

ASTRID JULIAN

BLOWUP

Lyrics for "The View from the Moon" by Geoffrey A. Landis

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If you attend one of the many science fiction conventions around the nation, you'll hear editors beg for hard science fiction stories. Or off-world science fiction stories. Or even science fiction stories set on the good old Moon.

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New writer Astrid Julian manages to make the Moon and the hard science fiction story fresh. "Blow-up" is her first sale to F&SF. She has also sold stories to Interzone, Writers of the Future, and Xanadu 3.

SIEG HEIL!" IT BURST OUT of Charlotte before she could stop herself. She felt her cheeks warm as she looked at the TV-watching faces in the room about her and realized she'd just insulted the musical tastes of most of them.

The video panned across the thousands of screaming faces in the stadium. Fans swaying back and forth to the music, their hands raised, resembled the fanatics of another age just as eager to follow the lead of a single man

Lyrics from Jimmy St. August's latest hit thudded through the TV speakers. The voice of the stadium mob became a dark echo that sang along.

"In dirty crowded tenements we huddle here like rats

The plaster's stained and shattered, with wind blowing through the slats

While they shoot our hard-earned dollars to the Moon

And from the Moon our problems all seem small

They don't see the filth, the vagrants passed out in the hall

Looking down, they can't see us at all

The Moon is cold and creel and has never been alive

And they speak of evolution, that only the strong survive

They dream of butterflies, in titanium cocoons

And from the Moon the damage looks so small

They can't see the weeds and rubble where forests once grew tall

Looking down they can't see us at all"

It was sickening to watch the fans reach forward to touch Jimmy St. August, or his pant leg or his shoe, or whatever else they could grab when he danced out to the edge of the stage.

The camera angle cut back to St. August alone, filling the TV screen of the conference room with his face. Charlotte Glass was repulsed at how St. August mesmerized the professionals gathered around the table. The various scientists and administrators were supposed to spend the next week guiding the Presidential Commission through Moon Station, not collecting St. August autographs.

Black foam padding from the microphone obscured St. August's mouth. Only his eyes, dark and intense, stared back out through the glass.

"Really, Charlotte," said a round-faced man wearing a wrinkled blue and green plaid shirt. "He's not Hitler."

Michael Carter would defend the video, Charlotte thought.

"He means well," Carter added.

He saw only jubilation as the Greens celebrated the closing of the Blind River nuclear power plant on Lake Huron, the last nuclear power plant in North America. Wasn't he listening to the lyrics they were singing? Carter was such a science nerd, too absorbed in his work to take in what this band of fun-loving environmentalists had in mind for Moon Station. She would spell it out to him later.

"Sorry. A mob always brings out the worst in me." No matter how innocent St. August's lyrics sounded with their appeals for world peace and for sharing world resources, the sexual throb of his guitar was a cry for power. Raw power. Corrupt power. Couldn't they see how he savored playing Jesus to the masses? It was so obvious, they shouldn't be able to miss it. But then, none of the rest of them had gone to high school with rock superstar Jimmy St. August.

Time to get out of here, before she told them what she really thought of their hero. "Look, I've got to pick up some ice samples on my way back to Station, so I'm going to ride a scooter out," Charlotte told them. "I'll see you all out at the landing crater."

The crescent Earth with its polluting billions plunged an angry talon into the clean, black, star-encrusted sky at the edge of the horizon. Charlotte Glass slammed the golden visor down over her faceplate and shoved the scooter into gear. Jimmy St. August, bad-boy fuck-up of Lakewood High School Class of 2023, was coming to the Moon.

It wasn't fair.

She'd spent twelve years of her life cooking up exotic metal alloys in stuffy labs; crawling around inside volcanic fumaroles, her nose bleeding from the sulfuric steam seeping into her mask; and puking her guts out almost every morning for six weeks at Johnson during her months of astronaut training. What had he ever done to earn himself a trip to the Moon? Write a couple of gold records slamming NASA. Records that caught the eye of a president who believed the great truths of the world could be captured in a rock-n-roll lyric. Jimmy St. August, who'd spent his whole senior year so stoned on acid and frost that

it was the shock of the summer to see him lope across the stage, shit-eating grin on his face, to pick up his diploma from the high school principal. That same Jimmy St. August had gotten himself named to a presidential commission to investigate bureaucratic waste at NASA. And at the top of his hit list was Moon Science Station. Charlotte's life work was about to be shut down by a man with a guitar.

But not before he got a free trip to the Moon out of the deal. She turned up the throttle on the scooter and sped up the ramp leading out of the vehicle storage hangar. The scooter shot off the ribbed concrete and landed softly in the powdery regolith surrounding Station.

Would St. August remember her? Probably not. Her math teacher had made her spend a semester coaching St. August through quadratic equations during her sophomore year, but her boobs hadn't been big enough nor her jeans tight enough for Jimmy St. August to notice her. He had a half a brain, when he managed to keep awake, but she still couldn't understand why the teachers had cut him slack. Everybody's golden boy. Why hadn't they been able to see how lazy he was?

He'd gone on from winning over teachers and seducing half the girls at Lakewood High, to advising presidents and enticing half the human race into buying his albums.

Well, if Biankowski ordered it, she had to show up at the landing crater to be part of the welcoming committee, but she didn't have to sit with the Presidential Commission on Space Exploration during the half-hour trip back to Station on the shuttle.

The scooter wheeled silently around the secondary equipment hangars and up the small hill where the solar collectors stood. A large stone caught the front wheel of the scooter, twisting it sideways and bouncing it back down the path. Several seconds passed before Charlotte realized it was a moon-quake that had caused her to slide back down. A big one. They weren't really dangerous with the Moon's crest so stable, more of a nuisance really, but for some reason they seemed to be increasing in frequency. Just what they needed with a commission on the loose.

The official tour was scheduled for eight the next morning. Soon enough to socialize with the Green coyotes lining up to devour Moon Station. She smiled to herself. St. August wouldn't be able to get his ass out of bed that early anyway.

At the top of the hill the scooter spun too sharply, missing the path. A plume of regolith shot up, spraying a light coating of dust onto the solar arrays facing the vehicle service bays. Good. Cleaning the powder off again would give the rookies something to do. And the Presidential Commission would have a chance

to see the spaceteam in action.

God, she was in a foul mood. A spin around Station perimeter would help her cool off long enough to play hostess and shepherd the high-mucky-mucks and assorted high-rollers onto the shuttle. Then she would be able to get back to the office and go over the latest assays with Carter before supper. They were onto something. Something big. The last bit of ice she'd brought out of the fault line two kilometers east of the volcano had been streaked with trace amounts of methane and carbon.

Charlotte pressed the clutch, downshifting the scooter and easing it onto the maintenance path that followed the volcanic Nile leading out to the landing crater. In a few places the lava shell covering the rille remained intact, but for most of the ride, if she stayed very close to the edge, she could catch the glint of the shuttle rail in the darkness below.

At the end of the line the scooter skidded out onto the parking pad. She counterwheeled into the direction of the spin to control the skid back onto concrete, then climbed off the scooter and headed to the air lock. The outer door, at the base of the landing crater wall, slid open as she approached. Inside she punched the controls and waited for the inner door to open.

A lock technician was waiting at the top of the staircase to help slip off her helmet. She shook her short brown curls free and turned off the climate conditioning on her hard suit's front.

"They landed about fifteen minutes ago," he told her. "We're still hooking up the pressure sleeve to bring the commissioners in at gate two. Boss wants to see you in the shuttle offices before they offload."

"Thanks." What could Biankowski want now? Charlotte walked through the man-made catacombs under the launch crater. The warehouses on her right ringed the outer perimeter. On her left were the ice makers. The launch tubes, which couldn't be seen from the outer corridor, formed a five-pointed star at the center of the crater where the big laser was. That way the laser could be swiveled around to burn ice in any one of the tubes. The meter-wide slab of water ice that would fuel the return of the lunar lander had just finished freezing. Technicians were rolling it onto a conveyor and walking it toward the crater center. White frost chilled the air as she passed the ice. The slab would be loaded into the bottom of one of the refrigerated launch tubes. After the commission had disembarked, the lander itself would be guided into the launch tube through a surface hatchway, then lowered down onto the ice slab.

The glass doors to the shuttle offices stood open. Stan Biankowski, a smallish, blond man with gold wire-rimmed glasses, sat at one of the computer terminals and pointed out something on the screen to an assistant. He looked up when he heard her footsteps, frowning when he saw the pressure suit.

"Ah, Glass, you're here. Good. Look, a static discharge near one of the transmission lines from the nuclear generator has knocked out a relay somewhere.

We haven't figured out if a moonquake ripped a grounding cable loose or what. Anyway it's nothing serious, but with night beginning, there could be periodic brown-outs. I don't have to tell you, we don't need this with a presidential commission here. We should be able to get the shuttle back to Station on battery alone, but it'll be a slow ride. I need you to distract them . . ."

She wasn't ready for this. "But sir, I drove a scooter out here."

"You can pick it up again tomorrow. Look, I know this is awkward for you. Carter told me you went to high school with this St. August fellow and that you're not overly fond of him, but it can't be helped. I have to stay on top of this problem . . ."

She felt herself blush. "I could supervise things here for you, sir."

Biankowski ignored her, raising his voice slightly: "And since you're leading the volcano tour tomorrow anyway, it will be less noticeable that I'm not on the shuttle if you take over. The fact that you know one of these commissioners personally, however slightly, could be an enormous asset to Station. Don't blow it, Glass."

"Yes sir."

"Now let's get out there and greet our guests."

THERE WERE twenty-one of them. Three were camera crew and not actually part of the commission. The two women, one Ghanian, one Brazilian, wore the blue berets of UN resource allocation officers. Their membership on the commission was required by international law. Four were United States Senators. The Germans and the Japanese, major financial backers of Moon Station, had sent their Ministers of Technologic Research. The three men in expensive suits represented a consortium of American business concerns. NASA itself had sent a senior administrator and an ancient astronaut left over from the early days of Mars exploration. The remaining four wore the black of clergymen of various denominations. Charlotte would have been roelined to see them as part of the problem, what with the ever-increasing recriminalization of both abortion and birth control on Earth, but they seemed to be playing an expanding role on governmental bodies of all types. Cardinal Alfonso Romero from Los Angeles chatted amiably with St. August.

St. August wore the uniform of the lay members of the commission -the expensive beige Italian suit and tie -- though his was lightweight wool, not silk. No doubt because silk manufacture involved the death of living creatures. What had happened to the rock-and-rollers who had wanted to rock and shock the world? Nowadays they seemed only to want to clean it up. Or at least they wanted their fans to do it for them. It wouldn't have surprised her to hear St. August had

flown his own Lear to the launch facility in Florida. Just as long as the ordinary, the little people, didn't waste precious energy or resources that should be shared with the third world.

His appearance didn't totally conform to the commission, though. Lush dark brown

hair curled over his shoulders and down onto his pink shirt; and his lilac tie sported a button emblazoned with the slogan, "Nuke the scientists." A slogan no

doubt intended to rebuke Moon Station's inhabitants, and to call attention to the fans back on Earth, in case they missed it, that it wouldn't be possible to

live on Moon Station without power from the small nuclear generator beyond the vehicle hangars. And Biankowski thought she would have some sway with this guy?

The welcoming formalities consisted mainly of assigning a Station-side buddy to

accompany commission members for the next day or so, while they acquired their moonlegs. Even with five-meter-high ceilings in the corridors, more than one careless visitor had managed to crack his skull bouncing through Station at one-sixth the Earth's gravity. St. August excused himself to the Cardinal and walked toward her. "Charlotte," he said. "That is you, isn't it?" Someone had coached him. He couldn't possibly remember. Well, it wouldn't work. She kept her

face stern as she shook hands. She refused to look up at the green eyes. "Shy as

ever, I see," St. August said, as he bent closer forcing her to look into his face. The tiny lines and crow's feet made him seem friendlier. Where his youthful face had been marred by childish self-absorption, his adult face intrigued. Then she spotted Biankowski smiling. He was watching her, shifting his gaze from St. August back to herself. By the time she figured out what he had in mind, and before she could introduce herself to one of the other commissioners, she found herself assigned to buddy up with St. August. So now she didn't just have to conduct the volcano tour tomorrow, she had to babysit him the whole damn week as well.

Charlotte stood at the front of the shuttle car after all the commissioners and

their moonside buddies had been seated. "Please keep your seatbelts fastened," she told them. "G-forces on the shuttle are weak, but new arrivals from Earth have a tendency to overreact and could be hurt."

St. August sat in the aisle seat just in front of where she stood. She felt his

eyes looking up at her as she spoke. They seemed to see through her, like his blind TV-eyes in that slick commercial where he looked up out of the TV after sharing his bowl of rice with a Nigerian AIDS-orphan. Or the one where he sang along with the Panterrans from inside a gigantic glass box on the shores of Lake

Karachai; Kazakh horsemen churning the radioactive dust of the shoreline into a

cloud that gradually obscured the box and St. August's face. All the while his

eyes stared at you, filling with tears, daring you to care about the world as much as he did. Big phony! Those celluloid tears were just another way to line his pockets.

What was he thinking now? If he could bring his fans here, she had no doubt they

would dismantle Station in hours. Too bad all that power couldn't be channeled

into bringing something useful to the Moon. Like the millions of tourist dollars
Elvis fans brought to Memphis every year on their pilgrimages to Graceland.

St. August's jawline was strong, but not overbearing. The rock-and roll idol needed a shave. Stubble on his cheeks made him seem more of an ordinary man, fragile even. Maybe he would be gracious enough to have a heart attack while on

Station. Dream on. He was too young and healthy. Maybe he would o.d. on . . . what was that drug's name? Splinters. Yeah, that was it . . . ice splinters. Then Station would get five or ten dollars from millions of fans for a St. August Memorial, and any future presidential commissions could put their white papers where the sun don't shine. Yeah, St. August could do a lot for Station, if he would be considerate enough to die there.

He was still staring at her. Why didn't he look away? She had to force herself to think of something besides him. The tour maybe, Charlotte? She was supposed to narrate it! "The shuttle rail is housed inside a volcanic rille formed by a jet of hot gases ejected from underneath the lava flow. L-l-like blowing up a balloon." God, he was making her nervous. She had to make him look away.

"If you look out the shuttle windows at the rille walls, you'll see that they are very smooth and glassy. This type of lava is called pahoehoe." The shuttle jerked, then cut its speed. Biankowski's threatened brown-out. "We're going to slow the shuttle down now, so you can have a better look. I always think it looks like satin." Think fast, Charlotte, she told herself. Keep them interested
until the shuttle accelerates again.

"The basalt forming this rille is called kimberlite. It actually formed about 200 kilometers underground, then forced its way up in a kind of gaseous explosion. Kimberlite is studded with diamonds, so if you see a bright flash of
light reflecting back at you from the dark blue walls, it might even be a diamond." It seemed to be working. The commissioners were all looking out the windows. Even some of the Station personnel were looking. Not St. August. His left hand fingered the chords of a song only he could hear. His eyes never left
her pressure suit, as if he were committing every velcro tab and instrument gauge to memory. She wished she'd worn something else. Damn that Biankowski.

"W-w-we don't recommend d-diamond hunting inside the rille however. Not only is
the shuttle apt to run you over, but the lava that has fallen from up above has
fractured into very sharp shards. Walking over them is dangerous even in a hard
suit," Cardinal Romero, who sat behind St. August, tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and they both looked out the window. Finally. Charlotte reached for the climate controls on her sleeve and turned on the unit's AC.

St. August's hand gripped the back of the seat in front of the Cardinal. The fingers were thick and strong, not what she expected a musician's hand to look like. His mouth seemed soft. More sensitive than she remembered. She watched it
form a mysterious pout in response to something the Cardinal said. The Cardinal
shook his head and laughed. St. August smiled, and said something which made the
Cardinal laugh even harder. She was alarmed to find herself wishing she were

close enough to overhear their conversation.

St. August's green eyes looked straight into hers. She'd been staring at him and he'd caught her. Smile, Charlotte. Smile. It's safer than suddenly looking away. Don't let him know he's getting to you.

Come on. Speed up the damn shuttle. How long could the brown-out last with Blankowski sitting right there reassigning Station power allocations? Start up the tour again, Charlotte. Don't let him talk to you.

"You never know," Charlotte spoke into her microphone. "You might find diamonds lying in the dust when you take a walk through the Station perimeter. It has happened."

Someone in the back of the car raised a hand. Good, a question. Get her mind on something else.

"Dr. Glass, where is the volcano in relation to the station.,'"

The shuttle lurched forward with a sudden surge of speed. Charlotte lost her balance and grabbed the support bar next to the aisle. St. August put his hand over hers to make sure she didn't lose her grip. The hard, guitar-string calluses of his fingertips brushed against the back of her hand. She jerked her hand away. Too quickly, you idiot. Don't let him know he's affecting you like this. You and about ten million other women. Sieg Hell!

She straightened, her body adjusting to the increase in speed. "This rille runs parallel to the shoreline of the Humboldt Sea, which lies about forty klicks to the east. We do most of our heavy-metals mining there. If you run a perpendicular line from the rille to the Sea, you'll hit the volcano twenty klicks out. Station was actually built inside a small impact crater to cut down on the amount of excavation necessary. The volcano wasn't found until Station was almost complete, when it was too late to relocate without wasting the billions of dollars that had already been spent."

She looked down at St. August to make sure he didn't miss the point. If the early settlers had been allowed to use seismic tomography to decide where to place Station, it might all have been avoided, but the Greens had exerted pressure on world governments and on the UN to ban the importation of large explosives to the Moon.

"But hasn't having the volcano so near turned out to be an advantage?" St. August asked. "I mean, after all, the volcano is extinct, and haven't you found traces of ammonia and other useful ices down there?"

So he'd done some homework. That was new. "Yes. And occasionally we find a small pockets of clathrates in the permanight fissures." Blank looks greeted her comment so she went on to explain. "Clathrates are tiny cages of water molecules with organic molecules inside them. Methane, ammonia . . . if we could find

enough of them, we'd have enough nitrogen to make Station biologically self-sufficient."

The shuttle pulled into Station. Thank God, Charlotte thought. St. August stood next to her. If she looked up slightly, she found herself looking at his lips. His soft lips. She looked down quickly, but couldn't stop herself from wondering what it would be like to touch them with her fingers. He bent down to speak into her ear. "Cute outfit."

"What, this old thing?" She played the game, but she was seething inside. How dare he? With his index finger, he brushed away moondust from one of the pressure gauges on her shoulder. He lifted his finger to his nose to smell the moondust, then tasted it with his tongue. Couldn't argue with his instincts. If he'd bothered to work during high school, he might even have made a decent lab tech.

"As long as we're straightening up each other's clothing. . . ." She unfastened his "Nuke the scientists" button and put it inside his jacket pocket. "Scientists have feelings too, you know."

"It was meant to be funny."

"It's not."

The shuttle door slid open.

THERE'D BEEN ANOTHER QUAKE during the night. Biankowski was growing increasingly suspicious that the quakes and the power outages were connected somehow and was anxious to get the commission out of Station so he could conduct more extensive tests. By the time Charlotte arrived at the shuttle terminal that morning, most of the commission members had already assembled. She had pleaded illness the evening before and asked Carter to fill in with St. August, but she'd spent the whole evening thinking about him anyway.

Artificial dawn flickered in from the slowly opening reflector reservoirs in the ceiling. Orange sodium light from windows and balconies in the apartments across from the terminal faded into the whitish daylight. The dark outlines of the tree tops softened, blurring into daylight green at their edges.

Dozens of St. August fans waited at the shuttle terminal. Those who hadn't been able to come last night because of work were here now. Charlotte grimaced as she watched them line up, CDs in hand.

Lanie Graham, Station's doctor, stood at the coffee bar of the small terminal restaurant waiting for Charlotte. She handed Charlotte two small envelopes, one

blue and one yellow, each filled with metabolic regulators to help the commissioners adjust to the long lunar night. "Start them on the first yellow tablet after lunch. Food will help absorb the first jolt of the day-stims. The blue tablets at bedtime."

"Thanks." Charlotte put the envelopes in her breast pocket and refastened the velcro tabs.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got an autograph to collect," Lanie said as she picked up a CD from the counter.

Charlotte winced. "Not you too, Lanie. I thought you'd have more sense than to let all this Hollywood bullshit get to you."

The doctor smiled. Was it a sad smile, or was Charlotte just imagining it? "You could stand to lighten up a little, Charlotte: Life is too short to be so serious all the time. Right about now, I'm wishing I'd studied geology instead of medicine."

"Well, maybe he'll get sick on the tour and I'll send him back into your clutches and you can have your way with him. Or you could go over his medical records, he might have missed a shot or something. Houston has been getting a little lax about these things."

Lame laughed. "You're not heading for an execution. It wouldn't hurt for you to look like you're enjoying yourself just a little. Some makeup might help too."

"Right. And it'll start running down my face inside my helmet and when I lift my visor, he'll scream with fright and I'll have to send him to sick bay and he'll be too incoherent to make any kind of recommendation whatsoever to his buddy the President. It's a good plan. I like it."

Lanie laughed again. Someone walked up behind Charlotte. She knew it was Jimmy St. August before he spoke. She could see the excitement in Lanie's face: He was close enough that she could feel the warmth of his body on her back, close enough that she could smell his soap.

"Good morning, ladies," he said.

Charlotte stepped to the side, next to Lanie and away from him, before she turned around and greeted him. As he shook her hand, she was conscious of how small and cold her hand must feel in his large warm one. He was holding it too long. Damn him! What would Lanie think? She tried to pull her hand away, but he held onto it. "Wait! Just a minute." He pulled her hand up close to his face, forcing her to look at him. The tone of his voice changed. don't bite, you know."

She jerked her hand again. This time he let it go. "No, seriously, wait! have a message for you from Carter," he said, before she could turn. "You forgot to turn on your machine last night."

"Yes?"

"He said when you get done playing tour guide out on the surface outside Station, you might want to take everyone straight to the volcano instead of out to the Sea, He's found something he thinks the commission will be interested in."

"Thank you," Charlotte said sharply. She excused herself to check with the various engineers and technicians responsible for VIP-tour ops. St. August signed autographs. Every so often she would look up and see him. How the muscles of his forearm flexed as he wrote, how the veins on his temple stood out when he shook his hair back out of his face, how easily he laughed with the women and the occasional man waiting for his signature. She should have worn makeup so he would notice her more. No, no, no. He was the enemy. He despised everything she stood for.

Two tracked busses, each seating fifteen, crawled up onto the shuttle platform. Charlotte waited at the door to the first bus while the commission members were briefed on the functions of their pressure suits. The crawlers were pressurized, but the volcano wasn't.

The busses crept part way up the solar collector hill to give the commissioners their first good view of Station, since the shuttle was primarily an underground conveyance. Charlotte sat alone at the back of the first bus and let the driver do the talking. He'd guided a tour often enough. Half of the morning was over when St. August made his way to the back to sit on the seat next to hers.

She didn't bother with the formalities of greeting. "You should stay in front. You can have a better look at what you're shutting down."

His mouth twisted slightly, a flinch, barely perceptible. She'd hurt him. Well, what did he expect? "We haven't decided to go that far," he said. "Not yet."

"No, but you will. Let's see, the report will read, 'The nations of the North, in using a substantial amount of the Gross World Product to fund Moon Science Station, exhibit a callous disregard for the needs of the Peoples of the Southern Hemisphere,' blah, blab blah. . ."

He crossed his arms and pulled himself into the corner, away from her. A half-smile hovered on his lips as he shook his head. "I doubt it will be that bad. Maybe a little scaling back, that's all."

"Maybe the Peoples of the South should scale back their populations a bit."

His smile grew sad. The sadness crept up into his eyes. He really did care. In spite of his methods. How could she be physically so attracted to someone she found so repugnant spiritually?

"What right have we to interfere in the cultural proclivities of other nations?"
he asked.

"We pay their bills, that's what right. That's more than the churches of Earth do for the starving little ones their parishioners keep bringing into the world."

"We also exploit their resources at ridiculously low prices. And churches give people hope for a better tomorrow."

"Superstitions don't feed people or eliminate smallpox. Science does."

"How do you know that prayers don't help scientists find the solutions?"

She didn't answer. What was the point? He would have the last word anyway.
With
millions of fans. And with the President.

Why couldn't he understand that the space program was seed money? Enough churches were willing to take the credit, but it was technology that was actually feeding the developing world's starving, damn it. Technology, not an enlightened moral status, made it possible for the developed world to share. What could the poor share except their poverty?

The busses had left Station far behind and were heading for the volcano before the afternoon tour of the mines on the Humboldt Sea. The crawler poked along, but she felt no compulsion to keep the commission members entertained the way she had the previous day. Let Biankowski worry about it.

An alarm beeped near the front of the bus. It paused, then beeped again. She excused herself to St. August, plugged in an earphone and toggled on the private
channel she and the drivers shared. "What's happening?"

"Protons detectors are going crazy. It's a solar flare."

"Impossible. Must be a malfunction."

"It's signaling on our bus too," the driver of the other crawler said.

"They wouldn't have let us leave Station. If it's really a solar flare, the X-ray satellites should have warned Station hours ago." Damn it. The anxious faces of the commission members turned back and forth between Charlotte and the
drivers. Well, let them wonder. Station couldn't control the sun. But the
X-ray
detectors! Christ, what had gone wrong? The commission would tear them apart for
this. If they survived.

"Satellites are both out, and the replacement bird's been delayed," her driver said. "Budget problems, remember?"

She hadn't been paying attention to how long they'd been travelling. "How long to get back to Station?"

"One hour, seven minutes." Not enough time then before the full brunt. The second, fatal wave of protons would reach the Moon before they could get back. Christ! How could this happen?

"We can get to the Humboldt Sea in thirty-seven minutes."

"Call ahead. Find out how many mummy crates they can spare. Keep your fingers crossed."

Her words precipitated a flurry of talking. She overheard something about the "rights of the third world will no longer be trampled" coming from the direction of the two blue berets. The German and the Japanese looked frightened. Shit. Why now?

She toggled off and turned to the commissioners. "Radiation from a solar flare is heading our way and we have to find a place to take shelter." None of the commission members had been able to hear the entire conversation, but they had to guess the situation was grave. Their faces wore anxious looks. She explained

how "mummy crate" was slang for radiation shelter because if you were caught outside of Station there was nothing you could do but to lie in one until the solar flare subsided. Still, she avoided looking into their eyes.

"Don't the hard suits protect us from radiation?" one of the clergymen asked.

The old ex-astronaut answered before she had a chance. "No. The radiation from a solar flare is too strong. We can't just hide behind a boulder either. When the radiation hits, it will scatter all over the surface. We need to find a radiation shelter or to get underground."

Charlotte tried not to think of Space Station Freedom when two Senators had bullied their way onto the space station, and there'd been a monster solar flare, and not enough room in the shelter, and the lottery that ensued. She'd stopped voting after that. And the Earth's magnetic field had mitigated solar flares on Freedom. On the Moon they would have to bear the full brunt of the flare. Please let there be enough crates!

"It's Biankowski," one of the drivers said. Charlotte changed channels. "One of the underground smelters is closed for repairs. Should be big enough for everyone in hard suits . . . buzz . . ." The flare was already breaking up the radio signal. "Bz-zzz . . . enough air. Could be a rough twenty-four hours . . . bzzz . . . shelter for four buried not too far from the smelter. Buzz-zz . . . resupplied with food just last week. Send bzzz three weakest or oldest into the shelter bzzz with one of the drivers to instruct them."

"Good." She told the drivers to let the commissioners know what was going on, watching relief relax the taut muscles of their faces. "Charlotte . . . bz-zz-zzz . . . another problem."

Right, it couldn't be that easy. "Carter's still out at the volcano . . . bzzz . . . sent everyone back to Station, but he's found something that's scared the bejeebees out of him . . . bzz-zzz-zz . . . needs monitoring even during the flare."

"What is it?"

" . . . doesn't know. Bzzz . . . some kind of liquid seepage. Like the rocks are melting. Says you're the geologist. He wants to know if you can get over . . . bzzzz . . . into the volcano before the main wave of radiation . . . bzz-zz-zz."

"I don't have a scooter."

"Bzzz-zz-z . . . Suit up the commissioners . . . transfer . . . bzzz onto a single crawler. You should be able to take the other one back to the volcano in fifty-three minutes . . . buzz-zz . . . tight, but do-able."

"You got a deal. Tell Carter to leave his notes and get the hell out of there. If it's just a minor flare, I'll see you guys in a few hours, but if it ends up being major -- I don't feel like sharing a crate."

"Bzzz-zz . . . don't like the idea of you being bzzzz alone down there for days."

St. August was watching her again. She turned away from him, toward the window and spoke softly into her collar. "Don't be silly. I know the volcano like the back of my hand. Anyway, Carter is the chemist, he'll be more help running lab tests of the liquid-whatever-it-is and, as long as the flare isn't too bad, radioing the results back to me."

She spoke louder, to the commissioners. "Solar flares are pretty routine up here. The underground smelter is a very safe place to sit one out. Plenty of leftover oxygen from the mining operations, and there's a restaurant on the edge of the Sea. They should be able to load the smelter up with food before the proton wave hits. Meantime, the boss man wants me back at the volcano to finish up some work."

The commissioners helped each other into their helmets while the driver gave Charlotte last minute instructions on how to operate the crawler. She watched St. August put his helmet on in the rearview mirrors. Whatever hold he had on her was getting more tenuous, dimmed by frantic activity.

She waited only long enough for the commissioners to off-load before heading toward the volcano. The tracks of the crawler churned dusty regolith, blurring the small cluster of hard-suited figures she could still make out in her side mirrors. Barring any major obstructions, she would reach the volcano with seven minutes to spare. Seven minutes to crawl through the passageways to safety underground.

No sense breathing air she would need down in the volcano. Keeping her left hand on the steering wheel, she popped the safeties on her collar with her right and tipped the helmet back. She felt for the air/off switch with her fingers. There was a bulge in her left breast pocket. Damn, she'd forgotten to give the commissioners their palls. Well, how out of whack could their circadian rhythms get their second night on the Moon? The solar flare probably wouldn't last

more
than a few hours anyway. Still, it was embarrassing. She rarely screwed up
like
that.

The digital map signaled a course straight across a wide plain. She picked her way around the larger craters. If the crawler threw a track out here, she would die. Don't think about it, she told herself. Just drive.

The crawler ride grew choppy. Through the windshield, she saw she was entering a rock-strewn basalt plain. Shit. She pulled up a distance profile on the digital map. Seventeen minutes longer to go around it. No choice. She had to go through. The crawler rocked from side to side as first one track then the other passed over the by now sizable rocks.

The bus shook and seemed to move sideways instead of forward. Another moonquake. What was going on? There'd never been so many before. Something lurched in the back of the bus. She heard a thump and then cursing. The crawler headed over a fair-sized boulder at the same time that she turned her head to see what was going on in the back. She almost lost control of the steering.

"Get out here where I can see you," she yelled as the crawler bucked back into control.

Nothing.

"You might as well come out. I know you're there."

Footsteps.

Her pulse raced. She knew it was St. August without looking in the mirror. How dare he risk both their lives like this?

He sat in the seat next to the driver's, not speaking for the rest of the trip. Watching her. There was no time to take him back to the other bus. She tried to radio the breach of procedure to Station, but the radio no longer penetrated the increasing radiation. She would be within her rights to put him out for ignoring the radiation warning, for refusing to take shelter as ordered. No court would find her guilty. Not after Freedom.

A small blue vein pulsed on his forehead. He looked so intense as he surveyed the moonscape, intensely fragile, so different from the guitar-playing idol who ignored the thousands of worshippers at his feet. And really, didn't Michael Carter gently remind her at least once a week to be less brusque with her own technicians? She sometimes treated them and even Carter himself like things existing only to help her get her work done. Not that she treated herself much differently. There was always a new problem that had to be thought about, a robot that needed fixing, a sample to analyze. Work was everything.

How different was she really from a rock-n-roll star who dealt with thousands of fans at a time? Did he see more than a mob? Did he think about the millions of individuals who had to work hours to pay for his CDs? Did the commissioner see people in Moon Station, or just a pack of money-wasting scientists?

Maybe she wasn't being fair. There'd been that time when she had been so worried about her grade in English that instead of her tutoring Jimmy in Math, he'd helped her write a poem. She'd forgotten that. She'd also put out of her mind how taken her teacher had been with the images of a young Ohioan standing on Tecumseh's grave, wondering about the modern-day alliances American leaders were forming. It had kept an embarrassing "D" off her report card. Jimmy had even set it to music, though no one but Charlotte had ever heard it performed.

The volcano appeared like a waveless black lake on the horizon. "There it is," she said. She cast a sidelong glance at St. August's face, watching it register surprise as he saw how different it was from volcanoes back on Earth. Just a hole in the ground.

Fifty-one minutes. Nine minutes to get as far underground as possible.

She held St. August in his seat by the shoulders for an instant, looking down into his eyes. "Do exactly as I say," she told him. "One deviation and you're a dead man." She could see he didn't believe her. "I have every right to abandon you. Don't doubt that I will, if you fuck up." That seemed to cause a flicker of interest. He stared back at her, a slight smile on his lips. What did he see? What was he thinking? Should she slap his smirk away? She was wasting time. "We have a serious situation here. No one, not Station, nor my colleague Michael Carter, would ask me to come here during a solar flare unless it were a life or death emergency." She straightened, put on her helmet, checked the seals on his, then signaled him to follow.

Once out of the bus, she held his glove in hers. She wouldn't take a chance accidentally having him bounce away from her by stepping too heavily. She pulled him into the ancient vent, walking quickly, no time for sightseeing. Shiny black walls reflected light from a string of bare bulbs leading down into the mouth of the volcano. As it grew darker, Charlotte showed St. August how to pop up the mirrored visor that hung down over their faceplates. The floor of the cavern had been spread with ten centimeters of regolith. She was thankful for the firm footing.

While the Moon's surface was gray and lifeless, its depths were vibrant with color. The black obsidian walls of the surface rille were iridescent with trace minerals. As she walked down, the light play caused the walls to shimmer, now blue-black, now green-black. The magma dike, the first place where her crew had

had to actually burrow down into the volcano, stopped St. August, as she knew it would. The walls and ceiling in the narrow, hollowed-out chamber were pink rose quartz studded with metre-long, light green pegmatite crystals. The path led down into another natural vent, formed millions of years ago by gasses exploding up to the surface. Red and black granite walls topped by fine yellow needles of sulphur made the ceiling appear to be growing hair.

The walls trembled. She blinked to get the sweat out of her eyes. Not again! She felt the floor vibrate under her feet. The vibration increased, splintering pieces off the sides of the vent. It knocked her into the wall, then up against the ceiling before she tumbled onto St. August. They sprawled on the floor, sulphur dust covering their hard suits. "You okay?" she asked, even though the radio was out.

He must have heard her. He nodded and smiled at her through the faceplate. "Hell of a solar flare," she heard above the static. What a time for jokes! "More like an eruption."

Could St. August be right? She lifted herself off of him, afraid he would see her fright through her faceplate. There was no choice. They had to keep going down into the volcano. She couldn't know for certain if it was an eruption, but to go back outside during a solar flare was to die. She helped him up and motioned for him to follow. They ran, Charlotte showing him how to bounce off the walls to propel himself forward.

Carter had left his storage cabinet open. She stooped down to grab his package of notes and an extra ration kit. At least she could record what was happening in the volcano.

The cavern shook again, knocking loose more volcanic debris. "Run!" she yelled at St. August. One more bend. Another. Finally they were deep enough.

She flopped down under a lamp next to some storage lockers and tried to catch her breath while pulling out Carter's map and unfolding it.

St. August sat on the edge of the writing desk in the dark, watching her. "What now?" he asked, the static dissipated by tons of moonrock. "Is the volcano erupting?"

"I don't know. There's nothing we can do about it in any case. We're stuck down here until the flare ends. Carter's notes show the seepage beginning half a klick from here, about a hundred meters further down. That's why he asked me to come down here. We might as well get to work. We'll hear the radios signal an all-clear once the flare ends."

"Okay Let's go."

Charlotte pushed herself up onto her knees. Another wobble of the vent floor

kept her down. She had just pulled herself up again when St. August knocked her down from behind, pushing her away. The lights sputtered and died out as the vent shook again.

She flicked on her helmet light and whirled around. A row of storage cabinets fell down onto his back. She heard his suit alarm in her earphone. He'd punctured his suit.

She scrambled up, ran back to where he lay and lifted the metal cabinets so he could crawl out. An ominous hiss sounded in her radio. No! Let it be static, please! The startled look in his eyes told her it wasn't. He was losing air. And

quickly. If she remembered correctly, there were two shelters, both about the same distance away. One was at the end of a lateral vent, the other down past where Carter had found his liquid. She could try to find the leak, but it could

take several minutes. Minutes that could be used in getting to a shelter. She decided to go down. Once St. August was safe, she could backtrack and observe Carter's discovery. Alone. The way she had planned.

"Move it!" She took his hand again. "Now!" she yelled when he was slow getting to his feet. Her eyes were adjusting to the helmet light and the dim phosphorescence of the salt-encrusted vent walls. The vent veered left, then down even more sharply. She wanted to run, but she couldn't risk film overexerting himself. "Look on the gauge on the left inside of your helmet where the red light is flashing and read me the numbers."

"It reads three liters per sixty minutes."

Christ, that was fast. "You have an air leak. We're walking to an underground shelter where you'll be safe. Try to stay very calm. It'll be close, but I think you can make it."

The volcano shuddered again. It was almost as if she could hear it. She sat down, pulling him down with her. She wouldn't let the volcano hurl them about this time. "Did you hear that?" St. August asked.

"Yes. I'd say it was an auditory hallucination of some kind." But it couldn't be, she thought, not if he heard it too. "If the volcano really is erupting, perhaps the vent is filling with some kind of gas." They stayed down until after the shaking subsided.

"One more turn and we should be where Carter saw the seepage." The vent opened into a huge cavern. To the left of the path should have been a chasm whose bottom couldn't be seen with ordinary helmet lights. It was filled with a mass of some kind that twinkled yellow and green. St. August looked frightened. Hell, she was terrified herself, if she had to admit it. "What is it?" he asked her.

"I don't know. It looks like ice, but there's so much of it. It's not supposed to happen like this." She stepped forward to get a better look. Could she be looking at the stuff of her dreams? The stuff that would cut Station's biological umbilical to Earth?

Suddenly the mass pulsed, as if it were alive. She jumped back and bumped her helmet on the cavern wall. Stupid. Just like a rookie, she cursed herself.

"Whatever it is, we've got to get past it. The mummy crate is on the other side."

Parts of the mass were already slopping onto the path. "Try not to get it on your suit. Could be sulphuric acid, or some other nasty thing volcanoes are fond

of collecting." It could be ammonia too, she thought. Please let it be ammonia!

She could hardly wait to tell Carter.

They ran along the path and down the next corridor. Then up again. A steep climb

up a ladder. She looked back. Ice was following them. So much ice! Where was it

all coming from? The moon had been geologically dead for millions of years. It had to be Station, the only new variable. Waste heat from Station was melting it

somehow, causing it to surge.

St. August lurched to the side, like a drunk struggling to regain his balance. Another warning sounded over her radio. She ran to St. August and helped him to

sit down to conserve energy.

"Go on without me," he said.

She watched the ice creep closer. The floor of the passageway they had just walked through was completely covered. "Don't be silly. Try to stay as still as

possible. I'm going to run ahead. There have to be spare oxygen cylinders at the shelter."

"Don't come back for me. There's no sense in both of us dying."

"No one's going to die. You're talking nonsense." She helped him lie down.

It made good sense to leave him and not come back. She might return to find him

already dead of asphyxiation, or his suit eaten away by sulphuric acid ice. Taking oxygen out of the shelter would jeopardize her own survival chances.

There was something animal in the way his eyes peered out at her through his faceplate. Not fright. Even more elemental. An urge to survive that penetrated even his mental confusion. And something else, something almost as if he believed she could let him die. That frightened her most of all.

She stood up and started running, bouncing off the walls to propel herself forward more quickly. St. August's testimony could end the space program. But if

he died here . . .? How fragile he was, this great rock and roll star. An icy sweat trickled down her face, stinging her eyes as she realized what enormous power she held in her own two hands. She could save Station just by letting him

die, just by being a little slow in coming back with the oxygen. It was so easy to

kill. Too easy.

She ran faster.

EIGHT MINUTES THERE and back. And three more tremors. The ice had to be causing them. And they could be felt all the way back on Station. After seeing the mass of ice inside the volcano, she wondered, could Station survive intact? And with seismic tomography, it could all have been avoided. Why hadn't they smuggled explosives to the Moon despite the ban?

There had been only two spare oxygen cylinders. She took them both. His oxygen was leaking so badly he would need them. It also meant there wouldn't be enough air in the shelter to keep them alive for more than a day, two at most.

He was barely conscious. The ice had crept up into the passageway until it almost touched his boots. Her hands fumbled with the buckles of the old canisters. His eyes pleaded for air. She hesitated. This was her last chance. How could she give him back to the mob and let it destroy Station, her life's work?

His gauntlet reached for her. She could see the enormous effort the raised hand was costing him in the perspiration on his forehead. The gauntlet trembled, then fell. A resigned expression replaced his panic.

She stood up and turned her back to him so she wouldn't have to watch. This was hardball. Real life. Play to win. With two canisters of air, she at least, would survive.

She couldn't wipe the look in his eyes from her mind. St. August wasn't to blame for the slavishness of his fans. He'd undertaken a dangerous mission to the Moon to call attention to the problem of dwindling resources and to try to help the third world. Did he deserve to die for that?

She grew angry with herself. Why couldn't she have more willpower? She looked down at her hands, despising them. Then, making a fist with both hands, she smashed them into the basalt wall with all her might. The surface glass splayed out like cracked pond ice. She wanted her hands to bleed, but the hard suit protected them.

She knelt down next to St. August. His eyes, like a drunken man's, had trouble focusing on her. With a deep breath, she said good-bye to Station, to her future, and grabbed the oxy tanks. She disconnected the old cylinders, then punched the air nozzles into the new ones. Several minutes passed before he was coherent enough to understand her words.

He leaned on her shoulder most of the way to the shelter. Ice followed them closely, lapping across the regolith-strewn path like a crazed amoeba, absorbing black dust, mica flakes and glass beads into its probing foot. Behind the blackened foot, the ice formed a gigantic pale yellow wave with a grayish-green crest that spilled out of the tunnel they had just passed through. No way back

to the surface. Not now.

The mummy crate was sleek and silver. A Porsche with elaborate fins. Charlotte flipped up the small shielded metal flap in its lid that hid the electronic lock. Her gauntleted fingers punched the code out onto the keypad. The lid popped open, revealing two plastic couches separated by a bank of gauges and switches. Clear plastic bags of food lined both side walls. Controls flickered to life as the lid rose. The regolith-laden foot scraped underneath the capsule sliding it upwards as she struggled to help St. August onto one of the plastic couches and slid down into the other one.

Electronic locks clicked shut. Air vents sished as the shelter pressurized itself. Before she could finish checking the control settings, the yellow ice wave surged up and slapped its crest down onto the capsule, blocking the viewports.

Once St. August could lie down and rest, he seemed to recover quickly. His thank you's were an embarrassment as she helped him remove his helmet and lie back in the couch.

Would he tell the Commission she'd tried to murder him? Did it matter? The destruction of Station by the ice would end it all anyway. If only they'd been able to evacuate everyone safely. Every accidental death seemed to set the program back a decade. People needed the time to reassess and to regroup their will to conquer space. Even without fatalities on Station, St. August's testimony was certain to end the space program. Did anything else matter? But if his charmed life ended here? Every Independence Day thousands crowded the streets around the Staten Island mansion where Mick Jagger had died of old age on a July Fourth earlier in the century. Couldn't all that power be channeled into the space program somehow?

She watched his shoulders rise as he took a deep breath. His hand reached up to rub a bead of sweat from the bridge of his straight aquiline nose. He was a miracle of motion and chemical reactions and words.

"There's one chance, but it's a long shot," she said, wondering how extensive his briefing had been.

"What is it?"

"We put out a radio beacon so Station personnel can find us, then we lower the temperature in the shelter and our body temperature close to freezing. That way we use as little oxygen as possible. It might just last long enough. There must be tons of debris all around us. It will take days to tunnel through." If anyone was left alive on Station. She pulled her hands up into the suit and unscrewed the gauntlets. With bare hands she unfastened her helmet catches and tipped it back. Her fingers ripped open the velcro holding her breast pocket shut. She pulled out the two envelopes filled with pills that she'd forgotten to give the commissioners. "These are metabolic regulators." She waved the package at him.

She put the yellow package back into her pocket. "We've had a lot of problems

adjusting to the 354 continuous hours of daylight and night," she said. "So we use these to raise and lower the metabolic rate, artificially simulating the circadian rhythms of Earth."

"Let's do it."

She tried to keep her heart still. "It's not that easy. I have no idea of the dosages. We should probably take more than the normal two needed to bring on sleep, but if we guess wrong . . ."

"It's better than doing nothing."

She adjusted the shelter controls. "I'm a only geologist. No guarantees. And even if it does work, there's a good chance we'll lose toes or . . . fingers."

"I've played guitar long enough," he said. "Time to take up something new. No sense getting stale."

The noise of ripping open the blue envelope was intense. Was it the last time she would hear paper tear? Speak, Charlotte, don't lose it know. "What do you think? Should we take four? Double the regular dose and hope it's enough?"

"Oh hell, let's take eight. If you're going to do something, might as well do it right."

She smiled at his joke. He would expect her to. Both of them remembered how the high school St. August had been content just to slide by. She pulled two water tubes from the storage rack and handed him one. Her fingers tapped eight tablets out into her hand. St. August rolled over on his side and took hold of her hand, the hand that had refused to let her die. He brought it up to his lips, closing his eyes as he ate the pills from her palm. Charlotte damned her lack of self-control, as she felt her face redden.

Her blush didn't go unnoticed. She tried to pull her hand away, but he kept hold of it. "As long as we're going to die anyway, and before I lose my fingers, there's something I've wanted to do for years, but never had the guts to try," he said.

"Oh yeah?" He let go of her hand so she could swallow her own pills.

She brought the pills to her lips and gagged trying to swallow the first one.

"What could rock star Jimmy St. August be afraid of?" she asked him, still holding seven of the pills in her hand, but she knew what he wanted. Sieg Heil!

Wasn't it enough that she had saved his life? Weren't millions of adoring fans enough for him? She wouldn't allow him to make her walk that walk and then take away everything that mattered to her with his presidential commission. The rest of her pills went down easy.

"Kiss my sophomore math tutor," he said.

She let him unhook her helmet from the suit. He was so sure of himself, but the kiss was tentative, his lips barely brushing hers.

Another quake shook the crate. Ice and rocks scraped across the metal skin of the capsule. For the first time since dedicating her life to studying volcanoes, she felt outright panic. This time there was no place to run to when she needed a break. No hitting the beaches of Maui when the fires of Kilauea got too hot. This time she was forced to submit to the whims of the volcano itself. Careful, Charlotte, don't fight it, an adrenaline surge now will kill you.

She smelled the skin of his neck, his shoulder, tasted the skin of his jawline. It felt so good to be alive. The ice pushed the capsule another meter further up toward surface. She cried out and crushed her lips against his, parting her lips for his tongue to enter.

He pulled away, cupping her face in his hands, and laughed. Then he pulled her face close again and gave her a real kiss, his tongue probing deep inside. Her stomach lurched. He moved away again. No. She tried to pull him against her. Now. Before they were crushed by the ice. He held her away and began unbuckling his suit, then hers. "I'm glad we never did this as kids."

He kissed her forehead "I like the way you are now," he said, his lips hovering centimeters away from hers. So close. "If I'd have been a part of your life way back when, you'd have changed." He smiled an ironic smile. "Who knows? You might have become the drummer in a garage band."

She stared into his eyes, willing him to stop talking, so he wouldn't say anything to end the spell. She put both hands over his mouth and kissed his eyelids. He grabbed one of her wrists in each hand and held them together in front of her face. "Such little hands," he said. "What did it feel like to hold someone's life in your two little hands?" He laughed when she pulled her hands away from him, catching them again easily and pinning them next to her head on the plastic lounge. She tried to pull them free. This time he didn't let go.

"Now you know what it's like to have power. "He held both her wrists in one hand above her head. "You like it, don't you? It's like that at first. You could have left me out there. No one would have been the wiser. You wanted to. You should have. That way your precious Station would have been safe. With the extra air, you might have survived. What made you change your mind and decide to bring me here?"

Before she could answer, he unzipped the front of her suit liner and slipped his hand in. Slowly. Enjoying the effect he was having on her. She shuddered and closed her eyes. The temperature was dropping quickly now, but she was hardly aware of how cold it was. "Power isn't something I ever worked for," he said.

"It just happens. I wish it would go away. People around me always change. I have trouble in math, and suddenly the strictest teacher in the department, a woman who never gives anyone a break, decides all I need is a little extra tutoring. A garage band I join signs a contract and starts selling megahits. "He

kissed her again, more demanding this time. "No one's ever tried to kill me before. Certainly not a famous scientist." Charlotte felt her cheeks blush. "Don't ever change," he whispered, so close she felt his breath on her cheek.

She knew she should remind him about the "Nuke the Scientists" button. She should hold him accountable for his silly speech about the burdens of power. A speech as fatuous as a rock-n-roll lyric. What did he think his work on the commission was? How dare he patronize her. She opened her mouth to speak, but no

words would come. What was he doing to her? His eyes filled with tears. They dripped down onto her cheeks and words no longer mattered. Her mouth sought his

chin, his fingers, his tongue, his nipples. She wanted him. Now. Before the pill-induced hypothermia shut down their bodies. Before the ice crushed the shelter. Before they were pushed up to the surface into the toxic proton cloud.

The lights blinded Charlotte. She shut her eyes again, listening to the beep of electronics, to the voices issuing orders.

"She's coming round," someone said.

"Thank God." Someone else who sounded like Michael Carter.

She tried to lift her hand. It hurt. A big IV stuck out of bandages taped across the inside of her elbow. Her hand was wrapped in thick bandages.

Carter avoided touching the bandaged hand and lifted her arm gently, laying it back across her stomach. He briefly turned his back to her and seemed to be taking a deep breath. When he faced her again, he was smiling.

"Congratulations, you're a hero!"

"I . . . what?"

"St. August left a note telling us how you kept going deeper into the volcano even though you thought it might be erupting. You have nerves of steel, Charlotte. I would have made for the surface, and the ice would have pushed me right out into the radiation."

A note? He left a note? No! "Jimmy? Jimmy St. August?" She struggled to ask the question even though she was terrified to have it answered.

"He's fine. . . ."

Carter kept talking but Charlotte didn't understand the words. He was fine! He was alive! Thank God! She looked around the room, searching for him, expecting to see the infirmary and Dr. Lanier, but nothing was familiar. "Where are we? Aren't we on Station?"

"We're at the launch facility." Carter looked down at the floor. "Station is gone. But at least no one was killed. We've had to temporarily evacuate most

personnel back to Earth. It was too dangerous to move you, so we brought the specialists up here."

"The ice. . . " she said, remembering.

"Ammonia!" Carter's face beamed and grew animated. "And water ice. Waste heat from Station melted a huge pocket of clathrates. It exploded up through the regolith like a geyser. Imagine, Charlotte. Tons of ammonia. We'll have all the nitrogen we need to make Station biologically self-sufficient."

The new doctor from Earth tapped Carter on the shoulder and urged him to the door, but Carter wasn't ready to leave just yet. "You better hurry up and get well, Charlotte. There's too much work for me to do alone."

The strange doctor grew more insistent, holding onto Carter's elbow.

"I better go," he said, his voice breaking slightly. "Rest up."

Jimmy. Where was Jimmy? Charlotte wondered, as the doctor unwrapped the bandages covering her hands and mumbled something about minimizing necrosis and physical therapy. She barely listened until the sudden loosening of the gauze unleashed a wave of pain. Her fingers felt like they were on fire. She cried out in spite of herself "Sorry," the doctor mumbled as he sprayed something on her hands. "Nurse," he called.

A nurse holding an IV bag in his hand stepped forward and fiddled with Charlotte's IV, adjusting the drip of pain medication. He was alive. She didn't let herself think of what she had tried to do. She couldn't. Fleeing the ice had been a bad dream, an evil dream. She could awaken now. Carter had said he was alive. The doctor put on a fresh dressing. The nightmare was over. It was safe to let the pain medication take effect. She fell asleep while the doctor was still rewrapping her hands in gauze.

She felt him even before she awoke. She knew he would be in the room with her when she opened her eyes, but it was Michael Carter who spoke her name. "Charlotte. Can you wake up for a minute?"

A nurse propped up Charlotte's mattress and rearranged her pillows so she could sit up.

"St. August is recovered enough to be sent back to Earth. His bigger body mass kept his injuries to a minimum. We can only keep essential personnel on the Moon now until we rebuild Station." A reporter and camera man were fiddling with lights and video equipment at the entrance to her room. "The press wants to interview both of you and the PR department thinks it's a good idea. Think you can handle it?"

Charlotte didn't answer. Sitting in a wheelchair at the foot of her bed was St. August.

He got up and walked to her side.

She turned to look at the wall, the digital monitors next to her bed, anywhere but at him. "It's okay," he whispered into her ear. She felt his sandpapery fingertips on her cheek as he turned her face back and gently kissed her lips. "Never change. Promise me."

Then the questions started. From the reporter in her room and from other reporters on two-way video.

"How did the accident with the oxygen supply happen?" "When did it happen?"

"How

long before the flare started did you reach the volcano?" "What made you think the volcano was erupting?" "When did you realize the ice mass was surging?"

"Why

did Dr. Glass lead Mr. St. August to the shelter that lay furthest from the surface?" "How fast was the oxygen leak?"

"Are you going to sue the Space Agency, Mr. St. August?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Well, the dosage. You almost died."

"I was the one who very foolishly suggested taking eight pills. Charlotte wanted

us to take only four pills. If I had only listened." His hand hovered over her bandages.

"What will you recommend to the President, Mr. St. August?" "Should the program go forward?" the reporter asked.

"Of course. My visit has convinced me that the valuable work being done here on

the moon should continue. Much of it accrues back to benefit the Earth and determining that was the main concern of my trip here."

The rest of the interview flew by in a blur. He wasn't going to stop the project! Charlotte realized. Her work was safe! When the reporters left, he bent

over her bed and kissed her forehead.

She lifted up her bandaged lands, not caring that it hurt and held onto his arm.

"Why?" she asked.

"Time to take up something new, I guess. "He flicked his long hair back over his

shoulder. "Any way, I pay my debts. You were right. I did come to the Moon with

the intention of shutting down Station. It still seems wrong to spend billions of dollars to keep a few scientists in space, when millions of kids back on Earth are dying of hunger." He brushed his fingertips across her cheek. "You could have left me to die. You saved my life with those pills back in the shelter.

"Don't change, Charlotte," he said, but it was too late. The explosion of clathrates had changed everything. Somehow, she didn't know quite how yet, but somehow he would prove to Jimmy St. August that Moon Station wasn't a waste of

money. Work was what counted, and somehow she would show him that the space program was just the beginning, that one day it would feed all those starving millions he cared so much about.

When she woke again, Biankowski was sitting in a chair next to her bed.

"Christ, we were lucky, Glass. First the solar flare. Then you and St. August. Then the damage to Station. Lucky no one was killed. That would have shut us down for sure. Good thinking, with the hypothermia thing. Though I think you could have kept your clothes on."

"My nakedness won't shut down the project, will it?"

"I hope this disaster won't. Every time the manned space program has fatalities -- Apollo 1, Challenger, Freedom -- the pressures to shut it down grow harder to resist." The boss disappeared from his demeanor and a little-boy wistfulness appeared in his eyes, as he asked, "St. August's report . . .?"

"Don't worry about him," Charlotte told him, wishing she weren't so sure, but St. August was running true to type. He really was shallow. How could he abandon his ideals to discharge a personal debt? Well, it fit the profile, didn't it?

She knew it was a lie as soon as she thought it, but it was a lie she needed to believe like she needed to breathe. Now, there was just a hint of a bitter taste in her mouth. There needed to be more. Concentrate, Charlotte. Finally, she felt as if she needed to spit.

Biankowski handed her a paper cup filled with water. She spat into a paper tissue. She could do it. She would work at it until she believed the lie. Again. Work, that was a thing she was good at. Work was what really counted.

Biankowski tried to shake her hand and got caught in the IV tubing. Untangling his own hand again, he settled for patting her on the shoulder. "Congratulations, Glass. You saved Station."

It felt good to be back on the Moon again. At work, where she belonged, Charlotte thought. She leafed through the sheets of chemical analyses with the prosthetic glove covering the damaged fingers of her left hand. The glove was getting easier to work with now, feeling almost natural. Her right hand wouldn't win any beauty contests, but it remained serviceable. No glove needed. "These look good, real good," she said to Michael Carter

It wasn't just the analyses that looked good, but also the research proposals she'd seen lying on Biankowski's desk. Only the lack of ammonia had held the Space Agency back before. Genetic magnification of the protein content in root crops; amplification of the vitamins found in grains -- the Moon was the perfect laboratory.

Carter shushed her and pointed at the TV in the corner of their shared office inside the laser launch facility.

Jimmy St. August was singing his latest single, written on the long flight back to Earth. His band, the Panterrans, played accompaniment.

"But if we have a future, on the Moon and on the Earth,
Then will you come and guide us, remind us of our worth?

And if we have a future, we cannot forget to dream

The Moon was made for dreaming in the sky

Did we forget we all were made to fly?

I learned death and redemption from the lady in the Moon

Across a harsh and blasted desert, I've seen a globe of priceless blue

From the Moon, we are the heaven in the sky

And I learned we are together one and all

Alone in bitter blackness, the Earth a fragile ball

And from that far perspective, it's so small

But that makes it no less precious, not at all"

The camera cut to a news clip. St. August stepped out onto the top of the shuttle staircase. In the blitz of camera lights, his face glowed, as if surrounded by a halo.

Charlotte watched him raise the guitar-calloused fingers of both hands and wave to the fans crowding the tarmac behind the reporters.

For the first time she understood what he held in those empty hands. She wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of the glove. Still didn't make it right. Things were just too goddamned easy for him.

For Geoff Landis with many thanks for the encouragement, the numerous helpful articles, and conversations. And for being my friend.