. Come back with me. I don't want to blast you."
"Just a quick lobotomy, eh?"
Another explosion occurred, this one behind him. He continued to gain on her.
"It's that virus program," he said. "Jenny, you're the last-the last wild one. You've nothing to gain."
"Or to lose," she responded quietly.
The next explosion was almost beside him. The Angel rocked but did not slow. Gripping the wheel with one hand, Murdock reached out and took hold of the pistol grip.

"She's stopped jamming my sensors," the Angel announced.

"Maybe she's burned out that system," Murdock said, turning the gun.

He sped around the rocks, avoiding the new craters, the light beam bouncing, sweeping, casting the high, craggy walls into a rapid succession of dreamlike images, slowly closing the distance between himself and Jenny. Another grenade went off behind him. Finally the moment of a clear shot emerged from the risen dust. He squeezed the trigger.

The beam fell wide, scoring the canyon side, producing a minor rockslide.

"That was a warning," he said. "Drop the grenades. Discharge the guns. Come back with me. It's your last chance."

"Only one of us will be going away from here, Sam," she answered.

He swung the gun and fired again as he swept along another turn, but a pothole he struck threw the beam high, fusing a section of sandy slope.

"A useful piece, that," she commented. "Too bad you didn't give me one."

"They came later."

"It is unfortunate that you cannot trust your vehicle and must rely upon your own driving skills. Your car would not have missed that last shot."

"Maybe," Murdock said, skidding through another turn.

Suddenly two more grenades exploded between them, and rocks rattled against the Angel. Both windows on the right side were fractured. He skidded sideways, his vision obscured by the flash and the airborne matter.

Both hands on the wheel now, he fought for control, braking hard. Passing through the screen of detritus, slowing and turning, he caught sight of Jenny racing full bore toward the pass that led out of the canyon.

He stepped on the gas again and followed after. She passed through and was gone before he could reach for the weapon.

"Return to automatic, and you will be free for the fighting," the Angel said.

"Can't do that," Murdock replied, racing toward the pass. "She could jam you again then at any time-and get us both."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Yes, the risk."

The red car was not in sight when he came through into the pass.

"Well?" he said. "What do your sensors read?"

"She entered the gully on the right. There is a heat trail."

Murdock continued to slow as he moved in that direction.

"That must be where she was hiding when we came by," he said. "It could be some kind of trap."

"Perhaps you had better call for the others, cover the entrance, and wait."

"No!"

Murdock turned his wheel and sent his light along the passageway. She was nowhere in sight, but there were sideways. He continued to creep forward, entering. His right hand was again on the pistol grip.

He passed these side openings, each of them large enough to hide a car, all of them empty.

He followed a bend, bearing him to the right. Before he had moved an entire car length along it, a burst of gunfire from the left, ahead, caused him to slam on the brakes and turn the cannon. But an engine roared to life before he could take aim, and a red streak crossed his path to vanish up another sideway. He hit the gas again and followed.

Jenny was out of sight, but he could hear the sound of her somewhere ahead. The way widened as he advanced. Finally it forked at a large stand of stone, one arm continuing past it, the other bearing off sharply to the left. He slowed, taking time to consider the alternatives.

"Where's the heat trail go?" he asked.

"Both ways. I don't understand."

Then the red car came swinging into sight from the left, guns firing. The Angel shook as they were hit. Murdock triggered the laser, but she swept past him, turning and speeding off to the right.

"She circled it before we arrived, to confuse your sensors, to slow us."

"It worked, too," he added, moving ahead again. "She's too damned smart."

"We can still go back."

Murdock did not reply.

Twice more Jenny lay in wait, fired short bursts, evaded the singeing beam, and disappeared. An intermittent knocking sound began beneath the hood as they moved, and one telltale on the dash indicated signs of overheating.

"It is not serious," the Angel stated. "I can control it."

"Let me know if there is any change."

"Yes."

Following the heat trail, they bore steadily to the left, racing down a widening sand slope past castles, minarets, and cathedrals of stone, dark or pale, striped and spotted with mica like the first raindrops of a midsummer's storm. They hit the bottom, slid sideways, and came to a stop, wheels spinning.

He threw the light around rapidly, causing grotesque shadows to jerk like marionettes in a ring dance about them.

"It's a wash. Lots of loose sand. But I don't see Jenny."

Murdock ground the gears, rocking the vehicle, but they did not come free.

"Give me control," said the Angel. "I've a program for this."

Murdock threw the switch. At once a fresh series of rocking movements began. This continued for a full minute. Then the heat telltale began to flicker again.

"So much for the program. Looks as if I'm going to have to get out and push," Murdock said.

"No. Call for help. Stay put. We can hold her off with the cannon if she returns."

"I can get back inside pretty quick. We've got to get moving again."

As he reached for the door, he heard the lock click.

"Release it," he said. "I'll just shut you off, go out, and turn you on again from there. You're wasting time."

"I think you are making a mistake."

"Then let's hurry and make it a short one."

"All right. Leave the door open." There followed another click. "I will feel the pressure when you begin pushing. I will probably throw a lot of sand on you."

"I've got a scarf."

Murdock climbed out and limped toward the rear of the vehicle. He wound his scarf up around his mouth and nose. Leaning forward, he placed his hands upon the car and began to push. The engine roared and the wheels spun as he threw his weight against it.

Then, from the corner of his eye, to the right, he detected a movement. He turned his head only slightly and continued pushing the Angel of Death.

Jenny was there. She had crept up slowly into a shadowy place beneath a ledge, turning, facing him, her guns directly upon him. She must have circled. Now she was halted.

It seemed useless to try running. She could open up upon him anytime that she chose.

He leaned back, resting for a moment, pulling himself together. Then he moved to his left, leaned forward, began pushing again. For some reason she was waiting. He could not determine why, but he sidled to the left. He moved his left hand, then his right. He shifted his weight, moved his feet again, fighting a powerful impulse to look in her direction once again. He was near the left taillight. Now there might be a chance. Two quick steps would place the body of the Angel between them. Then he could rush forward and dive back in. But why wasn't she firing?

No matter. He had to try. He eased up again. The feigned rest that followed was the most difficult spell of the whole thing.

Then he leaned forward once more, reached out as if to lay his hands upon the vehicle once again, and slipped by it, moving as quickly as he could toward the open door, and then through it, and inside. Nothing happened the entire time he was in transit, but the moment the car door slammed a burst of gunfire occurred beneath the ledge, and the Angel began to shudder and then to rock.

"There!" came the voice of the Angel as the gun swung to the right and a beam lanced outward and upward from it.

It bobbed. It rode high. It fell upon the cliff face, moving.

Murdock turned in time to see a portion of that surface slide downward, first with a whisper, then with a roar. The shooting ceased before the wall came down upon the red vehicle.

Above the sound of the crash, a familiar voice came through the radio: "Damn you, Sam! You should have stayed in the car!" she said.

Then the radio went silent. Her form was completely covered by the rock fall.

"Must have blocked my sensors again and sneaked up," the Angel was saying. "You are lucky that you saw her just when you did."

"Yes," Murdock replied.

"Let me try rocking us loose now," the Angel said a little later. "We made some headway while you were pushing."

The breakaway sequence began again. Murdock looked up at the stars for the first time that evening-cold and brilliant and so very distant. He kept on staring as the Angel pulled them free. He barely glanced at her stony tomb as they turned and moved past it.

When they had threaded their way back and out through the ravine, the radio came to life again:

"Murdock! Murdock! You okay? We've been trying to reach you and-"

"Yes," he said softly.

"We heard more explosions. Was that you?"

"Yes. Just shooting at a ghost," he said. "I'm coming back now."

"It's over," the other told him. "We got them all."

"Good," he said, breaking the connection.

"Why didn't you tell him about the red one?" the Angel asked.

"Shut up and keep driving."

He watched the canyon walls slip by, bright strata and dull ones. It was night, sky cold, sky wide, sky deep, and the black wind came out of the north, closing wind. They headed into it. Spinning through the dream of time and dust, past the wreckage, they went to the place where the others waited. It was night, and a black wind came out of the north.