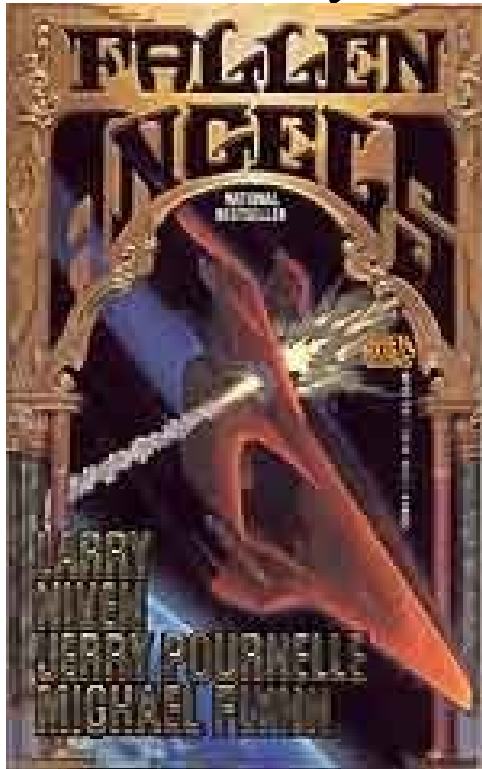


FALLEN ANGELS

Larry Niven

Jerry Pournelle

Michael Flynn



work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

at © 2000 by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle and Michael Flynn

s reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form.

Books Original

ublishing Enterprises

1403

, NY 10471

en.com

671-72052-X

t by Bob Eggleton

ting, December 1992

ed by Simon & Schuster

venue of the Americas

k, NY 10020

n by Windhaven Press, Auburn, NH

the United States of America

World eBook Library Consortia

Baen Free Library

Science Fiction eBook Collection

The World eBook Library, www.worldLibrary.net is an effort to preserve and disseminate literature, serials, bibliographies, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference works in a number of languages and countries around the world. Our mission is to serve the public, aid students, and support research by providing public access to the world's most complete collection of electronic books on-line as well as offer a variety of services and resources to support and strengthen the instructional programs of education, elementary through post baccalaureate studies.

This eBook has certain copyright implications you should read.

This book is copyrighted by the Baen Publishing Enterprises, <http://www.baen.com/library>. With permission copies may be distributed so long as (1) are for your or others personal use only, and (2) are not distributed or used commercially. Prohibited distribution includes any service that makes this file for download or commercial distribution in any form, (See complete disclaimer <http://worldlibrary.net/Copyrights.html>) or email info@baen.com

World eBook Library Consortia
Box 22687
Honolulu, Hawaii 96823
info@WorldLibrary.net



CHAPTER ONE

"Aspiring to Be Gods . . ."

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

Piranha was kissing high atmosphere.

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

ling, they called it.

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

s parents had once taken him atop the Sears Tower and another time to the edge of
sa Verde cliffs; and each time he had thought what an awful long way down it
en, they had taken him so far up that down ceased to mean anything at all.

ex stared out of *Piranha's* windscreen at the cloud deck, trying to conjure that
of height; trying to feel that the clouds were *down* and he was *up*. But it had all
o many years ago, in another world. All he could see was distance. Living in the
s did that to you. It stole height from your senses and left you only with distance.
glanced covertly at Gordon Tanner in the copilot's seat. If you were born in the
s, you never knew height at all. There were no memories to steal. Was Gordon
than he, or not?

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

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

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

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

Not bitter because . . . That part he did not want to think about. Just enjoy the ride; become one with it. If this was to be his last trip, he would enjoy it while he could. If everything went A-OK, he'd be back upstairs in a few hours, playing the hero to a minute or so that people would care. A real hero, not a retired hero. Then back in the care center wiping snotty noses. It would be years before another dip trip was in the cards.

He'd never be on the list again.

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

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

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

Or, he could always go out the way Mish Lykonov had in *Moon Rat*, auguring in to *tranquillitas*. They'd have a ceremony—and they'd miss the ship more than him.

Mary. Maybe especially Mary, since she'd got him the mission.

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

What's the delayet? Alex!"

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

He was getting a reading on the air temperature gauge!"

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

Gordon nodded, still unbelieving.

Gordon had read the book. Come to that, Gordon read a lot of books, but books don't

do much. No one ever learned anything out of a book, anyway. This was why they

always teamed a newbie with an old pro. Hands-on learning. The problem with

job training for this job was that there was not a hell of a lot of room for trial and

error. Alex moved the stick gently, and felt the ship respond. *Not vacuum anymore!* He

had brought them up level, feeling the air rushing past just outside the skin. His

ned across the gauges. Here. There. Not reading them. Just a glance to see if
ing was wrong, or if something had changed since the last glance. Dynamic air
ature. Stagnation air temperature. The Mach number needle sprang to life, leaped
ro to absurdity, then hunted across the dial. A grin stretched itself across his face.
es now. He hadn't forgotten at all; not a damned thing.
hat is funny?" Gordon demanded.
ld war-horse heard the trumpet again. Now it's your turn. Take the stick." Fun was
t it was time for the kid to wrap his hands around the real thing. There was only so
ou could do in a simulator. "There. Feel it?"
h . . ." Gordon pulled back slightly on the copilot's stick. He looked uncertain.
hadn't felt anything. "Take over," Alex growled. "You're flying the ship now.
ou tell?"
ell . . ." Another tentative move at the controls.
anha wobbled. "Hey! Yeah!"
ood. Look, it's hard to describe, but the ship will tell you how she's doing if you
sten. I don't mean you should forget the gauges. Keep scanning them; they're your
d ears. But you've got to listen with your hands and feet and ass, too. Make the
extension of your entire body. Do you feel it? That rush? That's air moving past
ve miles per second. Newton's not flying us anymore. You are."
rdon flashed a nervous grin, like he'd just discovered sex.
hat's our flight path?" Alex asked.
h . . ." A quick glance at the map rollout. "Greenland upcoming."
ood. Hate to be over Norway."
hy?"
y. Didn't the kid listen to the downside news broadcasts? *Gordon, this is your*
Don't you care? No, he probably didn't. It was his grandparents planet.
here's war in Norway. If we flew over, somebody would cruise a missile at us sure
nquakes, and we'd never even know which side did it."
e new tiling was wonderful. In the old days, the ship's skin would be glowing; but
. Four thousand degrees and no visible sign at all. Still, they'd be glowing like a
n's dream on an IR screen, new tiles or no, and that was all the Downers would
vector in on.
hich side?" Gordon mused. "What are the sides?"
ex laughed. "That's one of the reasons we can't be sure. When it started, it was
as left of NATO defending the Baltics." Non-nuclear, but it just went on and on
Alex didn't really care who won any more than Gordon did. "After a while, the
navians and the Russians took a nervous look over their shoulders at the glaciers,
st versus West became North versus South."
lly bastards. Nye kulturni."

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

Gordon mulled it. "Why south?"

Alex couldn't help the grin. "Never mind. Let me take her again. Hang on, while I kill some velocity. Watch what I do and follow me." He stroked the stick gently. "Come on, we go, baby. You'll love this. Drop the scoop face-on to the wind. Open wide. Right. Spread your tail, just for a moment ... Alex realized that his lips were moving and he'd pumped them shut. The younger ones didn't understand when he talked to the ship. "I was having enough trouble feeling the ship. "Okay," he said finally, "that's done. Over, again."

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

Alex ran a hand lightly across the instrument panel. Scoopships were pretty in an old-fashioned way: lifting bodies with gaping scoops that made them look like early jet fighters. They could not land—no landing gear—but they didn't dip into the water as far as the scoops were concerned. They were the hottest ships around. *Piranha* skimmed above the glare-white earth as hot as any meteor, but never too hot to handle. Humming, vibrating, functional.

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

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

mm?"

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

Alex grinned. That was good. Gordon was flying a scoopship on a dip trip, sucking five miles per, and trying to make casual conversation. *That's right, Gordo. You do this sort of thing all tensed up; you've got to be relaxed.*

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

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

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

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

The green hills of earth, he thought. Now the glaciers—not rivers of ice, but vast sheets of ice—were spreading south at tens of miles a year. Hundreds of miles in some places. In the dictionary, "glacial" meant slow; but Ice Ages came on fast. Ten thousand years ago the glaciers had covered England and most of Europe in less than a century. It was known that since the sixties . . . though no one had ever seen fit to revise his textbooks. But what did that matter? To a school kid a century was forever anyway. It was for Gordon . . . He glanced again at his copilot. Well, what the world is like in our time is what it should be like forever. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever will be. It was funny to think of groundside environmentalists desperately struggling with Nature, trying to preserve forever the temporary conditions and mayfly species of the interglacial. Alex looked again through the cockpit windscreen and sighed. "We could have stopped it," he said abruptly.

"Why?" Gordon gave him a puzzled glance.

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

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

Of a sudden, Alex's earphones warbled. He touched a hand to his ear. "*Piranha*

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

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

What?" He said something else, too rapid to follow.

English, damn your eyes!"

Oh. Yeah. Roger. Scoops closed."

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

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

Even o'clock low.

Constant bearing and closing."

Drop flares." That wouldn't do any good. *Piranha* was the hottest thing in the sky

now. But like the lady said, while spooning chicken soup to the dead man, it

didn't hurt. "How are they seeing us?"

Band."

Am it."

Am."

Sure enough was. Alex grunted. At least Gordo had read *that* book. Alex squinted

at the radar. There was the bogey, sure enough. Small. Constant bearing and closing.

on." He peeled off to starboard and watched the heat gauge rise. *Piranha* didn't

seem to be coming in for a near miss to tear off. Just small, fat fins and a big, broad, flat belly to be

evaporated or pierced. Alex bit his lip. Don't think about that. Concentrate on

what you can do.

The sharp turn pushed him against the corner of his seat. Alex relaxed to the extra

padding and prayed that his Earth-born bones would remember how to take it. Decades of

padding had turned him soft. The acceleration felt like a ton of sand covering him. He felt

it start in his sinuses. But he could take it. He could take it because he had to.

Gordon sat gripping the arms of the copilot's seat. His cheeks sagged. His head
Gordon had been born in free fall and thrust was new to him. He looked
ned. It must feel like he'd taken sick.
e turn seemed to go on forever. Alex watched the bogey on the scope. Each sweep
rm brought the blip closer to the center. Closer. He pulled harder against the stick.
xt blip was left of center. Then it arced away. Alex knew that was an illusion. The
had gone straight; *Piranha* had banked.
ou lost it!" Gordon shouted. He turned and looked at Alex with a grin that nearly
s face in two.
ex smiled back. "Scared?"
ell, no."
eah. Me, too. Anyone flying at Mach 26 while a heatseeking cruise missile tries to
his ass is entitled to be scared." He toggled the radio. It was Management Decision
Big Momma, we have lost the bogey. Do you have instructions?"
ere was a pause; short, but significant. "We need that nitrogen," said Mary's voice.
ex waited for her to finish, then realized that she had. *We need that nitrogen*. That
she was going to say, leaving the ball in his octant.
course we need the nitrogen, he thought. Recycling wasn't perfect. Gas molecules
ed right through the walls of the stations. Every now and then someone had to
e bucket to the well and get some more. The question was when. When someone
itchy finger was sitting in a missile farm somewhere below?
could pack it home and be the goat; his last trip a failure. Delta vee thrown away
gain. Or he could fly heroically into the jaws of death and suck air. Either way, it
ng to be his decision.
sensed Lonny Hopkins's spidery hand behind things. If Mary was performing
le deniability on his bones, it must be because her husband was floating right
her at the comm console, one hand gentle on her shoulder, while she downlinked
tud who had . . .
us, but some people had long memories.
ell, Mary was a free citizen, wasn't she? If the wife of the station commander
little extracurricular, it's her choice. She had never pushed him away; not until
t night together. We're hanging on up here by our fingernails, she had said then.
got to all pull together; stand behind the station commander.
ght.
body could stand behind Lonny Hopkins because he never turned his back on
. With good reason. Maybe he's right. He is good at the goddam job, and maybe
ition is so precarious that there's no room for democratic debate. That doesn't
have to like it.
d it's decision time.

nderstood, Big Momma. We'll get your air." *Take that, Commander Lonny*
s. He clicked off and turned to Gordon. "Open the scoops, but bleed half of it to
mjets."
lex . . ." Gordon frowned and bit his lip.
hey say they need the air."
eah-da." Gordon's fingers flipped toggled switches back up.
ex felt the drag as the big scoop doors opened again. The doors had just completed
cle when Gordon bean shouting. "Ekho! Ekho priblizháyetsya!"
nglish!"
omething exploded aft of the cabin and Alex felt his suit pop out. His ears tried to
d Alex MacLeod whined deep in his throat.
d forgotten, but his nerves remembered. It wasn't falling he feared, it was air
through his throat, daggers in his ears, pressure trying to rip his chest apart. Five
is suit had leaked air while they worked to save *Freedom Station*. He wore the
ruptured veins and arteries, everywhere on his body, as if Lonny Hopkins had
im to a mad tattoo artist. There were more scars in his lungs and in his sinus
. A sixth exposure to vacuum would have his brains spewing through his nose.
ouldn't come out to play; they had to keep him in the day-care center.
s fists clenched on the controls in a rigor mortis grip. He heard his own whine of
and Gordon's shout, and felt *Piranha* falling off hard to port. And his suit was
, holding.
fought the stick hard when he tried to steady her. Had he recovered too late?
ast, baby," he said through clenched teeth. "Hold fast." Hold Fast was the ancient
f the MacLeod. Alex wished fleetingly that he had the Fairy Flag that Clan
od unfurled only in the gravest peril. *Piranha* vibrated and shuddered. Something
d with the sound of piano wire. "Come on, baby. Steady down."
redibly, she did. "Good girl," he muttered, then tongued the uplink on his suit
Big Momma, Big Momma. We've been hit." There was nothing for it now but use
ne air they'd scooped, and anything else, to light off the jets. Get back in orbit; out
Vell. When you're in orbit you're halfway to anywhere! Get in orbit and pickup
be easy. He toggled the switches.
e rocket wouldn't light. The rocket wouldn't light. Air speed was dropping
y. The rocket wouldn't light. He suppressed the knot of panic that twisted itself in
Time enough afterward, if there was an afterward. The scramjet alone was not
to reach orbit again. It wouldn't be long before *Piranha* would be moving too
to keep the jet lit. She would become a glider.
d not a terribly good glider.
ex swallowed. It looked awfully cold down below. And the rocket wouldn't light.

"Mayday," he said. "Mayday. *Piranha* has a problem." A part of his mind was
d, admiring the cool way he reacted after that one moment of terror.
his is Big Momma. What is your status?"
ll, I'm just fine, Mary; and how are you? "We're going in, Mary. Tell my family.
n my file directory. Access code word is *dunvegan*." He glanced over at Gordon,
teenager just shook his head. His face was white through the plexiglass face
"And the Tanner family, too." Gordon didn't have any children yet. He was the
Damned near unwanted child at that: a stilyagi, a JayDee on parole. *Some parole!*
where we land and get the message out. Tightbeam."
e phones hissed for long seconds. "Sure, Alex. We have friends on Earth. Maybe
ny, but . . . We'll tell them. They'll take care of you. Can you—can you get her

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

hen that's two things you do well."

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

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

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

anded on Earth once before, Gordon. Who else do you know who can say that?"

orbett, Space Cadet. That's me. Disguised as a washed-up day-care gopher, he is in
Alex MacLeod, Hot Pilot. Lord, just let me get us down in one piece.

teen miles up and the air was thick. Mach 3.5. The clouds below were puffy with
nce. *Piranha* was diving into a storm. He wondered whether North Dakota was
mountainous.

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

re, but step outside afterward. Your eyeballs will freeze so cold they'll shatter
ou blink . . .

e clouds closed in and he was flying by radar. Dropping. Dropping. Lose velocity
urns. Mach 2.5 and falling.

Gordon couldn't lift his head against the acceleration. "At least we'll have life support," he said suddenly. "Life support for four billion people, my teacher told me. And it won't get really cold, right? Cold enough to freeze water, but not carbon dioxide." Alex grunted. Cold enough to freeze water. *Gordo, what is the human body made of?* he thought. "Right," he said. Gordon wasn't a distraction. He was just a voice. The last thing Alex wanted during his last moments was dead silence. There would be enough of that later.

Stay positive, Alex boy. You'll live through the landing, so you can freeze to death later.

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

Piranha didn't have wheels.

As the missile descended, he remembered what Mary had said. He wondered who she had meant. Earth's four great powers had hated the *Peace* and *Freedom* space stations with a passion. A dozen nations had fought a war when the nitrogen dipping started; but they had no space capabilities, so it meant anything but noise. Now *Piranha* was diving into their hands.

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

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

* * *

Arnar Haraldsson had watched the flame from his stading. He was wrapped in his parka, heavy boots, mittens like bowling balls, but still he shivered. His breath was visible in the evening air. He always took a turn around the house before they went to bed down for the night checking the gate, the wolf-traps, making sure none of the traps had been accidentally left outside. It came just at dusk, a fiery stream low across the sky still large and burning as it hit the ice and sent up clouds of steam. Not a shooting star. Not a sky stone like he'd heard of. It had come in too shallow, too controlled. A ship of some sort. Yes, surely it was Angels.

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

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

pride, in reas'ning pride, our error lies;
quit their sphere and rush into the skies!
piring to be Gods if Angels fell,
piring to be Angels men rebel."

CHAPTER TWO

"One Moment in Childhood. . . "

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

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

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

Not at the University, after all. That really ticked her off. The 'danes who signed her check bought the right to wake her up, sometimes and for some things; but ex-employees did not. "Bob," she said, "do you know what time it is?" Certainly. Two-forty-three. Plus or minus three sigma."

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

"I need you, Sherrine. Now."

"What? Look, Bob, that's all over." And why couldn't some men ever believe that? "I'll be there in five minutes."

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

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

Damn him. She was wearing heavy flannel socks, and she kept a pair of woolly socks under the sheets with her. She played contortionist for a while finding them and pulling them on. Then she slipped out of bed, leaving the covers carefully in place so the bed would stay warm. A heavy housecoat hung over the back of the chair next to the bed. She struggled into it and shivered her way to the bathroom.

When she flipped the switch on the bulb glowed at about quarter-strength. Sometimes a brownout could be convenient. Real light would have blinded her just then. She brushed her teeth to get the nighttime fuzzies out. The water in the basin wasn't quite hot, but it shocked her teeth when she rinsed. She spat out into the commode, because there was no sense in wasting the rest of the water in the sink. "Conservation will see us through," the posters said. *And when there's nothing left to give?* She ran a comb through her hair. It needed brushing, but she was too cold. "What does Bob Needleton see in you," she asked her reflection, "that he's coming here the dead of night?" The beanpole in the mirror did not answer. Big nose. Big mouth. Not quite pretty. She could explain why Jake left; but not why Bob wouldn't.

She opened the door on the first knock and stood out of the way. The wind was swirling the ground snow in swirling circles. Some of it blew in the door as Bob entered. She slammed the door behind him. The snow on the floor decided to wait a while before melting. "Okay. You're here," she snapped. "There's no fire and no place to sit. The bed's the warmest place and you know it. I didn't know you were this hard up. And, by the way, I don't have any company, thanks for asking." If Bob couldn't figure out from that much that she was pissed, he'd never win the prize as Mr. Perception. "I am that hard up," he said, moving closer. "Let's get it on." "What?" Bob had never been one for subtle technique, but this was pushing it. He tried to step back but his hands gripped her arms. They were cold as ice, even through the housecoat. "Bob!" He pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair. "It's not what you think," he whispered. "We don't have time for this, worse luck." "Bob!"

"No, just bear with me. Let's go to your bedroom. I don't want you to freeze." He led her to the back of the house and she slid under the covers without inviting him. He lay on top, still wearing his thick leather coat. Whatever he had in mind, she knew it wasn't sex. Not with her housecoat, the comforter and his greatcoat playing for distraction.

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

"Angels?" Was he crazy?

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

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

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

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

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

How do you know about it?"

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

"Where?"

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

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

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

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

"We're going to rescue them."

"Where? Who's we?"

"The Con Committee, some of the fans—"

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

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

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

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

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

"Where?" A tiny trickle of electric current ran up her spine. But . . . *Nah*. "Bob, I don't want to. My bosses thought I was associating with fen, I'd lose my job."

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

"It's a Proud and Lonely Thing to Be a Fan, they used to say, laughing. It had been a very lonely thing. The Establishment had always been hard on science fiction. The government-funded Arts Councils would pass out tax money to write obscure poetry

le" magazines, but not to write speculative fiction. "Sci-fi isn't literature." *That* censorship.

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

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

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

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

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

mn right! she thought savagely. We do conspire to bring back technology. Some e crazy enough to think that there are alternatives to freezing in the dark. *And f us are even crazy enough to try to rescue marooned spacemen before they freeze, opear into protective custody.*

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

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

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

ot Fandom. I was reading the true quill long before I knew about Fandom and d such. No, it was the feeling of hope."

ope?"

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

b was silent for a moment. Then he nodded. "Yeah. Nobody's building the future
e, 'We live in an Age of Limited Choices.' " He quoted the government line
y cracking a smile. "Hell, you don't *take* choices off a list. *You make* choices and
m to the list. Speaking of which have you made your choice?"

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

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

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

b shrugged.

ou want me to risk my life on the Ice, defy the government and probably lose my
crazy, amateur effort to rescue two spacemen who might easily be dead by the
e reach them."

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

uixotic. Give me four minutes."

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

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

b's van had less than half a tank of alcohol, so they topped it with the fuel from

She rolled her eyes up watching them. Typical fanac, she thought. Six people
o work a syphon at the same time. Finally Thor took over the whole thing and
e retired gratefully to the van with the rest and shivered while she waited.

or was outside, but he wasn't shivering. Sherrine watched him through the

y. He was built like the god whose name he used, and nothing about him had

d since she had known him except for the beard.

en with the last drop of alkey sucked from the car's tank, the van had less than a

k. Thor climbed into the van and slid the door closed. He still had the syphon.

e poked her nose out of her coat.

eeping the syphon?"

s grin was lopsided and too wide. Siphoning alcohol . . . He held the rubber hose
an Appalachian snake handler. "We can't make it to Mapleton and back on one

might not be too smart to gas up at a public station. 'Specially after we collect Rafe
oe."
Who?"
the Angels."
h. You know their names?"
nose are code names." That was Mike Glider, grinning on her right. "Gotta have
names on a clandestine operation."
are you do; there are standards to keep up."
e shook her head. Mike knew everything there was to know and had opinions on
. He'd been a county agricultural agent since quitting the IRS; but that was just
or his true identity as Oral Historian of Fandom. He was "tall and round and three
d pound," in his own words. If they froze on the Ice, he'd freeze last.
b started the van and Sherrine felt that electric thrill surging deep and strong. Real
en. Oh, God, to talk to them! Space stations. Moon base. Angels down; fans to the
e looked around at her companions. "Thor, you look like a Mormon patriarch."
ne beard's for warmth. I shave the mustache off so snot won't freeze in it. Ever
why Eskimos don't grow more hair? Evolution in action."
unh. No." Fans were a wellspring of minutiae, a peculiar mix of the trivial and the
al. Try asking about Inuit tonsorial practices in a group of mundanes! She tried to
snot-encrusted mustaches from her thoughts.
elcome back, Sherrine." Bruce Hyde was riding shotgun. He twisted around in his
look at her. "We heard you'd gafiated."
afiated." She looked him straight in the eye, daring him to disagree. She hadn't
away from it all; she'd been *forced away from it all*. She resented Bruce's probing.
bs I wanted I couldn't get if I were a known fan. My thesis advisor kept dropping
ints about getting down to earth and being realistic. So Jake and I went
e."
uce was overweight, but not in Mike's league; and his bulk was more muscle than
was stronger than he looked. His black beard was wild and bushy, wildly unlike
silken, Nordic god look. "How is Jake these days?" he asked.
e dropped her eyes. "I wouldn't know."
b put in his two cents. "Jake left her for a New Cookie five years ago."
anks, Bob. You could hand out flyers! "Jake really did gafiate," she explained. "I
a 'dane because I had to; but he really wanted to. He kept making digs about
and 'Buck Rogers stuff.' Trying to yank my chain. So . . ." A shrug. "We drifted
And in the end they couldn't even talk about it. The teasing turned into arguments;
uments into fights. Eventually she had to watch what she said around him because

ldn't be sure that he wouldn't denounce her for fannishness to the University. And that a hell of a basis for a marriage?

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

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

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

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

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

e let it drop and looked at the two strange faces. "Hi. I'm Sherrine Hartley." know." The man sitting to her left was massively built and had a shaggy mane of air circling his face. He looked like an elderly lion, or an Old Testament patriarch. Waxman, from L.A. Bob told us we were stopping to pick you up." He dropped his to the shoulder of the man next to him. "And this is Steve Mews. He's a Mean

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

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

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

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

ke grinned. "The word do get around."

ow's Worldcon?"

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

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

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

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

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

errine laughed. They were heading for the Dakota Glacier with less than a full
alcohol to rescue two downed spacemen from the clutches of the government. All
but Thor were putting their mundane jobs on the line. And . . . and they were
about what to name the convention! She had forgotten what it was like to be
fans. Her gut relaxed like a fist unclenching after many years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

—before the cops busted us."

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

mm, yes." It was starting to hit her. She'd never been underground before. Now . .
int and her job was done. A couple of slips and she'd be a wanted woman. "Thor,
been hiding out for a while—"

ight years." He sounded proud.

What's it like?"

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

o," she said. "I suppose not."

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

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

They all looked at her. "Plans?" said Mike in a simulated Mexican accent. "We don't have any stinking plans."

Sherrine snorted. *Fans.*

They sailed west on I-94, headed for the Dakota Glacier. Bob drove carefully, no speed for certainty. On clear sections of the highway, he floored it; where the clutter and shrubbery provided cover for police cars, he slowed to a respectable pace. After a while, the chatter died down and everyone settled into their own thoughts. She tried to imagine what they would need for a short trip onto the Ice. Her parents kept a lot of equipment in their barn.

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

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

She wrote *Dying Inside* and you snubbed it! *Son of Man's* out of print totally! You'll never buy you didn't buy *Nightwings*! No more damn science fiction for me!"

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

"Yeah," Sherrine said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

nd last year," she added, "you could only see it in midwinter." The Ice ebbed and
with the seasons, like tides on a hard, white ocean. But some of the snow that fell
nter failed to melt the next summer. The weight in the center of the pack forced
es to flow outward, and the Line moved a few more miles toward civilization. She
o shiver uncontrollably, even though she was wearing a thick down coat and the
ter was running full blast.
or noticed and smiled. He blew a few plaintive notes on his whistle; then
ed:

ome say the world will end in fire,
me say in ice.
om what I've tasted of desire
old with those who favor fire."

eryone chuckled. "That's from 'Fire and Ice,' " Thor said. "By Robert Frost."
rost," said "Mike. "That's appropriate."
ll Waxman grunted. "Finish the stanza," he said.
or stopped smiling and looked out the side window at the shimmering horizon.
while, he continued in a voice so soft she had to strain to hear him.

ut if it had to perish twice,
I know enough of hate
that for destruction ice
great
ould suffice."

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

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

Brandon was deserted. Everything in town was dark, except the few streetlights. The light reflecting off the crusted snow cast a dim, pearly light over the blank houses. There was not so much as a porch light on. Sherrine didn't suppose that Brandon had ever been so empty at four-thirty in the morning, but this felt different. Not just sleepy, but empty. Bob pulled into the General Mills station and honked the horn, but no one responded. A minute or so, Thor said the hell with it and climbed outside. His boots broke through the crust and he sank into the snow to his knees. He waded through the snow to the gas pumps. "Premium okay?" he asked. He unhooked the hose and flipped the switch. "Power's still on." When he squeezed the pump handle nothing happened. "The mechanism's frozen," he called out. He unscrewed the gas cap and stuck the nozzle in the tank. He stood there squeezing and releasing, squeezing and releasing until the gasohol began to flow into the tank. Mike gave a huzzah and he and Bruce slapped each other's backs.

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

Sherrine rummaged around under the greasy blanket and tool kit and came up with a red plastic container. She passed it up and Bob rolled down the window and gave her the gas can.

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

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

any who?" said Thor, clapping his hands together. "This town is dead. Everyone's been chased 'em out." "There's still power," she pointed out. "Yeah." He pulled his gloves off with his teeth and stuffed his hands under his seat. "Ghu, but that pump handle was cold! I wonder how close the Edge is to town?" Bruce turned around in his seat. "I think we should see if there are anymore gas cans at the station. We should fill them up, too. We mightn't get another chance like this." That was Bruce; a take-charge kind of guy, although she noticed that he didn't leap into the snow himself. Thor gave him a disgusted look. Why think of it after he had come back into the van? Thor didn't volunteer, either; he had done his stint. Steve shrugged and untwisted himself from his lotus position. Like Thor, he opened the rear van door only wide enough to squeeze through. There was plenty of residual heat inside the van from the heater and from their bodies, and no need to waste it. Steve watched him try the door to the station. It was open. Steve hesitated and glanced back into the van. Then he shrugged and disappeared inside. A few minutes later he came back juggling five more gas cans, which he filled at the pump that Thor had unfrozen.

When everyone was back inside and the cans strapped in place, Bob started the engine and pulled back out onto the state road. Steve held his hands palm out over the car seat. "Thor was right," he said. "The town is abandoned. The gas station was closed. All of the tools and most of the stock is gone." Steve bounced as he talked, tapping on the balls of his feet. "I found a couple of packing crates that had broken open. The contents salvaged. When folks left here, they left in good order. No panic. No rushing. I'll bet there's not a U-Haul or rental truck left in town." "Good." Will Waxman crossed his arms over his chest and settled back against the back wall of the van. "That's the way it should be. A fighting retreat, not a rout. I'll bet the station owner left the lights and pumps running on purpose. For travelers like us." "Terrine didn't say anything. She stared out the back window as the night swallowed the town. It was only Labor Day and already there was a foot of snow on the ground. By next winter Brandon would be half-buried. By next winter it would be gone; and the memories that had given it life would be gone with it. No more bake sales. No Harvest Queens or church socials. In a generation, its very name would be forgotten. As gone as if it had never been, more forgotten than Lake Wobegon . . . " "They took all their stuff with them," Steve continued. "But they didn't bother to lock up or turn things off." Bob shifted the van into high and pulled off the ramp onto the interstate. "They knew they'd never be back," he said.

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

Evansville, the Edge loomed close by the Interstate and she could see the caverns
vasses that made up the wall of ice. A playground of the imagination. There were
with battlements of crenels and merlons; cathedrals of buttresses and spires.
holes bored by fantastic creatures. Faerie pillars of gleaming crystal standing
like sentinels on the prairie, yards in front of the tidal wave of ice. In other
the Edge was a gradual sloping ramp leading up to the frozen plateau above.
ve and Will were entranced by the sight; and even Sherrine and the other
ed Northerners gazed in awe. It was one thing to live near the Ice, to see it in
s and photographs. It was another thing to look upon it in all its cold and terrible

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

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

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

at past the Fergus Falls exit, Bob grunted and hit the brakes. The van fishtailed and
across the road. There was a confusion of arms and legs and a great deal of
g as Sherrine and everyone else tumbled around in the back. When the van had
l, she untangled herself and gave Mike a dirty look. He spread his hands.
ey, I just grabbed something to keep from bouncing around."

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

"Take a look at this, you guys." Bob reached under the dash and flipped the switch outside flood lights. Sherrine crowded forward with the others and stared through windshield. She sucked in her breath, and even Mike was uncharacteristically silent. A great half-completed arch of ice was poised over the westbound lanes, like a monstrous wave frozen in the moment of breaking. "Shit," said Steve. It sounded like a bomb sometimes," said Mike, finding his voice at last, "the upper layers slide out *over* the lower layers."

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

"Thank you?" Mike asked.

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

"It looks bad," Mike said.

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

Bob whirled on him. "How far? All the way to Regina! How the hell should I know? The AAA people at AAA told me the road was open, but their last report was a week old." "A week old! Sherrine looked up at the star-studded night sky. The last weather report she had reentered years ago. She remembered sneaking outside her parents' house in the middle of the night, bundled up against the chill (oh, to be that *warm* again!) and waiting for the spark that marked its fall. The newsreaders played it up: the final defeat of discredited Big Technology was no more. The fact that all low orbits decayed from atmospheric friction and that all such satellites were temporary was somehow used to prove the folly of "spending money in outer space." Better to spend the money here on Earth relocating the people of Newfoundland, made homeless by "an unusually severe winter."

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

Bruce scowled and pulled at his beard. "Do you want to take a chance driving under that ice?"

Bob? It looks strong enough."

Sherrine gave underneath several tons of unsupported ice? She thought only Crazy Eddie could come up with notions like that.

and Bob was shaking his head. "Too chancy."
if to punctuate his remarks, the ice moaned and the sound of far-off thunder
in their ears. A cloud of ice crystals as fine as mist billowed toward them out of the
ss. Somewhere farther down the road a part of the frozen wave had broken off.
e was starting to feel the cold. She gazed longingly at the van. The others stood
shuffling their feet and looking at each other. She waited a moment longer. *This*
is on long enough. "The eastbound lanes are clear," she pointed out.
uce looked shocked. "You want us to turn back?"
e rolled her eyes up. "For Ghu's sake, no!" It took them a moment longer to catch
n Will began chuckling.
or a gang of taboo-shattering imagineers," he said, "we sure do let the Accepted
s of our tribe blinker us. Drive on the left side of the road? What a revolutionary
"

ey drove more cautiously headed west in the eastbound lanes. Bob put the flood
n blinker so oncoming traffic would notice. Not that he expected much oncoming
at six in the morning in rural Minnesota, not along the edge of the glacier, but it
urt to be careful. A few miles farther on, Steve pointed silently out the side
y at the westbound lanes and they saw where the ice had collapsed across the
y, blocking it completely with landbergs. Bob and Bruce exchanged glances and
nched his shoulders over the steering wheel. Sherrine's fingernails dug into her
Two Angels had been down on the Ice now for four and a half hours.
st Elizabeth, the glacier had flowed entirely across the road, and the Army Corps
neers had blasted and dug a channel right through it.
rgo Gap. Sherrine's heart beat slightly faster. A name of romance and bravery and
nation. Fargo Cap. Minneapolis's last link to the ice-free West. Arc lights staged
the worksite made the area almost as bright as daylight. Portable generators
d and men and women with picks and airhammers fought the encroaching ice.
dn't look heroic; they only looked tired. But wasn't that how heroes always
? She saw a cadre wearing Army Corps of Engineer uniforms, but most of the
s were civilians, with only a brassard on the left arm to show that they had been
into the corvéé.
state trooper stopped them well short of the work area. He walked toward the van
b rolled down the window and waited. The trooper wore sunglasses even though it
k. For the glare of the arc lights, she supposed. Or for the macho look. He pulled a
traffic tickets from under his parka.
"Where do you think you're going," he said without preamble.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Since Mike couldn't exactly mention a tightbeam downlink from *Freedom*, he was at a temporary loss for words. And while normally Sherrine might have enjoyed that, she didn't think a long, strained silence would be too smart. So she spoke up. "My parents live near Fargo," she said. "They saw a fireball go down on the Ice and

ne and told me about it. As long as these guys were coming this way to sightsee, I
I'd tag along and see if I could pick up some souvenirs."

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

roze," she repeated.

nd serves them right, too."

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

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

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

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

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

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

e trooper turned away, but Captain Scithers lingered. He leaned an elbow on the
o Bob couldn't roll the window up. "Thought you might be interested," he said.

ed River is pretty much frozen solid north of Perley. Bad news for Winnipeg, but I
ou could drive a truck across without falling through." He straightened and
to them. "Good luck," he said.

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

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

or ran his fingers through his beard. "Must be one hell of a dinner
sationalist."

don't know," said Bob. "Some of the strange stories I've heard about conditions on
he must have some weird tales to tell."
d with that they entered Fargo Gap, the ice on both sides of the highway rearing
and high as canyon walls and sparkling with the reflections of the work lights
them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eliza Crossing the Ice

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

consciousness was a mixed blessing, thought Alex MacLeod. It meant that he was
but it also meant that he hurt. His left arm throbbed with a dull ache. To draw
took immense, frightening effort, and his rib cage burned every time he succeeded.
toggily, he took inventory. He figured that if a bodily part hurt, he still had it. By
erion he had at least come down in one piece.

tried to lift his head to see how Gordon was doing.
couldn't move. Paralyzed? A moment of panic washed over him as he imagined
lying here slowly freezing to death, unable to do anything but wait. But, of
it was only gravity. When he realized that, he laughed out loud, which was a
e, because his ribs hurt worse than ever.
that difference did it make why he was unable to move? Helpless was helpless.
tried the suit radio. "Gordon?"
tic for answer. Gordon must be dead or unconscious. In either case, there was
he could do for him. Come to that, there wasn't much he could do for himself. He
d the uplink on his radio.

ig Momma? *Piranha* here."
ss and crackle. Maybe the radio was broken. He tried again. "Big Momma, do you
e?"

ary's voice came through the noise. "Alex? Is that you?"
no did she think it was? . . . Churlish. "Big Momma, this is MacLeod, I am
us. I do not appear to be seriously injured except that I cannot move. This must be
gravity. Tanner does not respond, I say again, Gordon does not respond. Can you
e a reading on Gordon?"
oger your situation report, MacLeod. Alex, I'm glad to hear your voice. Stand by
report on Tanner."

ex waited while she scanned the medical monitors. Medi-probes were a pain in the
terally—but they had their uses. He wondered if Mary had been standing by in
n Control the whole time he was unconscious, and whether it had been from duty

anything else. *That's right, Alex. Build yourself a few fantasies. You've got nothing to do.*

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

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

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

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

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

"Rescue party?" He started to sit up, but gravity and his ribs kept him flat. He stifled a gasp.

"You mean you're coming to get us?"

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

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

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

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

"I'll tell you we have friends on Earth. There's a team heading for you right now. They have an illegal Navstar link, so they know your precise bearing. The government search parties are still wandering around on the Ice thirty kilometers to the northwest. They don't know you're located, yet. From what we can overhear of their radio traffic, they got a bum report from a local peasant who couldn't estimate distances properly. But it won't be long before they expand their search pattern. With any kind of luck, we'll get you out of there when they read your position."

ex grunted. Not with *any* kind of luck, he thought. It had to be good luck, currently
supply. "How long before this rescue party arrives?"
take it half an hour. They got a late start onto the Ice. It took them a while to find
bedsheets. Watch for them to the south of you. The team leader is code-named
"

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

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

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

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

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

s eyes jerked open. *Bedsheets?*

e second time, he was wakened by the muted sound of motors outside the hull.
stened carefully, holding his breath. Yes, definitely motors. He tongued the radio.
omma?"

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

hear noises outside. Friendlies or government?"

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

our rescuers. They may seem, well, a little strange at first. Just bear with them.

good folks. Considering how things stand on Earth these days, they're risking a
elp you."

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

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

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

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

The face turned away and he heard a faint voice shouting, "Told you so. They're buried in the ice!" It turned back and waved again. It was an effort to return the wave, and after a moment Alex lay back and waited for them to open the hatch. There were banging and stomping over his head. Strange, Mary had said. So far they didn't seem strange. No stranger than anyone who could move about freely in this horrible

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

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

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

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

days, spaceman. I was born on Earth. Kansas."

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

"Are you a doctor?"

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

"Sorry."

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

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

"Breathe slow and deep."

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

urts when you breathe?"
es." He tried to sound blasé.
ouple cracked ribs." Waxman put the stethoscope away. "Don't worry, though.
aren't punctured. Well tape you up, and in a few weeks you ought to be good as

ex grunted. Good news from all over. What the hell; he was due for some good
Doc, how's Gordon? Have you looked at him yet?" The stilyagi was his
ibility. He was the captain; and if it hadn't been for his stupid pride, Gordon
be sitting warm and snug and conscious back in *Freedom*.
ordon? Ah, your copilot. I checked him first. Concussion. No broken bones, no
g, no shock. Your people upstairs say there's nothing wrong internally, but we'll
ful until we can get you to a clinic. How does the arm feel?"
hat? Oh, a little numb. Is it broken?"

Waxman ran his hands down the left arm, squeezing gently. When he reached the
Alex sucked his breath in. Waxman nodded. "Sprain, I'd say. We'll tape that, up,
Sherrine, could you help me here with his ribs?"
A woman came around from behind the pilot's seat. Her parka was unzipped and its
was thrown back, revealing the loveliest woman Alex had ever seen. Tall and thin,
under layers of sweaters, with prominent, fragile bones. "Hi. Sherrine Hartley," she
in a low, throaty voice.
Alex MacLeod." He managed to reach up to take her hand despite the gravity. It
was an effort, but worth it; but he couldn't hold it up long. She patted his hand
in a firm but gentle touch.
Welcome to Earth."

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

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

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

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

"Danes?" Alex was startled. "We were nowhere near Greenland!"
No, not Danes. Apostrophe—danes, as in 'mundanes.' People with no imagination.
who couldn't imagine space travel even *after* it had happened. The 'danes have
left the Earth."

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

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

"No way," Bruce said. "One look at those and the dumbest cop would know where
they are."

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

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

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

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

"All right. Be careful with Gordon—"

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

need for the antenna," Alex said. He pointed to something that looked like a megaphone.

Directional. Not too well focussed, but good enough. Otherwise they'll hear us. When

we get Gordon out of his suit, be sure to get the radio system out of his helmet. And

turn it off. Should I explain? The suit-to-suit radios broadcast all around; anyone

nearby will hear and can lock in to trace us. The suit-to-ship radio can be hooked up

to the directional antenna so you'd have to be more or less in front of it to catch the
signal."

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

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

They wrapped them in blankets. Sherrine and Thor had to carry him to the sled. He

couldn't walk, and could barely stand. Gordon was still out. They carried him over as

Sherrine settled him onto the sled and put on more blankets, then a white sheet.

"What if I?" she asked.

"Would you what?"

"Like the way the 'danes run things."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your grandparents sound like good folks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alex waited. *Freedom* would be below the horizon. Fortunately, there was always something in the sky. The RCA communications satellites, capable of relaying half the distance calls of the world, only the world didn't want them anymore. Now this

d system, capable of thousands of simultaneous calls, served the space stations
few people on Earth who wanted to talk to them.

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

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

ive them decoys."

y again?"

ive them bogeys. I've got it scoped out. Have SUNSAT beam down a few hotspots
d there around the glacier. If they're, looking for IR targets, let's give 'em their
desire."

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

NSAT did that. The U.S. government had nearly completed a demonstration
satellite before the Congress changed their minds and proxmired it. They'd needed
ney for dairy farm subsidies or corporate bailouts or something else real useful.

ire space budget, start to finish, was less than what HEW had spent in a decade,
n the cost *overruns* at the Defense Department; but space was "frills," so they
cut there first. The station had floated in orbit, nickels and dimes away from being
onal, until the crunch came and the habitats decided to cut loose from Earth.

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

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

ex could tell when Lonny entered the comm room from the way Mary talked.

he was alone, he was Alex. When Lonny was there, he was *Piranha*. *Piranha non*

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

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

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

The first search planes broke the southwestern horizon to the right a half hour later. Black specks in the white sky drifted slowly back and forth as they circled. Sherrine stepped back on the snowmobile and watched them. "They look like vultures," she said.

Alex wasn't sure what a vulture was, but it sounded unpleasant. "Are they coming to eat us?" He asked in a whisper, not because he thought the search planes could do that, but because the cold air had made his throat hoarse. "No," said Mike, the sledge driver. "But that's the good news." "What's the bad news?" Alex asked.

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

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

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

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

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

ex grinned. "Sure. Maybe not straightforward, but easy. There's a difference."
"All right. I'll tell the others." She pointed to the other sledge. "Your friend's awake."
Gordon was watching Alex from within his cocoon of blankets on the other edge.
ed to grin, but his face was nearly frozen.
"We live," Gordon said.
"a. How're you feeling?"
"Not good," Gordon said. "These are droogs?"
"a. Good friends." And they can hear anything I say, so I can't tell him Mission
says they may be a trifle weird.
"was—almost good landing," Gordon said. "I read once that any landing you walk
from is good. But we do not walk."
"Not just yet."
"is cold. I see why you laugh when I think that because it only freezes water it is
d. It is very cold." With an effort Gordon pulled a scarf over his face.
"didn't mean to laugh—" No response. Alex drew his own scarf over his mouth so
y his eyes, protected by sunglasses, were exposed, and turned his head away from
d. *Can't blame him if he's a bit surly. All my goddam fault we're here. But we*
the goddam nitrogen.
"what about the nitrogen that was already in the tanks? Eh, Lonny?"
"difficult to move," Gordon said. Alex could barely hear him. "How do people live
I try to sleep now."
"didn't, though. Alex could see that. Gordon wrapped himself up, but he watched
ing.

"The conference ended and Mike and Sherrine returned to the sledge.
"Problem?" he asked.
"We have a place. I don't like it," Sherrine said. "But it's the only possible one."
"We Mews and Thor set their goggles, dug their poles into the ice, and whisked
their job was to scout ahead for crevasses and other obstacles. "So where to?" Alex
Sherrine when she resumed her seat.
"Random."
"How far is that?"
"About a hundred fifty kilometers across the Ice."
Alex didn't say anything for a while, doing some arithmetic in his head. About ten
travel, assuming a reasonable pace. He glanced at the sun, wondering how many
of daylight were left. It was already high in the sky, and the earth seemed to be
going awfully fast. When was sunset for this latitude and season? He closed his eyes
and tried to picture the globe as he was used to seeing it. What was it like on the Ice at
Cold. Colder than it was already. "Don't fret," he said aloud. "It's only water ice."

When Alex reestablished the link, Mary wasn't at the comm anymore. It was a
he did not know. Well, Mary had to crash sooner or later. Lonny might have
ed that she was spending too much time downlinking.
k was cheap. The delta vee might cost too much for a rescue trip; but the solar
for the comm links was practically free. He and Mary could talk until Hell froze
hich, judging by his surroundings, would be real soon now.
let Gordo handle the comm. Not that he was sulking over Mary's absence, but he
as about time that the kid took a hand in his own rescue. Alex listened in.
kazhitye, Big Momma," he heard him say. "Team Leader 'Robert' points out that,
go Gap is uzkiy—is a choke point, and sure to be roadblocked by now. He
s that you contact their driver, code-named 'Pins,' by secure channel and tell him
t us at the gas station.' Tell 'The Ghost' that 'Pins' can be reached at 'FemmeFan's
' Katya, did any of that make sense to you?"
bkhodimiy, Gordon. As long as makes sense to you and to contact. We are letting
ow transponder frequency soon."
ke told Alex that "Pins" was Bob Needleton. "Pins and Needles get it? just like
is 'the Bruce.' "
ex wondered what the point was of having code names if Mike kept explaining
ey meant. Don't mean anything. *It's a game to Mike. High stakes, but still just a*
e decision to head for Brandon obviously pleased no one, but there was little
in the matter. As Bruce explained it, they could not return to Mapleton; they could
running the road block at Fargo Gap; and they could not easily set up a
vous with Bob Needleton short of a landmark they all knew about. >From the
pressions, they must know they'd still be on the Ice after sunset. Alex wondered if
ere having second thoughts about the rescue.
ex knew that rivers were free-flowing streams of water propelled by gravity rather
essure. He had seen pictures. He could even close his eyes and remember them.
swum in one once, a majestically slow stream with banks choked by trees, as
weightlessness as he had come in those days. But memory did not prepare him
sight of the Red River from atop the Dakota Glacier.
errine stopped the sledge at the head of a vast ramp of ice while Thor and Steve
ahead for crevasses. Mike pointed downward. "There she is," he said. "The Red
f the North. It carries warmer water from the south into New Lake Aggaziz. If it
for the river and the rectenna farm, Winnipeg would be under the Ice by now."
ex looked where he pointed. The valley was partially filled in, with ice and snow
g a broad shallow U. The river itself gleamed a perfect silver, the sunlight dancing

here it showed between the choking ice floes. At first the river seemed merely out the nearby hills and ice banks gradually brought it into scale in his mind. The free-flowing stream he had seen in recent years was when the laundry basin in the center had plugged up and the rinse water overflowed. He'd gotten three kinds of er it and spent a day and a half sponging loose globules out of the air. What he saw was vast beyond belief. *Hundreds* of liters of water, at the very least! He shivered, and not from the cold. Even the trip across the glacier had not prepared him for this sight. The white sky and white land had blended together, destroying all sense of distance. He had halfway convinced himself that he was in a small, sterile room. An immense vista opened below him, and—oddly—he felt more dwarfed than when on an EVA.

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

Alex shook his head. "I've never seen anything so big." He laughed nervously. "I'm not feeling a touch of agoraphobia."

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

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

Sherrine laughed. "You should see the Mississippi."

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

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

"Mike? Sure. We call him the 'Round Mound of Profound.' " She was perched on her knees atop the snowmobile engine housing, taking advantage of the break to get herself from the engine heat. "He'll talk about anything and everything. Sometimes he knows what he's talking about."

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

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

"No, were to now?" he asked. It was irritating to sit bundled in the sledge while he took charge. He knew he should be used to that. *MacLeod do this. MacLeod do*

on't forget to clean up. Help the kids put their toys away. Try to be useful for a

But piloting *Piranha* had wakened something. For a short time he had been the decisions. Poor ones maybe; but *his* decisions.

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

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

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

* * *

The Valley was as quiet as a Christmas postcard scene. Everything was shrouded in a blanket of light powdery snow. There were ghostly hummocks from which protruded the tips of mammoths or tree branch. Steve spotted an automobile embedded in the side wall of the glacier itself, its tail end protruding several meters past ground level. Ted remembered reading about the mammoths found frozen in the Siberian glaciers of the earlier ice age and wondered what future generations would make of this relic when the Ice released its grip.

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

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

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

Right. It was just as well that he was strapped into the sledge. Free to help, he'd be more than useless. He'd be an embarrassment. Thirty years of conditioned reflexes could be forgotten overnight. If it had been him scavenging the gasohol, he would have

jump over to the car and stand on the ice wall. *You can't stand on walls in a field, Alex. The car didn't just drift there, it must have been lifted and held by the* d, if Thor lost his grip, he would not simply float away in a slow spin; he would ate to the ground. It did not seem a terribly long way to fall, but what did he know alling?

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

9 was poorly maintained. It had been plowed in places, but long stretches had gulfed by the Dakota Glacier just as the car had been. Alex could see where highway—US 83—had been cleared as an alternate route wherever the te was impassable.

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

They halted at the riverbank. Sherrine turned off the snowmobile's engine and stared at the rigid water choked with "pancake ice and slush—an open expanse of water even than Alex had imagined from the glacier overlook. The scale of the planet was just ng to hit him. It was huge; everything in it was immense. And it was convex. He tightly to his boyhood memories. At one time he had regarded all this as normal. wondered how Gordon was taking it. The gravity and the scale were completely him. When Alex glanced over at the other sledge, he saw Doc Waxman was bent rdon. "Gordo?" Alex fumbled for a moment with the tongue switch, then thought f it. No point in sending a beacon for someone to home in on. "Are you all right, ?" he shouted.

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

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

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

One ever died from motion sickness; they only wished they could. Yes, Gordon get over it, just as Alex already had. It was a matter of synchronizing the sense of with visual perception. Gordon was born in free fall and a constant acceleration crewed up his motion cues a lot worse than it did Alex's. Like everyone else, he'd "Spinning Kiddies." The centrifuge sessions were required for children—for evelopment, Alex thought. But stilyagi like Gordon generally dropped out, and

ults avoided spin exercises when they could. Alex considered his own condition. No flab, with bones of rubber, and he'd been born down here.

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

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

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

"There ain't nobody here but us tribbles; so who gives a—"

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

"The code name idea was stupid, anyway—"

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

They both fell silent. Thor and Steve shuffled their skis back and forth across the ice.

"Don't stay here," Thor said. "We'll freeze." He looked back the way we had come.

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

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

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

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

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

Thor: "Yeah, the plan sucks."

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

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

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

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

Alex never saw so many mouths hang open at once.

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

Well, he didn't want to think about that. He supposed he was in less danger than he was in *Piranha*. A hot ship, miles high, hypersonic speeds. Even without a missile launcher, there were a million things that could have gone wrong. But it was one thing to face danger with your hands around the stick. It was another thing to face it while

d into a sledge, dependent on another's skills. It was the impotence, he decided; not
ger.

**e glaciers on both sides of the river
wled and popped as they flowed
th—an odd and disconcerting sound.
ery snap made him jerk, thinking it
s the river ice breaking up beneath
m. He had not expected sounds. But
n, he didn't suppose a mountain range
ce could slide across the landscape in
nce. He wondered whether, if the
cier sounds were recorded and played
k at high speed, they would sound like
ishing river.**

CHAPTER FIVE

"In the Hands of Crazy People"

nce called a rest break atop the Minnesota glacier. Satellite recon had located a the side, but it had been an arduous climb. Thor and Steve were winded. The stood around the two snowmobiles, slapping themselves with their arms, warming ives with the meager engine heat. Everyone seemed drawn and introspective. ell you," said Bruce, "that Engineer captain had to be a closet fan. Why else ne have told us about the river being frozen?" at doesn't make sense," Mike said. "How would he have known what we were up

e might have guessed from your questions about the Angels. One fan knows ."
rmly wrapped and trundled by sledge, Alex chafed at his helplessness while did the work of rescue. "I'm just not used to being so useless," he told Sherrline. y, *I'm here because I was expendable*. He thought of telling her that, but he didn't .
errine laughed. "Alex, sitting in that sledge, you've done more to help us than standing up."
e Angel flushed. "I'm a link to *Freedom*, that's all. They do the work."
errine shook her head. "Don't be modest." Was Alex serious, she wondered, or ust the usual macho self-deprecation? It seemed as if the older space pilot never a chance to put himself down, since putting himself down on Earth. And the kid ost of his time in a kind of sullen silence. And these were space heroes?
fair, she chided herself. They were injured and in shock. Give them time to .
e said, "Who had Big Momma beam down the IR decoys? Who arranged the ous with Bob when we couldn't go back to Mapleton? Who had the old Hubble t the best route up onto this glacier?"
was a rough climb anyhow. Almost too steep for the snowmobiles."
would have been rougher if we'd had to find our own way up, or just climb up the sheer wall."
ex grunted. "We also serve who only lie and wait."
e patted him on his shoulder. "That's the spirit. Don't worry. Steve will have you feet in no time once we et off the Ice."
eve?"

Steve's a bodybuilder. Didn't you notice his muscles?"
had. Steve seemed grotesque, thick and bulging, like a creature from another
but they all looked like that, more or less. "What's he going to do? Lend us a

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

ey!"

hat?"

ou're breathing rainbows!"

n what?"

reathing rainbows!" She was. Sparkling circles of color came out of her mouth
me she exhaled. They reminded him of radar pulses. He said, "You're magical."
o are you!" She bent closer to his face. "Hey, guys, look at this! Rainbow smoke

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

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

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

then they set out again, Bruce and Mike took the skis to give Steve and Thor a rest.

, brawny Thor took over as Alex's sledge driver. He seemed drawn and
ective. He was the only one who had not joined in the rainbow making. His breath
d with colors the same as everyone else's, but it didn't seem to delight him.

ter a few minutes of riding, Alex leaned his head back and studied Thor's face.

u want to tell me what's wrong?" he asked.

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

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

the hum of the snowmobile motor and the hiss of the sledge runners over the ice

only, sounds, until Thor said, "There was a family in that car."

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

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

ne back seats were clear. There were two kids there. A boy and a girl; maybe six
r. I don't know. They were lying there with their eyes wide open, as white as
ent, coated with frost. There was ice around their eyes where they'd been crying."
othing decays in this endless cold. If it weren't for the frozen tears, I might have
they were staring back at me."

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

o. Would you a have?"

e should have done something."

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

don't know. Dig them out. Bury them?" On Earth, he'd heard they buried their

seemed a waste of organics to Alex, but "custom is king of all."

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

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

o, it doesn't. But what could we have done? Broken our necks trying to et them

hat would we have dug the graves with inside the car, at least they're safe from

You know what bothers me the most?"

o, what?"

ne accident must have happened ten, twelve years ago, when most of these towns

vacuated. Hundreds of cars must have driven past. My mother told me that this

once spent millions of dollars to free two whales trapped in the Arctic ice. Why

nyone stop to help those people back then? *Those children might have still been*

ex couldn't think of any way to answer him. It wasn't his planet. He hadn't been

He wondered what the evacuation had been like. A panicked flight? A black,

ing recession? A car skids off the gassy roadway and plows into a snowbank.

stops. No one cares enough to stop. The country has turned its back on

ogy. Small is beautiful but small is also poor; and the country could no longer

o care.

the sun dropped toward the horizon, a curious green tint came over everything.

and the clouds, perfect white but moments before, glowed like emeralds. To the

ne sky itself was green from the horizon halfway to the zenith. Sherrine and Doc

l their snowmobiles and everyone stared.

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

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

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

asked Sherrine, "Is sunset always like this?"

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

ke was uncharacteristically silent. He muttered something about static discharge,
her too loudly nor too confidently. Finally, Bruce shouted. "Come on! This isn't
us any closer to Brandon." His voice was harsh and had a ragged edge to it. When
ers looked at him, he turned his head and looked abruptly away.

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

lex?"

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

"

ow much farther must we go?"

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

low power. Carries how far?"

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

think the one they call Robert is worried."

eah." Alex thought he knew why. Bruce had been keeping track of their progress.

ers might get distracted by rainbows and green skies, but Bruce always kept the
mly in mind.

m cold," said Gordon. "But my readouts tell me it's only minus fifteen degrees

. That doesn't make any sense. Neg fifteen isn't very cold."

ver hear of wind chill, Gordo?"

ind chill. No, what is?"

, Gordo, Gordo. Of course he didn't know. The only wind in *Freedom* was Lonny

s making a speech. "Gordon, the human body cools by convection, right? We

xcess heat into the surrounding air."

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

h-huh." The main problem in the habitats was to keep from roasting. No one ever

f too cold. "Well, what if the air around your body was constantly moved away

laced by fresh, unheated air. It would seem colder, wouldn't it?"

rdon thought that one over. "I guess so."
ook, as your body heat warms the surrounding air, it reduces the heat fall and the
heat loss slows. So you feel warmer. But keep the cold air coming in and you'll
our excess calories faster. It's—What did you say, minus fifteen degrees Celsius?
nd is enough to lift granular ice particles. Call it forty kilometers per hour. So the
ature feels as if it were, oh, minus thirty seven degrees Celsius."
lex."

hat?"
ell, it doesn't help me feel any warmer, but at least when I freeze to death, I'll
hy."
ay, Gordo, be a snot. But he's right. We are not going to make it. It was too cold,
ndon was too far. The space suits, with their heaters, had been left behind with
opship. They would have been incriminating, too hard to dispose of; and the trip
posed to have been a short one. The suits wouldn't have saved them anyway.
e and the others would freeze; Gordon and Alex could wait on their backs until
eries gave out. Better that they all go together.
was getting colder and the wind was picking up. And it wasn't just Gordo
ing on him. There were these Downers as well. It was his fault they were out here.
e was going to freeze along with them; but do passengers *really* feel better because
tain went down with his ship? Soon enough, he and his friends would be frozen as
those children in the car.

s not a bad way to go," Thor said softly.
ex looked up. Thor knew. He had the most experience with the Ice, and he knew.
ou get sleepier and sleepier. Then you don't wake up," Thor said. "They say it's
sier if you don't fight it."
nd do you give up?"

or shrugged. "I probably won't. But I won't last much longer than you do."
e glacier at night was as dark as the leese of *Freedom Station*. But *Freedom*
could turn on the spotlights for EVA work. Alex didn't think any of the rescue
ad realized how dark it would be. They hadn't expected to still be on the Ice come
l; so he couldn't blame them for not brining any flashlights. They had only the
t Sherrine's grandfather kept in the kits strapped to each sledge, and a small
light salvaged from *Piranha*. They didn't make much light; but, with them and
pes tying everyone together, Bruce could hope that no one would get lost in the
only there were some way to turn on the spotlights.
otlights. By God!

omething interesting?" Thor asked.
amn right, if I can raise the ship. You don't need the Sun to get heat from the sky."
nk?"

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

errine looked around with a frown.

lex——"

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

* * *

ptain Lee Arteria relaxed in a chair well to the side of the meeting room, the better h the proceedings. One should always have a clear field of fire, just in case.

of the other attendees threw repeated glances in that direction. Arteria, returning zes, could almost read their minds. Slim and fine-featured, pointed chin; topped red hair; noncommittal first name, and a grip like a Junkyard dog. Gay man n woman? They couldn't tell. It made them uneasy.

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

an we take it then," said Ike Redden, "that the subjects have died on the Ice?"

represented the INS on the Special Task Force. He was also the chair.

rvice wrangling and high-level compromise had left the Immigration and ization Service in nominal charge of the search. The space stations had declared dependence almost a generation ago; so their residents were, *ipso facto*, aliens. egal immigration was, according to counsel, the most impeccable grounds for ension of the stranded astronauts. Still, Arteria was sure that all the task force rs were looking for ways to bend the mission to their own advantages.

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

ateria could think of three or four ways. She kept her peace. The others were paid e thinking.

here was no one aboard the spacecraft when we found it." Air Force was reluctant ion finding the craft; no doubt because it had taken so long to do so. Never mind shuttle was painted a reflective silver; that it blended into the surrounding ice; ad apparently been deliberately buried. The failure to achieve instant results was ammunition for one's opponents. "We assume that the astronauts wandered out e Ice and froze. We've done IR scans of the immediate area and found no trace of o their bodies must have cooled to ambient. We may never find them." hey are not dead."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

people who thought they could improvise a rescue on the Ice on the spur of the moment and pull it off without getting caught.
fanac! It had to be fanac.
And if you could think like a fan again, Arteria thought, you might figure out where to go next. She smiled wolfishly.

* * *

The response was faint, almost lost in the hiss of static. "Da, we readink, *Piranha*.
Nochesh? What want?"
Thank God. Big Momma, it's cold here. We're going to freeze, all of us. We need
can you give us a microwave spotlight? Have SUNSAT lock one of its projectors
on our transponder frequency and track us across the ice."
Kazhite. One moment." Alex waited while Big Momma conferred—probably with
Ice Station chief and the SUNSAT engineer. Sherrine asked him what he was
and he told her. She and Thor exchanged glances.
Is that possible?" she asked. "To beam enough microwave energy down to keep us
from freezing?"
Sure."
It won't be, uh, too much, will it?"
Alex grinned. "I'll have them set it for thaw, not bake. Seriously, the beam density is
fifty-three milliwatts per square centimeter at the center of the rectenna farm. I
f we keep it to a couple of milliwatts, it will take the edge off the cold without
killing us. We'll have to take off whatever rings or jewelry we're wearing, wrap them in
maybe pack them in snow. Belt buckles. Anything metal. Microwaves penetrate
wood or plastic, but metal absorbs them. If you kept your ring on, Sherrine, it
probably burn your finger.
Thor grinned. "I'm not sure I'd mind—if it did cook us." He looked over his
shoulder. "Ever since we found that car. When Bruce raised this expedition, it sounded
like fanac. The ultimate sercon. A quick dash onto the ice and, back off. They'd be
talking about it for generations."
Alex made a mental note to find out later what language Thor was speaking.
The trouble was, we didn't make any contingency plans. Heck. We didn't make *any*.
Thor grinned. Well, Ghu takes care of idiots, small children, and fen. Who knows
what the Great Roscoe has in store for us next?"
Roscoe?" Alex asked, but they didn't hear him.
Alex barely managed to confirm the beam density with the Angels before losing
contact completely. They must have been at the very fringe of the scoopship relay's
range. When he had completed the message, Alex sighed and spat out the tongue switch.
That's that, he said.
Do you think they got the message?" Sherrine asked. "About the microwaves?"

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

they picked their way across the ice, Sherrine waited for evidence of microwave g. She worried about their equipment. The sledges contained little metal. Her ther had made them of wood poles and hide lashings. The two snowmobiles were fiberglass, but she wondered what microwave heating would do to the metal . Probably nothing. Engines run at high temperatures anyway. *But suppose they ke it? Better than freezing.* . .

ter a while, began to feel warm. Was it the microwaves? Or was it only her ? Or just the heat from the snowmobile engine? She saw a crevasse that Mike had and steered around it. *Cans of gasohol. What will microwave heat do to those?* e moon rose, half full, over the eastern horizon, creating a startling amount of light cy landscape. The crust of snow, reflecting the moonlight, seemed to glow from tself. She breathed out slowly and saw the flickering rainbow of her breath. She py. Even if they died here, it had still been worth the attempt.

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

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

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

ould you take a blanket or two off me?"

e turned around. "What? Oh!" Alex's face was dap with sweat. She realized that s perspiring heavily herself. She brought her snowmobile to a halt just as Will his and jumped off into the snow and began stuffing ice in his mouth. Now what? llings," Will mumbled. "Gold caps, teef." He settled back on his heels and d a sigh of relief.

m sorry," Alex said. "The calculations must have been off slightly." an you do something about it?" Will asked. "It's like using hot coffee for yash."

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

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

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

o good," said Alex, spitting out his communicator once more. "Damn thing's hot. I
ise them. Either we're out of range or the radio finally went kaput."

o big deal," said Doc. "I'll just keep a mouth full of snow." He took off his parka.
while," he said, "it's a little warm for this."

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

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

or gave him a suspicious look. "What?"

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

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

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

errine looked to the sky. "Oh, God—"

o," said Bruce. "Not up there. Over here."

e looked. Eskimos.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kumangapik did not look at her. Sherrine thought he wasn't sure if she was a

man or not. By his standards, she was too thin to be female; but he evidently had no

choice but to take chances. Bruce had facial hair and was obvious the leader, so he spoke

quietly to Bruce.

"We do not give gifts. I know that it is different among the *upernatleet*; but in this

land no one wishes to be dependent upon another. 'With gifts you make slaves; as with

you make dogs.' "

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

The old *inuk* seemed puzzled by the question. "You have shared your magical heat

and we are all wonderously warm." His breath made frosty clouds in the icy darkness,

Sherrine guessed that warmth depended on what you were used to. "What could I offer

you but these poor scraps of meat. Offal that has been dirtied by the dogsled. I am

glad to offer it to such excellent guests."

Mike and Steve looked thoughtfully at the skewers in their hands. Sherrine hissed at

him. "Not literally! If gift-giving makes slaves, you have to disparage the gift." They

were relieved and Steve took a bite and chewed.

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

"Dog," said Krumanepik. "But it was a very sick dog," he added hastily. "Mangy.

"We lost most of our team on this journey."

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

Kumangapik's band had intended to camp, but when Bruce told them that he was

to press on to Brandon, they elected to join up. "It is safer to travel together," he

said. "You carry the warmth with you; and the sooner we get off this wretched ice, the

sooner we get off the Ice?" Steve seemed surprised. "This is your world isn't it? The land at

the heart of the world."

Ula, the other hunter, laughed and the old man shook his head. "It is ours because

neither the Indians nor the whites want it. The legends say that when we first came into

the country, many ages ago, it was already inhabited by those you call Indians. In the

missionary's school, we learned that these folk were called the Athabascans and the

Inuits. We fought mightily to take the land from them. The grass ran red with their gore.

There were massacres to whet even the wildest fancy! Even today, to cry! 'Indians!'

The word the Greenlanders is enough to throw everyone into a panic; even though the word

g lost its meaning there. But the Indians were crueller and wiser in the ways of war; and, even though the forests were spreading north, there was not room in them for the Eskimo peoples, and we retreated before them. Soon we came to a strange, white land where the Indian would not follow. Life here became a contest with death, but we learned that if we followed the proper customs, we could live. Later, we found that Sila had used all this to harden us against the day of our vengeance. Now, the ice is bringing us back again into the land that was ours." The old man scratched his chin and asked in a dry matter-of-fact voice, "You have not seen any Cree, have you?"

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

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

When Mike was speechless.

"Cannibals?" asked Bruce in a strained voice.

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

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

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

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

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

Bruce let the Eskimos take the point. They knew more about traveling on the Ice and were more aware of dangerous conditions, especially in the dark. Sherrine thought it was more than a little glad to have someone else shoulder the responsibility for a

Now and then he consulted the transponder and sent word to Krumangapik to alter. The old Eskimo never revealed what he thought of these directions; but Sherrine knew that if he ever disagreed with them, he and his band would simply strike out on their own.

Two hours later, they stopped again to shed clothes. The heat, mild as it was, was making its way through their bodies. Sherrine tried to balance the heat and the clothing against the windchill and found, much to her surprise, that she was dressed for a walk on a spring day.

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

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

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

Krumangapik invited them to air out their own clothing as well. 'Normally, we do laundry in the igloo. It is usually not warm enough outside. But with this wonderful weather, it's different.' He raised his arms and turned slowly, as if basking in the sun on Miami Beach. 'Aren't you even a little chilly?' she asked.

Krumangapik grinned his gap-toothed grin again. "Better to be chilly," he quoted "and to have your clothes alone inside one's clothing."

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

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

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

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

on't even think it," Mike told him.
or raised his eyebrows and leered. "Think what?"
u know. Adultery is the major cause of murders among Eskimos. He jerked his
Mala, who had watched the byplay with no expression.
All the cartoons—"

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

errine was arranging Alex atop a pile of discarded clothing. Alex was trying to
ard enough to mask the wincing caused by the pain in his ribs. She pulled the strap
ut not tight.

nor," she said, "don't even think it." And she whipped around with a snowball in
d and blasted him on the chest.

en all fandom was plunged into war. Even the Eskimos joined in. It was such a
o know that they would not freeze! Sherrine wondered if she might even get a tan
t. She was laughing and dancing and dodging snowballs when the spotlight from
copter caught them dead center.

* * *

utenant Gil Magruder studied the shapes dancing in the spotlight below. There
vo sleds piled high with clothing and blankets. Nestled in the clothing, he saw two
corpses, long dead of starvation by the looks of them. Cavorting around them in
ort of ritualistic dance were a dozen naked and near naked men and women,
ng at least two children. When the light hit them, they froze in place and stared up
elicopter. Magruder pivoted the copter, keeping the beam centered.
ergeant. What do you see down there?"

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

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

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

gruder gave him a stare.

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

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

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

gruder stared at the group on the ground. "HQ ain't never gonna believe this," he

d. He straightened and adjusted the rotor. "You know what I think we saw,

at?"

r, I can't imagine."

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

* * *

The General Mills station at Brandon was a gleaming beacon in the dark for the last miles of the trip. Alex sighed. The madcap trip across the Ice was nearly over.

He drove the snowmobile down the state highway toward the station, where Alex saw a man—presumably Bob Needleton—sitting in a lawn chair reading a magazine next to a blazing fire he had built in an oil drum. When he heard them coming, he folded the magazine and stood up.

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

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

Maybe gravity pulled blood from the brain . . .

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

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

"Oh, right," Thor said. "I suppose we'd be too easy to locate if we kept it. But it was nice to have the spotlight beam on the arm."

There was a mad scramble in the back of the van as everyone hastened to don their gear.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SIX

" *A Way of Life* "

Where in hell was the Con Committee?

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

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

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

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

He stalked down the first-floor hallway of the Fielding Mansion, counting the doors as he went. Crazy Eddie had said to try the third door on the right in the west wing.

Usually he rated Crazy Eddie's reliability as no better than that of a network news anchor; but so far he was the only person who allowed as how he *might* have seen Bruce Hyde around the mansion.

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

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

The panel moderator, with her short-cropped hair and 15th century breast-and-back armor, looked like Joan of Arc as played by Ingrid Bergman. She shook her head.

"Want the Con Suite I think it's on the third floor, south wing. This is a panel on medieval and barbarian costuming. You're welcome to join us, if you want."

h, no, thank you." Chuck apologized for interrupting. He was revising his estimate of Eddie's reliability. When he left the room he noticed Fang lounging against the opposite wall of the bar. Five-eleven, muscular, tough as old leather, Fang was batting a rubber ball with a wooden paddle. He wore a small propeller beanie on his head.

At last, Chuck thought. Someone reliable. "Fang!" "Hey, Chuck." The ball was a blur of motion. Fang frowned at it in concentration. "Have you seen anybody on the Con Committee?" "Not a damn thing. Saw Crazy Eddie."

"Where?" "How about Bruce? He's the Chair. He's gotta be around someplace." "I think I saw him. North wing. Second floor." Fang missed a swat on his paddle and the rubber ball Zigzagged crazily. He fumbled with it for a moment, then tucked the paddle into the back pocket of his jeans. "Library? Yeah, the library. I'm sure that was

it. Thanks, Fang. I owe you one." Chuck turned and strode off toward the stairwell. He watched him walk out of sight. When Chuck was gone, Fang rapped three times on the door beside him. Crazy Eddie stuck his head out. "Come in." "How about Two Bats was a lean, hawk-faced old man, at least part Indian—although not that tribe he had never said. He had been writing science fiction forever, and movie scripts before that. He wore a tan nylon jacket and a red bandanna tied around one leg above the knee. His beard was stringy like a Chinese mandarin's. His voice was gentle. "Where'd you send him?" "To the library. North wing."

Crazy Eddie ran his hand across his jaw. He had odd hands. The fingers were bigger than the knuckles. "Good," he said. "Good. Who's waiting up there?" "Nobody. Howland Shew."

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

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

Crazy Eddie gazed toward the stairwell. "How long can we keep this going?" "Not much longer. You know how sharp this crowd is. I feel bad about giving Chuck a bad name around. He *should* be in on it."

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Tre-house often served as a station on the Underground Fanway. It was stuffed with science and fantasy memorabilia, usually hidden in secret vaults in the sub-basement, but

brought out a lot of it for the Con. The walls were hung with paintings: the usual dryads and wood elves and other fantasy scenes, but now many of them sported a picture hung to cover the First. There were prints of old *Astounding* covers, suns and swirly nebulae in wild colors, spaceships, men in fishbowl helmets and women in brassieres menaced by bug-eyed monsters. It was so beautiful Chuck wanted to cry. Much of the mansion's treasure had been reduced to holograms. Without a projector, they were not incriminating. What was on display here were prints; but Chuck knew that they would never have thrown away the originals. He remembered what the place had been like in its glory days, when everything was out, when you couldn't look away without seeing another marvel. Original paintings. Movie posters for forgotten B pictures. The little paperweight made from one of George Pal's models for *Of the Worlds*. The Lensman costume. George Pal's pen. And once—once Chuck had seen the original typewritten manuscript for *Fahrenheit* that would be well hidden now! He looked around, but they hadn't put out the poster. Too dangerous—but sometime over the weekend they'd certainly show the poster. That would be the big secret? But nobody would cause Chuck to miss that. Chuck remembered Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*! He had two-thirds of the book memorized, and could recite most of the rest. In that far corner had been the original Gort robot from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The tyrannosaur model from King Kong was there now. There had been so much. Now they did their best, but the walls and alcoves seemed empty and forlorn. And Thor was coming down the east wing, pushing a wheelchair. Another crippled man. What was going on? "Hey, Thor!" Chuck moved to intercept them. Thor froze in mid-stride. "Hi, Chuck." "Where have you been?" "Blank look. "Here and there." "I haven't seen you." "Shrug. "You know how it is. The Tre-house is a big place." "Yeah. It reminds me of a scaled down Noreascon III. Remember that one? Seven thousand fans rattling around a convention center bigger than the Ringworld." He held his hand to the man in the wheelchair. "Hi. I'm Chuck Umber. I publish *Hocus*." "Gabe," said the other. "Gabe dell'Angelo." "Gabe's arm was coming up in a help less jerky wobble. Chuck dropped his own hand. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know—" He coughed to hide his embarrassment. "Er. . . Gabe, you say. You don't look Italian." In fact, this Gabe looked kind of Swedish, with the dark hair. Gaunt and thin, with prominent facial bones. Like Max von Sydow with the beard. "Where are you from?" "I came here from North Dakota."

at explained the Swede look, Chuck thought. A lot of Scandinavians had settled
er Midwest. "I saw another guy in a wheelchair a few minutes ago. Younger.
enough like you to be your brother."
be looked uncomfortable. He seemed to be breathin&, funny. "That was Rafe. We
a flying accident."
h. I'm sorry to hear that."
be shrugged philosophically. "With a little therapy, they tell me we should be up
lking in no time."
uck nodded. "That's good. So, you're a friend of Thor's, are you? I haven't seen
und before. At cons, I mean. Fandom is a small world these days."
seems like a big world to me. I just dropped in recently."
neofan, then. Chuck grinned and gestured broadly. "And how do you like things so
everything is very heavy."
uck laughed. "Sercon," he explained. " 'Serious and constructive activities.' Not
You'll have to learn the language if you're going to stay with us. Don't worry.
ind plenty to entertain you. Not every fan activity is sercon." Chuck looked the
n at Thor. Is this *guy all right*? There had been a time when fandom had few
but no more. *Can we trust him?*
abe and his brother haven't been able to get to cons," Thor said. "Too close to high
ut they've lived in the future."
uck smiled. Thor was an undergrounder. Thor knew a lot of people who couldn't
sympathies show. And dell' Angelo wouldn't be their real names, either. "You've
them a long time, then?"
was Thor's turn to grin. "Long enough."
reat." He put his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Really good to meet you. Have you
J yet?"
be looked puzzled. "Not yet. Thor told me that this is his house."
e call it the Tre-house. Wait'll you see his collection. Movie posters. Props.
es. Books. Original manuscripts. You know what 3MJ's greatest attribute is? He's
aste at all."
e man in the wheelchair blinked his eyes rapidly and said, like a good straight
hat's good?"
es." Chuck waved an arm down the hallway. "See, he saves anything and
ing. He doesn't pick and choose what suits one particular clique or literary style.
ole life is dedicated to SF."
or nodded agreement. "Maybe we'll have time to look at some of the collection."
n faded. "Hope you don't *have* to, though."
h?" Gabe grunted.

aults. Hidden places," Thor said. "High tech priest holes."
These guys must be as hot as Thor! Wish I!"—Chuck suppressed his curiosity. It was
remember that there were some things he really didn't need to know. *He* knew
ever tell, but—

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

uck shuddered. "Well, I hope you don't *have* to see it, but if you do get a chance to
e collection, you'll see cyberpunk next to space opera; hard core next to New
Science fiction, fantasy and horror. This is as close to its `national archives' as the
Nation comes. Thor, have you seen Bruce Hyde around anywhere?"
or stroked his beard. "Not lately. But I'm sure he's around someplace."
hen I better be going. Someone thought he saw him upstairs in the library. Glad to
et you, Gabe." He patted the invalid on the shoulder. "Not many neofans drop in
ese days." And he hurried off.

* * *

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

ure, we can trust him," said Thor. "But it's one more risk. He runs *Hocus Pocus*,
gest fanzine around. The authorities tolerate it because it's focused on fantasy, but
manages to slip in some good old, technophile SF propaganda now and then."
o, he's on our side, is he?"

or twisted a strand of his beard around his finger. "As much as anybody here. But
ys are Big News, and the Library Advisory Boards all read *Hocus*. Thor's face
ugly. "I don't know how they get copies. Somebody sold out. But the fewer who
he better. That minimizes the risk. Not Just to us but to Chuck Umber." He
ed. "One day he'll realize that you answered his every question literally and kick
c."

hat did he mean by the `Imagi-Nation'?"

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

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

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

h?"

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

one stranger," Thor agreed.

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

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

ut why—" He wanted to ask, why would someone like Sherrine do it? These

he could understand. Thor, running away, looking for some way to hit back. The

some losers, none of them ding anything important—but Sherrine with her looks

ins could do anything. He couldn't say any of that. "Why do you do it?"

or shrugged his massive shoulders. What else can we do? We believe in the

We don't turn our backs on it, like the 'danes, and pretend that everything will

be the way it is today. Have you ever read science fiction?"

ex shook his head. "A little."

Well, you can see it in our stories. Mainstream literature is about Being. For

er studies, it's probably the best genre around; but nothing happens, nothing

s. Imaginative literature is about Doing. About making the future, not just

ing it. We'll all be living in the future by and by. Some of us like to scout ahead."

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

AWOL. Fandom is a way of life."

ex opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment a small crowd of

emerged into the foyer from the west wing. They were pushing a large cardboard

on a handcart. Inside the carton sat a burly, bearded man wearing a snorkle. He

nnning while the others poured styrofoam packing chips into the carton, chanting,

eth! Kill Seth!"

e parade circled the base of the staircase, flowing around both sides of the

nair, and disappeared down the east wing. Silence descended. Alex had trouble

his voice for several seconds. Finally, he croaked, "Er, Thor?"

mm?"

turned around and looked at the Nordic god. "What was that?"

or checked his watch. "They must be getting ready for the book auction. Hunh. I

think they'd scheduled it this early in the program."

ook auction? Who were those lunatics?"

ey turned right, into the north wing. Thor said, "No no no. *Lunarians*. A New

n club. They raffle off books at the auction. Seth always wins, so now they kill

every con so he can't buy any tickets. Last year, they made him 'The Wicker Man.'

ex didn't ask him what "The Wicker Man" was. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

When they arrived at the meeting room, Alex saw Sherrine evicting a group of young women dressed in outlandish robes and armor. "Costumers," Thor told him, "preparing for the Masquerade." Neither the fabric nor the chain mail concealed very much and he saw Gordon staring at the women with considerable interest. Alex stared, too. The women were not grotesquely fat; but they may have massed as much as 60 kilos. Some parts of them bulged and hung in unusual ways. Gravity, he supposed. Their breasts were nearly as rounded as those of the Eskimo women. They needed special support to hold their breasts in place. Some wore their hair so long that it hung to their knees in back.

Only one, a woman dressed in armor, wore hers sensibly short. In fact, if he had seen the armor was a space suit, she looked halfway normal. All in all, he admitted, the women did have a vague, exotic appeal. But true beauties like Sherrine were unfortunately rare down in the Well.

"I'm sorry," Sherrine told the costumers. "There's been a program change. Didn't you get the update? All costuming panels have been moved to the north wing, third floor." "Third floor! No, we weren't told," the panel leader said. "How disorganized is this committee anyway? People have been looking for them all day. If they're hiding, blame them!"

"I'm sorry," Sherrine said again. She pointed to Gordon and Alex. "It's a question of access. If you'd like to help keep the programming on course, I'll pass your names on to Ops—"

"No thanks. We didn't come here to run errands for Bruce Hyde and his elitist gang." The costumers gathered themselves together and left in a billow of robes.

They settled into the meeting room and waited. The others dribbled in by ones and twos. Some behaved so furtively that Alex was sure they would draw attention to themselves. Bruce arrived grinning. "This is the one room," he announced, "where Chuck can look for us."

Most of the rescue party was present. Doc (Sherrine told him) was a costumer and was busy on one of the panels; and Bob had to make a guest appearance at his mundane job at the University. Two strangers had joined them; Sherrine introduced them as Fang and Crazy Eddie.

Bruce rapped his chair arm with his knuckles. "Let's get this show on the road. First order of business is: What do we do with our guests, now that they are here?" "I'm not sure," Fang tilted his head back. "Excuse me, Bruce; but let's follow form. I'm the Guest-of-Honor Chair, so I'd better lead this discussion."

"And your egoboo on your own time," said Bruce. "The Con Committee rescued the guests, so the Con Committee is in charge."

Crazy Eddie frowned. He turned to Fang. "Besides, the Angels aren't Guests of Honor, so your subcommittee's jurisdiction—"

are they're GoH's," Mike interjected. "Who could be more honored at a Worldcon pair of spacemen? And they *are* our guests, Ergo: Guests of Honor."

spoken like a faaan, said Edward Two Bats. "Can't you understand? This is big. than Worldcon."

s eyes lit up, as if he had had a vision of the Holy Grail. There was a moment of silence.

ex spoke into it. "Excuse me. Do Gordon and I have any say in this?"

, Fang replied after a moment's thought. "You aren't convention members. You et a vote."

ay, that's right," said Mike. "They haven't paid the membership fee."

at's silly," said Thor. "I'll *lend* them the ten bucks."

ve could DUFF them," Bruce suggested. "Plenty of money in the Down Under Fan

ng shook his head. "No, that's to help Australians come to Worldcon. You guys ustralians, are you?"

rdon looked bewildered. Alex shook his head.

ke tried to look serious. "Well, but at the moment they are Down Under."

is announcement was greeted with respectful silence. Bruce nodded his head "I like it. I like it." He rapped the arm of his chair. "They are officially the DUFF rs of this convention. As Con Chair, I so rule."

ree people spoke at once. "You can't do that! We have to take a vote."

ex sighed and closed his eyes. Do they ever *settle* anything? He breathed in his left nostril and out through his right. It didn't help, but he was fascinated to e could do it, and it seemed at least as constructive as anything he was watching.

ook," Crazy Eddie said, "this is serious!"

d yet—things were being settled. It was always a pleasure to watch a master an at his job. Alex began to enjoy the way Bruce ran the meeting. Bruce played ommittee the way a jazzman played his sax.

played Mike and Fang against Eddie Two Bats and against each other. He subtly and indirectly, only rarely resorting to direct action. Bruce ran the show. Eddie tended to forget this every now and then, but nobody made an issue of it. ade a whispered comment to Sherrine.

ruce is food at this."

e said, Bruce is SMOF-Three."

what?"

SMOF is a Secret Master of Fandom. Fen are a quirky and individual bunch and en't many who can handle them. Bruce is one. Benjamin Orange is another. Thank ss *he* isn't here. Could you imagine two SMOFs at one con?"

redibly enough, he could. My God, he thought. I actually understood her.

the first order of business," said Bruce for the fourth time in an hour, "is what do we do with the Angels."

Alex seized the opportunity. "Now that we're members of this committee——"

Fang cut him off. "Only of the Convention, not the committee. But of course as long as you can——"

"This is serious," Crazy Eddie protested. His big eyes were nearly filled with tears. "Do you understand that?"

"Do you have a suggestion?" Bruce prompted.

Alex looked around helplessly. I guess not. We can't really do anything for ourselves unless we can move around better."

"Steve's helping them," Sherrine said. "Teaching them *asanas*. For older people."

"Appropriate," Alex said. "We feel old."

"I'm an ancient mariner, he stoppeth one of three——" Gordon said.

"Bousy fielding average," Mike said. "No long gray beards, either."

"You have read it!" Gordon exclaimed. "Coleridge and Pushkin, no one reads any more of you have——"

Alex bellowed, "QUIET!" For an instant the room was shocked silent.

"What's the problem anyway?" Thor asked. "We just keep them hidden until the Angels send a ship. Then we whisk them off to the rendezvous."

"Well, sure," said Steve. "But how do we keep them hidden? And where? Here in New York? What if the pickup ship has to land in Arizona? Can we get them there in time?"

Alex glanced at Gordon, who bit his lip and lowered his eyes. No *point putting this off*. He took a deep breath—from the stoma and through the left nostril. "There's no pickup ship," he told the committee.

Sherrine nodded to herself. Bruce's expression didn't change.

"Why not?" Fang demanded.

"They won't come down the Well."

Everyone spoke at once. "Gravity well, Earth is deep in it." "Niven's Belters called them 'holes.'" "Come off it, they'll come, these are ANGELS!" "I knew we needed contingency plans——"

Alex made a whistle of his fingers. Into the silence that followed he asked, "What do you mean? The Angels won't come to get you?"

Alex looked around the circle of faces. Angels. A sulky adolescent stilyagin and a construction worker who can't go Out anymore. Maybe I should have said to hell with it, fuck it, VA until my brains pour out through my nose. Why not?

"It's impossible," he said.

Sherrine nodded again, a tiny movement. "I thought so. Jesus, I'm sorry."

ut you're space pilots," Crazy Eddie said. "They need you——"
rdon laughed. Everyone looked at him. "What's funny?" Fang demanded.
lex is hero. They would come for him, but there is no way."
hey don't need me," Alex said. "And it doesn't matter anyway. There is no way for
come get us."
oming down is no problem," Mike said. His voice lost the bantering tone. "Going
p——"
xactly," Alex said. "Going back up. We don't have any ships that will land and
again. We never did."
errine was looking at him strangely. "You knew it all along."
ere here never was a time to tell you."
hy is Alex a hero?" Edward Two Bats demanded.
ddie——"
n a novelist, damn it! I'm not sure I ever met a hero before. Gordon?"
are time," Gordon said. "Solar flares expand atmosphere. *Mir* became unstable.
MacLeod brought a crew from *Freedom* . . ." *He* sensed incomprehension in the
ound murmur and the twisted frowns. "I start over.
are on the sun. Too much energy floods day side of Earth. Top of air becomes
mosphere inflates like vast balloon, reaches far into space, wraps ghostly tendrils
Mir. *Mir Space Station*, made to fall free through vacuum, begins to slow and
oser to Earth.
ajor MacLeod brought a crew from *Freedom*. They attached booster rockets to lift
higher orbit without disruption. With *Mir* safe, he had to return to bolt rockets onto
m, because *Freedom* was endangered, too. His suit blew out. Had to patch it and use
. Pressure suit, it must fit more closely than wife. Cannot borrow someone else's."
oked back a laugh. Gordon never noticed. "Once, twice, five times his suit
air. One can live through that, but not many times.
ow he cannot go outside again. Alex MacLeod cannot live in vacuum, even short
ll kill him."
ut you flew the scoopship!"
ipping takes a good pilot," Alex said. "I'm that. Paint stripes on a brick, I can fly
liked the look that Sherrine gave him. But—— "Dipping wants an expendable pilot.
, too. Look, everyone knew we might not come back."
o you're here for the duration," Bruce said.
ooks that way."
everyone was quiet. Alex looked from face to face. It was beginning to sink in: This
ust a short jaunt. These . . . *fans* hadn't signed on for a long haul. Pretty soon the
would wear off. Some already had second thoughts. *And I can't blame them.*

Sherrine put her hand on his arm. "So you volunteered knowing it might be one

He shook his head. "No, this is the first time like this. Usually nothing happens to

"Except sometimes they don't come back," Mike said. "Yeah, I can see it."

Sherrine hugged them, first Alex, then Gordon. "Orphans of creation," she said. "At
you're stuck among friends." Steve put a hand on each of their shoulders and
pressed gently but didn't say anything. Alex could feel the impression of Sherrine's ribs
against his bones where she had pressed against him. *Careful*, he cautioned himself. *Sherri
is a girl, like Mary was Lonny's. Like borrowing another man's space suit. Look
at how she got you.*

Alex looked thoughtful. "This changes things."

"What does," Crazy Eddie said.

"Look, I don't blame you," Alex started to say.

Alex cut him off. "We'll have to find you both a niche here on Earth. Not going to
depend on you. We all read Heinlein's story."

"It's Great to Be Back," Sherrine said. "Yes. It must be that way. Living among the
aliens and then stranded on Earth."

Mike said, "First thing you need is Social Security and driver's license."

Gordon looked puzzled. "Driver license? For what, mass driver? Disk drive?"

Mike sighed. "Never mind."

"Identity papers," Alex said.

"Why do we need identity papers?" Gordon asked. "We are all droogs here, no?"

Now they knew that "droog" meant "friend," Alex couldn't guess; but Mike actually,

"Sure, we're all droogs," he said. "Illegal droogs."

"You need an ID," said Thor, "because 'the Land of the Free and the Home of the
Brave' has become 'the Land of the Fee and the Home of the Slave.'"

"Do you have ID?" Alex asked him.

Thor smiled. "Sure. Three or four."

"Anonymous?"

"Free enterprise. They're the best kind."

"Sherrine?" Bruce asked.

"Risky. It was easier when I set things up for Thor. Now they have programs to
find out about hackers."

"You probably wrote them," Steve said.

"Well, Ted Marshall and I worked on the Bytehound program, and we left a

backdoor in, so I can probably manage it—Sure. We can do it, maybe, but it's going to
take some time at my terminal and I have to get hold of Ted."

"Ted's not coming," Bruce said. "Thinks he's being watched."

s important we don't give him away," Crazy Eddie said.
o we make do until then," Fang said.
ricky, though," Thor said.
hat is this Eye Dee?" Gordon asked. "May I see?"
ng took out a driver's license and handed it to him. Gordon looked at it carefully,
it over and over in his hands. He read the form on the back. "It says here consent
organs recycled. You can refuse, then? Very rich place." He held the card up to
t. "Does not look difficult if you have photograph. You do not have scanner and
inter?"
o, we have those," Mike said. "Just making a card isn't the problem. Everything's
nked now. If we make a bogus drivers license for Alex or Gordon, the IRS
er looks into the DMV computer and wonders why they never paid taxes before."
ed at Alex.
ut it can be done," Bruce said. "Just not easy anymore."
ex frowned. "Computers are high technology. I thought everyone down here—
you—I thought most Downers hated technology."
or laughed. "They hate it all right. Computers, too. But they still use them."
or themselves," Steve said. "They don't like others having them."
illegal to own computer?" Gordon frowned.
ow do—how can people read what you write? Like poetry? Stories?"
s illegal to own an unlicensed computer," Sherrine said. "But there are a lot of
d ones, and—well, the licensing laws are hard to enforce. So there are networks,
ne private boards "
There are still publishers," Bruce said. "A few good books get out. And like
e says, there are private boards—" boards?"
computer bulletin boards," Thor said.
ople exchange files. Not so common as they used to be, now that the phone
keeps crashing. But FAPA is still going," Sherrine said.
was in line for full membership in the Cult until I had to drop for missing
es," Fang said. "But Bruce is—"
d disks are harder to get," Mike said. "But I still manage to publish *File 880*. . . "
e's won twelve Hugos," Fang said.
r one glorious minute I thought I understood them—
azy Eddie raised his hand and waved it. "I've got an idea."
uce looked worried, but nodded at him. "The Chair recognizes Eddie Two Bats."
azy Eddie stood and looked across his blade-like nose. "There are still
hiles in Southern California," he said. "Enclaves clustered around the old, defunct
ce centers. I say we take the Angels there."

ere were nods of agreement. "Makes sense," said Steve. "Angels would be
ed there. Some places."

hat's right, you still live down there," Fang said. "Do you ever get to the Denny's

uce tapped his ring on the desk. "Edward Two Bats has the floor."
oet it would work!" Sherrine said.

azy Eddie nodded vigorously. "Damned straight! Then, after building our strength,
e a coup! Take over in Sacramento, install the Angels as symbolic governors, and
the State's resources to building a space shuttle to take them home again."

o the question is how to get them to California," Bruce said.

ne Angels have to go underground," Fang said. "Work off the books. Doesn't pay
as out front, but with no taxes you keep more, and nobody checks ID and credit
He and Thor exchanged glances. "It ain't so bad."

r a moment Alex felt panic. Then he realized that they took the good parts of
Eddie's ideas and simply ignored the rest. *And we don't have many choices*

. "You're used to living underground," Sherrine said. "They're not. Look at them!
do something——"

he Greens lynched a hacker in Chicago," Mike said carefully. "Last month, but I
e boy's still ban&in&, from the old Water Tower. Of course you know that."

hat was Flash. Flash couldn't resist letting his friends know what he did. So I'm
areful, that's all," Sherrine said.

o, we can't let you risk that," Alex said. "I mean——"

ork underground, off books," Mike said. "Great. What can you do?"

ex grunted. "I fly spaceships."

uce grinned. "Right. We'll send out your resume. But what did you do between
"

write poetry," Gordon said. "I would like to write science fiction."

o would everyone here," Steve said. "Do you know how many people make a
writing science fiction? There weren't thirty in the whole country, at peak. Now,

here's Harry Bean——" someone said.

e's a whore. He writes for the Greens," Bruce said. "Odd jobs. Alex? What can
besides fly ships?"

onstruction engineer." He looked at his emaciated limbs. "And if Steve's right, I'll
to do that again in about nine years."

e is also teacher," Gordon said.

indergarten. I was a day-care father," Alex admitted. The main advantage of the
as that you didn't have to remember a lot of details. There were other advantages,
supposed.

Sherrine looked at him closely. Now *she knows*.
He shook his head. "Too bad. They do background checks on day-care workers,
even the witch hunts. Even the centers who pay 'off the books' have to be careful.
You can't work for Sherrine, and you sure can't do that until she sets it up."
The lengthy silence that followed, everyone looked at each other, but no one said
a word. Finally Sherrine sighed.
"I'm not sure I can do it," she said. "Thor's right, they're paranoid about child
abuse. I'd have to build you a whole history, everything, traffic tickets, education—
it won't work. We can't fit them in, and we can't hide them." Fan and Thor started
to protest, but Sherrine overrode them. "We've just been over that. Short term, sure; but
longer term, or later they'd be discovered. No, there's only one option, and it took Crazy Eddie
to figure it out. We've got to find a way to get them back into space."
"How?" said Bruce.
"Through the Fandom!"
Bruce beamed. "Of course. We'll get them high with illegal droogs."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Black Powder and Alcohol . . ."

"You're going to send us back to space," Alex said.

"Perhaps I don't wish to go," Gordon said.

"Shut up. Look, with all great respect, how do you propose to do this? As far as I know, the only rockets left on Earth are military missiles." *And I can't see sticking one up in the air and riding it out—*

"Exactly! We hide out until we build strength and take over in Sacramento. Then—"

"There's a Saturn Five in Houston." Fang asked, "Will that do?"

Alex blinked and tried to sit up. "Saturn? Damn right." With a Saturn we could reach the moon. But—I didn't know there were any left.

"There aren't," Bruce said. "NASA took a full man-rated Saturn and laid it down as a monument. Alex, that bird will never fly again."

"Oh."

"It's right in front of the old Manned Space Center," Mike said. "Leetle hard to work with, but it's out attracting attention."

"We could steal it," Crazy Eddie said.

Bruce closed his eyes. "Steal it, Eddie? Do you know how *big* those suckers were?"

"Three hundred and sixty three feet high. Weighed three kilotons."

Bruce spoke patiently. "And you say we should steal it?"

"We could round up enough pickup trucks," Eddie Two Bats said thoughtfully. "Of course, it will be hard to stand it up again. I think we need an engineer."

"I'll see how it works," Alex said quietly to Sherrine.

"How?"

"It's Crazy Eddie's job to come up with nutty ideas, and Bruce's job to chop him off. Do any of Eddie's notions ever work?"

"No," Sherrine shrugged.

"You could cry."

"No," Sherrine frowned. "Over Crazy Eddie?"

"No, the rocket. The Saturn Five was the most powerful rocket ever built—Sherrine, the most powerful *machine* ever made!"

"A fire in the sky," she said. "I know the song."

"And now it's a lawn ornament."

m sorry," she said. "Monument! They didn't want competition for the shuttle. They
ed to burn the blueprints—" "It wasn't your fault."
know that, but I'm sorry. Sorry that anyone could ever have been so stupid. And
s NASA! We gave the space program to NASA, and they, and . . . Damn."
oes anyone else have an idea?" Bruce asked. "No? Then we carry on as before.
ver who know about the Angels, the safer they'll be. Don't tell anyone without
ing me. The cover is that they're closet fans from North Dakota, people Fang and
ve known for years. All agreed? Good. So ordered. Do I hear a motion to
? Meeting is adjourned. Next meeting is in Hawkeye's room about nine. Now it's
enjoy the convention."

* * *

e room had perhaps been a small ballroom when the house was new. Now it
crowded despite its size. There were windows along one wall, with couches under
the window sills were covered with brick-a-brack, photos of people in odd
es, strangely painted coffee mugs, vases that held improbable plants. That fur rug,
ed in yellow and orange, was neither the shape nor the colors of any of Earth's life
A grand piano stood down at one end of the room. It was covered with
raphs and paintings and drawings and plastic objects. Books lined two of the
nd the spaces between the large archways set into the fourth wall.
arge bear of a man with a sunburst of hair encircling his face stood next to the
iano, one hand resting on it. He was making a speech, and his free hand waved in
th his words. Other people were talking, too, which seemed impolite.
e man stopped in midsentence when Sherrine and Thor wheeled the Angels into
m. People looked around and opened a path, some of those on the floor moving
ome standing to move chairs, until Alex and Gordon were moved right up front
e speaker. The others moved back again. It looked choreographed.
ee you," Thor said. He seemed in a hurry to leave.
e speaker was in no hurry at all. He struck a pose, as if waiting for something.
ual? Alex wondered. Whatever. *Pavana mukthvsan* could be practiced as easily in
chair as elsewhere. Alex used both hands to bend his right leg and tuck it into his
against the pubic bone. Then he folded his left leg and laid it atop the right. He
ircles of his thumbs and index fingers and rested his hands on his knees. He
d in slowly through his left nostril, repeating the syllable *yam* six times. He
ed when Steve would graduate him to *siddhasan*, or even *padmasan*. Anything
ter than the *savasam* "corpse position" he had practiced in the van during the ride
Minnesota. He hadn't known that relaxing was such hard work; but according to
he first order of business was to make his muscles stop *fighting* the gravity.

Gregory Lutenist cleared his throat. "The Thirty-Sixth Ice Age," he said formally. His voice was strong, easily heard throughout the room.

Alex breathed in. *Yam*, he thought to himself. *Yammm*.

"We live in an ice age—" began Gregory Lutenist. When he got to the words "ice age," three people had joined him, speaking in unison with him. Then came a voice from the back of the room: "No shit!"

"—and we always have," he continued, imperturbably adjusting his glasses. "During the last seven hundred thousand years there have been eight cycles of cooling and warming. The glaciers retreat, but always they come back; and the warm, interglacial periods last for only about ten thousand years. Since Ice Age Thirty-Five ended ten thousand years ago, the next one must have started four thousand years ago. Of human history has been lived in an ice age. So why did no one notice?"

"It was too warm!" someone suggested.

Lutenist beamed at him. "Just so. It's hard to convince a man in Bermuda shorts that we're living in an ice age. But consider the halcyon, interglacial world of 4500 BC!" He held up a forefinger in the air.

"In Scandinavia the tree line was above 8000 feet." Three voices again joined him, speaking in unison, as Lutenist continued. "And deciduous trees grew all the way to the Arctic circle. The Sahara was a rain-watered, grassy savannah crossed by mighty rivers and populated by mightier hunters. We remember that age dimly as a Garden in Eden." Lutenist smiled and removed his glasses. He polished the lenses and set them back upon his nose. He sighed, and said, slowly, so that everyone in the room could join in, "But then the ice came and went out."

Gordon looked to Alex. "*Shto govorit*?" The man is mad, the sun has not gone out."

Lutenist beamed at Gordon. "Ah—"

"Fresh meat!" someone yelled.

"Tell me, my young friend," Lutenist said. "What lights up the sun?"

"Nuclear fusion, of course. The hydrogen trick? Fusion. Hydrogen to helium."

"And when the fusion ends, what then?" Lutenist asked.

"Oh—but how can fusion end? There is plenty of hydrogen."

"But it did end," Lutenist said. "And no one noticed." Bob Needleton stuck his head between Alex and Gordon. "Where have all the neutrinos gone? Long time passing . . . Give Sherrine a quick kiss on the neck."

"Hi, Pins," Alex said. "Welcome back."

"I didn't want to miss Greg's spiel." Bob cupped his hands around his mouth.

"There will be a neutrino scavenger hunt tonight after the program," he announced. "Bring your own neutrino traps and your Chlorine-37 tanks." The audience responded with boos and applause.

Lutenist waved to him and Bob waved back. "Hi, Greg. Still thumping the same old drum, I see."

"Excuse me," Gordon said, "but what means spiel about neutrinos?"

Bob pulled a chair up and set it beside Sherrine between the two wheelchairs. He turned it backwards. "It's simple really."

Bob exhaled and braced himself. When a physicist says, "it's simple," it usually meant it was simple as duck.

You see, when two protons fuse into a deuterium nucleus they yield a neutrino.

There are two ways that can happen, but . . . Well, the details don't matter. Sometimes the sun just hip-hops through beryllium into lithium and spits out another neutrino, and there are a couple of other reactions that also produce neutrinos; but that's about the gist of it. Fusion spits neutrinos. Get it?"

Gordon looked puzzled. "I get. So?"

Bob held his hands out palms up. "The problem is we never found the neutrinos. A Super-Kamiokande-37 detector should register a neutrino flux of eight snw, but all they ever get is a few snw."

Gordon's frown deepened. "What's 'snw'?"

Sherrine hid her face in her hands. Bob said, "I dunno, not much. What's snw with you?"

"Thank you for sharing that with us——"

"Sorry, I've never been able to resist that one. Snw is SNU, Solar Neutrino Units.

One snw is one neutrino event per 10^{36} atoms per second."

There was a commotion at the other end of the room. A dozen fans, maybe more, were going.

"Is this the pro party?"

Lutenist said. "I'm not through."

A large man in a bush jacket waved a salute with a bottle beer. "Go right ahead, Lutenist."

"Don't mind us."

"What's up?" Lutenist demanded.

The man shrugged "Con Committee said to come here, this will be the 'Meet the Pros' party."

"How much snw crap," Lutenist said. "This is my lecture!"

"What's to lecture?" Needleton demanded. "It was all simple, and known before the sun was born."

"The sun is not producing enough neutrinos. *Ergo*, it is not fusing. Yet, according to tellurium levels in deep molybdenum mines there were plenty of neutrinos passing through the Earth during interglacial and preglacial periods."

"Excuse me, Bob," said Gregory Lutenist, "are you leading this discussion or am I?"

Bob waved a hand. "Sorry, Greg. Go ahead." In a near-whisper, "Gordon, it's a cycle. The sun heats up, the sun cools a bit, shrinks a bit, the core gets denser and hotter, fusion starts again, the new warmth inflates the sun. See? Is that a relief, or what?"

"The solar constant is dropping! The solar constant is dropping!"

"The solar constant is dropping! The solar constant is dropping!"

"The solar constant is dropping! The solar constant is dropping!" someone shouted.

tenist beamed. "The sun goes through sunspot cycles. Lots of sunspots, it gets
ere. Few sunspots, colder weather. An astronomer named Maunder recorded
s and found that the last time there weren't *any* the planet went through what was
as the Little Ice Age, the Maunder Minimum." He paused dramatically. "And in
0s it became certain that the planet was going into a new Maunder Minimum

es, yes, we know this," Gordon said. "Sunspots are important to us. But if so
nt to Earth, why do they not know cold is coming?"
astards did," the man in the bush jacket growled. "But they said Global Warming."
rants," Bob said. "There's money in climate studies. All the Ph.D. theses. All that
go if things were so simple—"

short blond woman, slender by local standards, came in with a large tray. She
it up to the piano as if thinking to set it down there, looked at the clutter, turned
sly— "Ah. You're Gabe?"

smiled and nodded. She said, "Laurie. Hold this while we get a table." She set the
ross the arms of his wheelchair and was gone.

was covered with small dishes, each with a couple of slices of vegetables.
ber, carrot, a bit of lettuce, some cabbage. A stalk of broccoli. Alex felt his mouth
o water. Fresh vegetables! Of course the people here would be used to them—
b Needleton stopped talking about neutrinos and stared at the tray. He gave a
w whistle. "Dibs on a carrot stick!"

egory Lutenist said, "Broccoli for me. Now. It is important to realize that the sun
ays burned hotter or cooler during different eras of our planet's history.
ouse or Icehouse."

an spoke up. "Carrot for me, too. The dinosaurs lived during a greenhouse era,
ney?"

voice spoke from the doorway. "Pros get first choice. This is the Meet the Readers
ight?"

tenist nodded as if there had been no interruption. "Dinosaurs, and the Great
als, too. In fact, prior to the Pleistocene the world was quite warm. Hippopotami
ed in the Thames."

paused a moment. When he continued, half a dozen voices spoke in unison with
hen, in the blink of a geological eye, they were replaced by polar bears."

tenist beamed.

ex looked to Sherrine. "What—"

e laughed. "Some of us have heard Gregory before."

cumbers, celery, carrots, luxuries beyond his wildest dreams were cradled in
arms. He couldn't eat; he had to share this with the whole room; and he couldn't
hands on any of it without dropping the tray. Little dark red spheres, little bright

eres with white inside, were displayed on big green leaves. Where were they with
nn table?

edges were showing on various chests. Here were tiny oil paintings of alien
es and landscapes and starscapes, or wheel-shaped and band-shaped artificial
s infinitely more sophisticated than *Mir* and *Freedom*. A few badges bore angular
faces and elegant calligraphy: CLOSET MUNDANE. KNOWS HARLAN
ON (evil smirk. HAS READ MUCH OF DHALGREN (bewilderment).

tenist continued. "Human history is so short that, living between the
otamus and the polar bear, we thought those conditions were 'normal.'
fter the sun went out, the interglacial ended and the world grew colder and drier.
raha rivers dried up, one by one, until only the Nile was left. By 1500 BC, the
avian tree line had dropped to six thousand feet, and broad-leaf trees had
ared from the Arctic.

ne weather changed. The North African coast was the breadbasket of the Roman
. It began to dry up. Great migrations began, Huns, Arabs, Navajos, Mongols.
were Viking colonies on Greenland, but the Greenland Glacier began to move
until it covered them all."

ell you another one," the man in the bush jacket said.

o ahead, Wade," Lutenist said.

errine looked around. "Wade Curtis. A pro."

riter?" Gordon asked. She nodded.

rtis's voice boomed even in the large room. "In the American Revolutionary War,
l Alexander Hamilton brought cannon captured by Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga
o assist General Washington in Haarlem Heights. He brought them across the ice
rozen Hudson River. By the twentieth century, the Hudson didn't freeze at all, let
ard enough to carry cannon on!"

tenist smiled agreement. "Right! The Little Ice Age was coming to an end! In fact,
ing trend had started around 1200, and lasted for eight centuries. Anyone know

ey, let's eat!" someone called.

et him finish," Curtis growled. He drained his beer. A bearded man behind him

handed him another.

tenist stabbed a hand into the air. "Why?"

meone in the audience responded. "Because a farmer doesn't give up his land."

hat's right, Beth. Farmers! Hunters run, which is what our ancestors did during the
Fifth Ice Age. But the five hundred million settled and civilized humans of the
th century were not going to pull up stakes and move elsewhere. London,
nagen, even Moscow were too valuable to abandon. So what did they do?" He used
ed around the audience.

veral responded in unison. "They threw another log on the fire!"
tenist beamed. "Exactly! They fought the cold with heat, soot and CO₂. Air
on!"

mudge pots," Curtis growled.

ght, Lutenist shouted. "Smudge pots! Greenhouse effect!"

ollution, *poll-ooo-tion*," someone sang.

everyone shouted. "Jenny! And Harry!"

he moonbeam's here!"

ex painfully twisted around to see. The two people who came in through the
y were matched in clothes and height, but in nothing else. The man was enormous,
f shoulders, large of chest, and much larger of belly. He wore a battered slouch
d an oil-stained denim jacket. His boots clumped on the floor. Over one shoulder
ng a huge guitar case. In his hands he carried two nylon bags that clinked as he
He set the bags down and opened one, took out a jar, opened it and sipped at the
quid. "Finest corn squeezin's Kansas ever produced!" He handed the jar to Curtis.
e woman called Jenny was as tall as Harry, but thin. Her skin might have been
Her hair was long and straight, and dead silver-gray. The eyes burned brightly
he wrinkles. She carried a guitar, but she wasn't playing it. "*Don't drink the water,
n't breathe the air!*" she sang.

ke got up from his place on the floor. "We'd given upon you two," he said.

ike broke down in Wyoming," Jenny said. "Had to sing for our suppers. Some
you can't sing, though . . ."

rry struck a chord. "It's minus ten and counting, and time is passing fast, it's minus
counting—"

God, don't," Curtis said. The room was still for a moment.

eah," Jenny said. "And you can't sing 'A Fire in the Sky'—"

older man went over to her and eyed her belligerently. "I know you. Jenny

e do NOT use real names," Jenny said.

ou're a goddamned feminist," the man insisted. "What the hell are you doing

"

was interrupted by Wade Curtis, who roared with laughter. "Adams, you know
Sure, the feminists won, they're running the government along with—God
y. But think about it, she's too damn much anarchist to be inside the government!
vernment. Even a Green-Feminist government."

n no goddam Green," Jenny said.

orry." Curtis actually sounded apologetic. "Anyway—"

nyway, Adams," Harry said, "she knows who her friends are. So do I. Have a jug

Real moonbeams."

enny likes to feel wanted," Fang said. "She's not comfortable unless she's wanted
aw."

ny grinned, and sang,

Wanted fan in Luna City, wanted fan on Dune and Down,
Wanted fan at Ophiuchus, wanted fan in Dydeetown.

across the sky they want me, am I flattered?

s I am!

could just reach orbit, then I'd be a wanted

l."

. and in the midst of the Thirty-Sixth Ice Age, we were lighting global smudge
ood-burning during the Middle Ages was so intensive that the forests of Europe
tually smaller than in the twentieth century. Coalburning, which began in the
h century, saved the forests and put even more gunk into the air. By the late
nth century, most homes were heated by coal furnaces." Lutenist paused and
his hands together, as if imagining heat vents and radiators.

ine had formed. Veggies disappeared as they moved past Alex. Almost everyone
ssed put something in Alex's mouth. Dark red was miniature tomatoes; Alex
he implications. The red-and-white spheroid burned.

ny sang,

Wanted fan for mining coal and wanted fan for

lling oil,

ent very fast through Portland, hunted hard

e Gully Foyle.

ilt reactors in Seattle against every man's advice,

uldn't do that in Alaska, Fonda says it isn't

e."

ice touch, Jenny. They'll be expecting you to rhyme it with 'ice.' "

ou don't really think the nukes could have saved Alaska, do you Jenny?"

aska had been beneath the Ice for fifteen years.

. Then, beginning in the 1950s, we began to clean up our environment.

old coal furnaces gave way to centralized electric heating; and pollution was

d to the power plant areas, instead of belching from every chimney in the city.

nous pea-soup fogs of London disappeared."

tenist smiled wanly. "But so did the warm, rainy British winters. Heavy winters

the norm. In 1984 and '85 several campers froze to death when a blizzard struck

iera. Atlanta, Georgia, had a week of zero temperatures. Winter snow became
n in the southlands. Meanwhile, the Sahara resumed its southward march and
an grain harvests became less and less reliable. Raindrops need tiny particles
which to condense. So, when you eliminate air pollution, what happens?"
ess rain!" cried the audience.
nd less cloud cover means the ground loses heat faster. And that means?"
ne Great Ice!"
e day is a'comin'," Jenny and Harry sang softly. *"Hey sinner man, where you
run to—"* It made a nice background, now, for Gregory's litany.
es, my friends." Lutenist was walking back and forth in front of the piano. "The
tion of air pollution did not start with the Greens. It started with the Big Power
nies back in the fifties—as a by-product of their program of clean, centralized
al power generation. But it accelerated with the environmentalist movement.
ve were not allowed to burn the leaves we raked off our yards. We had to bag
n plastic bags, of course! And have them hauled away by trucks to landfills
ds of miles away. The Green Laws became more and more stringent at the same
at interest in and support for science was waning—not a coincidence, I might add.
day, with the Great Ice and the Sahara both sliding south, we are not allowed to
nother log on the fire!"
amned good thing!" Jenny Trout shouted.
everyone looked at her.
s got to fall," she said. "All the way. We don't like this world we made! Bring it
Bring it down!"
rry had taken out his guitar. He struck a chord.
lack powder and alcohol, when your states and cities fall, when your back's
the wall—"ex shuddered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"... *Someone's Daydream*"

the Phantom of the Paradise leaped out of the TV screen, as the audience, as made helpful comments. Sherrine pretended to watch as her thoughts leaped wilder than the masked phantom.

Reaching the Angels home wouldn't be simple even if they had a ship. Some of it she could do. With Bob to analyze the ballistics she ought to be able to write the code. Some she could be tougher. Fuel. They'd have to steal that.

Do the most important things first. Without a ship, everything else was moot.

Bob came into the lounge. Had he followed her? When he waved at her and headed in that direction, she sighed.

Bob was wearing his Rotsler badge. A cartoon face studied the *SS ROBERT K. EATON* and thought, "Pretentious." The sharp nose partly covered the letters. Bob sat beside her on the sofa, just close enough to be within her personal space, and put his head on the back of the sofa behind her. He leaned close to her ear. "Any ideas yet?"

She certainly had ideas. A couple of fens sitting nearby grinned at her. *Oh, Ghu!* she thought. *After tonight, everyone will think we're back together.*

For some men, "no" meant "maybe" and "maybe" meant "yes." She hadn't seen Bob in months; now she couldn't get rid of him. He was cheerfully impervious to her protests, as if he were not programmed to accept the data. Like Halley's Comet, no matter how long he was at each encounter, he kept coming back. Only he didn't wait six years.

Not that he was unattractive. He had been among her better lovers, back in the days when she hung out with the spa set. And maybe she only needed to get used to him again. She didn't know how to do things in a hot tub that . . . For that matter, he knew how to talk to a woman, not simply at her. He had been as interested in hearing about her computer—about LISP and LAN's and baud rates—as he was in telling her about his. There was only one thing he seemed incapable of understanding. He didn't understand that that was endings.

Bob was a romantic. Most men were. They thought that a relationship had a beginning and a middle, but no end. Danny, the time traveler in *The Man Who Folded Time*, had made that mistake. He kept going back and going back, trying to rekindle his romance with Donna; until finally he had kindled disgust and revulsion in her. The

was to quit while you were at the top go out like a champion and not fade into an
of pity like a has-been fighter who couldn't quit the ring.
e didn't want that to happen between her and Bob. She liked him too much. So
neutral. Keep it professional.
ou know, that Gordon is kind of cute," she said. And how was that for a neutral,
ional remark?
s arm made an aborted move toward her shoulder. "Oh?"
es." She spoke in a whisper. "Not just his background—a space pilot, by Ghu!—
way he looks. His facial bones and his little potbelly. And his puppy-dog eyes. He
seems so sad and withdrawn, it makes me want to cuddle him and cheer him up."
mm. I'm feeling a little sad and withdrawn myself," Bob said hopefully.
e slapped him backfingering on the arm. "Oh, you know what I mean. He seems so
cut off forever from his home and his friends."
was his fault they were marooned, you know."
hat?" She had raised her voice slightly and someone sitting in a nearby chair
d her. She lowered her voice and leaned closer to Bob. Bob helped her do that.
do you mean?"
e told me so himself." Bob whispered into her ear as if they were necking; and she
back to three nights ago, when he had woken her from the sleep of the innocent to
her into the Rescue Party. A good cover, he had said, in case anyone was listening.
damned good cover. He probably thought of it himself. "This morning, when I
them breakfast . . . Doc had taken 'Gabe' into the washroom to, uh, well, help him
know."
eah. Go on."
ell, once we were alone, the kid let it all spill out. It seems that during the missile
he shouted out a warning in Russian and Alex didn't understand until too late; and
hy they were hit."
h, no! It must be terrible to have to live with that."
b shrugged. "He's young. He'll get over it. That's the wonderful thing about being
The point is, the kid—"
e never learned what Bob's point was. Chuck Umber burst into the room waving a
up newspaper in the air. "Angels down!" he announced and flipped the lights on.
pship went down on the Ice yesterday!" He shut off the VCR player.
ey!" someone shouted. "Turn the *Phantom* back on."
o, wait! Look at this." Chuck opened the paper to the front page and held it up.
THIEVES CRASH ON ICE, screamed the headline. He had a bundle of
pers under his arm and began passing them out.
storm of voices greeted him. "What? Where?" "How'd it happen?" "Are the
okay?" "How come we're just hearing about it?" "Turn the *Phantom* back on."

Bob leaned into her ear. "That tears it," he whispered. "How long before someone figures things out?" Sherrine grabbed a copy of the paper from Chuck as he went by and opened it. She and Bob huddled over it. She scanned the story quickly, as much as she could, but what hadn't been said as to learn what had. It wouldn't do to show too much familiarity with the story.

The newspaper report was reasonably straightforward, a bit long on loaded words and short on detail, but not much worse than the usual news. There was no mention of what had happened to the Angels. A sidebar, entitled **DEATH RAYS FROM OUTER SPACE**, told of "beams of deadly microwaves aimed at the search parties" and informed the reader that "microwaves are a form of radiation, which causes cancer." Sherrine pointed. "Nice placement on the comma."

Bob just shook his head. "You'd think they'd know the difference between ionizing and non-ionizing radiation. They can't tell one type of asbestos from the other, either." "Why do you think they don't know the difference?"

Sherrine looked at her for a moment. Then he grunted, "You're a worse pessimist than I am." Bob turned back to the reading. "The 'danes really think the microwaves were aimed at the search parties," he said. "They don't see it as a decoy maneuver."

A shadow fell across the paper. "What makes you think the microwaves were aimed at the search parties?"

Sherrine looked up and saw Chuck Umber. Bob opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. "Better of it," Sherrine said, "Just listen, Chuck." She shook the paper and folded it. "It's so often the case when people rely on computers, none of the death rays actually hit the search parties." She gave Chuck a twisted smile. "Chuck, they tell the public that computers are unreliable—"

"Trust the Farce, Luke," Bob interjected.

"—but do you swallow that? If the Angels didn't hit anyone, it means they weren't aiming at anyone. Can you think of any other reason why they'd divert part of the power from Winnipeg?"

Chuck pursed his lips and presently nodded. "If the targeting system snafued . . . No, probably right. The microwaves were meant to hide the scoopship's IR footprint. That's the mission!" He ground one fist into his palm. "I wish some of us had been there."

"We've gotten the Angels off the Ice before the Government grabbed 'em."

There was a moment before Sherrine found her voice. "Yeah, Chuck. Too bad." She turned back behind the newspaper.

More people were pouring into the lounge. Dick Wolfson ejected the video cartridge and turned on the all-news channel. "C'mon," someone cried, "it was just getting to the good part, where Beef gets electrocuted." Sherrine thought it must be Dennis, the comics artist who had created *The Niki Birds*. It was said that you could play a contraband copy

Phantom of the Paradise anywhere in the country and Dennis would be there in the ending.

"Settle down, everyone!" roared a bull voice. "Let's hear what the 'danes have to

The lounge quieted as the fans concentrated on the tube. The impeccably groomed anchor recited several items of war news. Swedish marines had forced a landing on the Korean coast; but their Russo-Lithuanian allies had suffered a stunning defeat at their hands. No one had used nukes, yet; but the world was holding its breath.

It must be near the beginning of the headline cycle, Sherrine thought. She felt mildly disappointed that the Angels were not the top story. *Let's get to the Angels*. When the next item turned out to be a presidential photo opportunity, she almost screamed.

Finally, the screen displayed a shot of *Piranha* embedded in the ice. "This update on the successful landing of the air scooper from the space habitats. Scoopships are built to steal resources from the Earth and take it to the space stations. Many experts blame the cold weather for contributing to the loss of this air. Air Defense forced the latest scoopship to land in North Dakota."

The scene moved past the anchorman to a long shot of the glacier looking down the ice path toward the ship. "Experts now believe that the spacemen escaped from the planet using inappropriate technology."

Bob snorted. "Inappropriate? It worked!"

"Push, and listen," said Sherrine.

... the efforts of the space stations to stop the search with death rays. Meanwhile, the public should be on the lookout for possibly two illegal aliens believed to be on the

Sherrine blinked at the *artist's conception of spacemen*. The spectrally thin creatures in the sketch looked like famine victims who had been stretched upon a rack. Someone in the audience snickered. Others applauded.

The aliens are believed to be very tall because of the unnatural environment they live in.

But, because they live in zero gravity—"

free fall, damn it; not zero gravity!" That sounded like Wade Curtis.

—must be extremely strong, as well . . . " Onscreen, stock footage from the

mission of SUNSAT showed an astronaut handling an enormous solar collector

. . . so citizens are advised to be cautious."

Sherrine did not know who was advising the government searchers, but they could

have helped the Angels more if they had tried. The exaggerated height and leanness,

her interpretation of the effect of free fall on body strength . . .

The ruling coalition of proxmires, rifkins, falwells and maclaines scorned "the

fantastic science story." As if there were another kind of science; as if it were some

vented, like myth, to be discarded when a better 'story' came along. It was hardly
ng that the government had not sought out scientific opinion.
had they? Hah! What if they'd asked a closet fan? For that matter the scientists
ives, the pariahs of academe, might not volunteer to educate the very people who
d them. Sometimes you *want* an opponent to go on sounding like a fool.
-sooo . . . She grinned and hugged Bob, who seemed surprised and not displeased.
ne Angels were nearly home free! If people were looking for emaciated supermen,
ouldn't look twice at Gabe and Rafe.
erry and Jenny began a song.

a tower of flame in Capsule Twelve,
as there.
now not where they laid my bones,
ould be anywhere,
when fire and smoke had faded,
darkness left my sight,
ound my soul in a spaceship's soul
ing home on a trail of light.

or my wings are made of tungsten,
d my flesh is glass and steel,
m the joy of Terra for the power that I wield.
ce upon a lifetime, I died a pioneer,
w I sing within a spaceship's heart,
es anybody hear?"

nyone having knowledge of the whereabouts of the air pirates should call the
Do not approach them, they are armed and dangerous."
e have to do something." A man's voice. Crying.
hat?"
don't know, I don't know, but we have to do something—"
s too late, by twenty years."

y thunder rends the morning sky,
s, I am here.
e loss to flame when I was man,
w I ride her without fear,
I am more than man now,
d man built me with pride,

ed the way and I lead the way
man's future in the sky.

or my wings are made of tungsten,
flesh of glass and steel,
m the joy of Terra for the power that I wield.
ce upon a lifetime, I died a pioneer,
w I sing within a spaceship's heart,
es anybody hear? Does anybody hear?"

e song faded out, and the room was quiet, except for Curtis, who stared at the wall
ttered over and over, "God damn them. We were so near. God damn them all."

e room spouted a geyser of talk when the newsreader finished. Most of the fen
ed excitedly to each other; but Sherrine noticed a few thoughtful faces. Chuck
was busily scribbling in a pocket notebook. Wade Curtis was sunk into himself,
on knees and chin in hands, mouth slack, eyes hooded . . . eyes touched
e's, wandered away, wandered back. . .
unk. Can't say I blame him.

ome on," said Bob, rising from the sofa and tugging her arm. "We've got to tell the

e pulled him back down. "I think they already know. Quiet. I want to hear what
d here."

his crowd? Why?"

reas. That's what fen are for."

meone in the room spoke through the din. "What are we going to do about it?"

e chatter died down. "Do? What can we do?"

uck Umber took center stage. "Look," he said, "the 'danes say that the Angels
d. Well, they sure didn't escape on their own. They had to have had help. We've
ind out who's got them and offer to help."

aybe the Eskimos have them," Horowitz suggested. "The paper says that there
acks around the scooper. "

doesn't matter," Chuck replied. "Well find out who has them, sooner or later."

b tried to sink down lower in the sofa. Sherrine's pressure on his elbow stopped

aybe we shouldn't try to contact them, Chuck," said Dick Wolfson. "Whoever's
Angels might have to hide them for a long time. The fewer people who know who
ere, the better."

uck shook his head. "Not when the people are fen. I'm going to try and reach the Ghost. He must know something."

ure, Chuck. The Ghost runs his own fanzine. You think he'd let a competitor in on er scoop he has?"

uck stood up taller. "He will. Because this is the—biggest thing to hit fandom *Star Wars* . . . or Apollo Thirteen. We've, got to transcend factions and feuds and ether."

erry and Jenny had started a song, singing softly as background as the others ". . . and he knew he might not make it, for it's never hard to die, but he rode her tory, on a fire in the sky!"

ade Curtis uncurled and stretched and said, "They can't hide them."

ere was an instant hush when the writer spoke.

unk or sober, the hard science fiction writers were supposed to know everything. ughed at them when they made mistakes, but always listened . . . and Wade Curtis oice that filled every corner.

hoever it is, they can't hide the Angels forever. Think it through. No, there's only ng to do, get the Angels back where they belong. God damn NASA. Where *we all* God damn them, they ate the dream. For money. For money. The Angels belong e. We have to send them back."

hat's crazy." "No Wades right." "Hell, he's drunk." "Wouldn't you be?" "But 'They'll need a rocket." "Where can you find a rocket these days?"

errine clenched Bob's upper arm so hard he winced. Yes! Yes, where can you find t? She leaned forward, to hear better.

ade laughed. "The nearest rocket I know of is Ron Cole's Titan."

uck and some of the other older fen laughed, too. A younger fan spoke up. "What that?"

ade flipped a hand. Someone put a drink in it. "Old fannish legend has it that Ron bbled a Titan Two together from spare parts he bought from government surplus ost him less than a thousand dollars, too. He was on the Board of Trustees for the olitan Museum of Boston. He wanted it for an exhibit, of course. The Boston caught him trying to get the motors through the doors. They ran an article calling e world's sixth nuclear power.' "

errine clenched and unclenched her fists. *But where is it now?* She dared not draw n to herself. But a Titan! Titans had lifted the Gemini capsules into orbit.

uck laughed. "I remember that article, Wade. Boy, was Ron mad! He tried to tell ers that he did *not* have a nuclear warhead; but you know how 'danes are. Rockets missiles equals weapons equals nukes. Sometimes I wonder if Ron didn't go ahead ld a bomb just for the hell of it. As long as everyone thought he had one . . . "

uilding a warhead isn't as easy as the 'danes think. I don't care how many TV they show with terrorists and mad scientists whipping 'em up in their garage. n hexafloride isn't just radioactive, it's toxic as hell. Refining U-235 is not ing you can do in your garage; not without an ample supply of disposable ts," Wade said wistfully. uck ran his fingers through his goatee. "Still, if anyone could do it, Cole could. He had something wonderful in his pocket. A laboratory opal, a big chunk of l sapphire for armor, a couple of strips of platinum—" platinum?"

never knew why. Some failed project. And once he typed a guy a check on a sheet gold. The first check bounced, see—"

ot Ron," Wade insisted. "Not a bomb. He *knows* better. But I did hear that he ed away a couple of tank cars of RP-1 and LOX. Just in case he decided to take a e shook his head. "Poor guy is mad as a hatter these days. They kept booting him ne museum after another. Didn't like his technophile leanings. Is it still paranoia ey really are out to get you?"

Where is he now?" asked Wolfson. Sherrine held her breath.

Wade pursed his lips. "Ron and his Titan wound up in Chicago at the Museum of e and Industry. Don't know where his fuel trucks went, maybe there. The LOX is ne anyway, of course, but that's not so hard to make . . ."

Sherrine's heart pounded. Chicago! Why, that was just a short drive across sin. So close! She tugged on Bob's arm. "Let's get up to the room. We've got to others."

* * *

Wade Curtis listened with half an ear while Chuck and Dick debated the wisdom of ng for the Angels.

Someone had to know something. Any two people in the country were connected by of no more than two intermediate acquaintances. That was elementary lity. So, he knew someone who knew someone who knew the people who had the The question was who? He knew a *lot* of someones.

ason it the other way. Start with the people who had the Angels. Figure out who d to be. Government? Possible . . . but then the government would be bragging, the would be protecting their rights . . .

it? Maybe, but not for long. The Inuits lived a physical life, and the Angels going to be ready for that.

me third group. Someone with medical resources, because if they didn't have l resources the Angels would be dead already. Maybe they were. Assume they see where that got you. Like in playing bridge, decide what it takes to make the t; then assume the cards *did* fall that way, and go for it.

Probably somebody here in this room knows. So close! But no, they'd have told me, thought.

. You're a goddam drunk, and sober you wouldn't trust a drunk with anything this way should they?

was distracted momentarily by two fans winding their way through the crowd. skeleton, he recognized. Physicist at U-Minn. The other he recalled as a fafated fan he had known years ago. Computer whiz. "What's their big hurry?" he asked, g toward the two.

ck Wolfson grinned. "If you'd've seen them earlier, you wouldn't have to ask. I now Sherrine and Bob were back together. Haven't seen her in years. "

Sherrine Hartley, only Hartley wasn't really her name, it was her first husband's. been active in fandom once.

unh." Chuck Umber seemed miffed. "There are more important issues at hand at."

eah," said another fan. "Like how to let the Angels know about the Titan."

ade fell silent while the other fen debated. It was all moot anyway. Until they who had the Angels and how to contact them there was no point in composing a e. Someone handed him a drink, and he swallowed mechanically. Besides—" It's ng message," he said, but nobody heard.

he Angels did want to get back upstairs—and Wade could not see where they had er option—then it was silly to try setting up Ron Cole's old terror weapon. There etter ways anyhow. He narrowed his eyes in thought. Yes, sir. *Much* better ways. head hurt. Someone handed him another drink.

* * *

ex stared at the two-headed creature with the nubbled lips. Doc had wheeled him s for the meeting, opened the door, and there it was.

' was a smallish skeleton. The heads, set at the ends of long, flexible necks, were triangular. Each contained what Alex took for a mouth and an eye socket.

n the necks was a thick bulge of bone. The creature stood on three legs ending in hooves, with the rear leg attached to the spine by a complex hip joint. There was a laque attached to it.

ex gripped the wheels of his chair and rolled himself across the room. He squinted laque.

MPSON: RESEARCH AND DESIGN

ntents: ONE MODEL OF PUPPETEER SKELETON
PECIMEN A)

THIS MODEL, BASED ON A RARE SPECIMEN TRADED
FROM THE KZIN, SHOWS THE PUPPETEER JUST BEFORE
THE EXTENDED PHASE OF A HIGH-SPEED LOPE . . .

Alex shook his head. He could just imagine the consternation if, after the fall of
tion, paleontologists of the future were to unearth this . . . um . . . sculpture.
"Do you like him?" Doc Waxman wheeled Gordon into the room and parked him
Alex. He was a gift from Speaker-to-Seafood."
Alex thought he should be used to this sort of thing by now. "Whom?"
"That Reynolds, the writer. It's a long story, involving a drunken conversation with a
Savannah. I'll tell you about it someday." He whistled cheerfully while he set up a
sh glasses and an ice bucket. Alex couldn't help grinning. Doc was the most
nedly cheerful man he had ever met. He was easily sixty; yet he had not hesitated
out onto the glaciers with the younger fans, on what might easily have become a
ssion-of-mercy for two strangers. You had to like a man like that.
"You should see my collection . . . Hi, Fang, Bruce. Come on in. You should see my
on of fannish art. Or rather, you should have seen it. Statues, paintings. Worlds of
gination. Kelly Freas . . . I have *Hraani Interpreter*. Bonestell. Jainschigg's
'em' original. Aulisio's 'Mammy Morgan.' Pat Davis. Her 'Well-springs of
'er' can bring tears to my eyes. She's here at the Con, Davis is. You saw her
d costume at the Meet the Pros?" He shook his head. "A lot of it's gone now;
ated at busted cons. Now I only bring one object with me when I come. We keep
hidden in the bilge."
"What's a bilge?"
"You could see the gears adjust in Waxman's head. "My wife and I live on a
boat in the Marina. We've sealed everything into watertight containers and hid 'em
ah, bottom of the boat." He chortled. "Won't help in a thorough search; but it
ages the casual pest, now that we're not supposed to treat the sewage anymore . . .
when you get the chance and we'll haul some pieces out to display."
Alex grinned. "How can I turn down such an invitation?"
"Easy," said Fang opening a can of beer with one hand. "We're sending you back
s, remember? On a fire in the sky."
"Are, thought Alex. "Have you found a rocket yet?"
"No, but . . ."
"But we will," Bruce insisted. "Fen are nothing if not persistent. There are stories.
s. We'll trace 'em down. One or another's bound to be authentic. The Ghost may
something."
The others came in by ones and twos. Mike. Edward Two Bats. Steve was glowing,
had just finished a heavy workout, which Alex thought was rather likely. Thor

earing faded jeans, with his tin whistle protruding from a back pocket. He had his long, golden hair back into a ponytail. Not too long ago, Alex knew, such things on men were regarded as outré. Now they were becoming the norm. He wondered if the sudden advent of long hair and beards during the sixties had been an intuitive ecological response to the imminent ice age; like animals growing heavier fur before a severe winter.

"Got it," Mike announced. He searched the refreshment tray and came up with a bottle.

"Got what?" asked Bruce warily.

"A way to get the Angels upstairs."

The others waited. "Well?"

"Bang Bang." He opened the bottle.

Edward Two Bats looked at him. "Bang Bang?" Light dawned in his eyes. "Oh, no.

Excuse me," said Alex, "but what the hell is Bang Bang?"

"Crazy Eddie's hands came up like a fence. "You're crazy, Mike! Orion is fucking

aggressive! The whole world made a treaty——"

Mike overrode him. "It's simple. You get a big, thick metal plate. Real thick. You put a bomb underneath and set it off. Believe me, that sucker will *move*." He smiled.

Edward Two Bats snarled.

Alex looked at Bruce. "He's not serious, is he?"

"Before you can come down again," Mike continued, "you throw another bomb

down." He held his hand out, palm down, and jerked it upward in steps. "Bang,

bang. Get the picture?"

Alex got the picture. He liked his earlier idea about sticking a missile up his ass.

"I think there may be some difficulties with your plan," he said.

"Oh, sure. Details." Detail work, Alex could tell, was not Mike's forte.

Bob and Sherrine arrived, out of breath and flushed. They paused in the doorway,

grinning, heavily and grinning from ear to ear. "We have a ship," Bob gasped.

Alex felt a shiver run through him. The others stiffened. A rocket ship? They'd found

that a ship was only half the battle. There was fueling and guidance and . . . It was

so simple. So why should he be shaking?

It was a fragile thing, this imaginary spacecraft, and Alex feared to touch it. He

asked, "What sort of bird is it? What kind of shape is it in?"

Alex overheard Wade Curtis down in the movie lounge." Sherrine sank into a chair.

"Yes." She took the tea that Doc handed her. "They were listening to the news and

talking about it and ol' Wade, Ghu bless him, he cut right to the heart of it. The Angels

were out indefinitely. And he mentioned that Ron Cole had a rocket, and——"

Wade snapped his fingers. "Cole! That's right! There were stories, years and years ago. And get this. Wade says Cole has fuel for it!"

Sherrine shook her head. "No. The rocket is at the Museum of Science and Industry. And get this. Wade says Cole has fuel for it!"

They all whooped except Alex. "How much fuel?" he insisted. "And what kind of fuel? It won't do us any good if it just farts on the launch pad."

Sherrine looked at him. "I don't know how much fuel. Wade said it was a Titan Two. Matter?"

"Titan?" He exchanged glances with Bob and Bruce. "Titans were smaller than the Titan, weren't they?"

Bob nodded. "A two-stage rocket with a thrust of . . . well, enough *oomph* to put a Titan into orbit. A Gemini held two men. *Freedom's* what . . . two hundred fifty miles from the Earth. The Geminis reached seven hundred, didn't it?"

"Titan Two has more than enough lift," said Bruce, "*if* there's enough fuel."

"Meet them halfway," suggested Thor.

"Halfway?" said Alex.

Thor had his tin whistle out and was playing an imaginary tune with his fingers.

"Tell me that if we could just get enough fuel to put you on a decent suborbital, the Titan could rendezvous and pick you up. What did Sheppard reach in the first Titan? Redstone? A hundred fifteen miles or so, wasn't it? That should be doable from Titan."

"That's a good idea, Thor," said Sherrine.

The muscular blond smiled. "Baseball," he said.

"Baseball?"

"The Angels can't handle grounders; but I figured anybody can catch a pop fly."

Wade laughed and shook his head.

"That's so funny?" asked Bruce.

"Certainly not Thor's joke," said Fang.

Wade wiped his eyes. "It just hit me. *Freedom* orbits two hundred fifty miles straight from the Earth? *That's less than the distance from here to Chicago!* We have to travel farther from the Earth in the rocket than we would travel in the rocket itself."

"There's a little more to it than that," Alex said. "Velocity matching is tricky."

"It's not the distance," Bob said. "It's the energy."

Wade sobered instantly. "I know that." He stuffed his hands in his pants pockets and walked to the window. The blinds were open; and, outside, stars dusted the icy sky. He looked at the twinkling lights. "I know that," he said softly.

With the pollution gone, the stars were so clear. You'd think that was the point of the Titan.

uce turned to Alex. "How about it? If Cole doesn't have enough fuel to reach orbit, the Angels at least rendezvous with a suborbital?"
ney could," Alex agreed reluctantly, "if it were high enough and on the right
It's trickier than just flinging it up, and it would cost fuel—but yeah. They can do

exchanged glances with Gordon. Would Lonny even bother: Good ol' Lonny
weigh the cost of the fuel for the rendezvous versus the benefit of getting two duds
nd, no matter how you sliced it, twice zero did not make for a respectable return
stment.

rdon looked worried. He was probably imagining the trip. Arcing up on a nice
parabolic trajectory. Hitting the top. Earth curves away below, waiting . . . *Sorry,*
couldn't afford to meet you. And then an equally smooth parabolic trajectory

ex gave him a nod. Don't worry, Gordo. It'll never come off. So what's to worry?
twitched a smile.

ke frowned and half-sat on the window sill. Alex could see the stars over his
r; and damn if one of them wasn't moving!

nobody's home, once his own, was tracing a curve across the lack sky. Navstar?
freedom herself? Without an ephemeris, he couldn't tell— looking up from Earth's
disoriented him—but he was surprised at how much the sight of it ached.

would have to go back. Have to. Or die trying. And no one was going to come
ch him. So he would have to do it himself.

looked at Gordon and saw the hope there. Gordon couldn't guess how many
remained. Just find the bird and light it.

right, he thought. Torch it off and I'll fly it. I owe it to the kid to take him back.

uce scowled. "We're just spinning our wheels here. We need a plan of action." He

oints off on his fingers. "Number One, is the Titan for real? You know how
legends can build. For all we know, all Cole ever had were the components."

ould still use those," said Edward Two Bats.

uce blinked at him.

we have to, we'll assemble the damned thing ourselves," he explained.

uce started to say something, then shrugged. "Second, we need fuel. Does Ron
y have any, or is that just story, too? If so, how much of it does he have and where
l how do we load it aboard?"

or grinned. He pulled a rubber hose from his pocket. "Same way we fueled Bob's

ex had a mental picture: Crazy Eddie with a giant syphon drawing off LOX from a
ient tank. Don't suck too hard on that hose . . .

bird," continued Bruce, "we need a launch site where we can erect the Titan. And we need to get the Angels there, fuel the bird, and then light it off without being or caught by the authorities."

Fuzzy Eddie rubbed his hands together. "Piece of cake," he said.

* * *

and-time exercises, Alex thought. He bent way back with his arms stretched out his head so that his body formed a perfect bow. He could see the ceiling of the poor room he and Gordon shared in the mansion. His legs felt like rubber. Steve patted him with a hand beneath his shoulders.

"Here, you see?" said Steve. "The muscles are there. It just takes some getting used to. In falling free, you use your muscles to move things around; you still have to overcome the inertia. The difference down here is your legs have to learn to keep your body upright all the time, without conscious thought."

"You say so," Alex responded.

"Think of it as bench-pressing one hundred eighty pounds all day long."

"Piece of cake." Alex suddenly realized that Steve was not supporting his shoulders. He wobbled and semaphored with his arms.

"Ready," said Steve again putting a hand behind his shoulder blades. "Now, I'm going to take you through a simplified *soorya namaskar*. You let me know if anything hurts you. Now, exhale and bend all the way forward until your hands touch the floor. It's okay if you bend your knees. You, too, Gordon. That's right. No, in line with your feet. Good. Ordinarily, I'd have you tuck your head between your knees, but . . . Now, return to position."

"I think I'm being overtaxed," said Alex. His arms and legs felt like bands of fire. His muscles quivered.

"No, not yet. You're fooling yourself. You're working out, and your body says, 'Not enough, I can't take anymore.' But it's just trying to con you. If you quit, the rest of the time you'll hear your body laughing at you."

Alex's muscles were on fire, and the speech wasn't helping. He looked at Gordon.

Gordon was holding the pose and grinning. Smart-ass. just because he was younger . . .

Gordon kept staring at him until he saw the leg muscles tremble. Then he gave Gordon a nod in return.

Steve took them through a series of twelve poses. Each one forced Alex to extend a range of motion that he was unaccustomed to using. Getting around at the bottom of the shaft was certainly different from getting around in orbit. Upstairs, when he kicked off a surface, or flexed to a landing on another, he used those same leg muscles to oppose the body mass. But here he had to do so constantly, not just at kickoff and landing. Just as if he were in the centrifuge or aboard an accelerating ship.

was uncomfortable, but not exactly unpleasant. In fact, living in an acceleration had its advantages. Drinking was easier, for one thing. Objects stayed where you wanted them. And he always woke up in the same place he went to sleep, even without using a watch.

That's the spirit! I'm a stranger in a strange land full of wonders and delights. What was the point of being marooned if you couldn't enjoy it? He needed to embrace Doc Gordon's attitude; or Steve's, or even Mike's. The Round Mound paraded his seemingly bottomless store of knowledge with the same sort of delight as the kids Alex knew in the day-care center. *Gee, Mister MacLeod, look what I found! Mister Mac! Mister Mac, look at this! Isn't it neat!* That was Mike. Each nugget of information was fascinating. The world was full of new-found marvels and he wanted to share the excitement with everybody. They all did. They had a certain sense. It wasn't a sense of ennui or cynicism.

...
sense of wonder.

That was it. A sense of wonder, in the fine old original meaning of the word. They were amazed *at* their world. Because when you did that, everything was wonder-full.

After, after Steve had gone, Alex lay abed in the dark, breathing slowly and deeply, imagining the *prana* from the air streaming into his body, strengthening it. It was the universal energy, manifesting itself in gravitation, electricity, nerve impulses, thought. A kind of Hindu unified field theory. It was nonsense, of course. There was no such energy, and Steve knew it as well as Alex did.

Still, the mind-body interface was a funny thing and nobody really knew how it worked. As a metaphor, a mental focus, *prana* worked quite well. He tried to imagine a bright light in his body, with glowing strands coming from his mouth and nostrils, connecting with the sun and distant stars. Images were the tools of the mind, and a practical person used whatever tools came to hand. Sometimes what was important was not what was true, but what you believed was true.

He kept cobbling together a spaceship and flying into space.

Believing wouldn't make it happen; but not believing would make it not happen.

Nothing starts as somebody's daydream.

"Alex?"

"What?" He turned his head. In the dark he could not see Gordon, but he could sense the gangster's presence in the other bed.

"About . . . About the dip trip . . ."

"What? That again?" Couldn't the kid let it be? I'd like to have seen him do better.

"About it?" he snapped.

"I'm sorry I didn't speak English."

"When?"

Gordon twisted around, painfully, to look at him. "When? In final innocent carefree
t before missile shred *Piranha's* fin!"

ot. "Gordon, it was too late. The missile must have been in flight before I, before,
should have torched off and gone home. They'd *found* us. We *knew* it."

ence.

aybe we could have made another orbit. Only, we don't carry all that much

. And we needed the nitrogen, we *did*, that's not . . . not just Lonny talking."

hen it wasn't what I said. Or didn't."

ad really been bothering Gordon. The stilyagin must have flunked some math

. "What do you picture me *doing* about anything, with a couple of seconds to

ith? What kind of acceleration is *that* to move a mass like *Piranha*, with three tiny

assed fins and the scoop dragging us, too?"

ence filled the blackness between them. Finally, Gordon spoke again. "Alex, do

nk this Titan business will work?"

ex crossed his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Blackness should

ars in it, he thought. "I don't know. If there is a ship and if we can find fuel . . .

o you think?"

heard a heavy sigh in the darkness. "If we can rendezvous, no problem. If they

come and snatch us as we go past . . . They will not do it."

o, I don't think they would."

rdon hesitated. "Maybe my family can . . ."

aybe they could what? Overrule Lonny or Sergei? Not a chance. They can count

as we can. They've got enough fingers. Hell, you know it's not the personal anger.

loater in orbit would hesitate to risk his life to save another. But when we use

n resources, the entire station is at risk, and we have to draw the line. Start making

ons and where do you stop? When everyone is dying because too much has been

?"

was beginning to sound unpleasantly like Lonny Hopkins. "No, your folks will

ou arc past"—*Which is more than anyone will do for me—*" and they'll curse

at they can't come out and snag you; but they won't jeopardize the station for no

ain than two more mouths to feed."

ex remembered the old Eskimo on the glacier describing how his wife and

er had been killed and eaten by his erstwhile comrades. And he hadn't chased after

ibals and he hadn't wasted any tears. Old Krumangapik hadn't been cruel or

ss. Alex had seen the pain in the old man's eyes. But when you lived on the edge,

rned to cut your losses. Krumangapik had never heard of cost-benefit ratios, but

v that in his milieu he could waste nothing, not even tears.

krimos abandoned their aged and infirm to the Ice. Krumangapik had done it. their nighttime trek across the Ice, warmed by that invisible beam of *prana* from AT, he had told of building his mother's Final Igloo. She was old and frail and she had insisted. She even picked the spot. When it was over they had hugged each other and said good-bye; and Krumangapik had sealed the doorway to keep the wolves out and left her there and never looked back. Alex shivered as he remembered. "A duty to die."

How long would it be before elderly Floaters took themselves to the airlocks out of a sense of duty? Yes. That was how they would do it. No injections, because they would conserve the medicines. No slashed wrists, no blood droplets to purge from the air. They would climb into the airlock, nude, so as not to lose the fabric of their clothing. They would just turn on the pumps to evacuate the chamber. Alex remembered such a death. Later, a detail would reenter the airlock and salvage the valuable remains.

Perhaps that was the most unfortunate consequence of the new era of shortages, both up and down in the Well. That it forced them all, Downer and Floater alike, to be ready to die.

"Is it right to string them along?"

Alex jumped. He'd thought Gordon was asleep. "What do you mean, Gordo?"

These Downers. Fandom. They're risking a lot to help us, aren't they? Shouldn't we make sure they're not wasting their time?"

"Don't burn bridges, Gordo. There might be enough fuel to reach orbit on our own." "There's no fuel at all. Meanwhile, she puts her neck at risk for us. Maybe we should go get Big Momma for instructions."

"No!" Alex spoke sharply. "No," he repeated more softly. "We'd have to make our way through this Oregon desert."

Most character. If we do, the fans will know how iffy the whole scheme is and then they'll stop watching."

"And then?"

"And then they might give the effort up. Do you want to be stuck down here the rest of your life?"

"No, but—"

"Look. They're already in deep enough for what they've already done. We'll just let them go long enough to see if there is *any* chance at all. Then . . . Then, we'll decide."

"All right, Alex," Gordon said doubtfully. "You're the boss."

Alex relaxed into the pillow and closed his eyes. The room did not become any more comfortable. He listened to his pulse pushing the blood through his arteries. "Gordon?"

"Yeah?"

"He's too old for you."

rdon didn't answer right away. "She's younger than she looks, Alex," he said after
ent. "Gravity."
o to sleep, Gordo." Alex tried to roll over on his side. He almost made it. Good
om all over.

CHAPTER NINE

Please, Sir, May I Have Some More?"

Alex dreamed he had been strapped down in a runaway centrifuge. The module spun and faster. G-forces sat on his bones like mountains. Under the steady pull his face went away and pooled around his naked skull. He kept trying to cry out that he wanted to; but he couldn't speak.

When he heard drapes slithering, and sunlight warmed his face. "Wake up!" a loud voice insisted. "Time for *soorya narnaskar*!" Alex kept his eyes closed and held the *savasana* pose. Go away, Steve, I'm dead.

But the man would not be put off. He shook Alex by the shoulder. "Come on, you discipline is the key. You've got to work at this every day."

Alex opened one eye. Steve stood between the two beds, legs akimbo and hands on his hips. He reminded Alex of a coiled spring. If the Downers could only find a way to tap Steve's energy, they could use it to melt the glaciers.

Beyond him, Alex saw Doc setting up two trays. Tall glasses of milk. A calcium diet. "Whatever happened to privacy?" he asked.

"Alex," said Gordon. "It snowed last night."

Alex opened both eyes and turned to see Gordon standing (standing!) with his hands on the window sill. His breath made little clouds in the air and steamed the glass.

Alex stifled a groan. If Gordon could do it . . . He pushed the comforter and the blankets away from his body. With that much weight removed he felt as if he could float out of bed.

"Watch those reflexes," Alex. *Watch those reflexes*. Slowly, he swung his legs out over the edge of the bed and pushed himself to a sitting position.

"That's very good," said Steve, and Alex felt like one of his day-care charges who had just gotten a star on his forehead.

"They tell me it snows a little every night up here," said Doc. He brought the milk tray over. "Even during the summer. It's colder in California than it used to be; but L.A. only snows a couple times a year. Here, drink this. It's good for you."

Alex took the glass with both hands and drank. Milk was good stuff. Too bad they didn't have milk in the habitats. That mix-it-with-water powder didn't count, and they would run out of it sooner or later. Sooner or later they would run out of everything, including time. He clenched his fists around the glass. He was probably better off on

You could still run out of things on Earth, you could still die; but the margin for error was not nearly so thin.

There was a knock on the door. "Come on in," Alex called. "Everybody else has." It was Mike Gilder. He waved. "Good morning, all." He found the most comfortable chair in the room and sank into it. "Bad news," he announced. "Bruce tried to contact Ron last night through the Oregon Ghost. No go. The Ghost says Cole is reachable only through the Museum switchboard and no one wants to say anything over a line where there might be listeners. The Ghost says he can't vouch for the Titan, either. He says he knows the stories, too, back in the old days; but he doesn't know how close to the truth they are."

Doc looked up. "What are we going to do, then?"

Mike shrugged. "Bruce wants to take Bob and me down to Chi to check things out in person."

Alex grunted and noticed how his breath smoked. It was not cold, exactly; not like it was on the glacier. But it was chilly. Pleasantly cool, actually. More comfortable than the shirtsleeve warm habitats. There was no problem dumping waste heat on *this* planet. "Is it always this nippy in the morning?" he asked. Yesterday, he had been too warm from the van ride to notice.

Steve struck a pose. " 'To conserve, we all should strive. Thermostats at fifty-five,' " he recited. "It'll warm up later. Body heat from fifth-odd fans."

"Some of them very odd," said Mike. "Steve, who was that fellow who used the thermostat law to commit murder? What was it . . . two, three years ago?"

Doc didn't recall his name anymore. Papers on the Coast didn't play it, up very big. "Massachusetts?"

"Yannis."

"What are you two talking about?" Gordon demanded.

"There was a rich old man and an impatient young heir," Mike explained. "The old man died of pneumonia. EPA said to turn our thermostats down; so the nephew did it. He was proud of being a good citizen." He scratched his beard thoughtfully. "He must have had enough money to hire a good lawyer, because it never came to trial."

"The government wouldn't want it to come to trial," said Steve. "Good-intentioned laws are often allowed to have bad spin-offs."

Mike shrugged. "Whichever. The DA was really frosted, though."

Steve led them through their *asanas*. Stretch. Bend. Rest. Stretch. Bend. Rest. "I am your transcendental drill sergeant," Steve declaimed. "Meditate, you slugs! *Yam*, two, three, four!" As Alex came out of the Eight-Pointed Repose, he noticed that Doc was holding the *asanas* along with them.

had to admit that he felt much better afterward. However, he and Gordon were so
ed by the mild workout that they took refuge once more in their wheelchairs.
worry about it," Steve told them. "Each day you'll be able to stay on your feet a
nger."
nat's right," said Doc. "You should have seen me before Steve took me in hand."
eezed his left bicep with his right hand. "Muscles had gone soft. I tired easily.
ve never felt better."
ve looked at him. "There's more to yoga than physical conditioning."
reakfast time," said Sherrine. She pushed her way through the door backward, her
ripping a tray stacked with steaming dishes. Alex admire the view. Then he noticed
watching and scowled. Neither of them were up to that sort of exercise; but
would beat him to it.
errine set the tray on the lamp table. Mike tried to look over her shoulder to see
e had brought. "The kitchen is a madhouse," she said. "Ol' 3MJ is down there
g flapjacks himself. But Shew and Wolfson and Curtis and a couple of others are
out, too.
amn," Sherrine said.
'hat?" Steve asked.
st remembering. Nat Reynolds used to make Irish coffee at conventions. Long
o. What happened to him?"
kiled," Steve said. "After he got busted and they were all set to charge him with
ion——"
ubversion how" Alex asked. "I thought——isn't the Constitution still in effect?"
or most things," Mike said dryly. "There's freedom of speech for politics and so
but no one has the right to deceive people. Back in the '90s one of the Green
ations sued the publisher of a science fiction book and won. Didn't cost the
er much, but the author was held liable as well. So after Reynolds wrote *The Sun*
—
read this," Gordon said. "About satellite power plants to stop the Ice?"
ep, that's it," Mike said. "Well, Friends of Man and the Earth sued him. Class
suit for fifty million bucks for deceiving the people. Got a preliminary judgment
sing publication of the book. Reynolds wouldn't take that and let the book be
ed anyway and that was contempt of court, so then they wanted him on criminal
."
errine shuddered. "And once you're a criminal, they can do anything to you.
ation. Community service."
ell, they caught him, but he and his lawyers worked out a deal. Reynolds gave up
izenship and was deported to Australia. The Aussies always did like him. He
vant to go, but he didn't really have much choice."

things are pretty rough down there, too," Doc said. "But better than here. Hell, here is better than here."

They were quiet for a moment, then Mike said, "The important thing is, is anybody waffles?"

Sherrine held a plate out to him. "Here. I brought you some." She gave plates to Alex and Gordon. Alex studied his meal and nearly wept. These people had no idea how lucky and fortunate they were. Eggs. *Real* eggs from a real hen. And porridge made of real grain. None of it powdered or freeze dried or reconstituted or resurrected or anything from a vat of green slime. He savored a spoonful of oatmeal.

"That's one of the things I missed while I was fafiated," Sherrine continued.

Mike looked puzzled. "What? Crowded kitchens?"

"No, it's the way fans pitch in and help spontaneously. 3MJ didn't have to ask a single person for assistance."

Doc nodded. "They seen their duty and they done it."

But in the danelaw, nobody helps out unless there's something in it for them. I had to watch my back at the University. You wouldn't believe the bureaucratic in-fighting that goes on there, and the goddam union laws——"

"I would," said Mike, wagging an impaled fragment of waffle. "That's why I left the grunts at the P.O.D.'s were okay. They were just trying to do their jobs——impossible, considering how convoluted the law is——but the political hacks . . ."

Mike shook his head. Alex could sympathize with him. Lonny Hopkins was a son of a bitch; but, to give him his due, he was a perfectly sincere son of a bitch. And up there, you did your best. If you died. If you screwed up, maybe you killed someone whose relatives resented you. If you killed yourself, maybe something else, but the margins were too thin for

anybody down here they were rich enough to support useless people, but there were so many! They were concerned about their own careers and perks in the midst of the struggle for survival.

"Factions are different," Doc said. "At least since the fringe fans gafiated. That was one of the victims of government intimidation. A lot of the cuttle fish are gone." His voice took on a grim tone. "You know the ones I mean. The exhibitionists. And the so-called fans who stole 3MJ's hospitality by stealing his memorabilia. Nowadays the camaraderie is more like it was during First Fandom. It's a smaller group, but closer knit."

"The Few, the Proud, the Fen," said Mike.

Doc nodded. "FIAWOL," he agreed.

Alex held up his bowl. "More gruel, please."

Gordon laughed. "No, no, it is 'Please sir, may I have some more?' "

Mike roared. "You like that stuff? Don't you have 'gruel' where you come from?"

h, sure," Alex retorted. "We make it from the wheat we harvest on our limitless

Well, if it's cereal you want," said Sherrine, "you've come to the right place. What street is to junk bonds, Minneapolis is to cereal grain."

ke scratched his beard again. "Take some home with you, why don't you? I'm sure I'd stick a case of Quaker Oats or Cream of Wheat into the Titan with you. A gift for earth."

ey!" said Sherrine. They all looked at her and she spread her arms apart. "Why

Why not what?"

He stood up and bounced to the center of the room. "If we're going to loft a rocket I'd *pack* it with gifts. As much as it will take. Not just oatmeal, but . . . Oh, anything. Anything! Anything we've got down here that the Angels need!"

He raised his eyebrows. "That's a great idea, Sherri. It'll show the Angels that we still got a few friends down here. What sort of stuff do your folks need, Alex?" "What do we need? What *don't* we need?" Alex wondered how well-informed they were about conditions in the habitats. Not very, he suspected. "Bacon and eggs. Of any sort. Milk. Carrots, broccoli, everything you were serving at the Meet the Boss Party Hell, *any* vegetable. You have foodstuffs down here that some of our folks have never seen, let alone eaten."

"Hitlins and collard greens?" asked Steve.

are."

You guys must *really* be desperate."

Have you ever lived on a diet of lettuce and mustard greens? Zucchini, sometimes. We grow vegetables, but there are never enough. You can't eat spider plants! And some of our plant species have died off. We synthesize a lot of vitamins, but nutritional deficiencies are one of our biggest worries." *Along with solar flares, nitrogen outgassing, leaks of metals and plastics, and you name it. But let's not disillusion anyone.*

Food, then," said Mike. "Geez, we should name the ship *The Flying Greengrocer*."

Seeds, Mike," said Sherrine. "Not live plants. Call it *Johnny Appleseed*." She went to a small lamp table and rummaged in its drawer, emerging with a pencil and a small piece of note paper.

Mike scowled. "I knew that. I *am* the county ag agent, you know. Not that I know anything about it—"

When how the hell did you get the job?" Doc demanded. "As if I didn't know."

Seniority, of course. I was able to bump out someone else. Helps that I can claim white ancestry."

What kind of minority, white man?" Steve asked.

es, just so. Native American," Mike said. "Doesn't show, does it?" He shrugged. "I can claim it, so I do. The point is, I may be able to get stuff, and I can sure get it from the library records."

He pushed himself out of his armchair and paced the room, rubbing his fist with his thumb. "You'll want plants to satisfy three needs," he continued, thinking aloud. "Hot water. Who would ever have thought that a county agent and the space program . . . Well, water nutrition is one. You want maximum food value for minimum energy input. Photosynthesis and production and CO₂ scrubbing is another. And radiation hardening. So . . ." He stopped and rubbed his face. "I should sit down and put together a list, balancing all three needs. But for a start . . . Sherrine, write these down: green leafy vegetables and yellow vegetables. Sweet potatoes, carrots, spinach."

"Why them?" asked Gordon.

"They're great sources of vitamin A," Doc told him. "Important for bone growth, and for immune resistance."

"Vitamin D, tocopherol, vitamin E. That's good for radiation, too," said Steve.

"Sure. We can include a couple of bulk bottles of concentrated multivitamins."

"And tomatoes," Mike added. "Rich in vitamin A and they're easy to grow hydroponically."

"We have some of those," Alex said. "But they went bad. Started making people sick. They still grow tomatoes, but we make fertilizer out of them, mulch for the moon garden soil."

"Tomato seeds. Several varieties." Sherrine wrote rapidly. "You must need some synthetic chemical nutrients, too. Even with closed loop recovery, there have to be losses. What do you need for that?"

"Nitrogen, for one thing," Alex said.

"Potassium nitrate," said Gordon. They all looked at him in surprise. "Potassium nitrate?" he repeated. "You know. Saltpeter."

"Flower seeds," said Steve.

"Alex looked at him in surprise. "Can't eat flowers," he said.

"Steve shook his head. "Not for food. But as long as you need plants to produce oxygen, some of them might as well be pretty."

"Pretty is fine," Gordon said. "But pretty takes time, too." He shrugged. "Here you go. So much to eat. Not made of algae."

"Green slime," Alex said. "Good stuff. Bubble waste water through a vat of green algae. It takes out the ketones. Dissolve the carbon dioxide. It grows, and you can bake it into bread . . ."

"Okay," said Steve. "We send up everything we can get, though. Why not? Seeds are important. They weigh next to nothing; and they'll keep practically forever."

good," Gordon said. "When we know how much mass we can take up, we can ask the commander what is needed. I think it is not proper to ask until—" The room fell silent. "Until you believe in this," Sherrine said. "Don't get their hopes up."

"Something like that," Alex said. "I mean—we're grateful, and you're risking your lives, and—"

"But it's pretty mad to talk about finding an old Titan, fueling it up, and lighting it up," Doc said. "Of course it is. But—" He held up a finger. The others joined in unison. "It's the Only Game in Town." Doc's eyes lit. "Spices. Pepper. Thyme. Savory. Basil. Sweet Basil. Dill—parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme . . ."

Alex's mouth watered. Mythical flavors from childhood. "Ketchup," he remembered. "Mustard. Peanuts. Gordon, you have never tasted peanut butter. And not just peanuts, either." As long as he was daydreaming, why not daydream big. "We could use all sorts of materials. Machine tools, too."

"Plastics," said Gordon. "They can be shredded and remolded. Could always use them."

Alex shook his head. "Plastics would be too bulky to lift in useful quantities. We need things that are small and valuable."

"Don't rule anything out, yet," said Sherrine. "We're brainstorming."

"Too bad you can't grow plastic from seeds," said Doe. "Like you can plants."

"But you can!" Mike said suddenly.

"What?"

"Well, not quite; but . . . There was an experimental field—in Iowa?—where they grew plastic corn. *Alcaligenes eutrophus* is a bacterium that produces a brittle polymer. About 50 percent of its dry weight is a naturally grown plastic: PHB, poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) . . ."

"It contains only *natural* ingredients!" declared Steve with a grin.

"Researchers found they could coax the bug into producing a more flexible plastic by adding a few organic acids to the glucose 'soup.' They cloned the polymer-producing bacteria—oh, 1987 or so—and spliced them into *E. coli*. Later, they spliced them into corn, and finally corn. That was the bonanza. The mother lode of plastic. The corn was plastic kernels. Think of it: plastic corn on the cob," he chuckled. "Shuck the cobs and you get pellets. Perfect for melting in a forming machine hopper."

Doc frowned. "And you plant some of the plastic seed corn and grow more? That doesn't sound right."

Alex shook his head. "No, that was the problem, plastic seeds don't germinate. So we still need the original bugs, but you can breed them in vats and harvest the bacteria directly. Not as efficient as the corn, but . . . They were *this* close to cracking the

problem when the National Scientific Research Advisory Board halted all
" sounds fantastic," said Alex. "Where can you find this bug?"
eutrophus? In the hold of the *Flying Dutchman*. It's just a story that agents pass
The test plot was abandoned when genetic engineering "was outlawed. Later, it
ned by a Green hit squad."
c grunted. "Hunh. Burning plastic corn? I'll bet it released a toxic smoke cloud."
ure. But *that* was the fault of the scientists, not the arsonists. They burned one of
ntists, too."
y grandmother would know," said Sherrine.
ads turned.
y grandmother. She's a genetic engineer, remember? If anyone knows where we
ay hands on a culture of this *A. eutrophus*, she would."
ex felt a tingle in his limbs. They weren't just joking around any more. They could
work. Foodstuff. Seeds. Vitamins. Spices. *Plasi-facient bacteria, for crying out*
they could actually make it happen. They knew where to find the stuff. Or they
people who knew. He glanced at Gordon, who was looking straight at him, reading
e in his eyes.
re. Make the payload valuable enough and Lonny Hopkins himself would fly out
b it, Alex MacLeod and all.
ow would you handle meat, though?" asked Doc. "No seeds. No pills."
small animals. Rabbits. They breed fast and they're relatively meaty for their size."
guinea pigs? The Incas used those."
hickens."
old it. Hold it. This rocket is starting to sound like a Central American bus."
orget the chickens," said Mike. "Take fertilized eggs. They take up less space.
em in an incubator. Use the hens for egg production. Keep a rooster or two for
g stock and use the rest for meat."
ut we don't have a chicken incubator," said Gordon.
uild one. We can put the design and operating manual on a disc."
ell's bells," interjected Doc. "Give 'em a whole library on disc. SF, too, of course.
ust be getting tired of reading the same books over and over. As for the rabbits
nea pigs, just take the germ plasm. You have a sperm bank, don't you?"
ell, uh, yes. For humans."
ood. Frozen sperm, then. Frozen ova, too. Mix 'em *in vitro*. Though you'll still
take a few females along, just in case. Ova are more delicate than sperm."
diversity problem in sperm bank," said Gordon thoughtfully. "Gene pool is
"

ars Needs Women!" shouted Mike. Sherrine looked up from her notepad and a deep crimson. Before she could say anything, Bruce Hyde spoke from the y.

o I want to know what this discussion is about?"

errine and the others told him, all talking at once. He looked at Alex. "Will it

ex shrugged. "Why fly an empty truck? As long as we have enough fuel to lift the *And that would be a pretty problem! Trading altitude for cargo.* There had to cargo to make a rendezvous cost-effective. The more, the better. But more cargo, tude; and Lonny would have to use more fuel to match orbits, and . . . Where was k-even point? It was a question of minimizing the rendezvous costs while izing the cargo value. A minimax problem. But it wouldn't do any good to try and e an answer. Too many indeterminates—Lonny would be making his own ns anyway.

lex?" Steve was waving a hand at him.

m sorry. What did you say?"

asked about spare parts and fittings," said Steve.

e can fabricate most of what we need," Alex told him, "if we have the materials machine tools." Maintenance was the one activity in the habitats that was ely crucial. "We can scavenge and salvage most materials, although we're always nd more would always be welcome; but machine tools and dies for the machine e essential. Some of our blades and drill bits and molds have been reground or ened until they're useless."

achine tools would be small," said Mike, "but heavy."

o critiques, yet," Sherrine reminded him as she wrote. "What else?"

urgical implements," said Doc. "I'm sure people up there still suffer injury and

' He shuddered. "I'm trying to imagine resharpened scalpels and hypodermics."

ex nodded. "You're right. I'd forgotten. Shots *hurt*."

nd medicines," continued Doc. "All sorts. You must have to ration what medicines ve mighty close."

c might as well have pierced him with one of his scalpels. Rationing . . . In a

of scarcity there was always rationing; and some people were on top of the

g list and others were at the bottom. If Lonny or Mary or hydroponics chief

Hu fell sick, there would be medicine available. "Essential personnel." If Alex

od fell sick . . .

d if he did climb back into orbit with a rocketful of goodies, would his name

p the list? More to the point, how much could they realistically take with them in

anyway? Brooding, Alex dropped out of the brainstorming session.

not only medicines," said Sherrine, "but other chemicals, too. 3MJ has chlorine for
right here. He might let us have some."

metals, too," said Gordon ". . . Nah. Too heavy. We would not lift enough metal to
,
uce laughed. "What do you suppose the Titan is made of? If we can loft it hard
, we can put the booster into a recoverable orbit. Then your people can mine it to
art's content."

ter, when they were alone for a few minutes, Gordon looked at him with widened
t cannot work, but they believe—do you believe, too?"

ex arranged the blanket around his legs. He smoothed the green paid cloth,
the folds out of sight. Experimentally, he pulled on the chair's wheels and was
to see that he could roll himself across the room. As Doc had told him, the upper
rength would come first. It was the muscles needed for standing and walking that
the training. That and replenishing the bone calcium. He looked at Gordon.
hink it *could* work. The essence of trade is 'Cheap here; dear there.' Make the
aluable enough and get the rocket close enough and, yes, it damn well could
Gordon's blanket was a dull monochrome, which secretly pleased Alex.
ut, there are so many things that could go wrong . . ."

ex slashed the air with his hand. "Of course there are! Don't teach your
other to suck eggs—" "Sorry, Alex."

—We don't even know if we have a ship. Or whether we can fuel it. Or a thousand
ings. We don't know how much cargo we can load; or what kind and how much
vince the station to bring us in. It's got to be the right stuff. And we can't ask Big
a without tipping our hand and maybe losing the fans' help. There are a thousand
and if any one of them fails, the whole idea collapses like a burnt-out star. So
o you want to do? Give up and stay down here in the Well for the rest of your

o, but you don't have to prove—"

What do you know what I have to prove?"

Gordon pressed his lips together and looked away. "Nichevo."

damn right." Alex turned his wheelchair away. So, why was he being so hard on the
eep down, he knew that they were cut off from home forever. This business with
n was just half-baked wish fulfillment. What did the shrinks call it? Denial? Crash
ship, did you? Stupid dipper fell into the Well? Hey, no problem. We'll just patch
r an old derelict missile; stuff it with a cornucopia of wonderful goods, and sail
o triumph. Lonny Hopkins will be humiliated, and Mary will be so enchanted that
l finally leave him and we will all live happily ever after.

h, cheer up, Gordo," he said. "The damned rocket will probably blow up on the pad anyway."

blankets."

turned his head. "Hunh?"

rdon tugged at his lap warmer. "Blankets. Cloth. How many times can you

worn-out shorts or halters?"

h. Sure, sure. Tell Sherrine when she comes back."

lex?"

hat?"

didn't want to ask before, but what is corn on the cob?"

licker of images like an old silent movie. Golden corn glistening with melted

Picnic table spread on a bright summer's day. The merest of chills in the air, the

kiss of infant glaciers. Hot dogs on the barbecue. Mom and Dad laughing to each

cross the picnic table. The tangy smell of baked beans.

on't worry about it. We'll have a picnic and you'll see for yourself. Spread a

and . . ." He stopped suddenly and studied his lap blanket. Not just plaid. Light

k green, with yellow and red pinstripes. It was the MacLeod tartan. And Gordon

s blanket was ... a solid tan.

laughed suddenly and Gordon gave him an odd look. So, launching them back

it involved thousands of details, did it? He felt a sudden illogical surge of

m. These fans were people who *cared* about details. "Gordo," he said, "we've got

each this whole thing in a more positive frame."

hat do you mean?"

hy, there are a thousand things that could go right!"

APTER TEN

" *One of the Forces of Nature* "

errine held the door of the van open while Bob rolled the tub of powdered chlorine. He put it in place against the wall and mopped his head with a kerchief, glancing over his shoulder at the tarp-shrouded swimming pool. "This is stupid."

remont said we could take as much as we wanted. He doesn't think it will ever be enough to use the pool again." She followed his gaze to the pool. A layer of ice covered the tarp. One day soon, it would never melt. It was sad, knowing that the pool would never be used again, that no one would ever laugh and splash in it again.

That wasn't what I meant."

errine folded her arms against the chill. "So?"

ugging this crap all the way to Chicago. It's the kind of thing Crazy Eddie would do with."

lex told us that the Angels need all sorts of chemicals. The space stations aren't really closed systems. You know that. They were never designed for permanent, long-term habitation—and there's no chlorine on the moon. You're just jealous because you're not there and you didn't think of it." And why did Bob have to throw cold water on the idea? He himself had pulled her into this.

He leaned back against the van and stuffed his hands in his jacket docket. "We don't need it if Cole even has a rocket," he said. "And if he does, we can't just climb aboard and fly off from downtown Chicago with a bucket of chlorine powder aboard. So, we have to load up—on chlorine or anything else—right now."

She shrugged. "Where's the harm?"

Bob rubbed his shoulders. "It's heavy."

She didn't answer him. She huddled deeper in her coat, squinting at the snow flurries blowing up by the wind. The breeze hummed like a tenor pipe where it blew across the alleyway between the main building and the garage and parking apron. *Like a ghost*, she thought. The Ghost of Minneapolis Past.

"What's the harm?" asked Bob.

"None," she said.

His mouth twitched and he stuck his hand back in his pocket. "Me neither." After a moment, he spoke again. "Is Bruce going to tell the rest of the Con what's going on? I missed a thermo class this morning, so I missed whatever you decided at the

g. The traffic was tied up around the fraternity houses. They're getting ready for
ort of Greekfest."

all in sick, like I did."

shook his head. "I owe them."

Who, the University?"

o, my students. It takes a lot of guts to sign up for a science course these days. To
with the taunts and harassment. As long as they show up, I'll show up."

m glad I'm staff, not faculty."

ne Dean insists that we add creationism and crystal theory and spiritualism to the
um."

hey already have those—"

ot as equal time in the physics and chemistry departments."

errine whistled low.

ep," Bob said. "The science departments are resisting—we had a meeting after
s—but it's a question of marketing and sales. Of putting warm bodies behind
We told the Dean that there was no objective evidence for any of that crap. You
what he said?"

e sky was a slate gray; the cloud deck, low and oppressive. Sherrine stared up into
om. "No. What?"

e said that the alleged objectivity of materialist science was an invention of
exual, white males, so we shouldn't use that as a basis for judgment."

e looked sharply into his face. For a change, he was not laughing. "What did you
?"

othing."

the fire had done out of him, even the anger. Ominous. She said, "And?"

said nothing. It was like I'd been caught explaining something to a door, or a
ne recording. I felt like such a fool."

at's why I love working with computers. They're logical. Rational. They do
what you program them to do. And that forces *you* to be logical, too." She shook
d. "But the anthropomorphic nonsense I have to put up with from users . . ."

thought you were happy in your little niche."

e gave him a fierce look. "I was, damn you. I was happy! Thank you, Robert K.
on, for prying me out into this cold, mean, miserable world."

o you want to go back?"

e shook her head. "You can never go back. As long as you keep your eyes shut
ou can pretend whatever you like. But once you open them, all your pretenses are
ven if you shut them again, you *know*. I was getting along, day by day. Nothing
right; but nothing was too wrong, either. Now, you and your Angels and—" She
an arm at the Tre-house. "—all this. It's reminded me how gray and awful things

come. People ask me what my 'sign' is. It used to be a joke; but they're *serious*.
re a Supreme Court justice now who consults the stars instead of the Constitution.
e Luddites. Anytime someone suggests *doing* anything, it's 'this might happen' and
ght happen' and 'think of the risks involved.' But you can't do nothing, either. Oh,
nes I just want to shuck it all. Go somewhere else."
here?"

He looked back up into the sky and hummed softly. "And that was one small step,
re in the sky . . . "

"Sorry, all those trains have been cancelled."

"Except one."

"Maybe." He placed one mittened hand on her shoulder. "Sherrine. People like us,
uld stay here and fight."

"And lose."

"Losing is better than running."

He jerked her shoulder away from him. "I wasn't talking about running." *Yes, you*
I'm not like you. I can't laugh about it. I can't make jokes. It depresses me. You'll
ing wisecracks about crystal-heads and proxmires until the day they hang you for
philia—"

"They don't hang you for that. They send you to reeducation camps."

"Whatever. But, for me . . . I can't go back; so I've got to go on."

He nudged her with his elbow. "Here comes Chuck. You never did tell me what you
ecided this morning. What do we tell the others?"

"Oh. It's still a secret. Just us and the Ghost. What they don't know can't get them in

"She straightened and stepped away from the van. "Hi, Chuck."

Chuck Umber was agitated. His beard jutted out. "The Con is busted," he said. "The
e on their way."

Sherrine stiffened. The police were coming? They would catch her here, among fans.

"I would lose her job. She would . . . "How do you know?" she asked.

"Secret source."

"Closest fan in the police department. She remembered a civilian analyst who'd been

before. Probably a secret *Hocus* subscriber—

"Look, you've got to leave *now*," Umber said. "There's still time before they get

She turned to climb in the van. Bob grabbed her arm. "Wait! Gabe and Rafe!" She
into his eyes. "We've got to find them," he said.

"They're with Thor and Steve," she told him. "They'll get them out."

"Gabe and Rafe," Chuck said. "Dell 'Angelo. A pair of angels?"

"Shuck—"

on't worry," Chuck said. "I didn't hear a thing. We'll get them out. Now go! The people in your van, the less suspicious you'll look at the roadblocks." "Roadblocks?"

eah. This isn't any ordinary bust. The 'danes are out in force. They're looking for ing. This isn't just the cops, the Air Force is in it."

ain she traded looks with Bob.

ut I still don't know how the Air Force knew where to look," Umber said. "Hey, ng! Now. And get the badge off, Bob!"

e Rotsler cartoon badge. Bob dropped it in a pocket. "Don't have it on you," said.

errine said, "How will we find our friends?"

said don't worry," Chuck told her. "I've got it all scoped out. Always map escape first thing. Head for River Road just south of the big curve near the Bell Museum. iends will meet you there."

an you get them out in time?"

uck grinned. "Did I ever fail to get *Hocus* out on time? Then I won't fail to get this ut, either."

e climbed into the passenger seat and Chuck slammed the door on her. Bob started and they pulled out of the parking apron. "Sherrine, where's your badge?" y—? Back at the apartment."

ood thing," Bob said. He pulled on the radio panel. It opened, and he dropped his nto the cluttered cavity.

ERRINE HARTLEY, her badge said, and the little William Rotsler figure looked up at the letters, thinking, "Infatuation Object." It wasn't hidden in her apartment.

ought it too dangerous. She'd thrown it away.

e chlorine buckets in back rolled and thumped.

errine twisted in her seat and looked out the back window at Chuck. He was

running back toward the Tre-house. She straightened and stare through the

ield. Her hands were clenched in her lap.

hat is it?" Bob asked.

othing," she said. She was thinking of all the times her issue of *Hocus* had come

* * *

e Tre-house was in confusion. Fans grasping duffel bags and knapsacks

red up one corridor and down another. Tremont J. Fielding stood in the tiled foyer

directions, dividing the flow of fannish refugees so that they did not bottleneck at

e exit. He wore a long, flowing cape—his trademark—and indicated one corridor

ner with his malacca walking stick. Wolfson was at the far end of the west

y, near the carport entrance, hustling them along. Some of the fans were still in
all costumes: elves, warriors, ancient gods, aliens and spacemen.
J allowed himself a moment to appreciate Pat Davis's mermaid. The tail was split
could walk. She seemed to swim along the corridor. Much skin was showing, and
more implied. Her fine blond hair bobbed and waved almost as if she were
water.
priorities. Who had to run, who could stay? The nature people were safe. The Greens
ate them, except for their association with technophiles. The kids were all right,
ing to worry the cops. Students would get lectures, maybe some remedial reading
disasters, but students could get away with a lot.
people with mundane jobs were in trouble. Get them out first, since even if they
arrested, they could lose their jobs. And the pros. Most of them had judgments
g over their heads. They could be sentenced to "community service" for not paying
bts.
Olson raised a circled thumb and forefinger. Good. All the pros were hidden in the
below. So far no one had ever found those. *Of course, there's a first time for*
g.
K. The people are safe. Now our treasures. Most of the high tech posters were
gone, leaving the paintings of wizards and elves and witches and fairies. Over
A medal, stamped in aluminum from the original Apollo 11 capsule and given to
who had worked on the program! Priceless. He plucked it and put it in his pocket.
f this stuff was worth dying for, but this—The bell rang insistently. 3MJ took a
eath and opened it.
ere were at least a dozen cops, eight blues and several greens. Behind them was a
f Air Police at parade rest, and behind them were more airmen with rifles. An Air
captain was pointing to a group of students who had run away. "Catch them and
their ID. You know what we're looking for." The sergeant nodded grimly and led
n at double time.
emont pretended not to notice the Air Force and Greens and turned to the leader of
al police. "Yes, Officer?" he said politely. The name badge read Sergeant Pyle.
orry to bother you, sir. Are you the householder?"
emont smiled grimly. "You know who I am, Sergeant. Yes, I'm Tremont Fielding."
es, sir. Mr. Fielding, we're serving a complaint."
pulled a warrant from his jacket pocket and handed it over. "Public nuisance. One
neighbors complained about the noise from the party."
emont studied the warrant. "I see. Yes, this is all in order. But, Sergeant, I *know*
se wasn't loud enough to disturb my neighbors."
le exchanged looks with his Green partner, a Sergeant Zaftig. ` And how do you
that, sir?" asked Zaftig.

He spread his hands guilelessly. "I throw a great many parties, officer. Charity for all those bodies, it's an easy way to warm the house. As you know, I'm a firm member of the Patrolman's Benevolent Association. Hope you liked the party last month."

"Yes, sir," Pyle frowned. "So?"

"Like everyone else, I am concerned about pollution; especially noise pollution from my affairs. So the edge of my property is ringed with sound meters that record the decibel levels. I checked them earlier tonight, and the decibel readings have been no higher than normal background noise. Certainly not as high as they were during the PBA benefit luncheon."

"Sound meters," said Zaftig. The Green looked triumphant.

"Yes. I rent them from the EPA through the local Nader franchise. I have them checked there every two months." He turned to Pyle. "I'll be glad to apologize to anyone who has been offended, but really, any disturbance must have come from somewhere else. Is there anything else, Sergeant?"

Pyle sighed. "Yes, sir—" He fished in his uniform pocket and pulled out a second warrant and unfolded it carefully, then held it out for Tremont to read. "All right, then. No sign of harboring dangerous fugitives." "No sign of fugitives. May I ask who these fugitives are?" "I can't read it."

Tremont adjusted his glasses. He took hold of the warrant in one hand but the other man refused to relinquish it. Tremont raised an eyebrow, Spock-fashion.

"Sorry, Mr. Fielding," Pyle muttered. "I've got to show it to you, but I can't let you read it."

"I'll see." Tremont took his time reading the warrant. The longer he stalled, the better it was for everyone. "There's nothing about who the fugitives are." "The name is classified."

"The name is classified," the Green sergeant said, "and the signature is on file at the District Attorney's office." "The judge's signature is blank," he observed. "Just an X." "The judge's name is classified, too." Zaftig looked triumphant. "The mark on the warrant is witnessed," the Green sergeant said, "and the signature is on file at the District Attorney's office."

"I know we had literacy problems—"

Pyle looked uncomfortable. "There's precedent," he explained.

Tremont nodded. "The Steve Jackson affair. Yes, I understand." Jackson's game console had been seized by the Secret Service under just such an unsigned warrant. His papers, modems, files. Even his printers. Suspicion of hacking. And private ownership of unregistered modems had been legal back then.

"I'll leave aside," Zaftig said. "We'll be searching this place."

Pyle looked at him. "He knows that."

Tremont knew he had stalled long enough. He stepped away from the door. "Very officers. But please be careful. As you know, I have a number of valuable and *objects d'art* about the house."

Stig smirked. "Yeah. I heard."

Tremont sighed and resigned himself. There would certainly be vandalism and theft. It was grand larceny that worried him. Fortunately, most of the things he considered valuable would be thought trash by the Greens.

The Greens never had liked him, but then they didn't like anybody; they reserved affection for animals and birds and plants, constituencies that couldn't vote them out of office. They'd steal what they could, and destroy other stuff on general principles. The police would try not to cause much damage unless they found something truly reprehensible going on. Tremont J. Fielding had worked for years to raise his standing in the community. His charity balls and fund-raisers helped a lot. Still, he was a known quantity. So were some of the police. But not the Greens, and they had seized control of the bureaucracy.

It was the Air Force that worried him. Why were they here? Just who were these people they wanted? He had a pretty good guess. The dell 'Angelo brothers. Wheelchair aficionados made into instant guests: it had to be them. What were they wanted for? They were closer to the Air Force people.

It was clear that they were really in charge. They'd let the local cops speak for them, but when it came to giving orders—The Air Force captain stepped forward.

The name tag said ARTERIA. The officer was tall, thin, with long muscles. The flight strap was buckled, hiding part of the face. The hands were gloved. The grips on the customized pistol had been customized, and the weapon seemed well worn.

Arteria faced the troops. "We'll conduct this search systematically." The voice was a high, fruity contralto. "Start on the third floor and work your way down. Remember the description flyer says: 'spectrally tall supermen.' So be careful." Arteria handed out the flyers which Tremont recognized from the television broadcast the night before. "Remember, the Government wants them intact and unharmed."

Acemen. Dell 'Angelo. Angels. Of course. For a moment Tremont felt hurt that the committee hadn't told him. What difference would it have made? They were here, whatever the cost.

The soldiers clattered up the stairs and fanned down the three wings. Tremont could hear them stamping about overhead. He sighed, but did not leave the foyer. The head of the Air Force blue, darker police blue, and green—huddled together and argued in low whispers. Tremont shook his head as he watched them. Probably arguing about jurisdiction. He could not overhear and did not want to appear nosy.

Wolfson approached and, tugging at his sleeve, drew him aside. Tremont bowed his head. Wolfson could whisper into his ear. "They're all gone or in the hideaway, except,

Lunarians and the two neos in the wheelchairs. There wasn't enough room down

Tremont raised his head and blinked rapidly. "Oh, dear." The Angels! And no one
own to put them below first.

new and Curtis volunteered to give up their slots in the vault; but, hell, Tremont,
guys are *published*. The cops have their names and pictures on their list."

Tremont touched his arm. "Don't worry. Tell the Lunarians to execute Plan Two.
know what to do. Chuck Umber laid it all out before he left."

Wolfson licked his lips. He watched the police barking into their wrist coms. "All
he said. "I won't worry."

* * *

When they hauled out the Pierson's puppeteer skeleton, Tremont kept his face
y composed; but inwardly his heart cracked as he wondered what he would say to
taxman. The puppeteer was his prize possession. Tremont pulled his cape closed
anged his grip on his walking stick. Will knew the risks involved in attending a
e would buy Doc a drink the next time their paths crossed and they would both
their heads over their losses.

ook at that crap," said one of the cops, pointing to the puppeteer.
d that really was too much. He turned to the policeman. "Crap, sir? Crap? Do you
hend the creativity and art that went into the fashioning of that artifact? An
ically correct and self-consistent realization of an imaginary beast." *Careful*, he
nself. *It's a Monster, not an Alien*. Fantasy was still marginally acceptable; but just
so. He hoped the policeman would not read the provenance plaque. Maybe Will
naged to pocket it.

rt," the cop grunted. "I don't see no NEA sticker."
was made before—before NEA approval was necessary. Even today not all art is
ment subsidized." *And the National Endowment for the Arts had never given a
o fantasy or science fiction art.*

ome of the stuff you got here glorifies technology," the Green cop insisted. As if
t did not already know it. "You don't want to glorify technology, do you?"
aybe he needs some education," another Green said. "Community service."
r. Fielding is all right," a policeman said. "Good law and order man. Come on, lay

d I should leave it at that—He couldn't. "Do you dislike all technology? Such as
nology that made the cloth for your uniforms, or developed the electric cars you
ere?"

e Green looked surprised. "That's appropriate technology," he said.

* * *

the foyer was empty again, except for the three head cops, when the Lunarians made move. Most of the searchers were still scattered across the two upper floors, but and the two sergeants stood in a cluster at the foot of the grand staircase taking from their squads over their wrist coms. Those, too, were "appropriate." As were s they carried.

The rumble of casters caught their attention, and they turned just as Hal Blandings and the other Lunarians emerged from the north wing pushing a handcart with a large cardboard box on it. They headed straight across the—foyer toward the front door.

Pat was stunned. The sheer audacity of it! Lunarian fanaticism always inspired a certain sense of awe among the more circumspect men. But this . . . He realized that his fingers crossed and quickly uncrossed them. When he saw the tip of the snorkel protruding from the styrofoam, he held his breath. Did they have both Angels in there?

The three cops stared for a moment, then Zaftig shouted. "Hey, you four!" The Lunarians halted just at the front door. Zaftig grabbed Hal by the arm. "Got you, nutcase." He pointed at the cardboard box. "That there's styrofoam," he sneered. "You know better than that. Wasting valuable resources." He grinned. "Or you don't know better. You will, though."

Sergeant Zaftig," said Arteria, "that is not why we are here." The Green turned to the police captain. "You stay out of this, Captain. Environmental laws are *my* jurisdiction. I'll handle you, anytime." He faced Blandings. "What've you got to say for yourself, techie?" The west hallway door opened on cue. Pat Davis emerged into the foyer crossed to the hallway. Since she was still wearing her mermaid costume, every male eye in the hallway followed her progress—except Zaftig, who was reading the Lunarians their rights, and Arteria, who evidently did not care for that sort of thing. Pyle took after her.

"Sergeant Pyle!" Arteria snapped.

He muttered something about the Helms Law and kept going. Tremont smiled. Enforcing the obscenity statutes was tricky business. The courts had imposed strict guidelines. Pyle would no doubt have to study the costume for a considerable time from many angles before he could decide what to do.

Meanwhile, back at the front door, one of the Lunarians was showing Zaftig a videotape proclaiming that the styrofoam in the box was 100 percent recycled material. "Recycling! It's important! The paper they use in some of those fast-food restaurants that's from trees! They cut down trees for that! And we can recycle styrofoam. Now how much energy it takes to recycle styrofoam? Not much. But trees, it takes a long time to grow trees! Owls roost in trees! Trees are important. Sergeant, aren't you for environmentalism?"

The tip of the snorkel sank deeper into the chips. Zaftig sprang. "There's someone hiding in this box."

Arteria stiffened and looked at Tremont. "Smuggling out a fugitive, are you? That pretty clumsy maneuver."

The way the AP captain said it, it sounded almost like a rebuke and Tremont wanted to apologize. *We didn't have time to be particularly clever.* Arteria walked to the carton and Zaftig grabbed the end of the snorkel.

Wolfson tapped his arm and pointed silently to the top of the staircase. Tremont looked up and saw Anthony Horowitz tiptoeing down. He scowled. If there was no room in the hall for Harry and Jenny, there sure wasn't for a neopro like Horowitz. He'd been taking his chances—but Tony might just make it. He must have evaded the AP's on the second floor. The two cops in the foyer had their backs to the stairs and the west wall.

Harry and Jenny. Where were they? Jenny was sure the police were after her. She didn't quite say what for. Tremont didn't know about Harry. No room for them in the hall, no bikes, and their bike wouldn't start. They'd gone toward the kitchen . . .

Horowitz made it to the bottom of the stairs. No one had noticed. He'd never have a chance. Tremont shook his head. It was a helluva con. Better than Nycon I.

Zaftig yanked on the snorkel and its wearer emerged dripping plastic chips, a fish from the styrofoamy sea. The burly bushy-haired Seth looked around the foyer, saw the cops, and yelped. He took the snorkel from his mouth. "Is the book auction over already?"

Zaftig grabbed him by the wrist. "Is this one of them?" he asked Arteria.

The AP captain scowled. "Does this look like a 'spectrally thin superman' to you?" Arteria looked at him with disgust, but before Arteria could turn away, Horowitz had blocked the way.

Horowitz stuck out his hand. "Hi, do you do interviews? I'm Tony Horowitz. I'm an upcoming pro science fiction writer. I've got several books out already, but I need to increase my circulation."

"You're a sci-fi pro?" said Zaftig. He grinned. "I think your circulation just dropped to zero. It's dropped then, and the grin went away."

Horowitz smiled beatifically. "Yes, but think of the notoriety. Jailed writers always get it."

Zaftig's eyes were locked on Horowitz's badge. A sly and dissolute cartoon face, and the words SEX OUTSIDE MY SPECIES. The cop was unlikely to recognize a literary reference and if he took it at face value . . . the law wouldn't permit him to take it into consideration.

With visible effort Zaftig wrenched his eyes off the badge. "You ain't no writer. You're just a con man."

"I'll let *The New York Times* decide."

Harry and Jenny came in from the kitchen. Jenny had found the maid's uniform. If Tremont's wife was still alive he'd employed a housekeeper who liked wearing uniforms because that way Tremont paid for her work clothes. Now Jenny was wearing

ventional black and white pinafore that looked ridiculous on someone of Jenny's bearing. She'd even put on the silly bonnet.

Harry was wearing his own clothes, except they were dirtier and more torn than what he remembered.

"I'm sorry, sir," Jenny said. "I'd let this poor man out the back door, but the soldiers won't let me. Here, it's this way—" She led Harry toward the front door.

"Where the hell are you going?" one of the soldiers demanded. "Who is this dude?" "He's *homeless*," Jenny said. "I gave him a hot meal."

"A bum, you mean," the corporal said.

"Homeless! Are you a monster?" Jenny demanded. She turned to Arteria. "Sir, how can you let your men talk that way? I think there are laws. Don't the racism laws cover this? They can't say such things—"

She was off chasing mermaids. Arteria was buttonholed by Horowitz. Jenny was waiting at the Greens. Zaftig was encumbered with Seth and the Lunarians. Everyone was shouting at the top of their voices—and everyone but Tremont had their backs to the door. The north wing door opened, and two wheelchairs rolled swiftly and silently down the ramp. Thor and Fang pushed them into the west wing.

Toward the carport.

Arteria saluted with his walking stick. Fang waved back and vanished out the door with the others. Then Tremont swung his stick up and rested it jauntingly across his shoulder. He made a military about-face and watched the ruckus by the door. He smiled at the top of Arteria's head. *We had just enough time to be just clever enough.*

* * *

Merrine rolled down the passenger window of the van and looked behind, up River Street. From where the van was parked she could see the Bell Museum of Natural History. The university buildings lined the left side of the road, while the Mississippi—this far from the city, a human-scale river—curved past on the right in a gentle crescent. Directly across the river, she could see St. Anthony Falls. University students, bundled against the chill, were in knots along the roadside laughing and talking and swigging beer. Ice patches were scattered in the afternoon sun.

"Roll the window up," said Bob. "You're wasting heat."

"I don't see them yet." She faced forward and rolled the window back up. Crossing the street over her chest, she stuck her hands under her armpits. Bob had turned the motor on, but there was no heat. "It's not that cold, anyway," she said. "I'm old enough."

"Where I was, it was so cold our breath turned colors." She cocked her head and looked in the side mirror. No one. The students were waiting for something, but what? Not anything, surely.

Sherrine, someone had to stay with the van. We thought it would just be a short run off the Ice. So—"

"You don't have to make excuses."

"I'm not making excuses, dammit!"

"What if they can't find us?"

He paused and groped for the conversational tennis ball. "They'll find us. Chuck found everything."

She turned and looked at him. "And who is Chuck Umber that we should put our faith in him?"

Bob draped one arm across the steering wheel and half turned in the seat. "What's wrong with you, Sherrine?"

"Nothing. I just don't know if this fanatic is going to come off."

"You don't like running off and leaving the Angels behind."

"I noticed you jumped into the van mighty quick." But it wasn't that way at all, she remembered. Not at all. Chuck had come running out with the news and her first thoughts were for herself; and for her job; and that she mustn't be found here, among fans. It was Bob who had asked about the Angels, when she was already halfway into the driver's seat. And now . . . What if she'd lost them? What if she'd lost them?

Bob shrugged. "I trust Chuck. It's that convoluted, intricate mind of his. He knew it wouldn't be time to find Alex and Gordon and load them *and* their wheelchairs in the van and leave before the police arrived. It was a near thing as it was. The roadblock on University Avenue would have had them." He shook his head and looked stubborn. "He could not and should not have taken them with us. Chuck has something else in mind. Something to disguise the Angels' feeble condition in a way the police won't suspect."

"It's not that. It's . . ."

"What?"

She closed up. "Never mind." *But it doesn't matter what I could have done or should have done. It's what I didn't even think of doing.* Damn it all, when Bob had called that she should have stayed in bed.

Like those students coming down River Road.

She blinked and hunched forward, staring into the side-view mirror. *What the hell?* She looked down the window once more.

"What is it?" asked Bob.

"Look behind us." She popped the passenger door and jumped out. The students who had been waiting along the roadside were lined up now, cheering and clapping. Some of them were waving pennants with gophers and Greek letters on them. Farther up the road were a fleet of beds, a flotilla of four-posters and brass rails weaving toward her, white sails flapping like spinnakers.

She went to the rear of the van for a better view. Bob joined her there. "It's a bed," she said.

The student crowd was growing thicker. Spectators were running alongside the street abreast of the racers. They were yelling and shouting encouragement. She could see that each bed had a passenger and was being pushed by a crew of three. Did that mean triremes, she wondered? The bedsheets flaunted more Greek letters than a fraternity convention.

"It must be a fraternity event," Bob decided.

"Why, Holmes, how clever of you!"

"Alimentary, my dear Watson. I had a gut feeling."

She stamped her feet. How would the Angels find them in this crowd, local guide or local guide? Chuck was from the Bay Area, he wouldn't have known about this. So, should she go looking for them or should she stay put?

One of the beds hit an icy spot and skidded, forcing the bed next to it to swerve. The racers shouted epithets and laughed as they sprinted by. Sherrine imagined the beds peeling and bursting into flame like stock cars going out of control. Then she realized that the two stray beds were headed straight toward her. The students around her and fled.

"Hey!" She grabbed Bob by the sleeve and yanked him aside. They tumbled to the grass together, rolling tipsy-topsy in a snarl of arms and legs, and Bob naturally ended up on top. There was a crash of metal and a few shouts. Plastic bed and Bob leapt up, leaving her prone.

"That's my van!" he cried. "They smashed the tail light!"

"Thanks for helping me up, Bob," she said.

"What? Oh. Sorry." He hoisted her to her feet and watched while she brushed herself. "I always said I wanted to die jumping into bed with you; but this wasn't quite what I had in mind. Damn, that light's *broken*. Hey, you bloody vandals!"

She laughed. When he gave her a look, she said, "I'm sorry. A hit-and-run accident wrecked my brass bed? What'll your insurance company say?"

The race had passed by, with most of the spectators; but the two wrecked beds and their crews remained. They were hunched over the beds, tending to the occupants. "All right," Bob said to them, "what do you think you're up to?"

One of them turned around. It was Bruce. "We think we're making a getaway. What do you think?"

Sherrine's knees almost gave way. Alex grinned up from his place in one of the beds. "Pretty girl," he said. "Is that the way fraternity kids talk?"

"We are all droogs here," Gordon said.

"Drop," Mike said. "We didn't have enough money to bribe the cops. But droogs will get you through times of no money much better than money will get you through . . ."

They loaded the Angels into the van. "I was sure they'd caught you," Sherrine said. "Not a chance," said Bruce. "Chuck had it all scoped out. I don't know how he knew the race——"

"Angels are everywhere," Crazy Eddie said. "Actually, it was fun. How'd you guys like it?"

Gordon smiled weakly. "I wish I was back in the scoopship, where it is safer."

Alex grimaced. "We crashed that one, too, remember?"

Gordon's smile flickered. "Third time lucky?"

"Come on," said Bruce. "Thor, Steve, Mike. Help me load them into the van before he comes back to find out what's going on."

"You should have seen it," said Thor, as he and Mike lifted Gordon into the side of the van. Fang and Eddie were inside, helping. "It was the slickest fanac you'd ever hope to see. Even Chuck Wolfson and 3MJ orchestrated it like a goddam ballet. With a little help from the Marx brothers, the Marxians and Tony Horowitz and Jenny."

Mike chuckled as he helped Alex into the van. "It's like 3MJ always says. 'You've seen your Imagi-Nation.'"

Bruce nodded. "Or like Wallace Stevens wrote. 'In the world of words the imagination is one of the forces of nature.'"

Fang and Eddie hopped out of the van. "All secure," said Fang. "We figure to stay here and dismantle the beds. Shlep the stuff back to the frat house. You guys can put the van up for the night. Tomorrow we'll head for Chi-town."

Bob shook his head. "Whatever. You know you could have hurt Sherri and me, if you'd gotten into the van like that."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Didn't you see us coming?"

"Not until you were headed right for us."

"No. You mean you didn't read the frat logo on our sail?"

Bob's eyes went round in horror, even as he whipped around toward the beds. "The sail?"

Mike grabbed the edge of a sheet. He flapped it ("Olé!") and the breeze lifted it from the ground. Bob and Eddie ran over and spread it out like a flag. Sherrine read the letters and laughed. Of course, she should have known. Who else would belong to the Psi Phi fraternity?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"... The Lumber of the World"

Sherrine watched the brown, sere grasslands of Wisconsin slide past the windows of the van. It seemed as if she had spent half her life in Bob's vehicle. First, the drive to Chicago. Now this. The gentle shaking of the suspension; the lullaby hum of the tires. And the long, quiet two days out of her life.

Steve and Mike had flown to Chicago. She could have gone with them. There were flights from Minneapolis to Chicago every Monday, Wednesday and Friday; and the fares were not completely out of her range. But . . .

She turned and looked into the back, where Alex and Gordon lay on air mattresses, doing their yoga under Steve's guidance. Flying the Angels on a commercial flight was risky. Eye-catching. Two gaunt, skinny beanpoles who couldn't walk . . . Bob had suggested splitting them up to make them less conspicuous, but Gordon had gone ballistic at the idea and Alex had said no, definitely not, out of the question. Sherrine hesitated at that. The Angels hadn't seemed to be on friendly terms.

At least they were speaking to each other again. But Gordon tended to slip into long silences that needed all of Steve's cheery prodding to dissipate. Alex was no help either. Gordon's silences seemed to disgust him. There was a hardness to Alex, a kind of indifference for failure that was almost Darwinian.

She turned forward and resumed her study of the dreary Wisconsin countryside. Oh, at least this time she got to sit in the shotgun seat; and the van was not quite so cramped. Just Steve and the Angels and Thor and Fang. And the running motor kept them

Wooden rail fences topped by barbed wire paralleled both sides of the two-lane gravel road. Beyond the fences, a jumble of kames, eskers, and moraines; and nine small lakes strewn carelessly behind by yesteryear's glaciers; soon to be gathered and dried up by today's. Sparse, wilted grass sagged against the rolling dells of farm pastures. A farmer's guard of bony cattle, rib-bound and yellow-faced, chewed with half a heart. Steve had brought in a strain of Highland cattle, more ox than cow, hairy like the yak, with large horns. Their fur gave them advantages, but they didn't look happy either. Their hooves kicked up dust from the bare spots. Her eyes locked with one; and they stared at her, human to bovine, until the van had rolled past.

e road was draftsman straight. The rural roads of Wisconsin had been laid out by a
armed with T squares and straight edges. It stretched toward the vanishing point
horizon, where it converged with the fence lines on either side. Sherrine had the
disorienting notion that it was the road that was fenced in, and they drove along a
in, blacktopped pasture.

weathered sign dangled at the roadside. JUNCTION, COUNTY ROADS F AND
sconsin county roads bore letters. A, B, C; AA, BB, CC. Steve had joked that if
and Route KKK he'd just as soon turn back.

ey came on the intersection, right-angled as she had known it would be, and Bob
e wheel and they turned right, leaving the Interstate farther behind.

made sense to assume that the Interstate Highways out of Minneapolis would be
d; sure it made sense to take back roads. But she was tired of watching the richest
nds in the world turning into desert; she was tired of watching patiently starving
ows convert the last of the northern prairie into cow pats and methane. Every
ore and more water was locked into the Ice. The prairie lands at the foot of the
s were becoming scrub desert. Like West Texas, only cold.

ornish game hens," Fang said suddenly.

r head came up. "What?"

lex! How about Cornish game hens? For the ship. They're small, but they're great

e Angel grunted. "They sound delicious."

hey taste like chicken."

errine heard the wistful humor in the older man's voice. "I'm sure they do."

ay, Alex," said Thor. "Don't just take female animals up with you. Take *pregnant*
animals. Embryos don't weigh anything and you get two critters for the mass of

b braked suddenly and Sherrine jerked into her harness and then bounced against
drest. Steve, who had been sitting lotus-fashion in the back, caught himself on the
her seat. "What the hell?"

What happened?" asked Alex.

errine turned. "Are you guys all right?"

n sorry," said Bob. "The bridge is out."

errine followed his finger. The road bed crossed a crumbling concrete slab. Holes
n the paving and corroded reinforcing bars showed through. The bridge abutments
as if they had come loose from the earth embankment. Off to the left the dirt had
ewed into muddy ruts by truck tires. Matching ruts corrugated the farther bank.
t look like anyone has used that bridge for a while," Sherrine said.

b hopped from the van and walked to the edge of the creek bank. "Ford over here.
look deep."

Sherrine left the van and joined Bob at the bridge. Where was the county road crew? And had the infrastructure gone that they hadn't had the time or resources to fix this? She ran her glove along the crumbling masonry. Not for a long time. Bob and Fang joined them.

"I think the van can make it across," Bob said.

Bob walked out onto the bridge span. "Slab bridge," he commented. He crouched with his hands on his knees peering at the cracks and holes. Then he jumped across one hole to the other side, and Sherrine held her breath, afraid that he might fall.

Bob said, "It looks bombed. Maybe we've driven into a war?"

"No. Spalling," Fang called back. "Worst case of spalling I ever saw."

"What causes it?"

"Water and salt get down cracks in the concrete. The salt corrodes the steel reinforcing rods. Then the water freezes and expands. Concrete chunks pop right out of the surface."

"And the freezing season has grown a lot longer," Sherrine thought, and they salt the road a lot more.

Bob danced back to the bank where Thor waited. "So what do we do?" asked Thor.

Bob looked at Bob.

Bob said, "Drive across the ford."

Bob ran one of his outsize fingers along his nose. "Maybe. But if we try to cross and fail, we won't be up the creek, we'll be *in* it."

Bob worked his lips; then he sighed. "Yeah, you're right. Jesus, can you imagine getting stuck out here in, the middle of nowhere? It's so empty. I haven't seen a soul for the better part of miles."

"Don't you believe it," said Thor. "There were eyes in every one of those farmhouses watching us as we went past. They don't like or trust strangers out here. If you ain't white and Protestant, you ain't shit. Sorry, Steve."

Stephen Mews was standing by the opened side door of the van. He shrugged. "It's exactly news to me."

Sherrine waited, shivering. It was worse than that. This was Proxmire country. These were the people who had elected and reelected the nation's premier technophobe to the Senate where he could give his Golden Fleece Award every month to some especially pathetic example of scientific research.

Most of the targets he had drawn bead on had cost less than a single Washington State rat. So how would these people react to a band of technophiles travelling in their limousine? The Senator had always voted for dairy price supports. Hundreds of millions of dollars. She supposed that if she had been a Wisconsin farmer she might have been on his list, too. Farm subsidies never won the Golden Fleece.

Bob nodded. "Okay. We'll look for a detour. Maybe the next road over goes across." He pulled his jacket. "At least we can't get lost while we have the transponder. We know the way we want to go. It's just a matter of finding a road that will cooperate." They trudged back toward the vehicle. "Sure hope so," said Fang. "Yeah," said Bob. "I'm tired of zigzagging all over Pierce County." Terrine took hold of the handle to hoist herself back into the van. Fang shook his head. "Ah, sightseeing, I don't mind. It's the blizzard that bothers me." He pointed forward with his chin.

Terrine jerked her eyes upward. Black clouds huddled on the northern horizon. The air was new cold and from the north. There was a taste of ice in the air. "Yeah, she thought. Thor and Fang have no jobs. They didn't have to call in and take vacation days. They could have trucked the Angels themselves, if Bob would lend them a hand. But that sunuvabitch, Bob, he had to go and volunteer to do the driving. She leaned into her seat and pulled the door shut with a slam. Was she in a contest with Bob as to who would take the most risks? She stole another glance at the northern clouds while Bob made a U-turn on the road. *Risky business*, she thought. *I sure hope I'm back at my desk next week*. Not that she didn't have more vacation days coming, but . . . *Risky business*, she thought. *But at least they don't know I'm involved with the Angels*.

* * *

The INS was late for the meeting and Lee Arteria spent the time waiting by doodling on a scratch pad. All the seats around the table had scratch pads and pencils in front of them. Arteria had never seen anything useful recorded on one. The pencil traced a light squiggle, slightly oblate. Arteria studied it, grinned and added two smaller circles on the sides, like chipmunk cheeks. A tiny pout of a mouth. Two large, little kid eyes, with long, thin, wavy lines twisted to give the caricature a credulous look. Not too bad for a quick sketch. Sometimes Arteria missed the art world.

"Not bad," said Jheri Moorkith over her shoulder. He stole a glance at Shirley Redden, then whispered, "But maybe make her a trifle plumper." "Yeah, *and you're next*. Moorkith was a good-looking man, square-jawed, square-eyed, and a little red. Arteria would have sketched him as a Flash Gordon-style hero . . . but her pen never came out flattering, somehow. She changed her mind and tossed the pencil on the table. "Where's Redden? I don't have time to waste in these meetings." Moorkith shrugged. "None of us do. But this is INS's way of reminding us who's in charge." He leaned closer and whispered, "I checked your Air Force file." "That's illegal, isn't it?" "Not if you're not the other shrug. "I was curious. I like to know who I'm working with." "That's all right, sir. Thank you, sir." "Hom."

Whatever. Didn't do any good, though. Couldn't get access. You must have some codesmiths on your team. But I was able to look at your credit report."

"That's illegal, too." But he wants me to know he can do it.

"Yeah. The box where it asked for sex. You wrote 'Yes.' "

Arteria grunted and half-swiveled the chair to get a better look at Moorkith. "So?"

"So, why didn't you put down the right answer?"

"I did."

"You did."

"Think about it."

Arteria frowned. "Oh. But did you mean Yes, *I have a sex*. Or, Yes, *I want sex*?"

"Whichever way you want to take it."

Moorkith paused and stepped back. He licked his lip. Arteria knew what he was going to say: *Do I make the pass? What if I guess wrong and she's a he?* Or he's a she. Arteria had no idea which way Moorkith swung, and so had no idea which alternative to suggest. It frustrated him.

"Which way would he jump? Lee Arteria sent no signals; but she never bluffed. She hadn't made his move when INS arrived. *Ah, well. He who hesitates is lost.*

"We don't even know if the spacemen were in Minneapolis," Ike Redden insisted. "You did Captain Arteria, was bust a few sci-fi crazies holding an illegal meeting."

"Strictly speaking, Mr. Redden," Arteria responded, "the meeting itself was not illegal. The warrant was for harboring fugitives."

"Sci-fi nuts," said Moorkith. "Technophiles. It *should* be illegal."

"Nevertheless, there is the First Amendment."

"You tell him," said the Army rep.

"Maybe we need another exception. After all, Flag-burning and disrespectful singing of the National Anthem are not covered by the First. The destruction of Mother Earth is at least as important as those issues." Moorkith smiled thinly. "Got a couple of technophiles to send to the reeducation camp, anyway."

Arteria hid a wry smile. And from what I could see of those two fans, its going to be interesting as to who educates whom.

Ike Redden rapped the table. "Please. That is not the business of this task force." He ran his fingers through his hair. "We are searching for two aliens who entered the country illegally. If we don't locate them quickly, we will all look very foolish."

Arteria translated, thought Arteria: You will look very foolish.

"What must it be like to mold your entire life around bureaucratic ladder climbing? To interpret every issue in terms of attaboys and awshits on your performance appraisal?"

"Don't Redden see that there were *principles* at stake here? At least Moorkith had some. Wrongheaded, but principles."

ne spacemen must be in Minneapolis," insisted the State Police commander. "It's y big city reachable from the crash site. They had to head there. They would be too uous in a small town. Our man at Fargo Gap told us that a van from Minneapolis rough there the night of the crash, and they were asking about the air scooper." my frowned. "The same night? How did they know about it?" here was a girl with them. She claimed that her grandparents lived nearby. They'd come down and phoned her." ou think they were technophile subversives going to pick up the spacemen?" te Police hesitated. "It seems likely," he admitted and hastily added: "In ht." ot an ID on the girl?" Arteria asked. o. We might have, but it wasn't our detail. One of your people was in charge." ho?" n engineer captain named Scithers." thers. That explains some things. idn't you search the van," asked Moorkith, "when they came back? You had cks up by then, surely." te Police bristled at the implied insult. "Once we were informed that the spacemen ot in their vessel, we had to take that into account, yes. A maroon van did leave akota, but there was just one man in it. It may not have been the same van." dden looked at the ceiling. "Two maroon vans travelling Fargo Gap in opposite ns the same night," he said to no one in particular. hen the others in the van must have gone west," said Shirley Johnson. "Or north, ipege." my grunted. "The Winnies would shelter them, all right." o," said State Police. "The tracks across the glacier were headed east. That's why cked out all known technophiles in Minneapolis." He looked at Arteria. "With that utfit meeting it looked good. Damn it, it still looks good." greed. We didn't find them though," Arteria said. They were there, though. I how they worked it? dden waved a hand in dismissal. "The tracks were Eskimos. Illegals who crossed om Canada. We found them in Brandon, looting." He turned to State Police. "But a. You claim that a whole load of them went west through the Gap but only one ack?" at's what the trooper remembers. He was almost sure it was the same van." lmost sure," said Moorkith with a smirk. dden held up a hand to forestall any argument. "And they asked about the air . We should follow up on it. Lord knows, we have few enough leads. Have you ed the van, yet?"

the State Police captain shook his head. "Just the color—maroon. The license plate
ake. Belonged to a car registered in Brandon."
ake. Why didn't you arrest him, then?" Moorkith demanded.
ne computer was down. No way to check it until too late."
omputer was down," Arteria mused. But lots of citizens switched plates. Too
itpicking regulations, like an eternal swarm of mosquitos. The police had nearly
l noticing.
hat about the girl?" Redden asked.
kay, *what about* the girl?"
dden gave an exasperated sigh, and looked again at the ceiling, as if he expected
allies there. "Are you checking for grandparents near the crash site?"
te Police set his jaw. "No, sir. That's in North Dakota."
uck North Dakota. What is this, a state's rights convention? This is a national
y matter. If we don't show some results soon, the task will be taken out of our

d that won't look good on your record, will it? Whoever found the downed
en would shine like a star in this crowd.
t the Minnesota State Police. The search would be outside his balliwick. It
y was already, but these fools didn't see it yet . . .
it, now. Army, across the table from Arteria, was smiling like the cat that ate the
und canary. He's on to something; or he thinks he is. And he's got a national writ,
Air Force; so state borders don't bother him. And Johnson, she would try to track
arries by channeling to some two-million-year-old avatar.
ere was the FBI? Was Redden keeping them out for jurisdictional reasons; or
ey running their own search? Or both. Wouldn't that be a hell of a note, if the FBI
hem first! There wouldn't be any interdepartmental squabbles to hold them up.
e can make a request to the North Dakota State Police," said the state cop. "We
them to run a cross-check of local residents against Minnesota van owners. If we
ast name match . . ."
etter check it, against all residents of Minneapolis," said Moorkith. "Its a
daughter, remember And she wasn't driving the van."
dden shook his head. "I've got a better idea. Our people will cross-check Fargo
ts against the 'suspicious background' files."
hy?"
gave them a superior smile. "Someone passed the word to Minneapolis about the
per crashing. Why would a good citizen leak a national security issue."
aybe they didn't know it was national security?" suggested Army.
was out of the ordinary. It's always safest to assume that such things involve
l security unless the government says otherwise."

ay," State Police brightened. "Why not check long-distance telephone calls in Fargo and Minneapolis?"

teria listened passively and continued doodling. Everyone had a channel to try. He had an angle that might give results. Hell, who knew? Maybe Shirley Johnson's would pass the word. They would find out who had the spacemen. And everyone try to keep it a secret from everyone else, so they would not have to share credit. What teamwork was all about.

dden would try to hunt from his desk. He would wait for printouts and summaries brought to him. No one ever found anything by tracking paperwork but more paper. He would only find the "Angels" by piggy-backing on someone else. Someone who did not work of questioning witnesses and following clues.

at'll be me. Or the FBI.

the Worldcon had seemed a good bet. Hell, it *was* a good bet. The spacemen were they were smuggled out under our noses. That man, Tremont Fielding, he knew. I see it in the way he looked at me. But where had they gone?

at west; not back to the crash site. There was no percentage in that. Not north, Fans were bright, if feckless. So, east? Into Wisconsin? Maybe. They'd have to take back roads. The Wisconsin Glacier had eaten the Interstate past Eau Claire. So: could they find shelter in Wisconsin?

teria smiled. *Of course.*

* * *

the snowflakes impacting the windshield were no longer melting. They built into white masses shoved aside by the impatient, ice-encrusted wiper blades. The road ahead of them was turning as gray as the heavens. Gravid snow clouds piled up behind them. Flickers of static electricity played along and within them as they rubbed the sky. Bob was hunched over his wheel, peering into the gathering gloom. They were in the hill country below Prairie du Chien now, after hours of racing the clouds south. The snow clouds were winning. The roads in this part of the state were mistier; the farms were tucked into dells and hollows. Property values had boomed since it became known that this corner of Wisconsin had been free of glaciers the last time.

ve and the Angels were staring delightedly out the side window. Steve had never seen a storm like this in California; and the Angels had never seen snow falling. Sherrine smiled brightly with them, as if there were nothing to worry about.

or leaned over the seat between her and Bob. "Turn right up ahead," he said. "There's a farm down that road where I did some work last spring."

o what? You want to make a social call? The Interstate's to the left."

he hell with you, Bob. I want us to get to shelter, *now*. "

shelter?"

eah. It's snowing. Or haven't you noticed?"
noticed."

o. Do you know what a plains blizzard can be like when the black clouds roll
from the northlands? They call it a 'norther' around here. Temperatures can crash
degrees in the blink of an eye; snow drifts man-high in heartbeats. Damn it, Bob,
ow what a blizzard can be like in Minneapolis; imagine what can happen out here
ountry, beyond the heat sink. I've heard tales about cattle suffocated when the
ew the snow up their nostrils so hard and fast they couldn't breathe. Farmers don't
out shit like that."

b rubbed the steering wheel with his mittens. He glanced at Sherrine. Then he
back at Thor. "Are you trying to scare me?"
eah."

noded. "Which way is this farm? And how do you know they'll take us in?"
or shrugged. "I don't. But it's our best chance. Sherrine, let me take your seat so I
igate."

b stopped the van while they exchanged seats. Sherrine unbuckled. "You have the
Mr. Sulu." She crawled into the back—her familiar seat—and Bob put the van
gear.

it really as bad as Thor said?" asked Alex. Sherrine twisted and looked at him. He
concerned; Gordon, frankly frightened. Steve, sitting lotus between them, was
oga techniques to calm himself.

e nodded. "It could be." Never pull your punches; never sugarcoat the truth. What
n't know can hurt you bad. "It could blow over, too; but it's better to play it safe
d a way station where we can hole up."

that safe? The authorities are hunting Angels . . ."

ook, Alex. Gordon. A blizzard can be fatal. We used to have weather satellites that
advance warning. Now, folks get caught by surprise. Like Thor said, you don't
get caught outdoors in a norther. And neither do the cops!"

e snow began falling faster, piling up on the windshield, melting from the heat of
, and freezing into an impenetrable slush faster than the wipers could handle. The
side was a blur in the icy lens. Bob turned right and Sherrine felt the wheels go
road. Bob put a van into first and recovered. He rolled down his window and
at the ice with his glove. The wind spray-painted his beard with snow.
ve can make it in time, she thought. And if they'll take us in.

* * *

Redden held the telephone away from his head and stared at it. Then he put it
against his ear. "What do you mean, you can't get north of Lancaster? A blizzard?
ible. This is September. How do you know? I see. A truck pulled into Patch Grove
ow on its roof. No, you can't argue with evidence like that." *Wherever the hell*

Grove is. He glanced at the Air Force Intelligence captain fiddling with a pen on the other side of the desk and shrugged helplessly.

"Yes, I understand," he said into the phone. "But we received a report about a van with Minnesota plates somewhere in your vicinity, and we thought—No, I can't. Yes, we're asking all the counties, on both sides of the River. Certainly. I hope you will do your best. Thank you." He hung up and leaned back in his seat.

"Any sheriffs," he said to no one in particular.

"Do you plan to check out every van in Minnesota and Wisconsin?" Lee Arteria asked.

"I'll try," Redden said.

"Suppose you have a better lead, Captain?" Arteria smiled but said nothing and made a steeple of his fingers. Does that mean the Air Force has a lead and they're going to tell me? Or does it mean the Air Force wants me to think they have a lead? "You could wait for the information from the DMV," Arteria suggested. "At least, it would narrow the list of vans."

Redden waved a disparaging hand. "Ahh. It's been three days already. Some sort of problem with the computer. They're still trying to straighten it out. Goddamn DMV can't find its own phone book if they used both hands."

Arteria considered that in silence, then nodded. "Any word on possible contacts in the Fargo area?"

"Not yet. That moron, Moorkith, is supposed to be running a cross-check through the phone file . . ." Redden blinked and looked puzzled. "Techno—phone—file," he said slowly. "The Greens are supposed to keep it up to date for the House American Activities Committee, but . . . It's just an alphabetical listing of names. I have to re-sort it by addresses and then merge it with another file or something. I know nothing about computers." He waved his hand airily, as if he were bragging about an accomplishment. "A team of GS-5's could have gone through the list by hand by now. I took another report from his in-basket and studied it. Another goddamned van. This one on US 52 near Rochester. But it was blue and its occupants had checked out. Arteria grunted humorlessly, stood and stretched. The side wall of the office was covered by a large-scale map of the upper Midwest. Arteria studied it carefully, running his finger from Fargo to Minneapolis and beyond. "Where was that van spotted?"

"Which one? We've had two dozen reports."

"The last one; where you put a bug up that badger sheriff's ass."

"H. Crawford County."

Arteria traced a route. "And heading southeast?"

Redden frowned. "On 18. Is that significant?"

Arteria straightened. "Probably not."

Meaning it probably is, Redden thought. What was Arteria's lead? Damn it, didn't they ever believe in teamwork? Everyone was concerned about getting credit for the

That Army colonel, he had something going on the side, too. Some connection
innipeg. This was supposed to be a Team effort; the Team would share the credit.
dden was chairman of the Team.

Well, Ms. Arteria, we'll see just how smart you think you are. "If they went that
n," he said, "they drove straight into a blizzard. If we can believe the hicks.
y just a light dusting. You know how the squareheads like to yank our chains."
don't know. Weather is something farmers don't joke about; especially nowadays.
ard, out in the country; that's a life or death issue."
Well, if the van Wilson spotted was our quarry, there's no rush."
Why not?"
s been three days since the blizzard hit. They'll be froze dead by now."

* * *

puty Andy Atwood kicked at the back end of the van with his snowshoe. The
half-melted snow slid off into a pile on the ground. "Minnesota plates, all right,"
to his partner. He straightened and looked around. There were several vans and
clustered around the white, clapboard church. St. Olaf in the Fields. He turned up
collar. "Come on. Let's check this out."
The snow was two-, three-feet deep. Even with the snowshoes he found it rough
His feet broke through the crust and he sank several inches into the cold, wet
beneath. It must have been a hell of a storm this end of the county. It was melting
but it would never melt all the way. Not 'till spring. If then. He glanced behind to
partner following in his footsteps.
They were met at the door of the church by a crusty old man in a red-checkered
man's cap. He was racking a pair of cross-country skis against the side of the
"Yes, deputies," he said. "Can I help you?"
"We'll see, old timer." Atwood nodded toward the church. "What's going on in there?
Sunday."
"Hope. Funeral. We hold a few of those after it snows." He worked his jaws, as if he
chewing tobacco and was wondering where to spit. "We don't get much heating oil
parts anymore," he went on. "Not like you folks in the cities, where the
pers and teevee cameras are. So when it freezes here . . ." And again there was a
out, introspective silence and when he resumed speaking, it was in a lower, quieter
When it freezes hereabouts, why we've all got to huddle right quick. Some folks
ake it in time. This time it was a feller did some chores for me. He and a couple of
nds."
"See. Do you mind if we check it out, Mr . . . ?"
Wallace. Enoch Wallace." The old man held out a heavily bundled mitt and the
touched it briefly with his own. "It's God's house, aina? All are welcome." He
e door open for them.

the deputies stamped the snow off their snowshoes in the narthex. There was a thin
snow on the wooden floor, unmelted and trod hard by a great many boots. They
peeled their snowshoes and hung them on pegs on the wall. Atwood noticed several
pairs of snowshoes, as well as a few more skis. One pair of skis he recognized as
high-tech fiber glass Alpine type. A family heirloom, no doubt, from the days when
people skied for fun.

"Huddle," he said. It was not quite a question. He had heard stories. In Grant County,
they had stories.

Wallace tugged off his mittens and stuffed them in his heavy wool jacket. "For the
deputy. For the warmth. Every farmstead hereabout has a huddle room or a shut
where folks can gather when the cold hits. Folks lie in, under the blankets, hugging
each other until it gets warm again outdoors. Those on the outside of the huddle are
naturally a bit colder; and those on the inside have got to be mighty tolerant of body
heat. You don't get much sleep, but you don't freeze, neither."

"Jesus Christ. What do you do during the winter?" Atwood's partner was a young kid
in the force. A town boy. He would see enough before the winter was over.

Wallace seemed not to mind the swearing, even standing in the narthex of a church.
"Huddle all winter, deputy," he said with flint in his voice. "Every man-jack, woman
child in the township. We come right here t' St. Olaf's and we huddle."

"Like hibernating bears?"

The old man's eyes were hard as coal. "We don't quite hibernate. Come spring we're
thin. And some of us are ready to do murder and some are ready to get married,
but mostly we're still alive." He opened the door to the nave. "Mostly," he repeated. "My
man and some friends of his got caught in the open by Friday's storm. They didn't
see it."

Wallace preceded them into the church. Atwood grabbed his partner's arm before
he went in. "Look, Bill. About huddling all winter. You don't have to say anything back in
the house. It would only get folks distressed. The townies complain about the thermostat law;
these farm folk, they would be glad to turn their thermostats up to fifty-five."

"But, Jesus, Andy. We should do something for them."

"There's one thing we could do."

"What's that?"

"Drill for oil."

Atwood waited to see if he were joking. Then he blurted, "But that's inappropriate
in a church."

Atwood followed Wallace into the church. "Yeah."

There were three coffins, one of them supported by six bearers. A dozen or so
candles were scattered through the pews. Atwood walked slowly up the aisle, looking

n right. He didn't see any seven-foot supermen. Spectrally thin, the flyer had said. present fit that description. There was one woman, tall and skinny, though not meet by any stretch. How did the government know if the aliens were men or ?

e woman locked gazes with him. Her eyes were red-rimmed and wet with tears. se was running and her cheeks were puffy. Embarrassed, Atwood let his gaze e turned to his partner. "Come on, they aren't here."

hat about the van with the Minnesota plates?" Bill whispered.

eh. The border isn't that far. You can see Minnesota from the bluffs. Families have tives on both sides of the river. You see anybody here who's seven feet tall?"

wood winced as Bill gripped his arm tight. He saw his partner pointing tiously at belt level so the mourners could not see. Pointing at the coffins. Atwood in his breath. One of the coffins was easily long enough to hold a seven footer. He over to it and ran his hand along the plain pine wood top. Looking up, he located e.

ook, I really hate to ask you this, Mr. Wallace; but I'm afraid you'll have to open National security."

ational security?" The old man seemed amused. Atwood wondered if he would ee a warrant. Folks seldom did anymore.

can't tell you any more than that, sir." He smiled apologetically and scratched his 'They didn't tell me much more. This one isn't your handyman, is it?"

allace shook his head. "One of his friends, from out of state."

wood nodded. "Then you can't vouch for his identity."

allace gazed silently at the coffin. "The lumber of the world," he said. n?"

e old man looked at him. "The dead are the lumber of the world. Their bones are ing and shoring that hold it up."

wood waited while Wallace located a claw hammer. He could feel the eyes of the rs on his back. Watching with a dull anger. Atwood gritted his teeth. It was a duty to pull.

e nails groaned as they came out of the coffin lid. Atwood remembered tales of te, plush-lined coffins of shiny mahogany. There were special people, funeral s, whose sole job was to manage an elaborate and impressive funeral display. here were just too many funerals. Sometimes the coffin was a canvas bag. mes, not even that.

e lid came off and Atwood gazed into the box. The light was bad; the angle, He stood aside to get a better view.

all man, but not seven feet. So thin he looked almost wasted. He had the skin of a sh man, yet with the hint of age around the eyes. Atwood glanced at the hands

across the breast. Long, bony fingers, blackened with frostbite at the end, as were
e and ears. He sniffed. The corpse had been washed, but the smell of death was

wood stepped back. "All right." A wave of the hand. "Nail it back up." He brushed
ds vigorously, although he hadn't touched anything. "Come on, Bill. We've
d these people enough."

Wallace did not follow them out. In the narthex, they pulled on their outdoor gear,
d the snowshoes to their feet. "Was that one of them?" Bill asked. "The corpse?"
wood shrugged. "He was tall enough and skinny enough to fit the profile."
ren't there supposed to be two of them? And what about the people who are
ed to be helping them escape?"

escape to where? he wondered. "We'll pass the van's VIN along and let Minnesota
t out. But you heard what Wallace said. His handyman and a couple of friends.
w the frostbite, didn't you? Jesus. No heating oil. No gas. They've been written off
government. They've got to move south or die, and they're too stubborn to move.
anted to do something for them, Bill? Then let them bury each other in peace."

* * *

e six pallbearers watched the deputies leave. The whole time the long coffin had
arched, they had held the shorter coffin aloft. Alex was growing tired. His arms
rom hanging onto the coffin handles and he was sure the four men holding the
were just as tired. After all, they were bearing his weight and Gordon's and the
, too.

ney're gone," said Wallace's wife at the back of the church.

ex sighed and relaxed. He slumped gratefully to the floor. Thor, Bob, Fang and
owered the coffin to its cart. Bob groaned and rubbed his shoulders. "I thought
ever leave."

rdon, leaning on the middle handle on the other side, had to be pried loose, his
d grown so tight. They led him to one of the pews and let him stretch out.

ex pushed himself to a crawling position. Sherrine left her pew and helped him
right. Then he walked in slow, careful steps to the nearest pew and dropped into
d, wooden seat. He kneaded his thigh muscles. One thing about being snowed in
e days at Wallace's farm—he and Gordon could now stand upright and walk, at
r short periods. Like Steve said, practice every day. Still, what if the security
had noticed him hanging onto the coffin instead of lifting it?

och leaned over him. "You all right, Gabe?"

l be fine. That's the longest I've stood up in . . ." *In thirty-odd years*, he realized.

errine patted his shoulder. "Before you, know it, you'll be walking across the room
own."

ex laughed. Who would have thought that walking required the mastery of such skills? He had walked as a child, but could not remember the learning of it. He took on pedestrians in the future with a certain amount of awe. "It was good of you to take us in like that," Alex told the farmer. Wallace grunted. "Seven warm bodies during a norther? My wife and I would have died without you. Like poor Jed and his friends." Alex glanced at the coffins. "Yeah."

Enoch had been waiting for the handyman and his friends to come to his huddling when Thor appeared on his front porch. After the storm had subsided, they had all been looking and found the bodies only a few hundred meters from the farmhouse. Following the tracks that had not filled in with snow it appeared that the three had been walking in a circle. "It happens," Enoch had said. "When the wind blows the snow everything whites out and you lose all your sense of direction. Thor, who had known the handyman, had insisted on staying for the funeral.

"What next?" asked Alex.

"On to Chicago," Bob told him.

Wallace shook his head. "That deputy copied down your license plate. Just routine, I suppose. But, if I were engaged in anything a shade less than perfectly normal—not that I mind you, or that I suggest that anyone else is—I might be a touch wary of driving my car over the roads. Folks don't travel so much these days, what with fuel so hard to come by. So anyone far enough from home might strike the government as suspicious." Bob frowned and ran a hand through his beard. "You're right." He looked at Sherrine, then back at Wallace. "What should we do?"

Wallace smiled. "Why don't you folks follow me over to Hiram's shop. We'll see if we can't fix something up.

They followed him outside into the brut, frozen sunlight. Alex found himself walking beside Wallace. Sherri supported him on one side, but mostly he carried his own weight. He walked like a two-year old and felt like two hundred; but he was moving under his own power. "Hiram's shop," he said. "Your friend is not a farmer, then?" "No, he's a tinker. He fixes things. It's a knack he has. Snowblowers, radios, anything mechanical. He gave Alex a sly wink. "Maybe even a computer or two, if anyone owned such a thing, which I'm not saying they do."

Alex raised his eyebrows. He exchanged glances with Sherri. "You don't tally like a phobe," he ventured.

Wallace laughed without humor. "You ever try farming without technology? It's a lot more charming in those old woodcuts than it is in the flesh. In a good year, we get to eat but cheese and beef. Cook the beef good. No antibiotics. If you could lay your hands on a supply of good medicine for cows it would be worth its weight in gold."

ex chuckled politely. But why would cheese be valuable in Wisconsin? He would
It stupid asking. Instead he asked, "What do you do in a bad year?"
Wallace grunted and his voice hardened. "In a bad year we starve."

* * *

Sherrine found she could not let go of her suspicions. Granted, Wallace had saved
from the storm, and he had helped them fool the sheriff's deputies, too; but that
have been from a sense of duty. After all, their body heat had helped save Wallace
wife, as well; and the country folk had no great love for a government that had
ely abandoned them. Still . . .

They followed Wallace's pickup down the country lanes behind Millville. Sherrine
back with Alex and the others. The road undulated through the rumpled hills,
trees, fooled by the glaciers, were rusted and yellow. An oddly disorienting layer
n leaves lay atop the snow, as if the seasons had gotten jumbled by the storm.
trees stood blizzard-stripped, stark and wintry against the sky. They came out onto
bluff from which she could see the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi.
ers sparkled in the sunlight. They flowed sluggishly, with so many of their sources
into ice.

was only when Wallace honked and pointed to the driveway of the ramshackle
g that Sherrine relaxed. There was a hand-painted sign nailed to a post by the
e. Bright red letters on a large plywood panel:

BIG FRONT YARD SALE
RAM TAINÉ, TINKER

course, she thought. *Of course*. They were among friends. She saw Fang grin and
Thor with his elbow. Thor smiled quietly, as if at a well-orchestrated surprise.
e started to laugh, earning an odd glance from Alex.
t that time she had been worried about being in Proxmire country. She had
en they were in Clifford Simak country, too.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"The Best of All Physicians. . ."

The van was dark and cold and stank with a stale pungency Alex MacLeod could get used to. Worse than a spaceship! He sat huddled under blankets with the others in the back of the van, sharing his warmth. The only light was the feeble glow of a flashlight. Alex took a breath of damp, moldy air. He wished Bob could start the engine and the van could warm up; but, of course, that was impossible.

Errine was a goblin face half-lit by the weary flashlight. "This is cozy," she said. "I read science fiction books like this—under my blankets with a light. Always my ear cocked for the sound of my parents coming." "Did they ever catch you?" asked Gordon.

"Oh, sure. I got a lecture the first time. The second time, they spanked me. They caught me again. Maybe they got tired of watching. I always looked forward to the visits, though, when they'd send me to Gram's farm. Pop-pop kept two cartons full of comic books hidden in a corner of the root cellar. I could read them in daylight." Gordon laughed. "It sounds like fun."

"Yeah, lots of fun," said Alex. "How long are we going to be stuck here?"

Bob shrugged and the blankets shrugged with him. "I don't know."

"Relax," said Fang. "Here. It's cheddar."

There was a half-found wedge. Alex felt his throat close. "No thanks," he said. "I'm going to get heartily sick of cheese by the time we get to Chicago."

"Cheese is fermented milk curd," Fang volunteered. "The Orientals think of it as 'sour milk.'"

Errine turned to him. "Thank you for sharing that thought with us."

"Well," said Thor. "Where there's a curd, there's a whey."

Seriously," Alex insisted. "How long will we be stuck inside this trailer?"

Enclosed by cheese. Encastled by cheesy ramparts. Breathing cheese with every breath.

Sure, it saved gas on the van; sure, it hid them from the sheriff's deputies; but it was as if he had been buried in a tomb of . . . of fermented curds.

Bob nibbled on the wedge, looking for all the world like an oversized mouse. "How long?"

he said. "Hard to say. The trailer takes the back roads to avoid the mounties."

"The Mounties?"

"Mounties . . . Montereys. They high jack cheese."

rdon cocked his head. "High-jack cheese? Poche—Why would anyone do that?"
ng held his wedge up and turned it so it caught the pale light. "Supply and
d," he said. "South and east of Chicago this stuff is rare. Infrastructure collapsing.
s, culverts, embankments. Roads are near impassible. Can't hardly get gas
re in Wisconsin. So not much cheese ever gets out of the state. Not until the
can hoard enough fuel to make a run like this one. Naturally, the monties are on
kout. One cheese truck taken to . . . oh, Pittsburgh or St. Louis, could set you up
"

ve heard," said Sherrine, "that in some places they stamp the cheese wheels with
seals and use them for money."

or laughed. "I've heard that. What would you do for a wallet?"

o, no," said Fang. "You put the cheese in a larder—"

ort Cheddar!"

—and issue certificates—"

acked by the full faith and credit of—"

sue certificates," Fang repeated more loudly. "Pay to the bearer on demand, so
ounds of cheese. Pound notes!"

ould a Swiss cheese pound note be worth more than a cheddar?"

are, you know how reliable those Swiss cheese bankers are . . ."

ow many Gorgonzolas to a Colby?" asked Steve. "What's the exchange rate?"

xcuse me, sir," said Sherrine to Thor, "but do you have change for a Roquefort?"

eeep your stinking money."

ey," said Bob laughing. "At least the money would be backed by *something*."

aybe," Thor ventured, "they could use jellies and jams . . . backed by the Federal
e Bank."

ex simply could not believe it. Van and all they were riding in a back of a cheese-
ghteen-wheeler trailer, rolling through territory infested by highway bandits, and
panions made . . . cheesy jokes. "It seems to me," he said, "that this is an awfully
ay to escape Wisconsin."

e others looked at him with their mouths half-open in smiles, waiting for his

ine. Alex plowed resolutely on. "I mean the monterey's. They're real?"

are, but. . ."

lex," said Sherrine. "The police are looking for a van."

iram Taine gave us new plates and painted us orange."

ll the more reason not to risk being stopped."

esides," interjected Thor, "there's something I've always wanted to say."

ex frowned at him. "What's that?"

heese it! The cops!"

everyone broke into laughter again. Alex scowled and shifted his right foot to a more comfortable *siddhasan* position. His companions couldn't seem to take things seriously. He had to make jokes. Just how dependable was this rescue? Was this to be his fate, his punishment for screwing up that one last time? To be shuttled aimlessly across the planet for the rest of his life?

Sherrine touched his arm and leaned past Thor who was cracking yet another joke to him. "Alex," she said. "We could never have scrounged enough gas for the van to drive on our own. The farmers there have been saving fuel for a long time to send just this junk out and back. They made a tremendous sacrifice by putting *us* back here instead of some lame volume in cheese."

"It's not that, Sherrine. It's . . ."

"What's what?"

Alex sighed and she leaned closer. He could smell the sweetness of her breath. "It's . . . that *was* bugging him? Was it that the optimism he had felt at the Tre-house had washed out of him? That his resolution to enjoy his exile had foundered against huddling under blizzards and crumbling roads and funerals? He jerked his head toward the back of the van. "Don't they realize the gravity of our situation?" he whispered to her. Sherrine whispered back, "You fight gravity with levity."

After, as they dozed under the blankets, Alex was jarred awake. He raised himself on his elbows, momentarily delighted that he *could* raise himself on his elbows, and looked out the window. Not that he could see anything. Under a pile of blankets inside a van that was packed up inside a trailer. It gave the word "dark" new meaning. He lay still and listened. The familiar grumble of the motor and the gentle rocking and bouncing were still there. The truck had stopped.

"What is it?" Sherrine's voice sleepy beside him. He flashed a momentary fancy that he and the others were huddled a bunk together, somewhere hidden from their five chaperones.

"Nothing," he said. "The truck stopped, is all. Rest break, maybe."

"Oh, good. I could use a rest break myself. Should we get out, do you think?"

"Wait." Doors slammed and the engine roared to life. "Changing drivers, I guess."

"Get off the ground and caught. "The two guys up front must have switched seats."

"I hope we get there soon, or this van is going to smell like a New York subway car."

"Please," said Bob, yawning in the darkness, "if you have to go, go outside. "Don't breathe in the cheese?"

"I really miss my space suit," said Alex. "Do you miss yours?"

"No? Why?"

"I had a catheter," he said dreamily.

* * *

Arteria studied the list that Moorkith had passed around the table. It was several long. Eight-by fourteen-inch computer pages. Names and addresses ranked in columns. Not even alphabetized! Maybe it was sorted by address? No, there was no real order to the sequence at all. A random dump. Maybe no one on Moorkith's knew how to run a sort. That seemed likely. Computers might be necessary, but they were a necessary evil. Too much about them and you might be seduced into technophilia. Besides, the agency was elitist. It was easy to imagine Moorkith's people gingerly pressing and leaping back lest they be defiled by the touch. "This is a lot of subversives for a small area like Fargo." The state policewoman was a member of the Team, representing North Dakota. Arteria supposed that the various jurisdictions had decided to pool their resources so they would not be left off the hook and miss out on the collar. "I wouldn't know," said Moorkith. "But I believe it would be wise to investigate each of the possible connections with Minneapolis technophiles." Arteria stifled a grin. Pompous ass. They would be a long time checking out some of the leads. Verne, Jules. Gernsback, Hugo. Wells, Herbert George. Even Jefferson, Tom. Over, G.W. Technophiles, all. Had Moorkith even *looked* at the printout before trusting it? No, he simply assumed it was correct. For someone who professed to be an expert on high tech technology, he had a naive and trusting attitude toward it. How long had Moorkith's database been compromised? Arteria would dearly have liked to know. A hack years old would have nothing to do with the current mission. A new hack might be intended to muddy the search for the spacemen. In either case, the list of phony names pointed straight toward fandom. Arteria smiled. So far, no one else seemed to have noticed a fannish flavor to this mission. They might suspect sci-fi fans on general principle—"technophiles is just a fancy word for fanboies"—but their general attitude was that fans were hare-brained and ineffectual nerds. A dangerous assumption, sometimes correct, but sometimes wildly off. "I can crack this one solo and keep all the credit. Might even be good for a mission."

* * *

The back door of the van was thrown open and raw sunlight filtered into the back of the van. Alex crouched with the others next to Bob's van, peering through the pallets of boxes that screened them from view. There were loud voices and shouted orders and the rumble of an engine. "Bob scratched his beard and frowned. 'Enoch said his friends would release us from the warehouse before they drove the trailer to the cheese market.'" "Bob scratched his beard. 'Maybe there's been a change in plans.'"

on't like it," said Fang shaking his head.
"What should we do?" asked Gordon.
"Can't run. Can't hide. Might as well enjoy the view."
The forklift pulled the cheese pallet from in front of them. A gang of men in heavy shirts was counting and stacking the cheese wheels. They froze suddenly and at the trailer. The leader of the stevedores looked up from his clipboard and an ogie fell from his lips. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.
He studied the skyline. Gray, sooty clouds lowered over squat, blocky buildings. In the distance, twin spires of black smoke twisted skyward. He shook his head. "We're not here, gang."

"Welcome to Kilbourntown, gentlemen and lady." The Alderman graced them with a smile from atop his fur-lined throne. He was nearly as wide as he was tall. He wore a tawny-and-white cloak of fox skins. Aides and servants hovered around him like debris around a satellite. A number of the men wore sidearms and crossed swords, but Alex also spotted swords here and there. A young girl, scantily clad, stood insolently on the steps below the dais. Body odor was a miasma in the room. "This is a barbarian court," Alex thought. He stood wobble-kneed with his friends, still unsure if they were prisoners or not.
The Alderman gave him his elbow to hang onto. "Great Ghu," he whispered out of the side of his mouth, "we're in Hyperborea. Where's Conan?"
The Alderman lifted a huge, carved stein toward them. "Have a beer," he said.

Alex yanked the stein.
It was a signal. His aides rushed to hand out smaller steins to the travelers. Alex took his stein doubtfully. Scenes of Teutonic pastoralism adorned the sides. A lid popped off the top. Now, that was familiar. Open-topped mugs still seemed a trifle odd to him. How do you drink from the damned thing? There was no nipple.
Alex noticed a little thumb lever that flipped the lid open. Aha. So, what was the problem with the lid? They had gravity here. They didn't have to worry about the beer floating out.

The Alderman waited and his ward heeler motioned that they should drink. It was a weak brew with insufficient carbonation. Alex smiled and pretended to drink some. "It's very good," he said. No point in offending your host; especially one of an alien and barbaric temper.
The Alderman nodded his smiling head. "It tastes like horse piss, doesn't it? Oh, one more thing. You're new here, so I'll let you get by just this once. But please, do not speak to me again until I've first spoken to." The voice twisted up at the end, almost like a question. The smile faded. Alex felt there. The jolly eyes still twinkled. Alex felt sweat in his armpits and groin. *I've been threatened so politely.*

Alex had already opened his jacket. Now he loosened his shirt collar, as well. This was the first time he had felt really warm since the trek across the Ice. Was it really warm in the Alderman's palace—a.k.a. the old Federal Building on Wisconsin Avenue—or was he just nervous about their circumstances? Then he remembered that the stevedores loading the dock had been working in no more than flannel shirtsleeves.

Bob said. Hadn't Thor told him that Milwaukee was closer to the ice fields than any other city, save Winnipeg? Something about the Lake Effect and the Jet Stream.

Putting his stein down on the tray proffered by his butler, the Alderman gusted a little cough and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He made staccato pointing motions with his right hand and the other servants collected the remaining steins. Alex surrendered his own; but Fang held onto his and took a second pull from it before releasing the handle.

The Alderman shook his head. "You're either a brave old cuss or you got no taste for beer." He rubbed his hands together. "Now, to business. Who the hell are you and what are you doing in the cheeser?"

Sherrine exchanged lances with Bob and took a step forward. "May I speak?"

The Alderman raised his eyebrows. "I asked a question, didn't I?"

"Yes, your honor. I meant, may I make a request?"

The Alderman raised his chin and stroked it slowly with his thumb. "Sure. Why not? I'll even grant it, even though you ain't registered voters."

"Two of my friends here are only recently out of wheelchairs. They cannot stand up for long periods. Would it be all right with you—"

"Your honor' is the correct title."

"Thank you, your honor. Would it be all right with your honor if they sat down?"

There was an audible gasp from the assembled servants and courtiers. One of the women fumbled her tray and nearly dropped the steins she carried. The Alderman colored a little; then he grinned. "Hey, sure. This is a democracy, aina?"

Two chairs were brought. Two only, Alex noted. "I can still stand," he told Sherrine. "I don't want to be chivalric. Don't push yourself beyond what Steve tells you."

Alex settled himself into the chair. He glanced at Gordon. "Let them handle this," he said.

"That was planning to," Gordon responded.

The Alderman smiled his humors smile again. "Now. About your presence in the city."

"Yes—" Sherrine glanced at Bob, who shrugged.

"Go ahead."

"We were stuck in western Wisconsin, your honor. Some friends helped us save gas by carrying us piggyback on the cheese delivery."

"That's a real expensive favor. I'm short a couple hundred kilos American because of

here was a blizzard, your honor," Thor explained. "We saved the farmer's life." "A square-head's life ain't worth his volume in cheese. But he might not know that." "He raked his chin again with his thumb. "You sure you ain't from Juneautown? Nah, I ain't," he answered himself. "If you was playing Trojan horse it woulda been a stupid stunt; and stupid ain't one of Alderman Wlodarczyck's sterling qualities." He spread his arms out wide and slapped them down on the arms of his throne. "But I'm still out the cheese. So what do I do?" "Alex suspected the question was rhetorical; but Thor spoke up anyway. "I thought the shipment was going to Chicago. Your honor. Did they put us on the truck?" "The courtiers laughed. Even the waiters permitted themselves a supercilious snigger. The Alderman's smile turned tolerant. "Did I say something funny, your honor?" "No, those square-heads don't know nothing about economics. Sure, they was buying their cheese by Chi-town; but they coulda got a better deal here. So we did 'em a

you!" Sherrine blurted. "You're behind the monties!" "The Alderman turned a fierce glare on her. "You watch your mouth there, lady. If you ain't a lady, you'd get six months hard for leeze majesty. We don't steal cheese. We need it to negotiate with them gangsters in Chi ever since Juneautown cut us off from the Port and the Marina. Chi's gonna get their cheese sooner or later, don't you worry about that; but it might as well do *us* some good along the way." "Alex was having a hard time remaining seated. Floaters didn't lose the strength in their hands. Alex's hands were hard and sinewy; they could crush the fat Alderman's hand if he would hold still for a moment. "An honest man beset by greedy neighbors. Was it simply hypocrisy? Self-deception? A lack of any moral code but relativity? "Was it not so simple as that? The Alderman and his cronies were arrogant bandits at the center of power. But did the smiles seem forced? Did the eyes glitter with a hint of greed? The Ice was sliding down the west side of the Lake faster than anywhere else on the coast. Places like Fox Point and Brown Deer were already engulfed, according to

even why was it so warm here? "Milwaukee was no longer a city: the two sides of the river had become separate towns. Maybe Alderman Strauss was just an old-time, city machine politician desperately fending off disaster from his bailiwick, knowing all the while that it was his. The pressure of that sort of burden could deform a soul past its yield point, even past its breaking point.

ok what it's done to Lonny Hopkins. And that was an odd notion, because it was a sympathetic thought he had had about the station commander in a long, long

right, Alex. What would *you* do if you were sitting on a plundered restaurant wearing a cloak of animal skins, watching your beloved community be swallowed by glaciers? Anything it took, right? There was nothing like disaster to focus one's

s. But the farmers, your honor," Sherrine insisted.

Back off, Sherri, he wanted to tell her. These are desperate, ruthless men and women. They aren't stealing cheese for fun. They are trying to save themselves and their families. "They'll get their payment. We ain't got beer," the Alderman shrugged magnanimously. "They'll get their payment. We ain't got beer. They got more cheese than they know what to do with it. We got beer coming—" He grinned. "Well, coming out, anyway. So we'll load up their stinking wagon with enough barrels we figure equals the cheese and send it back by them. For value. We ain't got cheese here; they ain't got beer there. They even get their drivers back."

But, your honor, what can they do with a trailer load of beer?"

Throw a party. Get drunk. What else is there to do in the sticks? The e should be bartering at all. Meanwhile . . ." And he rubbed his hands. "I figured out what to do with you folks. My city clerk will calculate the value of the cheese you stole from the truck. Then we'll put you to work at standard wage—minus room and board of course—until you pay it off." He smiled an appeal to them. "That's fair, aina?" Alex, for one, was not going to tell him otherwise.

The guard who took them to their new duties was full of enthusiasm and civic pride. It hadn't been for the short sword at his belt and the crossbow on his back, Alex would have thought him a member of the chamber of commerce. Or maybe he was.

"Ain't the Alderman a piece of work?" he bragged. "I was in the fight when the town burned the Clybourn Street bridge. He was all over the battlefield, rallying the men, leading that last charge to tear down the barricade. A damn shame we lost the bridge, but you can't say the Alderman lost his nerve." The guard shook his head. "That belongs to all of Milwaukee, not just the east siders. It ain't right that they keep us out of it. The same goes for the old City Hall. Juneautown thinks they're hot shit."

The horse cart pulled up at Zeidler Park and the guard ordered them all out. The park was enclosed in an immense plastic tent shored up by a wooden framework. The plastic was translucent, and through it Alex could make out the dim, distorted shapes of people sitting on benches. He climbed down from the cart with the others and stumbled toward the tent. He had support from Thor and Fang on either arm, each step sent a lance of fire up his legs. Highs.

ey Hobie!" the guard called out. "Got some new temps for you!"
ancing up, Alex noticed again how gray the cloud deck was that hung over
akee. And the twin plumes of black smoke to the north. "Guard," he asked, "are
res?"
unh? Oh, sure. That's how we get our steam heat. We're burning buildings down.
s Juneautown; but it was our idea first. Most everything north of Capitol Avenue is
v."
What do you do when you run out of city?"
e guard blinked at him. "There are other cities, aina?"

bie was the head farmer for Zeidler Park Farm. Once inside the huge, low tent,
as assaulted by the warm, moist scent of compost and plant life. The entire park
n turned over to crops. Rows of corn and wheat were mixed with pea vines and
ants. The plastic sheeting acted as a greenhouse, letting in the solar energy but
g the ground-reflected heat, which was supplemented by steam hissing from
s jury-rigged about the grounds. *Shorewood is burning to keep the corn warm*,
ought. It was actually warm inside the farm and, for the first time since falling to
Alex saw men and women in shirt sleeves. They were bent silently over the plants,
them with hoes and rakes. Some were kneeling, grubbing at the dirt with hand
nd weeders. A few of the . . . serfs? . . . glanced at the newcomers with a studied
curiosity.

ere had been a popular joke on *Freedom*, started by a man named Calder. Looking
rom space, he had said, the dominant life forms on Earth were obviously the
and other grasses. They occupied all the most desirable and fertile land; and they
ned insects and animals to care for them. In particular, they had domesticated the
to nurture and cultivate them and to save and plant their seed. Now, watching the
, Alex could easily imagine that they were worshiping and genuflecting before
asters.

bie looked them over. "New temps," he said. "Heh, heh."
hat's right," said Bob. "Just until we pay off the fine."
nd what fine is that, sonny?"

Well, we were in the back of a cheese truck and . . ."
bie cackled. "Heh, heh, heh. In a cheeser, was you? And you gotta pay the Boss
r the cheese he couldn't steal because you, was back there instead? Heh, heh."
b scowled. "What's funny?"

Well, you may be here a while."
hat's slavery," Bob pointed out without any real surprise.

Hobie affected a look of astonishment. "Why, so it is, sonny!" He leaned forward tentatively and added, "You want we should go tell the Boss? Maybe he'll stop it if he knows how illegal it all is. Heh."

Hobie's face sagged. He turned to Sherrine and put his arm around her. "I'm sorry I got mixed up in this," he said. "I truly am."

Sherrine leaned against him. "I'm a big girl. I make my own decisions. But come on, I won't show up when I don't show up for work . . ."

"What?"

Hobie shrugged. "They'll probably start looking for me; but who would ever think to look for me?"

Gordon said, "I would like to sit down."

"Ain't too much sitting down here, sonny," Hobie told him. "Lots of bending and stretching though. Heh." Fang and Steve helped Gordon hobble over to the rude desk that was apparently Hobie's business office. Gordon sat against it, taking the weight off his leg.

"Hey!" Hobie called, "you a farmer, too?"

Gordon's head hung down on his chest. He shook it wearily from side to side. "No. I'm not a farmer. I was, a hydroponic tech for a week; and I screwed that up, too."

"You ain't a farmer," Hobie insisted, "why'd they lame you?"

"What?"

Hobie stooped and made a slitting motion with the blade of his hand against the back of his leg. "These city boys don't know from soil and growin' things. They're much better at breaking stuff down. So any farmers they catch they hamstring so we don't try to run away. The telephone on the desk rang and, as if to demonstrate his last remark, Hobie answered it. He walked with a curious shuffling gait, almost dragging his left foot. He shoved her fist in her mouth and even Fang looked ill. Hobie picked up the receiver. He looked at the group.

"Well, don't look so sad. It don't bother me no more. They just cut the one leg. They want us to be cripples."

The milk of human kindness, thought Alex. Great Ghu, he had just begun to gain the use of his legs. Was this barbaric chieftain going to take them away again?

"Hello, Edna?" Hobie spoke into the receiver. He lowered himself into an old swivel chair. The padding was old and ragged and the ticking stuck out from ripped seams.

"I put 'er through . . . Hey, Terri, you old bug stomper, what's up? Yeah. Yeah, I'm here; they just got here. You need to what? Well, that's a new one on me. Naw, I don't look lousy to me; but if you say so, I'll send 'em right over." He hooked the receiver and stared at it, pulling his lip. "Terri says you gotta come over by her place for a while. Says she heard tell of the typhus over by Greenfield and West Allis. Your turn to come through that way, so she's gotta check you out. The drivers have already been here. Now it's your turn."

d so back into the wagon. Go here; no, go there. Autocrats usually gave
ncy" as the reason for centralizing the decision making. Good ol' Lonny sure
did; and Alex was sure that Alderman Strauss did, too. But why did the
ngs always have to cut and paste to make things work?

erri Whitehead ran a pest control operation from a building alongside the
kee River. As the guard said driving them over, you could wave to the guard on
eautown side and they could count how many fingers you used. The guard let the
o at a walk. "You ain't in no hurry to start weeding, are you?" he asked. He wasn't
urry, either. He had pulled an easy duty and saw no reason not to relax while he
chance.

ex lay on his back in the wagon and stared up at the brown smudge of a sky. Bob,
g beside him, followed his gaze.

lthy, isn't it?" he said. "All that soot and carbon from the fires. This may be the
y in North America with a smog problem, worse luck."

orse luck? Why?"

ecause if everybody was lighting fires and putting carbon dioxide into the air it
be a damn sight warmer. Like it used to be before they cleaned up the
here."

b gestured with his head. "Take a look around you," he whispered. "Wisconsin
n devastated by the Ice more than any other state, except maybe Michigan. Yet
kee is almost a tropic oasis. Why? Because, whether they admit it to themselves
the locals are trying to restore the Greenhouse Effect. They threw another log on
"

ve had been listening quietly to Bob's whispered lecture. He leaned over to Alex
sotto voce: Burn a log and see it through, with heat and soot and CO₂!"

'e're here," announced Sherrine. "And——" She stopped abruptly.

nd what?" Bob asked, twisting to his feet. He stood silently for a moment,

ving laughter.

ex grabbed the side of the buckboard and pulled himself to his knees. They were
before a wide storefront with double-paned plate glass windows. A wooden sign
above the entrance was painted in bright red and gold letters:

NGVI'S DE-LOUSING AND PEST CONTROL CENTER

e guard finished hitching the horse to the rail and scowled at them. "All right,
everyone grinning?"

question exactly, thought Alex.

Terri Whitehead was a short, muscular woman with long, black hair and owlsh
She wore jeans and a man's dress shirt with rolled up sleeves, and elbow-length
When she spoke, it was in a husky contralto.
She took care of the guard first. "Because you may have picked up lice from being
the new temps. She made him take off all his clothing and dusted it with
on powder. Searched through his underwear, and recoiled in horror.
"What?" he demanded.
She held up forceps. "Louse, aina? I'll have to see if it's carrying anything." There
microscope by the window. She put the insect on a slide and studied it. "You're
This one's healthy. Get back to barracks and take a hot shower. Here's a
otion. Tell 'em I said *hot* water. Use this stuff." She handed him a small bottle of
liquid. "Use it good, all the hairy parts of your body. Scrub like hell. You'll be all
h, Doc—" "
typhus," she said. "Dehydration. Babbling. High fever. After a while you dry up
. You won't like it."
sus, Doc—" "
ou'll be all right. One thing, if you itch, don't scratch. Don't crush lice. That's
ad. Just wash them off. Then powder yourself. As for your clothes, change
Take your old ones where they're doing a fire and get 'em good and hot, then
them good. Real good.
eah, I will, but, Doc—" "
ou're all right now. I can tell. You don't have it. Get going before you do."
What about them?" "
e laughed and was suddenly holding a pistol, quite casually. "No problem. Now
ng."
es, ma'am."
this time Alex could feel tiny life forms crawling over his body looking for blood
t. He kept his hands rigidly by his side. Life under Lonny Hopkins had its
cks; but at least lice wasn't one of them.
When Terri faced them, she was laughing. "Yngvi is a louse," she said.
AWOL," Bob replied.
JAGH," she responded. Then she and Sherrine and Bob and the other fans joined
ppy embrace.
Sherrine said, "A sensitive fannish face! I *knew*—" "
here isn't time," Terri told them. "We have maybe an hour before they send
guard. Follow me." She led them to the back of the building and out the rear
Don't worry about the typhus, she said. "That was just to get you over here. It's a
ing you have that transponder, Bob. The Ghost knew right were you were." She

and looked at them. "You guys must be awfully important." No one said anything
shrugged. "None of my business, right? Come on, this way."
path led across the ragged yard to the river bank, where a small sailboat bobbed at
ing, wooden wharf. "Seamus will take you from here. Seamus deBaol. You may
over him. He used to publish a line of SF books in the old days. 'Books by deBaol'?
ke you down the river as soon as he ties me up back in the shop."
errine took her by the arm. "Aren't you coming with us?"
rri shook her head. "No, someone's got to stay behind and give you an alibi. I can
m how you overpowered me and headed west out St. Paul Avenue. My friend
ace belongs to Psi Phi Fraternity over by the University. They'll report some
stolen, so the Alderman's stooges will go chasing off that direction. I'll tell them
gonna die of typhus anyway. The Alderman will think you're a blessing. Maybe
o to Juneautown and start a plague."
ut—you won't come, then?"
his is my home," she said. "Such as it is. What if other fen find themselves in need
someday?"
errine hugged her. "It must be awful, living life undercover like that. Aren't you
f exposure?"
rri grinned. "That's why I stay under the covers. Being a fan was a lot simpler in
days; now we've all got new destinies to pursue. Here." She handed them a paper
You'll need money. Take this. It's filled with cheese. Sorry, no apple pie. 'The best
nysicians is apple pie and cheese.' Quick, now. Into the boat. Seamus, hurry!
still got to tie me up."
e short, bearded man grinned at them as he jogged past up to the house. "Some
f this job, I like."

was a gaff rigged catboat with plenty of room aboard. The mast was stepped well
l and wore a single quadrilateral sail.
e boat pushed off from shore, and the sail caught the wind. It heeled dangerously,
ttled on course. They huddled in the bottom of the boat, out of the chill wind, and
anaged to be next to Sherrine.
ow did you know she was a friend?"
ne sign. 'Yngvi is a louse'-well, it's a quote from an old fantasy, and it got to be
a catch phrase among fans. As soon as I saw 'Yngvi DeLousing . . .' "
ex nodded. "I see. FIAWOL I know, but what means that other one?"
e grinned. "FIJAGH. Fandom Is Just A Goddamn Hobby.
* * *

e Museum of Science and Industry was located on the shore of Lake Michigan in
a Park on Chicago's south side. Seamus maneuvered the catboat to a spit of land

th of the museum and ran the bow aground. "Are you sure you want off here?" he

es," Sherrine told him. "We are supposed to meet someone."

amus glanced up at the imposing building. He ran a hand through his beard. "Well, ful. It's not the museum it used to be. Time was this was Chi-Town's biggest attraction. Four million people a year came to look at Science and Technolo s. Like a damn city come to visit. A lot of the displays have been changed over hey only left a few, and they don't keep the homeless out."

ex wobbled as he stepped ashore. His legs felt like rubber and he grabbed Thor's ers to stay upright. "Sorry," he muttered. "I seem to have lost it." The long, y sail down the Milwaukee River and then along the shore of Lake Michigan had, gentle rolling motion, put him back into a state of near weightlessness. Now the eaved to and fro as if tossed by waves.

amus waved to them as he cast off. The wind was off the lake, abeam to his course ming and going. "Sailor's wind," he called. "Good luck."

AWOL," Alex said tentatively.

on't you just know it," Seamus called. He hauled in the sheets and the boat moved away.

b and Sherrine disappeared and reappeared a short while later with a pair of hairs with C.M.S.A.T. stenciled in yellow ink across the back. "Here you go, Sherrine said. "You wouldn't believe what they wanted for a deposit on these

b led the way to the front of the building. The façade consisted of tall, fluted s with voluted capitals. Statues of the Muses gazed serenely down. "It's a huge g," he said. "Covers five and a half hectares. It was built originally for the 1893 Colombian Exposition; then rebuilt in the 1930s as the museum."

Where would this Cole character have his Titan?" asked Alex.

here used to be a wing, called the Henry Crown Space Center. It had Schirra's Seven Mercury capsule and the Apollo Eight, the first craft to orbit the moon. The probably back there. I figured maybe we could mount the Apollo on the Titan w. It seats three."

Which means," Sherrine interjected, "that you could even take a friend with you. ess not. Seeds and stuff—"

he Titan was rigged for a Gemini," said Bob, "but I figured we should be able to . .

oice trailed off. Alex suspected that Bob was just beginning to appreciate the ude of the proposed rescue. As long as it was blue sky dream, there were no ns; but the closer they came, the more the difficult details emerged.

people didn't really build spacecraft in their backyards, or in museums. That was just fiction.

far so good!

They went up the handicapped ramp to the left of the main entrance. The mass of the g was beginning to get to Alex. *Peace* and *Freedom* were frail metal balloons next to the concrete habitat. It was, he thought, like being in a hollowed-out asteroid.

Bob secured a map of the museum and they huddled over it. The logo read, "Chicago Museum of Science and Appropriate Technology," with a footnote explaining that "science" did not mean only "materialist science."

Now, what might "non-materialist science" be? Alex wondered. Plasma physics? Where is it?" Bob pointed. "I'll be damned. It's still in the same old spot. Henry Crown Center. What does it say in the description?" He bent closer. "This exhibit has been displayed as it was in the past as an example of Big Technology. Astonishing as it may be, millions of dollars were once spent in outer space rather than here on Earth. See the capsules that were used to give a few military pilots joyrides at taxpayer expense." "I don't understand, Bob," Alex said. "How could they spend money in space? There were no stores there back in those days."

That's not what they meant, Gabe," Bob replied.

Bob spoke gently. "They meant that the money was spent on the space program rather than on Earthly problems."

Sherrine burst out, "They got so much from the space program! Fireproofing. Disaster forecasting. Dammit, these"—she kicked Alex's wheelchair—"lightweight chairs we're pushing around. Sorry."

Alex started to laugh. Sherrine said, "Sorry. My *God*, it's been so long since I could do that kind of thing!"

Did these chairs really—"

Waste-water treatments. Medical instruments. Most people had no *idea* that any of these came out of the space program. Or for that matter, that it even existed. A new design for a lightweight wheelchair doesn't make the kind of headlines that a scrubbed launch or a space mirror makes, even if the structural analysis techniques and composite materials used to make the damn thing were aerospace from the beginning. What is everyone looking at?"

Welcome back," Steve said.

Thanks. Oh, Bob, there was nobody to *talk* to."

Steve said, "All that stuff was just 'spin-off,' you know. Science happens because sometimes a scientist wakes up and says, 'Today I'm going to invent toothpaste.' If he didn't invent a better wheelchair, he can't take credit for it."

Come on," said Bob. "We're wasting time here. Let's get back to the Crown Center."

led them through several exhibits on the way to the back room where the space was stashed. One was a Hall of Minerals that featured all sorts of crystals, r with detailed descriptions of the powers of each for " . . . clearing away negative s, centering personal energies, enhancing communications, promoting healing, g the heart to love and courage, simplifying decision making, balancing the spirit, g the mind, tapping into psychic powers, and using chakras and colors." Another exhibit was entitled "Origins of the Earth." There were seven panels, one for y. One large poster read "The Speed of Light: A Test of Faith?" and explained ht created "already on the way" could give the impression of a universe much nd older an it really was.

ere was a Green exhibit on alternate energy sources. Windmills, passive solar. s. "Biomass?"

b said, "Burn wheat and corn. Real efficient. Well, at least they don't have an on generating energy by squeezing crystals."

hy the grin, Alex?" Thor asked as they entered a stairwell and turned right into a it corridor. A faded sign on the wall read, "This way to Henry Crown Space "

ex chuckled. "We grow perfect crystals in our electronics lab in *Freedom*. I could if I had brought a handful with me."

e Crown Center was housed in a separate wing that could be reached only through narrow corridor. A homeless pair huddled in a niche near the doorway. They were d up in torn blankets that covered everything but their eyes.

ey, man, you got any change?"

one looked at them. Eye contact might humanize them . . .

If the lights in the hallway were out and the edges at the floor and ceiling were ith nitre and cobwebs. This was a part of the building long—and deliberately—ed.

e center itself was dimly lit. The two space capsules were shadowy shapes led from the ceiling. A couple of teenaged boys who had found their way in were g beneath the Mercury capsule. ". . . and all they ever brought back was a bung of noon rocks," Alex heard the one tell his companion. He turned to them as he was d past.

id you ever ask what those rocks were made of?" he asked.

e two kids gave him a wary look. "Rocks is rocks," the older said.

ight, kid," murmured Thor. "Aluminum, titanium, zirconium, calcium. If we had he moon like some people wanted, we wouldn't have to disturb Mother Earth and e environment here."

e younger kid stuck his chin out. "Yeah, but then we woulda ruined the moon's y."

tried to jerk his arm away from Thor, who was trying to calm him down. If Thor, he didn't react. Sherrine stepped between them, saying something that Alex tried to hear. "We are stuck down here, Gordo," he persisted. "Stuck. Forever. It doesn't matter whose fault—"

"Quiet, there! Quiet, I say!"

A sudden voice came from above. Alex looked up with the rest and saw wild hair and a long New Englander face, partly white in the uncertain fluorescent light, staring down at them from an opening high up in the Titan. The face showed nothing. He said, "Get away from that. It's not yours."

Everybody moved.

A knotted rope snaked down from above and the tall, thin man came down hand over hand. He landed too hard, staggered, recovered. He took his place before the Titan, in no particular hurry.

"I bought the parts and put it together and held it together for forty years. You're not going to hurt it."

Thor stepped up to him and reached for his arm. "Ron? Ron Cole? Is that you?" His hand stopped, because that was a gun in Cole's hand.

The creature looked at him. "Yes." He squinted at Thor's face. "I know you. Don't I?" His other hand stroked the discolored flank of the Titan. He held the gun with evident reluctance, but it was still pointed at Thor's belly.

"They took away her boosters, they did. Her boosters. Too dangerous, they said. What did they know? Without the fuel . . ." His lips clamped into a straight line.

Thor had backed away a bit. "What fuel is that, Ron?"

Cole backed against the Titan, shaking his head. "No, no. Things are seldom as they seem. Like milk masquerade . . . masquerades as cream." He nodded his head wisely. His gun was cooped.

"Ron, what happened to you?" Thor demanded.

"Eh. One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest—"

"Electro shock," Fang said. "And drugs. They must have helped him, in one of the health centers."

When Thor turned back, Alex could see tears staining his beard. "I knew Ron," he said. "I knew Ron back in the old days, in Boston. We had dinner together at a Thai restaurant there. He told me stories, wonderful stories. About how the *Boston Globe* named him the world's sixth nuclear power; about Wade Curtis and the machete; and about the Great Duel . . . He was the brightest man I ever knew, and look what they've done to him. Look what they've done." He bowed his head and Steve stepped to him and put an arm around his shoulder.

It had all been in vain, Alex realized. The harrowing trip across Wisconsin; the escape; the narrow escape from slavery . . . All for nothing. The shining vision of the

an had gone before them like a pillar of fire in the desert night. And at the end, d found only junk and an old man who had been helped by mental health ionals.

one said anything. Bob studied the Titan, checking out every part of it; as if he will it into flight worthiness, as if he could somehow find something they had ked that would make everything all right. Steve consoled Thor, while Sherrine ted a weeping Gordon. Even Fang seemed bereft of ideas.

ex watched Gordon cry. Thor had lost his friend. Sherrine had lost her job; or when she failed to show up for work in the morning. Bob had lost his van, and y his job, too. But Gordon cried uncontrollably. *Okay, for Gordo this is a totally anet. I could acclimate myself. I was born here. I loved Kansas; I cried when my took me up. I could learn to love it here again. I could convince myself that I was ming home again.*

e Titan had given their sojourn a purpose. They had had a goal, as quixotic as that d been. Now, they had nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"See What Free Men Can Do. . ."

he's dead, then," Bob said. "Goddam. The rumor was right. Cole had a rocket. It was alive, once."
or all the good it does us," Sherrine said bitterly. "Oh bloody hell, I'm, sorry. I'm sorry."
on't look now," Bob said. He jerked his thumb toward the entrance. The homeless pair who had claimed the corridor were now in it, still wearing their blankets. Sherrine wondered if they had clothes on under them. The pair seemed to be hustling a girl in her teens. The girl tried to move away from them but the pair followed, evidently begging. The pantomime dance was curving them toward the rocket. Cole eyed the three and took a tentative step to place himself between them and it. One of the blanketed figures began to sing, very softly. The other joined in, then the third. They had been begging from. Even as close as they were, they could barely be heard.

Star fire! Star fire!
Singing in my blood, I know it well!
We can know the promise of the stars.
Star fire! Star fire!
The promise of the universe is ours——"

Harry?" Bob said quietly.
nobody else," Harry said. "Been waiting for you. 'Lo, Ron."
'Lo, Harry," Cole said. "Wade send you?"
up. Says it's getting on for time to move on."
Some of the mad glint faded from Cole's eyes.
Harry, what are you doing here?" Bob demanded.
Better yet, what are you talking about?" Sherrine said.
h," Jenny said. "Come on where we can talk." She eyed the two spacemen. "Huh. You're walking now! You had me fooled."
ot me," Harry said. "I guessed in Minneapolis. Come on——"

Thor looked at Harry and shook his head. "Same old bullshit. Like hell you guessed." He looked suspiciously at the girl who had come in with Harry and Jenny. "Who's this?" She had dark hair, soft brown eyes, exotic features. Sherrine thought that with a little hair and some attention to her hair she would be beautiful. As it was, she seemed to look plain: no makeup at all, not even lipstick, hair brushed severely back and tied in a bun. She wore a skirt and sweater, both drab brown, with black leggings and heavy warmers over those.

"Who's this?" Thor demanded again.

"Violetta Brown," Harry said. He looked around the room, saw no one, and lowered his voice. "Oliver Brown's daughter."

"Oh," Sherrine said. "Pleased to meet you, Violetta. Is your father—"

"Waiting for us," Violetta said. "Come on. Harry has a lot to tell you."

"What I do," Harry said. He turned to Cole. "You, too, Ron. Wade says it's time. Said he knew what I meant."

"And past time. You'll be back?"

"Tomorrow," Harry promised. "Maybe tonight."

"Let's get out of here," Thor said. Outside he turned to Harry, "You get picked up as a suspect—"

"Not," Harry said.

"But you're no crazier than you ever were. Why?" He stabbed an arm back toward the lit space center. "Why the hell did they do that to Ron? And not you."

Harry shrugged. "He was interesting."

"Interesting?"

"Yeah," Jenny said. "The last thing you want to be is different. Those mental health clinics are filled up with graduate students, all just alike, no future, unless they can find an interesting case to write a thesis about."

"Ron couldn't be ordinary, no matter how hard he tried," Thor said. "Yeah. I see."

Harry said, "Some of us hide it better than others."

* * *

Captain Lee Arteria opened the folder and removed the single sheet of paper it contained.

ed. *Do all files start as innocuously as this?* One sheet; but destined to multiply, like a bacterial colony. *Trees die so that we may keep dossiers.*

Arteria looked up and caught the eye of Captain Machtley, the North Dakota liaison.

State Police agencies, fearful of being left out in the cold in the pursuit of the

men, had agreed to be coordinated through Arteria's Air Police.

"Why don't you fill us in on what this says, Captain?"

Machtley cleared her throat. "Her name is Sherrine Hartley. She lives in

Minneapolis, but her grandparents live near the crash site; and the telephone company's

records show that she called them the night of the crash."

Well. That certainly sounds suspicious. Calling your grandparents." "In the middle of the night? Besides, there's more," Machtley said happily. Arteria replaced the sheet in the folder and closed it. "Tell me." Machtley looked around the table at the others. *That's right*, thought Arteria. *Share are alike*. Dakota Bell's data banks were scrambled the next day. If the off-line backup hadn't been the first thing in the morning, there would have been no record of Hartley calling her grandparents. We suspect that the Legion of Doom was involved." He was unconvinced. "The Legion of Doom has been sparring with the phone company since Day One. It might not be related." "We would never have found the grandparents," Machtley insisted, "if we hadn't gone door to door. It was a neighbor who told us about the granddaughter in Minneapolis." Arteria smiled. "I've always said that good old-fashioned police legwork beats these computer searches for useful results. Moorkith and his Green Police are going nuts to straighten out their records. They're too damn lazy to hit the bricks." "Don't forget the Motor Vehicle data banks," said Captain Conte, the Minnesota captain. "They were scrambled, too. Remember when we tried to ID the maroon van?" Machtley nodded. "That's an interesting point. Hartley's grandparents would have been on Moorkith's un-Green list, too; if *it* hadn't been hacked up. They are not the milk-drinking type at all. The old lady is a former gene-tamperer." There was a general stirring around the table. "You're right," Arteria said. "Gene tampering does not sound good at all." "It violates God's law," put in Captain Traxler, the Wisconsin liaison. "And it harms the ecology. Satan's work." "We've started checking up on the Hartley woman," said Conte. "She was once considered as active in the science fiction underground." "a. "By whom?" "Her ex-husband." "Ex-husband. Was the report substantiated, or was it just a messy divorce?" Conte shook his head. "Nothing was proven; and the records say she's kept her nose clean the last few years. But still, where there's smoke, there's usually fire." "a. *well*, thought Lee Arterna, *we never needed a Fourth Amendment, anyway*. Start with the exceptions in the need for probable cause and where did you stop? Not at the checkpoints. "Does anyone else have anything concrete to add?" Nobody spoke. After a moment, Arteria nodded. "Very well, Captains. Scrambling separate databases relating to Hartley, her grandparents and the van. Machtley, that's good work. It would be one hell of a thick coincidence." *And there is a definite whiff*

shness about Hartley. Gafiated years ago, but still has connections. "Hartley may
en the woman in the van at Fargo Gap. It's worth following up. Captain Conte?"
es?"

hink we should pay this Sherrine Hartley a visit, don't you? And . . ." Arteria
back in the chair and contemplated the ceiling. "I don't think there is any reason to
Green Police or the INS into this quite yet. Let's wait until we have more to show
we let them share the credit."

e grins of the other captains showed that they knew quite well how to share credit.

* * *

ver Brown had the entire fourth floor of an older apartment building. There was
ator. They carried the Angels up the stairs using sheets for hammocks.
e building looked old and run down, but the apartment was light and clean. Books
acked everywhere, in book cases, in piles on the floor, on every flat surface.
oletta introduced her father. He was a little taller than Sherrine, portly, with dark
d a distracted expression. He tend to mutter to himself when he wasn't talking.
muel Johnson, Sherrine thought. He ushered them through the living room to
room piled high with even more books.

uce and Mike were there.

see Harry found you," Bruce said.

es. He said Wade Curtis sent him," Bob said.

work for Wade," Harry said.

oing what?"

opher. Booklegger. Postman. Whatever needs doing." Harry grinned. "He said go
ound Ron Cole and see if anyone from Minicon shows up."

ut why—"

e guessed?" Sherrine asked.

suspected," Jenny said. "He said maybe someone would come looking for a rocket

somebody from Minicon comes looking for a rocket ship, tell 'em where to find
at's what he told me to do. So here you are," said Harry.

doesn't work!" Sherrine said. She was near tears. "It never would have worked!"

hat pile of junk? Naw."

ntil we got here you didn't know that any better than the rest of us," Jenny said

rry gave Jenny a pained look. "I knew it wouldn't work. Anyway, we got here just
f Bruce and Mike, and they said you were coming. Only you didn't come, and
uldn't wait for you at the museum."

ke patted his ample bulk. "Too conspicuous."

hat happened to you?" Bruce asked.

ong story," Fang said.
o Jenny and I moved in," Harry said. He fished into his pockets and held out a
of change and a couple of bills. "Not too bad a location. Some people still care. A

ey heard footsteps outside. Violetta opened the apartment door. "Hi, Mom."
s. Brown was bundled up against the cold so that she looked larger than her
d. She looked at the crowd sprawled around her living room and smiled thinly.
of your godfather's friends?" she asked Violetta. "Glad to meet you, but I'm afraid
eed you all. We——!" She hesitated.
elga works at the university clinic," Oliver Brown said. "And I write science
She doesn't get paid much but it's more than I make. What she's too embarrassed
s that we can't afford to feed you."

ill this help?" Sherrine handed her bag of cheese to Helga Brown.
heese? Wisconsin cheese? Ollie! It's real, the real thing-But there's too much! I
le this for a lot——"

o see what you can get for half of it," Oliver said. "Violetta, go with your mother."
aybe I better go, too," Harry said. "Tough neighborhood——"

ou have to tell your story," Violetta said. "IT get Roland. My boyfriend, he lives
or. He'll come with us."

an?" Bob asked.

ioletta laughed. "My father is Oliver Brown, my mother is Helga Brown, my
er is Wade Curtis. You figure it out."

ll right," Thor said. "Just what the hell is going on? We've chased all across
sin. Lived through a blizzard, almost got enslaved by a crazy alderman, damn
ught by the cops, just so we can find out that Ron Cole is mad as a hatter and his
never was any good. Now you tell us——what in hell is it you want to tell us, Harry
?"

you'll shut up for a minute, maybe he can say it," Jenny said.

or glared at her.

Wade says——"

Wade says," Thor said. "Look, Wade Curtis hasn't been sober in ten years. Maybe
raving like Cole, but he sent us here! He believed in Cole's rocket, just like you
d I did and——Oh, God, Damn, It."

ot a letter," Harry said.

uce asked, "Letter for whom?"

aybe you." Harry took off his left boot. "Wade said I should give it to——I should
o somebody I thought he'd trust." The inner lining wasn't properly sewn to the
ell. Harry reached between the two leathers and took out a dirty envelope.

"What does it say."

Harry said, "It's sealed." The hurt barely showed. "Wade said I should burn this if from Minicon showed up looking for Cole, but if anybody did, give it to anybody with judgment." He looked around the group. Finally he held the paper out to Brown. "Reckon he trusts you."

Harry took the paper. "What Harry is carefully not saying is that Wade and I are still working on a book. Harry brought me two new chapters yesterday."

Harry went over to his desk and got a letter opener. He was maddeningly slow, and he wanted to scream as he smoothed out the envelope's wrinkles, then carefully slit the letter opener and slit the paper. There was a single sheet inside, and he took it slowly.

"I haven't seen Wade, haven't seen Wade for years," Oliver muttered. "Afraid it will change her job. If they knew. But they do know. They have to. May be they don't, but—" He spread the paper out and began to read. "Ah. Hmm. Mmmh hmmmh. Yes.

For God's sake!" Bob shouted. "What?"

"I read it," Oliver said. He cleared his throat. "'King David is in the high desert. A worthy project. My wings are made of tungsten, my flesh of glass and steel. Explorers—'"

"That's a song," Sherrine said.

Brown looked up. In the silence Harry sang, "I am the joy of Terra for the power that I have."

Sherrine and Jenny were with him. "Once upon a lifetime, I died a pioneer. Now I live within a space-ships's heart, does anybody hear?"

"The Phoenix," Harry said with just the trace of a bow. "Julia Ecklar."

"Damn drunk," Thor said. "Told you he's just a drunk. Doesn't make any sense at all."

"Explorers in the desert keep bottle shops," Roland read. "'Skim milk grades as cream. It is time for the merry soul to move on, to see what free men can do. What man has done, man can aspire to. Love and plenty kisses. W. ' "

"What's it?" Sherrine asked.

Harry nodded. "I hope it means something to you."

"We were hoping it would mean something to you," Mike said. "Harry, he thought you'd understand this"

Harry thought it was important enough to send me here with it," Harry said.

"Which might mean he wanted you out of the way?" Sherrine rejected that with a headshake. "Start with what we know. He thought someone from the Con would know. Why? Nobody's come here for years. Because—because he'd talked about Ron Titan at the Con."

ke: "Someone might have overheard——"
uce: "——and told the Angels!"
o it's a message for us," Sherrine said. "Why in code?"
runk," Thor said.
hat if Harry got picked up?" Fang suggested.
o, I was carrying a manuscript for Oliver," Harry said. His big shoulders rolled,
that weight. "They'd have sent me to mental health for that, letter or no."
e wasn't protecting Harry and me," Jenny said. "What, then?"
ho the hell cares what he thinks?" Thor demanded. He looked to Fang. "Maybe
e to move on."
o, it's time for the merry soul to move on," Mike said. "That's Cole, of course. Not
ould be so obvious if we hadn't just seen him."
kim milk——Cole said that, too," Sherrine said. "Harry, you had a message for
nd what were you supposed to do once you'd found us all and delivered the
es?" Bruce asked.
can tell you exactly what he said," Harry said. He looked uncomfortable.
hat?" Bruce said.
arry looked out the window.
ant me to tell them?" Jenny asked.
o. No, I'll do it." Harry stuffed his hands deep into his jeans pockets. "Wade said,
I trust your honor with my life, but I don't trust your judgment to go buy the beer.
dy shows up, forget all this and meet me in——well, where we meet, next month. If
y from Minicon shows up, go tell Oliver Brown, then deliver the messages, and
y to help people. I think they'll want help.' "
nd that's all?"
arry shrugged. "That's all."
here is Curtis now?" Mike asked.
arry shook his head. "I don't know, and I guess I wouldn't tell you if I did."
reat," Thor said. "So we have this nonsense from a drunk writer, and a messenger
n't trust with his drunken ravings, and we're supposed to get all excited."
ng said, "Thor, it's a *puzzle*."
ade always did drink a lot," Oliver Brown said. "But he turned out the stories. He
be in the space program you know. Other things. Were you ever in his study
they burned it down? Big place. Books. And a signed picture of *Voyager*——Hey!"
hat?" Bruce demanded.
See what free men can do.' That was the inscription on the photo. By, by the man
ilt it-Dick Rhutan! Who flew *Voyager* around the world on one tank of gas. *That*
r."

hutan. *Voyager*. King David in the desert!" Mike said.

ike?"

ing *David's Spaceship!* It's a book title. And the Rhutan brothers were working on ship. A spaceship called—" He paused dramatically, holding a wide grin. "Wait was called *Phoenix*. They were working on it in the Mojave desert." "The damned," Bruce muttered. "That was that thing that looked like an inverted jam cup—"

ngle stage to orbit, vertical take off and landing," Oliver Brown said. "SSTO"

ke was frowning. "Sure, we all saw the briefing at a Worldcon. Long time ago.

n? Somewhere in there. Wait a minute and I'll come up with the name of the guy

is in charge of the *Phoenix* project."

udson," Oliver Brown said. "An old friend of Wade's."

udson. An explorer in the desert," Mike said. "Yup. Well, there's no question what was talking about. *Phoenix*."

spaceship. Where have I heard this before?" asked Alex. But his blood was ng to sing . Again.

es, I know," Sherrine said. "But—but *Phoenix* was real! They spent tens of s of dollars on it. And *Voyager* was real, it flew around the world!"

ve got up from the floor. As usual he seemed to float up, as if-he could turn off vity. "*Phoenix* is real, all right," he said. "I've seen it. It's in a museum in Mojave."

another museum," Gordon said. "I think perhaps this time we do not bother?"

uit yourself," Steve said. "But *Phoenix* flew once. I saw it."

ew!" Alex tried to stand. Fang noticed and helped him. "Flew?"

ot to orbit," Steve said. "The *Phoenix* was just too heavy. Hudson had to make too compromises. But it could have gone around the world, like *Voyager*, if NASA topped him."

or said, "Like the *Spruce Goose*? There's always a reason why it didn't work."

ve's muscles were bunching. Thor was getting to him, though he may not have ware of it. "NASA said it had to do with flight safety. Gary Hudson got to take the x straight up fifty miles and dump most of his fuel and come straight back down. e budget cuts came, and the Green Initiatives passed, and the Greens got in "

o where is this *Phoenix* now?" Alex demanded.

a hangar on what used to be Edwards Air Force Base in California. It's been ed as a reminder of Big Bad Science, just like the Space Center here. Actually, I e military may have had ideas they could use it. They didn't have the money to fix hey never throw anything away either. It's out there 'as a monument.' People are

ed to go out and be scandalized; but . . . When I was there, a lot of the tourists had their eyes."

robably for all the money that was wasted," said Fang sarcastically.

ve nodded. "Truer than you think. I shed a few myself at the waste. That's where I dson. They've got him conducting the tour."

uce jumped. "Himself? Why—"

thought the Single Stage Experimental Lifter was never finished," Thor said

rently. "They proxmired the whole space program. They even outlawed private

s, like Hudson's."

hat's what Gary said when I took the tour," Steve agreed. "*SSX Phoenix* was never

d. Just flew the once. Never fly again, he said. Over and over. One thing, though."

hat's that?" asked Bob.

ve sighed and smiled dreamily. "It seats ten."

errine felt her heart begin to pound. Seats ten, she thought. Seats ten. "Never

d," she said. "*Phoenix* is too big to hide. Hah!"

ah?" Mike said.

ottle shop," she said. " 'Explorers in the high desert keep bottle shops.' "

iles began to form. Bruce said, "Ah. A bottle shop sells miracles, and is not what

s . . ."

nd the proprietor of a bottle shop usually lies. So what do we have? A rocket ship,

sight, and Gary Hudson who helped *design* the bird makes sure he tells everyone

an never fly again." *And it seats ten! It seats ten!*

do not believe it," Gordon said. "It is one more goose to chase. A chimera."

e, either," Thor said. "People, it's been fun, but I am not chasing off to California

other rocket ship."

o what do we do with the Angels?" Bruce asked.

or shrugged. "Not my problem. The Con's over. You're Chairman. You take care

ass-on. You don't need Fang and me for that. Time for us to move on—"

ng said, "Guests are my responsibility."

or shrugged. "Suit yourself."

e all have places to be," Bruce said. "Except you and Fang. Steve, how are you

back to California?"

mtrack. I have a ticket. Don't think I can get anymore. Maybe they'll be watching

ions anyway."

rry had been uncharacteristically quiet. "Jenny and me, were headed that way.

we could steal another bike—"

e have a little money," Bruce said.

eah, but—" Harry shook his head. "It's a rough trip, riding double. Don't think the would make it."

rdon laughed. "Nor do I, Harry!"

s all crazy anyway," Alex said. "You know where there is a ship. Single stage to eats ten. Assume it works, that unlike that ancient Titan, it has been well ned. I don't believe it, but assume that. It will need-I'm guessing-half a million of fuel? Liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen. They don't leave that stuff lying "

ere was no answer.

ne. You don't have the foggiest notion of how to get the fuel, or how to move it if _"

etails," Mike said.

reams," Gordon said.

n with Gordon," Alex said. "Look, we are very grateful, but it is time to give up ms. We have to look for ways we can hide. Forever, I guess."

ence descended within the Brown household. Presently Mike Glider said, "We can

ID, I think. Permanent convention guests. God knows fans will help."

iven ID," Bruce said. "Sherrine?"

I lose my job—and I will if I'm not back tomorrow morning—there won't be g I can do." *It's just a dream. A dream that seats ten. Oh, damn—*

hen we have to get you back to Minneapolis. Fast," Bruce said. "That needs

g on. Meanwhile, can they hide here? Oliver?"

own nodded eagerly. "I would be honored. I suppose you won't mind telling me fe in space?"

K," Bruce said.

t what if I don't want to go back? Oh, that's crazy. Let them find a way. I go home,

ck to my job. I get Ted on-line and we work out the ID. And I go back to work,

what I always did, my neat career and I have some memories.

herrine's not the only hacker in fandom," Steve said conversationally.

ey all looked at her. "Yes, of course," she said. "There's Ted Marshall. And—"

nd?" Mike demanded.

MS himself," Sherrine said. "Nobody knows anything but his initials. Ever hear of "

he programmer's editor? Sure, I use it," Bob said.

e wrote it."

ould he arrange fake ID for the Angels?" Bruce asked.

errine nodded. "If it can be hacked, he can hack it."

ould he?"

or space pilots? Oh, yes."

"Why don't we know him?" Mike asked.

"RMS has been wanted forever," Sherrine said. "Since before the Greens took over. He used to come to Worldcons, but—well, he doesn't stand out in a crowd. Doesn't make sense."

"How do you contact this RMS?" Bruce asked.

Sherrine shrugged. "A million ways. It's just a question of getting the word out on the net. The Legion of Doom will see it and—"

"Used to think I understood you people," Alex said. "Legion of Doom—"

"Super hackers. They—well, they're pretty good, and not always responsible. Some are, some aren't. But they listen to RMS, and he's a fan—they'll let him know we're serious. The question is, will he believe us? Everyone's after RMS. Pick his brains, jail him, educate him, study him in psych labs, he's an odd fish and—"

"Easy," Bob said.

"I tried to smile. *"Yes, we could get him to do it. I don't know why I didn't think of it. RMS and Marshall, they can do it if anyone can." It doesn't have to be me. I don't have to sticky my neck out. I can crawl back under my covers.*"

"What do we do now?" Bruce said.

"Don't know about you," Harry said. "I've got a message for the merry soul."

"Then what?" Alex demanded. "Why should we care what that crazy man says?"

"He was one hell of a man, once," Thor said.

"One hell of a man who got his brains burned out," Alex said. Strain in his muscles was making him irritable. "So what happens? He tells us another story, and we end up in another stupid chase across the country, more crazy aldermen, cheese trucks, people with grudges."

"Alex, it was not so bad," Gordon said.

"What?"

Gordon shook his head. "Was not fun, then; but think of the stories we tell now. Bedtime stories. Dancing on ice."

Ever Brown chuckled. "Sure you're not a writer?"

"I wish to be. I have written . . . minor things. But it was not survival-oriented task, that."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what will happen. Not my job to know what will happen. I know what I was told to do."

"Present what Wade said, don't you?" Jenny said.

Harry glared at her.

"True, though," she said. "Everybody knows it. Deep down, you do."

Harry tried to grin. "You didn't have to say it."

are we did. I'm still with you, eh? You must do something right—" She caught
"Anyway, we got our job straight. Go tell Cole it's time to see what free men can
ops."
es?" Bruce prompted.

Without the Angels, why is it time?"

Bruce nodded to himself. "All right, we should all go see Cole."

ot me," Thor said. "You guys carry them. I'm not going back there."

What does present a problem," Mike said.

Maybe not," Bruce said. "Harry—Harry, go find Cole, and bring him here. Make
you're not followed."

Maybe he won't come," Harry said.

He'll come," Oliver Brown said. "He knows the way."

h. Yeah, of course he would," Mike said.

And that would be that, Sherrine thought. They'd take the Angels to California, either
them or to try again with *Phoenix*. But that wouldn't matter to her. By tomorrow
uld be back home in Minneapolis, safe and snug and not quite warm.

* * *

The wind blew cold sleet into Captain Lee Arteria's face, stinging her exposed skin
thousand tiny needles. The Minnesota troopers and the Minneapolis police formed
n around the small, one-bedroom house. Neighboring houses winked in the dusk
inhabitants pulled window shades aside for a glimpse of the goings on. One or
ghbors had bundled up and come out onto their porches. They stood there with
ms thrust under their armpits, bouncing up and down in nervous anticipation.
e Arteria had never liked spectators.

glance into the pulpy sky showed that the storm had hours yet to run. Arteria
o the squad on the Hartley porch. "No answer?"
pantomime shake of the head.

When break the door in, Sergeant Pyle." The policeman hesitated, and Arteria
l, "Its fucking *cold* out here."

le nodded and raised a boot. Two well-aimed kicks broke the latch and the door
in and banged against the back wall. Arteria crowded into the hallway with the

nit," said one of the state troopers. "It ain't that much warmer in here."

nte stood by Arteria's elbow. "Are you criticizing the thermostat law, Trooper?"
h, no, Captain."

ll right. Spread out and search the place."

What are we looking for?"

Arteria threw back the military parka's enormous, furlined cowl and gave the trooper
smile. "You'll know when you find it."

search did not turn up much. One of the city police located a photograph of
and handed it to Pyle, who showed it to Conte and Arteria. "Horsey looking, ain't
you'd want to brown bag a date like that."

"That will be all, Sergeant," Arteria said in severe tones. "Homeliness isn't a crime."
... it isn't true. She's attractive enough.
"Good thing, or she'd be doing hard time." Pyle barked at his own joke and resumed
his portion of the search.

Conte studied the picture over Arteria's shoulder. "What do you think, Captain? Is it

Arteria passed the photograph to him. "Probably. Show it to some of those nosy
troopers hanging around out there. Verify her identity. Find out if they know the name
of the man in the picture, too."

Conte called to a trooper and gave him the instructions.

"Wait," said Arteria as the man turned to go. "If it is Hartley, have him get copies of
the photograph made for distribution."

Lee went from room to room looking for inspiration. Nothing was conspicuously
missing from the closet. The toothbrush still hung in its rack above the sink. One
flush only. An ice-coated pool of water stood in the sink. A housecoat thrown
on the bed. Wherever Sherrine Hartley had gone, she had left in a hurry and had
not had time to return soon.

... at fits. Angels down. Fans to the rescue. She picked up the housecoat. It was
down-filled. Whatever happened to flimsy negligees? Arteria had always liked
them. Now you couldn't find them anywhere. Victims of the new, chillier age. Besides,
from her picture, Hartley had never been the type to wear risqué nighties.
Who was she? *Aah, who ever knew?* Lee dropped the housecoat onto the unmade bed.
... are we doing here, pawing through some poor woman's personal things and
... g? The people at the University had described her as a loner, a misfit. A talented
writer, they granted, but, really, a nerdette, lacking in the social graces.
And didn't I know a lot of those, boys and girls both, once upon a time? This could
be any room, if I'd stayed where—Bit late for that, now. Or is it? How long before one of
the archers found—

Lee thought was hardly born when a city policewoman, her hands thrust deep
beneath the mattress, shouted in triumph. She pulled out three tattered, dog-eared
black books, looked at the covers, and handed them over to Pyle with a smirk. "She's
got them, all right."

The books were *The Sixth Winter*, *The Man Who Awoke*, and *Fahrenheit 451*.

ook at this crap, would you," Conte said in disgust. "With all the problems here on why would anybody waste their time with this escapist stuff? We oughta take these ow them right into the trash can."

"What're the stories about, anyway?" Arteria took the dry, brittle volumes from and read the back covers. *Won't do to let them know I know already . . .* "Get this. here that *The Sixth Winter* is about the sudden onset of an ice age; and *The Man woke* is about a scientist in 1933 who goes to sleep and wakes up in a future of d resources and ruined environments."

nte took the books back. He scowled at them. "Yeah? What's the third one about?" urning books."

nte looked uncomfortable and opened his mouth to say something, but he was oted by the arrival of Jheri Moorkith and the Green Police.

ureaucracy," said Moorkith, shaking his head. "Would you believe it? I never d your memo announcing this raid."

teria shrugged. *Okay, let's play head games. First you dribble crane around the hen I'll dribble yours.* "It's probably lost somewhere in the interdepartmental mail. urier will find it stuck in the bottom of his pouch tomorrow."

"Well, no matter." Moorkith dismissed the breach of protocol with a wave of the "I'm here now. What's going down?"

teria hated civilians who tried to talk like cops. They always got it wrong anyway. lashed a sympathetic smirk. *I'm glad he's your problem.*

"We're checking on a possible lead. The details were in the memo——"

teria was interrupted by the return of the state trooper with the photograph. "Good Captain," he said, reporting to Conte. "We've got a definite make on Hartley. or lady on the west says the fellow in the picture with her is an ex-boyfriend Robert Needle—or something like that. A university prof. Get this: he's a list scientist. He used to hang out with her a lot. We're running a make on him ut, get this, the neighbor says he drives a maroon van. And he showed up here wo in the morning the night the air thieves went down."

Moorkith sucked in his breath and traded triumphant looks with Conte and Arteria. "I e're onto something here." He took the photograph from the trooper and studied it. ? "How can the witness be sure about that early morning business?" Arteria

ne says she sleeps light and the noise of the van woke her up. Me, I think she's a d biddy who likes to spy on her neighbors. But what the hell, a lead's a lead,

ght. And the University said Hartley called in later that morning and took an
duled week's vacation. She's supposed to be back tomorrow. When she does, we'll
ing for her. And then what do I do?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"The Sister of Misfortune . . ."

"We'll get him," Harry said. "It may take a while. Ron gets spooked easy."

Ever Brown nodded. "Well he might. I'm not overly anxious to have him seen here, matter."

"We'll be careful." Harry and Jenny left, and Oliver barred the door.

"Do authorities watch this house?" Gordon asked.

"We don't think so," Oliver said. "Helga and I are better known for fantasy. And the

Alex shook his head. "SCA?"

Sorry. Society for Creative Anachronism. The Current Middle Ages. I was king,

"I think I will let Alex explain later," Gordon said. "May I read now?"

"Certainly," Oliver said. "What would you like?"

Gordon grinned and swept his hand to indicate the disorderly piles of books

there. "I think I will find something—I will remember where, and put back there."

"Thank you. Use my big chair if you like, the light's good there; very good, it's a

table place. Alex, you look tired."

"Eh. Considering that I weigh almost a hundred kilos—"

Ever patted his ample bunk. "Alas, so do I. So do I, but I am more accustomed to it.

"Would you like to rest in the spare room?"

"Yes, please."

Ever led the way. "I'm afraid it will be a bit cold," he said. "We don't heat this

Hydrogen is scarce." He ushered Alex through the door.

"Hydrogen?"

"Yes, the Greens like to use hydrogen. They pipe it through the old natural gas lines.

"Much leaks, and is wasted, and since they shut down most of the power plants there

"electricity to make hydrogen."

"But they do make it?"

"Oh, yes. Here we are. As I said, the room is cold. I'll get you a blanket."

The room was cluttered as well as cold. In the habitats, a space this cluttered would

"a trap: masses could crush a man from any direction. Here, gravity . . . then

gravity was part of the problem. Loose objects had to rest all against the same

ere were the inevitable book cases, but here odd tapestries hung on one wall. They
scenes of dogs chasing deer. Two large steel swords hung in the corner, and
hem were two almost identical swords made of wood. A day couch near the
y was piled high with—"Costumes?" Alex asked. "Armor?"

es. I mentioned the SCA? We still meet, we still hold tournaments. It is an
le activity. Indeed, many of the Greens come."

ut what do they—you—do?"

ver Brown grinned. "Why, we dress up in medieval costumes and pretend we live
Middle Ages," he said. "What else? It used to be fun to learn medieval skills, how
on common, cheap food, fight with swords and spears, and run a civilization with
hnhology. Now—"

eah. I see."

ver piled the stuff from the couch onto a chair. "We don't go often now," he said.
fraid someone will get drunk and forget that the Greens are listening." He handed
heavy wool cloak. "Use this as a blanket. I'll call you for dinner."

e window looked out onto gray, mean streets. Other apartment buildings, identical
r their graffiti, lined both sides of the block. The cars were old and in disrepair.

is up on blocks; another, stripped. Street lights flickered uncertainly, then
ned in the growing dusk. Alex looked to the sky, but found it overcast with
ng, gray clouds. A solitary figure, heavily bundled, walked quickly down the street
pposite side. He—or she—clutched a cane not needed for walking, and glanced
eft, right, behind.

t used to it, Alex, my boy. From now on this is home.

ybe not. *Phoenix!* He remembered the program. A low-cost system, not merely
e but savable. It could get to orbit even with one engine out. Ran on liquid
en and liquid oxygen.

ey make hydrogen. If they make hydrogen, they must have oxygen as well. But—
ere was a tap at the door. "Come in."

rdon came in, frowned at the costumes, swords, and tapestries. "I thought perhaps
ght want company."

rdon found a pair of cushions and lowered himself to the floor, slowly, carefully.
ing, standing upright so long. But, every day grows easier. Perhaps I will like it
ne people are . . . interesting."

ex smiled and sat on the bed beside Gordon. "Remember what they do to
ing people."

criminal. Alex, is *no* objective evidence for the effectiveness of psychoanalysis.
laces conscience, original sin and confessor with superego, id and analyst. In

t times, was used in same way to deal with dissidents. Our way is so obviously
d good that if you disagree you must be crazy."
never heard you talk this way before, Gordo."
sound angry? I am angry. I like these people, Alex. I am half-Russian. Mental
clinics . . . I *know* what they are risking to help us. You saw Cole. I don't wish that
en to Sherrine, or any of our friends."
either do I. It's simple enough. We let them go home, and we keep moving. No
reams."
ou must always have dreams." Gordon craned his neck and looked at him. "You
wish to remain down here, do you?"
ex rose and walked to the window. He studied the shrouded sky once more. "No."
et, you were born here. This was your home."
shrug. "That was a long time ago."
nd if we go back? Colonies are doomed. We all know this."
ex looked around the room.
ou think they listen?"
o. If these people are listening without permission it would be more than—no.
t't say that where they can hear, Gordon."
pravda, though. More than pravda. Is true."
ex nodded slowly. "Yeah, I suppose it is, over the long haul. We're running out of
ing. The resource base is too small." He laughed bitterly. "Ninety percent of the
es available to the human race, easily available, aren't on Earth, and we *have*
ut the resource base is too small. Not enough people, not enough chlorine,
n—"r. Lichinsky says give him few more years, he will make chlorine and nitrogen."
usion synthesis. Yeah. And his people have been saying they'd have that Real
ow since before you were born, Gordo. Face it, even with chlorine and nitrogen
re genetic materials, there are just too damn few of us!"
et you are eager to return."
ell yes! I fought to make *Freedom* a home. Home is the place you would die to
nd that's *not* the bottom of the Well. Not that it matters. We can't go back."
hink this, too," Gordon said. "But—is not so bad."
eah, yeah," Alex said. "But dammit, the Downers are on a downward spiral, too.
rned their back on the future, and now they've got no more chance than the
s! Every decade, every year, they're less able to cope. It won't be long before
ons will be like that song, 'Black powder and alcohol. When your states and cities
"
rbital decay."
n?"

like *Mir* and *Freedom*, nye pravda? Spiralling downward. Every decade here drag eats velocity. But perhaps a timely boost can still save them." Alex scowled and looked away from him. "It's not that easy. We're not talking about a habitat you can strap booster rockets to." "No, trajectory of people is harder to change. So. What do we do now? Do you have any ideas in this *Phoenix*?"

Alex worked his lips. "No, but—if there's even the slightest chance." "Why not? We have to go somewhere. Steve said California was our best chance for a foothold underground, anyway." "And when *Phoenix* fails to rise from her ashes, you will chase after the next rumor that comes next." "At least I'll still be trying. What else is there to do?"

* * *

Ron Cole sat in a large stuffed chair in the oversized living room. He looked out of place, and kept casting nervous glances left and right. Jerky movements, bird's. Then he sprang from the chair and shoved it into a corner of the wall. After a moment, he sat slightly more at ease, though he still seemed to twitch nervously. "I still have paranoia," Thor whispered to Alex, "when they really are out to get you?" "His eyes danced from face to face around the room, lingering briefly on each. He smiled slightly when he locked gazes with Alex; and nibbled on his lower lip over 'Oliver,' he said plaintively, "there are too many." Helga and Violetta had already returned with several bags of snack foods that they had picked up from the grocery store for the Wisconsin cheese. They broke open bags of pretzels and trail mix into large bowls and hand them out. Alex raised his eyebrows. "How much in trade?" he asked her. "Well, people will pay far more for the cheese than it is worth," Helga explained. "I mean, even that, as long as a single slice can make it out of 'America's Dairyland,' people can convince themselves that things, aren't all that bad and they'll return to normal someday." "Nostalgia has value, doesn't it?" said Sherrine. "Don't we have our own nostalgia? For the way the future was." "A Fire in the Sky' . . ." said Bob. "And we all want a slice of that future, too," said Mike with a grin. "The *Phoenix*," said Bruce. "He jerked and looked at him. "You're not supposed to know about that. What do you know about *Phoenix*? Oliver, I don't know these people." "Make it easy, Ron. Nobody here but us chickens. Alex and Gordon here are . . ." "Angels. Yes, yes. That's obvious. Bone structure. Height. Anyone can see that. And I know Thor. I think. It's so hard to remember sometimes."

ex exchanged looks with Gordon. Was their origin that obvious? If so, how could
er hope to maintain a false ID? Or was it—remembering the other people they
ountered along the way-obvious only to someone like Cole?

ou know Harry," said Oliver.

le made a face. "Yes. I knew Harry. Know Harry. Oh, thank you."

oletta had come by with a tray of glasses. Cole took one and sipped it. "Oh my,
hat is it?"

andelion wine."

le licked his lips. He looked sly. "I know where you can get some peach brandy."

es, Ron," said Helga from the kitchen door. "We know. You sell it to us. Harry?"

es, ma'am?"

ould you help me out in the kitchen for a minute. I'm cutting up the rest of the
for hors d'oeuvres."

rry looked briefly angry, then looked sidelong at Ron Cole. "Yeah, sure."

any took his arm. "Come on. They don't need us here." She led him from the room.

doorway, she turned. "It really does hurt his feelings, you know. He's not as tough
kes to act."

ver shifted in his seat. "Sure. But, Christ, Jenny, you know him better than any of
nt him out for beer once and . . ."

nd the store was closed, so Harry broke a window. I know. He likes to tell that

ex frowned. "He smashed a store window to steal some beer? That doesn't
—"

o, he left money for it."

or was sitting on the floor with his back to the opposite wall. He rose smoothly

sted himself. "I guess I'll take a long walk."

ve said, "Hey, Thor . . ." And Fang reached out and touched the golden giant's

orry, Steve. Fang. But I haven't stayed loose this long by hanging around a bull's-
ither have you."

ng shook his head. "I'm seeing it through. I finish what I start."

et me know what you decide."

hen Thor had gone, Cole peered at the group from Minneapolis. Oliver held out a

I'll vouch for them, Ron. You trust my judgment, don't you?"

le sucked in his lips and nodded.

arry delivered the message?"

h, yes. It's time to move on and see what free men can do."

ence lengthened. Faintly from the kitchen came song:

ader's Raiders want my freedom, OSHA wants my
alp and hair,
'm wanted in Wisconsin, be damned sure I
n't be there!
he E-P-A still wants me, I'll avoid them if I
n.
ey're burning down the cities, so I'll be a
nted fan."

witched nerves. Oliver said, "Whatever happened to escapist literature? Ron, tell
t *Phoenix*!"

Phoenix. A fire in the sky," Ron Cole said. "It flew once, you know. I was there.
as sure it could circle the Earth. They wouldn't let it fly all the way, though. They
r chained. Not everyone wanted her chained, though." His voice had become
normal, and Oliver leaned back, more relaxed now.

was politics. NASA and the military," Cole said. "The cost per pound of payload
earth orbit was five to ten kilobucks. Those were the official numbers. The real
ll! NASA got five billion a year and they were lucky to get a launch every two
. If Gary could fly to orbit for a few million dollars instead of billions, NASA
ook ridiculous."

remember," Alex said.

ut the Air Force was going to build it, part of the strategic defense system, but
e Russians gave up their empire, and the Air Force wasn't worried anymore that
e would seize the high ground on them. So they killed the program, but they hate
v anything away. Pack rats, they are. So they decommissioned her and set her up
blic part of Edwards, so technically they still have some jurisdiction."

ex leaned forward. "How did they decommission her?"

le chuckled. "They unplugged her. Heh, heh."

uce frowned. "What does that mean?"

le looked uncertain. "You're sure I can—"

ou can tell us," Oliver assured him.

hey took her ROMs." Cole perked his head up and beamed at them.

ve cocked his head. "They took her ROMs?"

means," said Alex, "that they pulled all the computer chips with the flight
nning and internal controls. Engines, life support. Everything that made the bird

errine sat up straight. "Programming? Why, we should be able to replace that! Bob
ry can work out the physics. And Tom Marshall and I can do the coding."

ex smiled thinly. "About 200,000 lines of code, to judge by the birds I've flown? 200,000 lines apiece. At 100 lines a day, that would be three years' work."

That's right," said Mike. "ROM wasn't built in a day."

errine slumped. "Oh."

Strike one," said Alex, holding up a finger. "Is there anything else, Dr. Cole?"

Here's the IMU, of course. They took that out. Couldn't leave *that* in."

That's an IMU?" asked Fang.

It's an inertial platform," Bob explained. "It would be about so big . . . His hands cut in the air. "Maybe a little bigger than a shoebox."

Don't suppose you have one on you?" Alex asked Cole.

He looked at his hands, as if he expected to find an IMU there. "No. *That* I don't

Strike two." Alex held up a second finger.

And of course," Cole continued, "there's no fuel."

Strike three, and we're out." He turned to Gordon. "All I asked for was a chance. There's no chance here."

He blinked rapidly. "Oh, but none of those are insuperable obstacles. No, indeed. Superable, at all."

Ever Brown nodded slowly. "You don't have the IMU. What is it you have, Ron?"

He looked sly. "Well——"

ROMs. He gave you a copy. For safekeeping," Oliver insisted.

Yes, yes, you know us both, of course you know that. Yes. I have them, back at the n. Wrapped in foil. I have them, safe, safe. We thought we thought once I would Gary, but not now, not now. Now I would be a burden."

Strike," Mike Glider said. He held up three fingers, and folded one down. "Now out the——IMU?"

h, we know where that is. They put it in a safe place." Cole nodded happily.

ey waited while Cole continued to nod. A pained look crossed Oliver's face.

is it, Ron?"

He became suddenly wary. "A very safe place." His eyes slid left and right and he forward and whispered. "It's in the military security area at Edwards AFB."

military security area. A safe?" Oliver asked.

omething like that," Bob said. "We've got security containers at the University. ———"

That sounds simple enough," said Fang. "Just straightforward B&E and a little y. Harry!" he called.

Harry stuck his head in from the kitchen. "Yo."

ou know those things at Bob's university?"

ook like file cabinets with a big combination lock," Needleton said.

ure," Harry said.
an you open one?"
ake about half an hour if you don't mind noise.
uple of hours if any body's listening."
ke Glider folded down another finger. Two." "And the fuel?" Alex demanded.
are we going to find a half million pounds of liquid oxygen and liquid
en?"
ey quieted down. Sherrine seemed crestfallen. Bob and Oliver, somber and
ful. Steve, folded into a lotus on the floor, vibrated with nervous energy. "Shit,"
ng. "That's a stopper all right."
le looked puzzled. "But that's the easy part," he said. "You *make* the fuel."
ex strained to hear Cole through the resulting babble. The man kept talking in the
w tone of voice despite the noise around him. Finally Bruce put two fingers in his
and whistled.
. hydrogenation of fats; and of course, there's the TV industry."
ence.
ould you mind, repeating that, Ron?" said Oliver. "We didn't get it all."
le squeezed up his face. "I was simply explaining why, in spite of government
ss and propaganda, there are still plants making hydrogen. The Greens may not
ustry, especially the chemical industry; but hydrogen is politically correct. When
n it, the ash is water vapor. There are things that they want to have—that they
have. Like television. You can't make television sets without hydrogen."
eating, too," Oliver said. "We have hydrogen pipes in this building. It's not very
ut it's hydrogen."
t true, Alex thought. And the more Cole talked, the saner he became, probably
e in talking science he was orbiting in his home module . . .
es, indeed," Cole said. "All you need is methane and electricity. And steam.
e-CH₄-is everywhere. Natural gas. Swamp gas. You get some when you crack
um or pyrolysize coal. And cow farts."
ke's jaw dropped. "You're going to make rocket fuel from cow farts?"
o, of course not. I only meant . . . methane is common. There is hydrogen in the
es. There will be a pipe to *Phoenix*."
ait a minute, " Alex said. "A hydrogen pipe? Liquid hydrogen?"
o, no," Cole said. "Just hydrogen. But you compress it, and it will liquify. It is not
ficult."
nd the oxygen? LOX?"
le shrugged. "Liquify air, and boil off everything else. It is really very simple." He
his hang smiled at them. "And there you have it."

spreading his hands, Cole revealed two bright glassy marbles. Go on pointed at Shto eto?" he asked.

mm? Oh, my family jewels. I made them. A long time ago—carbon-12 ds." Cole stared at them morosely. "It was my idea, but the big companies took away from me. They make good lasers, you know; but I kept these because they beautiful."

ll right," said Alex, still not quite believing it. "There are chemical plants ng that make hydrogen—"

ney're small, too. Ten to twenty people."

nd pipe it through the desert. And the LOX you get by compressing air and letting oil off. Fine. But a half million pounds—"

le shook his head emphatically. "That's the total, not all of that is hydrogen. What ed is 66,500 pounds of hydrogen. It's bulky, but well, there are ways."

nd the oxygen?" Gordon asked.

ost of the ship is oxygen," Alex said.

ll right, I bite," Fang said. "How do you liquify air?"

turbo expander," Cole said. "Four hundred thousand pounds of oxygen, make it on t."

here do we get a—turbo expander?" Bruce asked.

le shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't cared since they—since they ruined my ut Gary will know. Oh yes, Gary will know."

ke Glider folded his index forger halfway. "Only half a strike left."

ex found himself nodding, nodding. Half a strike. "Now I'm lost. A—turbo er. What powers that?"

s like a jet engine," Cole said. "Very like, a jet engine. In fact, it is a jet engine, on't fly—"

o it needs—"

P-4. Kerosene," Cole said.

lot of kerosene, I expect," Oliver Brown said.

ke Glider held up one finger again. "Strike—"

es, a lot," Cole said. "But not more than we have."

hat?" Bruce demanded.

le grinned widely. "Larry and Curly. You must meet them. Alas, I sold Moe . . ."

the door on the abandoned warehouse bore a stenciled sign reading *Private* ty—*Museum of Science and Appropriate* Technology. Rust speckled the metal grass and weeds had punched through the cracks and edges of the concrete truck The shattered windows had been boarded over and covered with graffiti boasting

vanished gangs. The cold wind blew off the lake and crystal patches of gray frost unmelted in the shadows.

He bent over the padlock and worried it with a key. "This leads back into the bluff beneath the museum. It forms a subbasement where they used to bring exhibits in and hardly used anymore. No sir. Hardly used."

Alex, Bob, Sherrine and Oliver stood behind him, casting occasional wary glances toward the open area by the lake and at the museum.

"Ah." Cole grunted in satisfaction and the chain fell away. The doors pulled smoothly up and clicked into place with a satisfying snap. Behind them, two gleaming white tractors reared high and proud. The headlights and grillwork had been polished to a mirror that coruscated from the quiet sun overhead.

"Here they are," Cole announced. "Larry and Curly."

Alex stepped into the warehouse. He ran his hand along the bright, cold grillwork. A tractor was hitched to a long, silver, cylindrical tanker. The logo painted on the side

WILKHEIM

LOW-FAT MILK

"How will these hold liquid gasses?"

Alex's head bobbed. "Twelve thousand gallons each. I got them war surplus for practically nothing. For peaches . . ." He laughed. "They are filled with RP-4. Enough to power the air converters. Now all you must do is get them to Thunder Ridge."

"Thunder Ridge?"

"Towards Air Force Base," Cole said. "The rocket test stand. Get them there. Gary and I will do the rest."

Alex approached the nearest truck—Larry? —and laid his cheek against it. "I've been waiting for this day forever." There were tears in his eyes.

"I don't get it," said Bob. "You've got the ship and you've got Gary to pilot it. You've got backup ROMs—maybe—and know where to get the IMU. You know where to go and you've got the trucks to move it. So, tell me one thing, Ron. Why didn't you just fly a long time ago?"

A good question, thought Alex.

Alex pointed to Alex. "Because we were waiting for him."

"What?"

"How could you know our scoopship would—"

"Wait!" Oliver held up his hands. "Wait. Ron? Ron, it's all right. It's been years and

most of us forgot *Phoenix* ever existed. How did you know Alex was coming?"

now Alex was coming? No, that's silly. Alex? Couldn't know. Couldn't know. But ded Angels to make it fly. Angels to bear her up into heaven, lest she dash her foot stone."

ex rubbed a hand over his face. *Oh, dear God* . . .

ou see, she won't reach orbit on her own. Gary told me that. Long ago. Before. heavy-duty ship, designed for flight tests. And maybe Gary cut the design too he can get to elliptical orbit, but it won't be stable." He turned watery eyes on And up to now there's been no way to change that. But you can."

That in the world is this?" asked Sherrine. She called from the back of the ous garage. Alex and the others followed her voice to a dark corner behind the where an immense and convoluted structure of piping stood hissing. Out of one all dark droplets of liquid fell into a holding tank. Oliver started to laugh. o this is it!" he said.

le bounced up and down from his knees, holding a finger over his lips. "Shhhh!" hat is it?" Sherrine repeated.

b frowned at the structure. "It looks familiar. I've seen it somewhere." He started his finger under the dripping liquid, but pulled back. Who knew what that stuff

s the regenerative cooling system from the old Titan up in the museum," Oliver ed. "Ron stripped it out and used it to make his still. He distills fruit brandies." He a finger under the drip and stuck it in his mouth. "Blackberry. Very tasty. The n doesn't pay Ron squat."

pay *them*," Cole said. "Heh. Apple is best. The trucks were bought with apples and s."

b started giggling. "*Moonshining* in the basement of the Museum of Science and y? I love it!"

ex smiled. "Yes, but back to the trucks. Is there fuel? Can we get to California? Or another detail?"

ome details are important," Cole said. He pointed to stacks of 55-gallon drums against the far wall opposite the still. "Shemp."

ex blinked. "Shemp?"

ourth truck," Cole told him. "Sold it before I sold Moe. Full of JP-4. Kerosene. g oil—"

ver nodded. "People pay a *lot* for heating oil and they don't ask questions."

ex blew a cloud of breath into the chill air. "No, I don't suppose they do." He had a wild image of Cole, his eyes glowing crazy, careening Moe around the streets of o, making clandestine midnight deliveries of black market heating oil. It was a hell net.

* * *

ce was a SMOF. He made a list. SMOFs always make lists.

errine sat on the floor next to Steve, with her knees drawn up under her chin and ed if she would ever see Gordon and Alex again. She pictured *Phoenix* soaring d on a pillar of fire. God, to be there! But she would be back home, and would out it only on the news (if they dared run it on the news) and she would smile a mile that her coworkers would never understand.

rst," said Bruce, "we need identity papers for the Angels, in case *Phoenix* doesn't ut. Sherrine, Mike, Bob and I will be returning to Minneapolis. Sherrine, you'll with Tom Marshall and get *that* ball rolling. Okay?"

ck to Minneapolis. Sherrie nodded. "Sure." Back to the old terminal. It would be working things out of the University computer center, setting it up so they couldn't ck to her.

ce checked off something on his list. "Good. I'll have The Ghost set up the Great ger Hunt." He looked at Alex. "Fans will come up with stuff we never thought of. ave your cornucopia."

ce checked off another item on the list. "Mike."

ke came to abrupt attention—hard to do while slumped in a chair—and snapped . "*Oui, mon capitain!*"

u find out about the plastic corn at Iowa State."

es, *mon capitain!*" He looked at Sherrine. "I'll need a name," he said.

errine rose. "I can call my grandmother right now. Oliver, can I use your phone?"

se a public phone," said Thor. "Always use public phones. Its a rule."

ng looked at him. "I thought you were quitting this."

or shrugged and looked away. "Last reflex twitch of a dying brain."

on't do it now," said Bruce. "Wait till we're done here." He studied his list and

he point of his pencil. "Steve. You've got to get back to California, right?"

ve, meditating in a full lotus on the floor, answered without opening his eyes.

"

ould you be our point man for the first option? Head up to Edwards and talk to Get the full picture. Fill *him* in on what's happening. Find out if he'll volunteer his

e'll volunteer, all right. I only met him the once; but the one thing in life he wants an anything else is to fly that bucket."

rry popped the lid of a beer can. "Odds are that Wade has already filled him in."

ure, but Wade doesn't know everything. Steve, it can't hurt to make sure."

ve opened his eyes. "I know that. My dojo can stay closed another few days."

e're not asking you to go underground," said Bruce, checking another item off the liver will hide the Angels until everything is ready."

ver bowed. "My honor."

specially Gordon," added Violetta, giving the younger Angel a broad smile. "You
ke Roland jealous."

rdon said, "Well, uh . . ."

heck," said Bruce. "Next item is to get the trucks—"

arry and Curly," said Cole.

—to California. We need drivers." He looked at Thor, Fang and Harry.

told you already," Thor said. "Count me out."

arry shrugged. "I can take one, but the bike will be more useful. You'll need scouts,
ny and I do that best."

ng raised his hand and waved it back and forth. "I want Larry."

uce blinked. "Why Larry in particular?"

ecause I always liked him. The Forgotten Stooge. He never got the credit he
d."

uce made a note on his pad. "Fine. Jenny can ride the bike—or can you drive this

b said "She doesn't have to. I'll drive."

uce frowned. "Bob? Don't you have to be back at the University?"

ook care of that. I'm not going back."

errine looked at him. "What happens to your students? I thought you told me you
to your students to teach them."

met her eyes. "I will be teaching them. This will be a lesson they never forget."

re you contemplating going to orbit?" Alex asked.

ure. I'm in good shape, I have a Ph.D in physics, and the rocket seats—what?
an two."

ore than two, da," Gordon said. "But—"

e's saying don't burn your bridges," Alex said. "Commander Hopkins may not
other physicist. Even if this *Phoenix* works, which isn't all that damn clear to me."

know that," Bob said. "I didn't quit. On the way here I called the University and
m I have typhus.

yphus?" Thor said.

hy not?"

mn you, Sherrine thought. And I'll be back at my computer console—

uce tugged on his beard. "Okay, then. Bob and Fang drive. Harry and Jenny scout
Steve takes the train to coordinate with Hudson. Now what about Dr. Cole? Ron,
o you want to do? Stay here?"

may not be safe," Cole said. "It has been getting worse every year. Another year,
most No, there is no reason for me to stay here now."

Want to go to California?"

o. It would be too painful," Cole said. "You may have the tank trucks. I have
a six-wheeler. If you will help me load my still on it, I will be all right."
I help," Thor said. "Ron, if you like, I'll go with you. "
le looked at him. "I remember you. Yes, I would like that. Thank you."
errine took a deep breath. "I'm going, too," she announced.
hat?" said Bob. "Now, wait. You can't take that chance."
ou are."

uce brandished his list. "You've got to go back to Minneapolis to coordinate the
new IDs," he said.
e shook her head. She had been wondering for days whether she was risking her
whatever security she could count on in poor, doomed Minneapolis—or whether
s leaving it behind. Now she knew. Damn Bob, anyway. "You don't need me. The
of Doom can handle this. So I guess it's not so important that I get back to my job
ow—"
hat you're saying," Bob said, "is that you don't *want* to go back to your job."
e took another deep breath. "I guess that is what I said, isn't it?"

errine called her grandmother from a phone booth in the candy store on the corner.
d a few tricks to shunt the call through four other trunks just to humor Thor. After
talked to Gram, she was glad she had.
e must have looked badly shaken up when she left the phone booth because Harry,
d escorted her there, looked concerned. "What's wrong, Sherry?"
—" She shook her head. "Take me back, Harry."
ck in the Brown apartment, she handed Mike a slip of paper with a name and
number. Then she turned to Bob and fell into his arms. "Oh, Bob. We made the
oice, after all." Tears ran down her cheeks. When had she started crying, for
ake? She didn't like to cry.
hat do you mean?" Bob asked.
mean they know about us!"

ho?"
uce rose from his chair. "Who knows what?"
he police. Gram said they came to her house asking questions. About me. About a
van. I—I—" She paused, took a deep breath. "I made some other calls. Tremont
ey've got my house staked out and they're asking about Bob around the
city."
b stepped away from her. He looked a little gray.
errine touched his arm. "We'd both already decided we weren't going back."
know. It's just . . ."
hat?"

ow we *can't* go back. It's different when somebody's following you around
bridges."

uce and Mike exchanged glances. "What about the rest of us? Doc Waxman?"

e shook her head. "I don't know. But why would they have any clues that point to
ys?"

ke let out his breath and Sherrine knew that she should be relieved for his sake, as
ut she was simply angry that he was happy to be off the hook.

h, dammit. Dammit." She made fists of her hands. "I never had much; but it's gone
y house. My car. All my clothes, except what I packed for this 'two-day'
on. Everything."

b shook his head and said, yeah, he was sorry for her, too. And that made her cry
ore, because, hell, Bob had lost as much or more as she had, and somehow he
mile. She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned and stared into Ron Cole's crazy

on't worry, dear," he said. "Don't worry. You can always stay in my Titan. The
f misfortune is hope."

h, Ron Cole. That's the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me."

rather round," Bruce said. He sat in front of Oliver Brown's fireplace and tapped
er against his hand. "I've got a list."

'hy am I not surprised?" Mike asked.

ist?" Harry asked.

nings we have to do. First thing: Mike, you're the only one who has any right to be
research place, the one with the bacteria."

Well, yes . . ."

s not far out of our way," Bruce said. "We go there, make sure everything's all
nd Belinda Jenks will meet us in her car and get us back to Minneapolis. The rest
will go on to St. Louis. The St. Louis people will get you aimed west."

ight. We're off then," Harry said. "We'll be sure everything's all right."

hat if it isn't?" Mike asked. "What can you do?"

e can warn you," Harry said.

ow? Telephone?"

ny sniffed. "We'll get you the word. If we have to make enough noise that
ne in the country knows—" She patted her oversized handbag.

eah, well that makes sense," Mike said. "But—" He took Harry aside. "Harry,
s. It's a thousand."

don't need—"

ke's voice was low but intense. "Harry, you never ask until you need it right *now*.
ne—just take the money, Harry. Think of it as default option money. It's your last

When you run low on funds and Jenny's ready to rob some poor schlub at gunpoint, damn money instead."

Harry hadn't taken it. Mike said, "You know her, Harry. Any excuse. "Bring it down, down——"

Yeah." Harry took the money and had it in his boot with a minimum of motion.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Treasure Hunt, or The Hundredth Dream

gon>
reetings, all, from the Oregon Ghost. Gabe and Rafe are on their way. Let's all
and do what we can for their going away present. If you can't deliver it in person,
ord and I'll find a way to get it there.>
Ghost, with both hands, you couldn't find your—
Alter! How did you get out of your dungeon? I don't have time for you now. There
us business afoot.>
That's why I'm here, you pitiful Primary Ego. This is too serious for me to sit
d watch you screw things up. Did you think I would stay down there amusing
by burning those old copies of *The Intergalactic Reporter*—?
What?! How dare you burn my collection of fanzines? What would Carol Kovacs
ne knew?>
Well, an imp has to keep itself warm somehow. If you would heat the dungeon I
't have had to ignite that stack of *Lan's Lanterns* last week—
rriek°
Or the *FOSFAXs* or *Mimosas*. They're getting dry and crumbly. Make good tinder
ll right, Alter. Make your point, if you have one.>
Point? Point? Oh, very well. Friends, don't trust The Ghost. His minds aren't what
ed to be. Send your contributions to the usual places. DUFF, SKIFFY, TAFF,
all in this. The final drawing hasn't been scheduled yet; but the big prize is still the
a Lifetime. Remember, two Grand Prize winners have already been chosen, but
t that stop you from giving them the boost they need. They're feeling a little
>
hank you, Alter. Now get back to your dungeon, like a good little Ego.>
Don't count on it, Ghost. I'm the Prime Self now. Remember? The fans voted for
Galaxy years ago. Me, not you, Ghost. Eh? No! Not the Spell! Not the Spell!
—
goff>

* * *

like what?> Anonymous note on electronic bulletin board.

You name it; they need it. Make it small and make it light. There's a weight limit on baggage.> Anonymous reply on same bulletin board.

* * *

Captain Doom flashed the light briefly at the big wooden sign. PUTNAM'S WORMS FOR SOIL CULTIVATION; WORMS FOR BAIT; WORMS FOR PURPOSES. He pondered that, wondering what other purposes worms might have. He shrugged and touched his throat mike. "Captain, Doom to SMOF-One," he said. "I am in position."

oger, Captain Doom," he heard Benjamin Orange's voice tinny in his ear. "Go for

Captain Doom nodded to his three companions. He grabbed a section of chain-link while Mark and Lisha Hartz worked their wire cutters in unison. Then he lifted the flap like a trap door. He clapped the third fan on the shoulder. "Chain up! We're in."

Andy ducked swiftly forward with a shovel in his hand. Captain Doom began counting in his head. "One one-thousand; two one-thousand; three one-thousand . . ." He tapped Mark and Lisha, who dropped their bolt cutters, grabbed plastic sacks, and hurried through the hole in the fence.

While his teammates were gone Captain Doom tied twisties to the cut sides of the flap. Then he waited. When his mental count reached three minutes the bag carriers broke through the fence, followed in another minute by Andy with the shovel. The plastic sacks bulged and Captain Doom caught a whiff of the contents. "Better than a bag that," he said. "It's a long ride back."

His three companions nodded and slipped away into the darkness. As he fastened the fence section back in place with the twisties, Captain Doom triggered his throat mike. "Captain Doom to SMOF-One. Mission accomplished. Have the deodorizers

Captain Doom rejoined the others. Benjamin Orange stood by the open back doors of the dump truck they had come in. Doom's teammates and two other teams were already inside the truck, wiping greasepaint from their faces. Orange was garbed in slacks, a dress shirt and sported a prominent bow tie in the Black Watch tartan. He wore a throat and throat mike that left his hands free for a clipboard and checklist. SMOFs made lists.

"Can you hear me, Team Gamma? Can you hear me?" He glanced up as Captain Doom approached. "How'd the worm farm go?"

"It went like clockwork, Orange."

ood." The SMOF nodded. "Good. Wait." He put a hand to his earphone. "Ah, you are, Henry. I can hear you now. Have you got the bull semen? Yes, I know it's old. We've got a refrigerated container in the truck; so hurry it back here. SMOF- at." He grinned at Captain Doom. "Let's see the Lunarians top that one. With that e ova from the agricultural school . . . if the Angels can't culture a bit of laboratory en we aren't the Fanoclasts."

* * *

e clerk at the checkout counter raised his eyebrows. "Starting a garden, miss?" nnie Null piled more seed packets on the counter. "Sure am." e clerk studied the packets. "You must have a mighty big plot." ig enough." ou've got too much there, miss. They'll choke each other out." nnie sighed. Why did men assume that, because she looked like a covergirl, she have a brain in her head? "I know what I'm doing." you'd like a little advice on gardening, I get off at five." hat's very generous. My husband and I will be glad to have your help." Husbands eful, she reflected, as the clerk suddenly busied himself with his job. One of these e would have to get one.

* * *

or waited by the checkout lane at the supermarket, holding a place in line while hurried back and forth with small purchases. That earned him a glare from the dough-faced woman who was next in line. Probably upset because, due to Fang's he was one place behind her rightful place in line. Thor considered letting her go decided against it. Her shopping basket was piled so high that by the time she was at the cash register the glaciers would be in the parking lot. e doughy woman gave him one last glare before, rustling the pages with a , she dived behind the anonymity of a checkout tabloid. This one, called the *tional Global Celebrity Tattle-Tail*, featured a lurid headline in 72-point type:

CE NUDES ON GLACIER!!!"

was accompanied by a rather fuzzy photograph of a nude woman in unidentifiable dings. The remainder of the headlines lined the margin of the front page like wers at a school dance. One of them proclaimed a new "Thermal Diet" to help e warm and comfortable during the colder winters. From what he could glean, it d a considerable amount of curry and jalapeño peppers. e woman caught him reading the front page and, with a sniff of righteous tion, folded it over and returned it to its rack. Thor wondered what unspoken rule transgressed. Could one freeload on a freeloader?

ng scurried up to him with an armful of spice cans, dumped them into the arm Thor held, and dashed off for one more run. Thor scanned Fang's choices. A little everything, with an emphasis on the preservative spices. When the contents were , the light tin-plated containers would still be valuable. He considered for a t sending Fang after some jalapeños, but decided it would take too long to explain. ere were the Angels by now? Halfway to St. Louis, probably. Thor toyed idly e spice cans. Was he right to drop out? After all, Fang was sticking with it. He'd be out in Larry as soon as they bought the supplies. t someone had to watch over Ron Cole. And the fewer people hanging around the the better. And the *Phoenix* would never fly anyway. e what free men—

or sighed unhappily. He had really believed in the Cole legend. A naive belief, he w. His parents had always been after him to "be realistic." Especially after g him with "that" literature. So he had always associated realism with a world dreaming was suspect.

nety-nine out of a hundred dreams came crashing down around you. But if life fell short of your expectations, that was no argument for *lowering* them. There ways the hundredth dream.

e shopper in front of him finished her check through and Fang returned to line umbo jar of multivitamins just in time. Madam Doughball pointedly did not move or Fang, but that didn't stop the crusty old guy. He lobbed it.

w, there was someone who had the Talent. Fang could dream realistically. The ad not fazed him at all. An option had failed to pan out; there were other options. ng watched the tally carefully. Programming skills were deteriorating and scanners n known to commit egregious errors as a result. But all Thor could see in his eye was the magnificent ascent of *Phoenix* from her desert home. With ten berths rew cabin module. Eight of them up for grabs. He wondered if any of the others d the same dream he had. t it wasn't realistic.

* * *

ling in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler tank truck southbound on I-55 for the y City, with the pavement humming beneath their tires and off-highway neonlit lashing past in the darkness, Sherrine had a barely controllable urge to tune into a /western station. Bob was hunched over the steering wheel, eyes glued on the ead. He looked like a trucker. They'd found him a yellow baseball cap with the f a feed store on it, which he wore pushed back on his head. Between them, dozed fitfully.

errine had thought that the truck cabin would be crowded with four of them but she found that the big Peterbilt could fit three across the seat while the fourth

est in a smaller sleeping compartment behind the cab. The two Angels did not
e cramped conditions. In fact, they seemed to relax. Sherrine judged that they
customed to sleeping quarters not much roomier than the back of the Peterbilt.
ey passed the turn-off for Winnemucca, which made her think of Cordwainer
ird had taken the National Endowment for the Arts advance for *The Very, Very*
dangerous Visions; Really. And This Time I'm Not Foolin' and vanished without a
umor speculated that he was preparing the ultimate diatribe; the one that would
e Establishment to its very foundation.

ere were stories about Bird. Some of them were true.

Wonder if Bob misses his van. Foolish question. Of course he did. He had had that
ong time and had kept it in careful condition. It was comfortable, like an old
Lots of memories there.

ts. The quilts and blankets in the back of the van were not entirely meant for
on. Sherrine gave Bob a sidelong glance. She was not opposed to marriage, in
e. Not for sex, although the new laws made it safer that way, but for the
eship. She had even tried it once, and it had been the happiest three years of her
though the marriage had lasted five.

atever had become of Jake? Had his liaison with Heather lasted? The Cookie had
her as one who enjoyed the chase more than the prize. Suppose, after dumping his
r a better looker, Jake had been dumped in turn for a more virile stud?

else Jake and Heather were living a life of connubial bliss in a suburban
ow somewhere, with a miniature Jake and Heather scampering around them.

Well, well. How little we know ourselves. She had not thought about Jake in a long,
ne. Yet, the recollection still drove her heart to flutter. Not the end-Jake, but the
ke. He with the wide, smiling mouth and the perpetually shadowed jaw and the
y to wander through the timescape of undreamed lands. Somehow, beneath the
ss, beneath the anger, there was . . . not love, but the shadow of a love that once

he was glad when Bob pulled over and turned the wheel over to her. Gordon half-
hen settled back. Alex climbed out of the sleeper box like a sleepy spider monkey.
awled in. Sherrine put the monster in gear.

he task at hand was to honcho an eighteen-wheeler to St. Louis. Other cars drifted
e windup toys. There weren't many in these early morning hours.

he truck turned majestically, less like a car than a seagoing liner. A lot of
tum in an eighteen-wheeler. But if they stuck mainly to the interstates she would
y. No sharp turns. What was it that Bill Vukovich had said after winning his
strait Indy 500? "There's no secret. You just press the accelerator to the floor and
rning left."

"What did you—?"

did I say that out loud? Sorry, Gordon. Back to sleep."
can you drive and talk?"
ure, Gordon. How are you holding up?"
was asked, 'Am I still having fun?' I am. You?"
haven't had time to stop and think since Bob roused me out of bed to pull Angels
Ice." She remembered the comfort and security of the computer room with a
that shocked her. There was an animal contentment to living only in the present,
nder the covers and comforters, giving no thought to the future.
e future was a sneaky tense that crept up a day at a time, each tomorrow just a
fferent from the last, until one day you looked back along the path you had
d and saw how very, very far you had come from your roots. Safe and secure; but
ur dreams cauterized. In the bright light of day, she could see that that path of
lated tomorrows was a smooth and slippery one that led down, down, down. The
of a Well was the point of minimum energy; which was why it was so easy to rest
moving.
move, however . . . Ah, that was another matter entirely. There were other paths,
tomorrows. One could choose among them. And she had made her choice.
d having made that choice, having left behind everything in her life but a change
es—"Yeah. Yes, Gordon, I'm still having fun."
t both Angels were asleep, slumped into each other as if boneless.
errine felt more at peace than she had had at any time since Jake had left. Yet, all
chologists would agree that she should be feeling terrible tensions and insecurity.
at rest tends to remain at rest, unless acted upon by an outside force. She had
nought of Newton as a psychologist before.
ey passed an interchange. A neon sign on the feeder road below them glided out
arkness and then faded behind them. HARRY'S ALL NIGHT HAMBURGERS.
a sudden passion for cheeseburger and fries.
* * *

licked the pencil tip with his tongue, tucked the receiver more firmly against his
l held his hand poised over the order pad. "All right, go ahead. You want what?
a hens. Fine, ma'am. Yes, we do. All sorts of barnyard animals. A half-dozen? And
see. Is there some reason why they should be pregnant? How about a nice rooster,
? Fine. Yes, you can pay when you pick them up."
* * *

e clapboard building was falling apart. The porch roof sagged, and the windows
boarded up. Shutters and sidings loose and brittle with time ratted in the prairie
behind the building, black and rotted husks dotted a weed grown field. Mike
gingerly got out of the truck and looked around. "Harry?"
ere." Harry and Jenny came down from the decaying porch.

thought this was the place," Mike said. "Now I'm not so sure."

"This is it," Harry said. He held up a piece of broken board. IOWA STATE
GE AGRICULTURAL RESEA—The end of the sign was charred black.

"The road here is run down," Bruce said.

Mike nodded. "Yeah, but it was once the pride of the Agricultural Service. They did
good work here."

"Closed by court order," Harry said.

"Worse than that," Mike said. "They didn't even wait. A Green flying squad burned
the building out. Killed four of the research staff—and got off as justifiable
murder."

"Wasn't the only place that happened," Harry said. "The big pogrom—lot of
people killed that year. Okay, what's next?"

"We get shovels," Mike said. "They buried the bacterial cultures out in the cornfield
before they heard the mob was coming."

"Better watch the bike," Harry said.

"It's all right, I can see it," Jenny said.

Harry shrugged. "Okay." He looked around at the wasted fields. "Shovels. Dig
up the bones."

"They faxed me a map," Mike said. He grabbed the doorknob and shook it. The door
didn't budge. "They used student labor during the school year; then used volunteers
to keep the land"—again, he tried the door—"into summer
months. There are probably all sorts of tools—" He kicked the door. "If we can just get
in."

The doorknob was pulled from his grasp. "I came in through the back," Harry said.

Mike looked at Bruce and Bruce looked at Mike. "I would have tried that next,"
Mike said. He stepped inside the building to the musty smell of cobwebs and rotted
wood. A thick layer of dust coated the floor, broken by the tracks of rodents.

The building was a warren of rooms and closets. Abandoned offices. Desks with
drawers hanging open. File cabinets overturned. Papers scattered about the floor,
some with rodent droppings and the leak of rain through the roof.

"God damn them," Mike said reverently. "They did good work here. Milk. We had a
factory that synthesizes hormones. Natural hormones, what cows make themselves. Give the
cows more and get half again as much milk. Only they wouldn't let us use it."

"With people starving?" Jenny demanded. "How long has that been going on?"

"They discovered how to do it back before the turn of the century," Mike said. "In
the 1920s."

"But—why—"

they're still testing to see if it's safe. That's what the Greens said. The dairy
tions didn't fight very hard. The last thing they need is cheap milk. Oversupply,
lled it."

found Bruce at the back door of the building. The door was hanging loose on its
and the jamb around the latch was broken and splintered. Bruce pointed to the
d door. "When Harry said he came trough the back door——"

e's got a helluva knock, doesn't he?"

Harry approached them from the farther hallway carrying two shovels over his
er. " I found a store room," he announced. He gave one shovel to Bruce; the other,
e. "And there were just enough shovels."

* * *

gon>

MOF-One: Bull semen!!!??? The Ghost>

goff>

* * *

e plant manager spoke in such a broad Texan accent that you would never guess
not originally from Texas. Just as some people were "more Catholic than the
Ron Ellick reflected, others were more Texan than the Texans. Johns even kept a
rattlesnake in his office. It all seemed very strange, because they were in the
Ivania coal country, nowhere near Texas. Ellick felt right at home.

e plant manager led him past the beds of enormous NC machines jiggled to shape
t parts from the base material. All but one were silent and shrouded. The plant
irdly quiet with only a handful of people at work. The echo of hammer, saw and
unded small in its cavernous spaces. "Not very busy, Mr. Johns," Ellick ventured.
all me Johnny," the manager said. "And you're right. We aren't very busy, 't all.
e of the all."

ll?"

ight. Pollution laws won't let anyone drill for all anymore. So, less fuel for the
. And they cut back on the number of flights because it might damage the ozone
o fewer planes are being built." Johns shrugged. "Bunch of guano, if you ask me.
an interested party. The aerospace people were our biggest customers. Now all
are maintenance and spares orders. There's an example, on that pallet. See where
s gluing the details in place? Now, what does that remind you of?"

bee's honeycomb."

ns nodded. "Right. We call it structural honeycomb. That there is part of the nose
ly for a 737b."

n Ellick studied the part dutifully. He had flown from Minneapolis to
lphia, courtesy of 3MJ, on an old 737b. He wasn't sure he wanted to know how

f it was held together with glue. "You work on some mighty big parts, Johnny. rd shapes. Must be a problem handling the stuff." h, not the raw material you were asking about. That comes in blocks. Come on, let w you." ns led him to an area of the plant filled with shelving. Each shelf held a stack of ooked like solid oblong blocks. "The way the industry's been ruined, we have honeycomb in stock here to last a generation." Johns shook his head sadly. ow, the stuff was shipped collapsed into blocks like this. Easier to handle. We set cks on an extender, put hooks in each end, and stretch 'em open like an accordion." ated to another machine which to Ellick looked like a rack from a medieval torture r. His mind toyed with the notion: a modern day horror story . . . o the original honeycomb block," Johns went on, "takes up hardly any room at all. show Ed here what happens when you put a block in water." He nudged Ron with his elbow. "Watch this."

e worker pulled on a pair of metal reinforced gloves. *Glaives*, thought Ron Ellick. *mail*. It seemed appropriate for someone who worked on a rack. She pulled a block e shelves and began to lower it end-first into a barrel filled with water. his one is aluminum," Johns told him. "But we have honeycomb, in all sorts of e and non-metallic composites." e block was completely immersed in the water now and the level in the barrel had risen at all. "Ninety percent air," Johns assured him. I doubt there's any structural l on the face of the earth that combines the structural strength with the lightness of omb."

n Ellick nodded. *Or off the face of the earth, either*. "How much for the blocks?" ns rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful. "The aluminum kind or the—" ach."

ns cited a list of prices from memory. Ron Ellick wrote them down on a notepad. ohnny, I'll talk to my people. You can ship it to California?" ns nodded. "Son, the way the market is right now, I'll *carry* it to California."

* * *

gon>
have caught the bug. MYCROFT.>
goff>

* * *

d Marshall was a young man, round of face and soft of muscle. At 5' 11" and 160 , he gave the odd impression of being both skinny and overweight. He had an n to athletics of any sort. Every morning he watched a run of joggers pound by his ifting them up and putting them down; a peculiarly elaborate form of self-torture. school, he had taken remedial gym.

held the chip up to the light and looked at it. "How many books does it hold?"
about five hundred," said Will Waxman. The old man with the bushy patriarch's
aid four more on the table. "This is almost my entire library. The last one, there?
the Encyclopaedia Britannica."
d grunted and laid the first chip down. All five had been modified to look like
do "Game Boy" cartridges. "Cyberbooks. And you want to know if I can duplicate

ll Waxman nodded. "And the reader." He set a Sony Bookman on the table
n them. "Maybe a dozen of each?"
d picked up the Bookman. "Where did you get this baby? I thought their import
anned."
is."
d inserted one of the cartridges into the Bookman and touched the "game buttons."
does it—Never mind, I got it. This is page forward; and this is page back. Hey!
of the entire Heinlein canon in here! And Asimov and de Camp and . . . What
is button do?"
moves the cursor around so you can tab hypertext buttons. Go ahead, move it to
y title you want to read and then press the 'A' button."
d did so and smiled when he saw the title page appear on the screen. He glanced at
er cartridges. "This must be a lot of fun when you're browsing through the
pedia."

ying tough the encyclopedia," Will corrected him, "like a stone from David's sling
g over the water. No, more like jaunting in Bester's *The Stars My Destination* or
ping discs in Niven's *Ringworld*. Did you ever hear Philip José Farmer's
on of a dullard?"

d shook his head. "No."
ll grinned. "Someone who looks a thing up in the encyclopedia, turns directly to
y, reads it, and then closes the book."
d laughed. "It's a damn shame they banned these things. The trade problem—"
rade friction had nothing to do with it." Will took the Bookman from Ted, saw that
open to *Pebble in the Sky* and flipped through the electronic pages. "Can you
e any gadget better designed to seduce the Video Generation into reading?"
d frowned. "Nah. Conspiracy theories are fun, but it's usually just ineptitude or—

well-read, educated public is more difficult to lead around by the nose ring." Will
across the table. "Can you duplicate the chips and the reader, Ted? I need to

d Marshall shook his head. "No, I can't. The programming? No problem. But the
hemselves . . . I'm not a hardware man."

the old man sighed. "I was hoping to keep my originals. Oh, well."
He held out a placating hand. "Hold on, Will. *I* don't know how to duplicate the
re, but I know someone who knows someone."
Free-lance electrosmithing was almost as incriminating as free-lance programming.
He didn't ask further. Ted Marshall made the Bookman and its chips vanish. "I'll see
what I can do. You won't mind if I make copies for myself, will you?"
"Of course not."
"Will. Won't the, uh . . ." He cast his eyes toward the ceiling. "Don't our friends need
like algae for their hydroponics a lot more than they need books?"
He shook his head. "Man does not live by pond scum alone."

* * *

argon>
Host: Honeycomb, won't you be my baby. Batman>
goff>

* * *

"Oh, what a cute little bunny rabbit!" said Adrienne Martine-arnes, stooping over to
look into the cage. The oversize rodent inside laid her ears back and sniffed. The
long incisors lay bucktoothed over the lower lip. Yes, aren't you cute." And plump,
bunnies gave good meat per volume. So did guinea pigs.
"May I help you?" The pet store manager had come up behind her.
Adrienne rose and turned. "Yes, you may." She had the commanding presence of the
goddess of Olympus. A white streak accented her otherwise black hair, as lightning does
the blue sky. "How much are the rabbits and the guinea pigs? The manager told her and
she decided. She pulled a checkbook from her handbag. "And do you give quantity
discounts?"

* * *

When they came to the Interstate bridge over the Mississippi, they slowed, and Harry
hadn't seen any came by on the motorcycle. Harry held up his hand, thumb and forefinger in a

"All clear," Bob said. "At least from outside."
Alex could see the St. Louis waterfront laid out below him. Many of the docks and
piers along the river stood dry and inaccessible, since so much of the river's source
had been locked up in northern ice. Starved as she was, though, the Mississippi was still
a busy stream; and tug barges and riverboats crowded her like a Manhattan street. The
Missouri, which entered a few miles upstream, was still running near strength wind and
currents having so far kept her watershed nearly ice-free.
When so, Alex noticed two barges aground on a mud bar near the East St. Louis side of
the river. Grain barges from the north, Bob told him. Files of people, ant-mall in the
city, marched on and off the barges, balancing baskets full of grain on their heads.

ndered how much of the cargo they could salvage before rats and rot did for the

rdon, sitting between them, suddenly perked, up and pointed through the
ield. "What is that?" he asked.

hat is the Gateway Arch," said Bob, taking the exit onto Memorial Drive. "Our
ion."

ut what does it do? What is its function?"

he Arch? There's an elevator inside that takes you to an observation platform on
d there used to be a Pioneer Museum underneath; that's closed up now for lack of

hat's all? Not for microwave relay or, your word . . . *weather* observation or

o, it was a tourist attraction. A monument. Why?"

rdon shook his head in wonder. "I have never seen such an artifact built for no
urpose. Could make poem about such beauty. Building under constraint of
ield is like building poem under constraint of sonnet form. Requires craft and
"

ex noticed Gordon's lips move and grunted. The stilyagin was probably trying to
e a poem on the spot. It was that sort of distraction that got him put on probation,
the dip trip.

t Gordon was right about its beauty. In orbit Alex would not have wondered twice
ne Arch. Such construction would have been easy, given the mass . . . which is
iven, in orbit. *That's why we need Moonbase so badly. All that free mass!* But in a
ield . . . how did they keep it up? Its soaring lines seemed to defy gravity. He
imagine the forces acting on the arch. The downward vectors must be translated
ctors along the length of the arch itself. A neat problem in basic physics. It was a
ing planet. His eyes travelled along the sleek parabola until, in an odd echo to his
s, he saw what looked like vector arrows pointing down from the top of the Arch.
atched, the arrowheads swayed slightly in the wind.

hat are those?"

b squinted through the windshield. "Beats me." He reached back over his shoulder
ped on the back of the cab. "Coming up on the Arch," he said.

e panel separating the sleeping cubicle from the cab slid back and Sherrine stuck
e through. "The fan club meets in the underground museum, right?"

hat's what Violetta said. They'll give us a place to spend the night." He pulled to
e of the street and turned on his blinkers. A car and two horse carts drove around
ll clear," he announced.

ex heard the door to the sleeping cubicle open and shut. He squirmed a bit in his
en he gripped his cane, unlatched the passenger door and slid to the sidewalk.

ey," said Bob, "where are you going?"
With Sherrine," he answered. He flourished his cane. "For the practice. And just in

* * *

Sherrine saw him coming and waited politely on the tiled plaza. She was framed by
oming Arch against the backdrop of the river. A barge drifted lazily behind her,
g carefully to the canal buoys. He was struck again by her fragile beauty; a beauty
self seemed oddly reluctant to acknowledge. Most Earth girls seemed terribly
nd muscular to him; and he had seen enough by now to realize that pudgy and
ere the norm. Yet, Sherrine continued to allure him.

as it only a physical thing? Or was it a fixationé—imprinted like a baby duck!—
on by the fact that she was the first woman he had seen after Mary had . . . had
d him? Now there was a thought!

trayed you how, Alex? Because she didn't order you back upstairs after that first
attack? Because she left it up to your own stupid pride? *If anyone betrayed you,*
was yourself.

sudden horn jolted him from his reverie. Two men in a horse jitney shook their
him as they pulled around. As if they hadn't the whole street to themselves, Alex
sourly.

Sherrine said, "Alex? What's up?"

ou don't want me with you?"

r lips parted to answer him, then she shook her head. "Come on, then. I think the
e to the old museum is over this way." Alex wondered what she had been about to
thought he could make a reasonable guess. Couldn't stick to the flight plan, could
ex? And why? To moon along after a woman who . . . He wanted to say that he
er attractive; that he admired the way she had abandoned her career and freedom
him; that he wanted to get to know her better. But the words stuck awkwardly in
at. Held down by gravity.

e led him down a concrete ramp festooned with gaily-colored graffiti and
ls. One large poster, plastered overtop the others, announced a closed-circuit TV
by Emil Poulenc, "Discoverer of the Ice Folk." Whatever that meant. The sun
h in the sky, brushing the shadows from the ramp. Four odd, circular shadows
d like black spotlights on the paving stones.

ny can't I ever pick a woman who'll choose me back?

Sherrine knocked three times on the boarded-up doors at the bottom of the ramp. A
e a side of beef peered down at her from behind a plywood partition, too high up.

bit of a stutter she said, "We're knights of Saint Fantony."

s face showed nothing. "Here for the High Crusade?"

o win victory or sleep with the Angels. By order of Duke Roland."

"Duke Roland" was Oliver Brown.

The giant's face withdrew into shadow. A minute or two later the door opened.

The young man who opened the door was considerably smaller. In the midday
less he seemed shy and awkward. He blinked up at Alex and held out his hand.

"Name," he said. "I'm Hugh." He indicated his companion, a giant to rival Thor. "We
in Fafhrd."

"What *are* those things up there?" asked Sherrine, staring up against the glaring sun
four bundles dangling from the Arch.

The young man looked up, shading his eyes with his hand. "Scientists from the
city. They were accused of practicing nuclear physics."

Sherrine stared at Hugh. "They *hanged* them for that? Because they were convicted
of nuclear physicists?"

The young man shook his head. "They weren't convicted. We think they were four of
people who ran the museum here. The place was empty after that, and we moved in."

He led them inside. Alex saw a flash of silver at his left hand, then jumped as a
ominid shadow caught the corner of his eye.

Hugh had a knife in his left hand. He'd had it ready while his right immobilized
while the giant doorman guarded him from overhead. "Duke Roland says you're to
be. I trust my senses when I can. Alex, how do you take a shower in free fall?"

Alex said, "It takes forever to get wet and forever to get dry. Wherever water is, it
to stay. We don't have enough water anyway. Mostly we—Hugh, how would a
know if I was lying?"

This Downer was a physics teacher at KC High. Milady, I might grant you're an
but not an astronaut."

Sherrine smiled and colored. "No. I was one of the rescuers."

"I see." Hugh's arm swept in a circle. "Well, welcome all!" Others came from out of
dows beyond the entryway. Many people, some in armor. "You have friends?"

"Yes. I'll go for them," Sherrine said, but she didn't move at once. "Hugh, if the
are hanging scientists, are you safe here?"

Hugh's face closed like a wall . . . and then he said, "We are safe indeed. I am Duke
bloodcup because I was King Hugh of the Middle Kingdom six years ago. The
—the Downers—they hanged four scientists here, once. But when others came to
us, we buried those bodies and replaced them. The locals see four bodies hanging
the Arch. They never think to examine them, to see if they've been cycled. But there
enough to protect us, and if *they* won't—"

"Yes. I see. Your Grace, Alex MacLeod will need to sit even in your presence—"

"Yes, of course. A chair for our saintly guest! And an escort for Lady Sherrine!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Last Shuttle

"Tell you, Captain," Lieutenant Billings insisted, "*something* is going on. There's increased activity in the fannish underground over the past few days. Weird ."

Arteria nodded to the AP lieutenant standing stiffly before the desk; reached out and thumbed through the thick stack of reports. "Yes. Though how can you tell when fannish activity is weird?"

"They've been quiet for so long. The timing must be significant, wouldn't you agree, Captain?"

"True."

"Someone must be hiding the spacemen, or we would have found them by now." "Not sci-fi fans? Really, Lieutenant. Could a bunch of nerds and geeks have slipped past the search parties on the Ice? With virtually no notice, mind you." She looked at him. "Maybe the Ice Folk have them."

Billings made a face. "Ice Folk. Supermarket tabloid nonsense. A newly evolved race of humans who can live naked on the Ice? And there's that Sherrine Hartley. She reported back to work. And her boyfriend with the maroon van called in to report a typhoid. Typhoid! And vanished. Captain Arteria, this other fannish activity must be related to the spacemen, too."

"Cornish game hens, Lieutenant? How will that help hide the fugitives?" "I don't know, ma'am. They might be stocking a hidden hideaway with food." "Full semen, Lieutenant? Earthworms?" Arteria leaned forward, hands placed flat on the desk. "Dung?"

Billings turned red. "Maybe they're hiding on a ranch or a farm." "It could be, actually. Anyway, you've convinced me. Something's up. Get reports on unusual activity by known or suspected fans. Let's get 'em!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Arteria thumbed idly through the file folders. *They're up to something. But* the fans were technophiles, so they were watched; but they were mostly flakes, so the surveillance was sporadic and incomplete. And they kept trying to recruit the cops, lecturing them, giving them reading material, driving them crazy.

ore fanac would surface presently. Bull semen, earthworms, dung, game hens?
than the Stardust Motel Westercon Banquet! *Bouncing potatoes, bouncing*
s—A known fan in Portland bought rabbits. One buck and several females. How
fit the pattern? Impregnating rabbits with bull semen? A secret gengineering
? But to what purpose? *You'll come abouncing potatoes with me!*
gels down. Fans to the rescue. That, said the waitress, is roast beef and a salad,
u'll come a-bouncing potatoes with one! But what would they want with Cornish
ens?

* * *

e St. Louis Society for Creative Anachronism were not exactly fans. But there was
rable overlap between SCA and fandom; and Oliver Brown had been King
II, which made him a Royal Duke, and the SCA people were deferential to their
acy. The place was used by fans; but it was an SCA fief.
e museum was a large, low-ceilinged space broken up by partitions and display
to quasi-rooms ill-lit by kerosene lanterns and candles. Men practiced with
weapons in cleared spaces. Women showed each other intricate ways of making
with their fingers. Men, women, children huddle around the light sources, reading
old books; talking and arguing with animated gestures; or, in a few cases, writing
on smudged tablets of lined paper.
o knights brought Gordon inside, one at each elbow, and helped him to a chair.
pale with effort . . . no, Gordon was stronger than that now. Pale with shock. He'd
under four corpses.
ex said, "Still think the Well is worth saving, tovaritch?"
rdon nodded. "Desperately so."
here's Sherrine?"
elping Pins with docking maneuvers. A squire has shown them where to hide the
Why, are you lonely, Alex?"
e're to meet the King all together. Never mind, that must be them." There was
at the door. Passwords were exchanged, while the silent giant Fafhrd took his
position. Duke Hugh ushered them in: Sherrine, Bob Needleton, Harry Czescu
ny Trout. Gordon and Alex stood to join them. Duke Hugh whispered instructions
they were led to meet the King.
e procession was short. All eyes were on them. Alex enjoyed having Sherrine on
, though she was supporting him. The King was a large young man whose nose
e been smashed flat against his face. It was fun to watch him try to balance hero
o against his royal dignity. Still, he was the man who had beaten every other
in St. Louis; that was how you got to be King. The four bowed, with Sherrine and
upporting the Angels.
ey were turned loose into a party that was just starting to turn raucous.

Harry and Jenny stayed behind, by invitation of the King. Some of the court settled
le. Some had lutes or tubes that turned out to be musical instruments. Alex
l for a bit. Songs of past and future—

Wanted fan for plain sedition, like the singing
this tune.

NASA hadn't failed us we'd have cities on the
oon.

t weren't for fucking NASA we'd at least have
lked on Mars.

never can make orbit, then I'll never reach
stars."

ever can make orbit . . . Harry and Jenny were singing to Alex's soul. Alex wasn't
mood for that much gloom. He moved away, toward laughter.
ny's voice followed him. "How's this, Majesty?"

Wanted fan for mining coal and wanted fan for
lding nukes;
Wanted fan by William Proxmire and a maddened
rde of kooks.
ashington, D.C., still wants me 'cause I tried
ould a dam.
hey're tearing down the cities I'll help any
y I can."

eah, Jenny, I know you would . . ."

rdon gravitated to one of the fans who was writing furiously on a legal pad. He
little aside so as not to distract the woman; but Alex could see that she was aware
Angel's hovering presence.

ex wandered among mannequins dressed in the style of mountain man, Plains
cowboy. They stood ghostly sentinel amid prairie dioramas and reconstructed
ogas. Sunbonnets and calico and flintlocks. A moldboard plow. A *la riata* coiled
over a steer's horns. Chaps and Stetson hat. Buckskin shirt and leggings done up
ads and quillwork. A birchbark canoe bearing a *coureur de bois*. The opened diary
man who had crossed the Plains in an 1840's wagon train. Alex tried to read what
itten there, but the light was too dim.

the ages interfaced. No wonder fans were comfortable here.

Gordon, he saw, was deep in conversation with an aspiring writer named Georgina. Yagin was sitting lotus beside her on the floor and was pointing to something on the wall. They had gathered a small audience—all femmefans, Alex noted—and she was looking with a very serious look on her face to whatever Gordon was saying.

Alex found a chair and sagged into it, a bit too tired to be sociable. Somebody brought him a pewter flagon of fairly powerful punch. A younger fan brought an elderly couple over and introduced them as Buz and Jenn. "Have you made use of the shuttle tank?" Jenn asked. "The one that went up with the last shuttle?" Alex nodded. *Noblesse oblige*. "We couldn't live without it. And the other one. I've heard the story, of how the pilots and a friend in Mission Control brought the first tank to the surface. It was supposed to splash, but the pilots pulled the circuit breakers for the emergency on charge igniters."

Buz nodded. "The astronauts and cosmonauts had already decided to try to build a station. They had to have the tanks for living space." "You were in on that?" Alex asked. "A little," Jenn said. "They couldn't do that but once, though. Then came—the Last Shuttle," Buz said. "Yeah. I was in it," Alex said. "We know," Jenn said. "How are Ian and Alicia?" "You knew them?" "Yes." "My father was killed in a blowout nine years ago," Alex said. "Mother died last year. She was thirty. I'm sorry," Jenn said. She turned to her husband. "They had twenty years together. Up there." "And we're still here," Buz said. He turned to Alex. "It was Ian and Alicia or us," he said. "When the astronauts decided to take the last shuttle up. The space program was being wound down, and we thought it would be important to get more people into the habitats. The shuttle was named *Freedom*. Cooperation between U.S. and Russia. Symbols of peace and friendship. They already had a shuttle tank in orbit, and we wanted to send another, but we wanted to send up families. Jenn and I were candidates. So were Ian and Alicia. And you, only you didn't know it. You were about six, as I recall, and your mother was pregnant, so the two of you weighed less than I do." "Georgina and Gordon had come to listen, and others gathered around. "What happened to the last shuttle?" Georgina asked. "You still have it, don't you?" "No. It can't reenter. It was damaged." "It was heard—there was a riot at the launch," a fan said. He was younger than Gordon, a round teenager with thick glasses. "I read about it—"

was *Enterprise Two*," Alex said. "Like Buz said. There had been regular supply
ut-maybe Buz should tell this."

ve told it before," Buz said. "Let's hear how you tell it."

was six," Alex said. "My father and mother were mission specialists. Engineers.
heard the space program was being closed down, and thought—they thought that
were families in space, Americans as well as Russians, it would shame the
ment into supporting them. So they all volunteered to go. They thought there
be other ships. The NASA ground crew swore they'd stay on the job, refurbish the
d send her back up with supplies. It wasn't supposed to be the last one."

ome group had tried to get a court order to stop the launch," Jenn said. "Said there
hance that a bad launch could fall on pleasure boats out in the ocean. Then they
st of their membership down to man a fleet downrange of the pads."

eir audience had formed up in a circle. The younger fans were wide-eyed. A man
evals, a troubadours outfit, with a lute slung across his shoulder, was jotting notes.
ans, hanging farther back, showed a blacker mood. It wasn't just a yarn to them.
remembered.

hat was Earth First," Buz said.

an snorted. "You mean Earth Only."

arth Last," another muttered. "Bastards."

obody worried about their court order," Alex said. "But then the word leaked out
launch was on, and a mob gathered around the perimeter. They tried to tear down
ces, but there was another group, the L-5 Society, supporters, trying to protect the
ot enough of them. There was fighting. Mom wouldn't let me watch. She had a
rip on me until she could get us aboard."

ex noticed he was rubbing his arm, and stopped. "We squeezed into one couch.
ing was going wrong, Dad said half the control board was red, but they launched
y. I remember the acceleration. Mother was holding onto me, the couch wasn't big
other kids were screaming, but Dad was grinning like a thief; I'll never forget his
r Mother's. "

n the way up there was a *clonk* and a lurch. Didn't feel any worse than what was
ing till I saw Dad's face. Scared. *Snarling* with fear."

n eco-fascist Stinger," Jenn said. "It was a near miss. Ripped a shitload of tiles off
e."

ex nodded. "Punched nearly through. I've seen it. But we made it. Mission Control
eding corrections to the main computer. They're the real heroes, the NASA ground
never knew their names."

'hy them?" asked one of the young fans.

ecause they stayed at their posts."

ut—"

the mob broke through."

h."

the fighting in Mission Control was hand to hand," Buz said. Long, hard muscles
umping in the old man's arms. He'd learned to fight . . . but afterward, Alex
. "The mob had baseball bats. Two had handguns. Some of the ground crew held
the door until they took bullets and went down." He turned to the woman beside
d took her gnarled hand in his and stroked it. "The mob swelled inside, swinging
d smashing panels. The crew held on, nobody left, nobody left a console until
Enterprise Two was up." He sighed and looked at the floor. "The police showed up then;
as too late to save anything."

the MP's were pissed," said Jenn. "They'd been ordered to stand down because the
ers had assured everyone that the 'demonstration' would be peaceful; and an MP
would have been 'too provocative.' Not that the politicians needed much
ce. California and Florida both had Green governors."

kazhitye," said Gordon. "But how do you know so much about it?"

the elderly couple glanced at each other. Jenn said, "Jim here was Launch Control
R Separation. I was Flight Path Planning and RSO."

ou—" Alex felt a lump rise in his throat. Buz's voice—a younger Buz's voice—
n the last words from Earth he had heard, fed through the speakers into the
ger cabin in the silence after the engines shut down. *Good luck, Enterprise. Our
are going with you.* Alex took a step toward them and they rose from their chairs.
ent's awkward hesitation gave way to an embrace. Alex's cheeks were hot with

ou knew, didn't you," he said, hugging the old woman. "You knew it would be the
uttle up."

e said nothing, but he could feel her head nodding. "We knew we'd never see
," said Buz. "Not in our lifetimes. But we're still the lucky ones. Come."

led them through the exhibits, past the trappers, the cowboys, the sod busters.

s, Alex thought. Pioneers all.

z led them to a small case near the back of the museum. It was nothing but a
done up on pseudovellum. One-inch-square photographs had been mounted beside
names. The lettering was an intricate Old English calligraphy.

r Date 670127 Virgil J. [Gus] Grissom

ger Chaffee

ward H. White II

0424 Vladimir Komarob

0629 Vladislav VolKob

iorgi Dobrovolsky

ktor Patsayeb
0128 Francis R. Scobee
ichael T. Smith
with A. Resnik
nald C. McNair
ison S. Onizuka
egory B. Forbis
rista McAuliffe

ex woke groggy on a museum bench.
rdon sat in a plastic shell of a chair hunched over a scarred and warped desk. He
ring off into space with his mouth half-open. Writing a love poem? Sure. And to
Alex thought he could guess. Shoeless, he padded up silently behind Gordon and
er his shoulder:
e scoopship's cabin was a sounding box for vibrations far below the ears' grasp;
over the northern hemisphere, her hull began to sing a bass dirge. My bones
eel . . .
rdon jerked suddenly and turned in his seat. "Alex, I did not hear you come." He
l the tablet with his forearm.
ex grinned. "Does the hero get the girl?"
rdon flushed a deeper crimson. "It is not that kind of story. Are no heroes. It is
out belonging; about one's place in the world. About being at home."
ex's eyes flicked toward the hidden sky.
o, Alyosha. Not home like that. Not accident of birth. Home is where, when you
go there, they have to take you in. Sometimes you find it in places you don't
,"
hat's fine, Gordon." Gordon did have a way of putting words together. Not just a
c hum, but a "dirge." The hum and the sweetness of flight—yet with a touch of
s anticipation. When Alex wrote, the words fell like stones in line: solid,
able prose for memos and technical reports and the occasionally informative letter;
ever sang like Gordon's did.
ay I ask you a question, Alex?"
ure. I can't sleep; and we'll be leaving soon anyway."
sk away."
bout Sherrine." He looked up, locked eyes with Alex for a fraction, then looked
Alex. I burn. Sherrine . . . She is as Roethke wrote: I knew a woman, lovely in her
/ When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them . . .' But I . . . she and I . .
ook head abruptly. "Nyet. I cannot assert myself. The time is not right." He
and looked again at Alex. "What if she does not care for me?"

Alex almost laughed. "Is that what you wanted to ask me about? You want her, but I don't want you? How would I know? Ask Bob. She doesn't confide her love life to me." Alex forced the words out between his teeth, surprised at how much they hurt. "Things are a lot looser down here in the Well, you know." Gordon looked at him strangely. "I thought you . . ."

"You thought I what?"

Gordon shook his head. "Nichevo."

Alex shrugged and tried to recover his broken sleep. What was with Gordon, anyway? Lost on frozen Earth, the authorities searching for him, and there he sat writing novels in the middle of the night. A novel no one would read.

* * *

Marjorie drove the rig while Bob slept in the back. The hill country of southwest Texas, trees shorn prematurely of their leaves, swept past on both sides of the nearly finished interstate. The setting sun nagged at the edges of her vision, not quite dead yet and too low for the visor to help, painting the pastel clouds that hugged the horizon. She kept her speed down; from fear of the cops, but also because she had to watch for each overpass as she came upon it. The Ice was only a distant whisper beyond the horizon, borne on summer winds that had become cooler and cooler. The fall came earlier, and the winter blizzards were more frequent. And none of the overpasses had quite collapsed. But they were shedding. What had caused it? Spalling? Sometimes she had to steer the truck around chunks of concrete that had fallen from the roadway under an overpass; and she sweated when she drove across a bridge. The mad blizzards of the smog-free 19th century Plains once more shrouded the land in winter, freezing and cracking the works of mankind.

Alex was crumpled against a pillow jammed between the passenger door and the seat. He slumped loosely, dozing, bent like a contortionist, or a marionette. From time to time he would blink and raise his head and gaze around himself as if baffled before falling off once more to the gentle rocking of the truck's suspension.

Gordon sat between them quietly reading a book. He had found it at the clubhouse in El Paso and had pounced on it with unconcealed delight. A thick squat paperback with worn and dog-eared covers. *The Portable Kipling*. The fans had made him a gift of it. He closed it now, because it had grown too dark to read. Gordon gazed out the window and gazed into the gathering dusk, where sunset stained the western horizon. He tried not to wake Alex. "I saw nothing like this in *Freedom*. Always we see things from above."

Marjorie was glad of conversation. Driving in silence disembodied you. It was talk that made you real. "I've seen the old pictures, looking down on the Earth. They made my heart ache."

each place has its own beauties. We can learn to love the one, and still yearn for the

"What were you reading?"

story. A character sketch. 'Lispeth.' It tells of Indian hill country girl raised by missionaries. She wears English dress and acts in English manner. When a young of the Raj passes through, she falls in love. He swears he will return and marry her. He never has such an intention and abandons her without a thought. Finally she finds the truth. So she gives up the mission and returns to her village and her gods and becomes a peasant wife."

"A sad story."

"A tragedy." She could hear his smile in the dark. "I am half-Russian. We are not without a tragedy. Kipling saw the tragedy of India. Lispeth thought she was without, but the English never did."

"I haven't read much Kipling. His books are hard to find these days."

"Oh, but you must. I will lend you mine. Kipling. And Dickens. And London. And Wonderful writers. I have. . . . No. I have only this one book now. Real book, of power. Still, you may borrow it."

Evelyn smiled to herself. "You like to read."

"Yes. Yes. Though much I do not understand. References. Shared assumptions of characters. I read Austen one time; but her world is like alien planet. Still, I laugh and cry for her characters."

"I had a math teacher in college who had read *Pride and Prejudice* fifteen times, in three different languages."

Gordon blinked. "Math professor?"

"Math professors read literature, Gordon. But it's not commutative. Lit profs never read math."

"I laughed. "Russian literature is harder than maths. Do you smile, that I find Russian literature difficult? My *matushka* made me read Tolstoy, Gorki, Pushkin. It was so different from my father's Western literature. In the West, novel was biographical. About characters. About Lispeth or David Copperfield. In Russia, was writing about *War and Peace*. *Crime and Punishment*. Characters, even central characters like Anna only illustrate the Idea. Very hard for each people to read the other kind. But my *matushka* said it was important I live in two worlds, the *Rodina* and the West. A society is evolving in the habitats. Western optimism and Russian gloom."

Evelyn laughed. "It sounds . . . appropriate. It needs a new literature, then. A new one. Floater literature."

"Perhaps. Gloomy optimism. Optimistic gloom. I have tried . . . " Silence.

light-hearted pessimism. Mark Twain?" She turned on her headlights. Had Gordon
"You've tried to write something?" Scratch any eager reader and you'll find a
free writer.
ichevo. Story fragments. A few poems. Such things are not survivalrelated
. I must steal time to do them. So they are not very good. Nothing good enough
to hear."
ave you ever read a fanzine? No, really. I read some pretty awful stuff in my
ther's old pulps. Go ahead. Recite one of your poems for me."
xt to him, Alex stirred shifted positions.
o, I cannot," Gordon whispered.
e took a hand from the steering wheel and laid it on his arm. "Please?"
. . If you will not laugh?"
won't laugh. I promise."
ould you to promise." Gordon coughed into his fist, straightened in the seat. He
off into the black distance, not meeting her eyes, and spoke gently:

ying softly, white as snow is snow,
th delicate beauty, borne delightful to the eye,
flected in the silver, skydropped moon:
r face, upturned and smiled on by the stars.
leep is she more lovely and at peace;
r skin would glow a light unsnowlike warm. She sleeps. Touched by the moon
d me.

fell silent; still he would not look at her. *Bashful*. "Why, that's lovely, Gordon."
turned at last. "You like it?"
ertainly." Sherrine probed: "She must have been pretty."
'ho?"
our girlfriend. The one you wrote the poem to."
ne is. Very beautiful."
a! "Have you, ever recited for her?"
eah-da. I did." Sherrine smiled broadly out the windshield. Gordon was caught on
p where he wanted to keep his love a deep, delicious secret and shout it to the
t the same time. She had been caught there once before. She and Jake. A long
o, but she could remember the wonderful glow. With Bob it had been different
od times, a lot of laughs; but she had never glowed. "What did she say?"
ne said my poem was lovely."
Well, that's a pretty tepid response to a love poem."
ong pause, then, "Ah. I had forgotten."

forgotten what?"

You do not live in such close quarters as we do. You do not have to be so careful to offend or to rub against your neighbor's feelings. So few of us, and still there has been murder, because we cannot escape from one another. One does not speak of love and be sure."

Then how can you ever be sure?"

He may have shrugged in the dark, but he did not answer. Sherrine returned her attention to the road. She kept it at thirty and slowed for every shadow in the road. Some streets were hard and rigid. Approaching bridges, she crawled.

In minutes or an hour later, something went *click* in her head.

No, no. He means me!

It had been obvious for some time that both Angels lusted after her. Lord knew why. The thin, skinny was the Angel ideal, but . . . Lust she could deal with. A little recreational sex; fun for everyone and no hard feelings. It was impossible to sit between two Angels—three, counting Bob, who was in a perpetual state of rut without picking up pheromones. She was more than a little horny herself.

But Gordon was not just horny. He was in love; and that she could not deal with;

Yes . . .

Because Jake is still living there, somewhere in the back of my skull.

Yes, great. Now she had four men to deal with. Three live and present; one a ghost.

A rhyme capered through her thoughts. Its gude to be merry and wise. / It's gude to be honest and true; / It's gude to be off with the old love, / Before you are on with the

Is he asleep? Or studying her in the dark?

She said nothing; concentrated on her driving. *He loves me?* She craned her neck and looked in the large side-view mirror. A smaller Sherrine, distorted by the convex shape, looked back. *He loves me?* The truck had a lot of inertia; a lot of momentum.

Gordon said, "You are offended."

No!" She paused; spoke again. "No, I'm not. I'm flattered. It has been a long time since anyone loved me."

Gordon seemed appalled. "*Shto govorish?* How can that be? There is Bob——"

He only thinks he's in——"

And Alex."

The cab was silent except for the older Angel's deep, regular breathing.

Alex."

Yeah-da. You do not see it? He is Earthborn American: more direct than most, but more eloquent. Still, even he may have been too oblique for you. Alex loves you; though he has no poems. Is why I have hesitated so long to speak. He is my captain, and——

ish to be fair." He shook his head again. "Life is complicated for my generation. If I'm all Russian or all American, there would be no dilemma."

"Fair! And he treats you so badly. I mean, I like Alex, too; but he's so stern and demanding. Especially over the crash."

Gordon nodded slowly. "That is true."

"And it wasn't really your fault."

"My fault? Oh, no. It is himself he cannot forgive. He was hero once. Now he feels ashamed. After the first missile we could have aborted to orbit. Alex chose not to. Now he wished again to be the hero, da? Now he feels shame. He feels he has failed the *mother*; has failed Mary Hopkins; has failed me."

"How would you like some advice, Doctor Freud?" The voice was low and thick with sleep. Sherrine twisted her head to look past Gordon. Alex's eyes shone in the dim, candle light. The cab fell silent. The tires hummed on the roadway.

"Find your own *business*, Gordon." Alex twisted, punched the pillow into a soft lump, and lay back into it with his back to the rest of the cab.

After a while Gordon leaned over and spoke in a whisper. "I was wrong. This truck is as close quarters as anywhere in orbit."

Sherrine sucked on her lip. The Interstate was a pale ribbon under the rising moon. A car far distant in the northbound lanes was the only movement other than the wind-blown trees. It would not do to laugh.

* * *

Stratton stared at the Alderman. The platoon of Air Police stood by waiting, their rifles held at a casual order arms. The Alderman's court cast wary eyes at their visitors and kept their hands away from their own motley collection of hunting rifles and bows.

Outside, the *shoop-shoop* of helicopter blades interrupted the silence. "Well?"

Stratton put an edge of menace into the question.

The Alderman looked up from the photographs he had been given. He licked his lips and looked around at his ward heelers. The ward heelers would not meet his eyes.

"Yeah. Sure." Alderman Strauss stuck his chin out. "They was here. What about it?"

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Alderman. It confirms what we learned from the truck driver and your own stevedores." Though those farmers in Millville were certainly disappointed. HAH! "Big Front Yard Sale." And that van the Kilbournetowners had bought . . . Lieutenant Billings says it's maroon under the new paint job. Thank God I got the deputy's report on the funeral in Millville. The engine's VIN had matched a van owned by Robert K. Needleton of Minneapolis, a materialist science professor at U. of Minnesota. Called in sick, with typhus. Whereabouts unknown.

"Now, where did they go when they left here?" God, we should clean out this nest of rats, too. Why haven't they been evacuated south? If the government knew how far they had fallen under the cloak of anarchy . . . The Green Weenies would love to arrest an

ity for air pollution. Unless they don't care, or don't dare let the rest of the country what's happened here.

terria studied the bitter and edgy men and women clustered around the Alderman's smelled the ripe smell of fear. Sure. Move them south. And when conditions to worsen, too, move them farther south. I'm glad it's not my job to do anything. Maybe they've got the right idea. Stay and fight. Like Scithers and his engineer t Fargo Gap.

the Alderman tugged at his spade-like beard, clearly wondering if he should try to t for some advantage, but Arteria's face decided him. "They went west," he said. escaped from the de-lousing station, stole some horses and rode west. We didn't o chase 'em because of the typhus."

est didn't make sense . . . though typhus did. If Needleton had been here . . . "Are e?"

ure, I'm sure. You can ask over at Yngvi De-Lousing, if you want."

terria nodded slowly, eyes hooded. "You're right. Maybe I should ask over there." turned to leave, and the MP platoon followed, not quite relaxing, not quite turning cks.

ey!" The Alderman's voice stopped them and Arteria lifted a questioning eyebrow. ou're from the government, aina?" The Alderman was out of his seat and the ce and contempt had dropped from his face. "When's the government gonna come p us out of this? I've got people dying up here!"

terria said nothing for a long moment. He still believes in government bailouts. an I tell him? That the government is too busy chasing polluters and nuclear ts and secular humanists? And people who cut wood without permission. That the ment can't afford it any more and wouldn't know how, anyway?

curt nod. "I'll let them know the way things stand. Things are tough all across the n tier."

the Alderman licked his lips. "Yeah. Sure." He looked around at his cronies. s must be a lot worse other places, right? Otherwise they'da gotten to us by now." terria wouldn't meet his eyes. A crafty machine politician. He wasn't fooled. It was nic all over again. Not enough lifeboats to go around.

tside at the command chopper Arteria contacted Redden on the radio. "Your seem to have been correct, sir. That's right. We found the van. We can confirm on as well as the Hartley woman. Plus four other males, three Caucasian and one *Two of them were tall and skinny and having trouble walking.* Things were interesting. "There's a lead here I want to follow up on. No, sir, I don't need g more. I'll go solo on this."

Arteria rang off and handed the set back to the tech sergeant. The sergeant looked at her. "Do you think that's wise, Captain? You could send one of the troops, instead." "No, Sergeant, this is something I've got to do personally." "But you'll be out of touch. Shouldn't you . . . ?" "No, soldier, ask not what my plans might be." Arteria looked left, then right, then added in a louder voice, "It's a crazy idea; and if it doesn't pan out" The sergeant blinked, then slowly brightened. "I get you. No one will know." "Right you are. Besides, I won't be any further out of touch than the radio in my car. We'll just have to make sure that the Rapid Deployment Team is ready to go anywhere, anytime, on my signal. Now tell Lieutenant Billings I want a staff meeting in ten minutes." The sergeant saluted and dogtrotted off to find the platoon commanders. Arteria gave a slow smile. Solo and in civilian clothes. That was the best way. No committees and no guess and hamper you. Just your own wits and reactions. Follow the clues wherever they led, without a lot of silly debate. Redden and the military brass would want periodic reports; but that was no problem. Moorkith would be worried that he wasn't getting all the skinny; let him stew. If the others wanted the credit of finding the Angels they would have to do the same thing. Get off their asses and scour the highways and byways. Especially, the fannish byways. And who better to scour those byways than a gaffiated fan?

Arteria parked outside Yngvi's De-Lousing. Her car was plain black, with civilian license plates from Ohio, because this wasn't the first time she'd needed to look like a civilian. She got out and went up to the door and waited to see a sensitive fannish face. "AWOL," Arteria said. "Terri Whitehead gave her a blank look. "What?" "AWOL, and it's damned well true of you if not me." "I don't know—" "Look, I don't have a lot of time," Arteria said. "Yngvi is a louse, but throwing a bucket of rotten snow at *me* isn't going to get rid of me." "Who are you?" Terri asked grimly. "The only people here are the Alderman's men—and police. And you?" "Air Force," Arteria said. "I'm in charge of finding the Angels." "Angels?" "Look, Dr. Whitehead, if I wanted you in jail I'd have come with a squad and taken you away." Lee took a photograph from her jacket pocket. "Here. Sherrine Hartley and her deadleton. They were here. Incidentally, Dr. Needleton called in to his university saying he had typhus. I suppose he got that idea from you. Ideas are contagious." "—"

"Why should you tell me anything?" Lee asked. "Because *they're going to get* Be real clear about it. That picture's being circulated all over the country. If *I* find can help them. And will."

"How do I know that?" Terri asked. She was near tears.

"You don't, but you know damned well nobody else cares," Lee said.

"Who are you——?"

"Ah. Got it," Lee said. "WackyCon at Waikiki Beach. Lex Nakashima's convention. I was on a panel with Will Waxman. The Miracles Panel. Cheap superconductor cold fusion——"

"By God, that was fifteen years ago!" Terri said. "You were there all right. But—— police now."

"Air Force," Lee said. "Air Police. Office of Special Investigations. Yes. Look, Dr. Head, this is it: you tell me where they went, or——"

"Or?"

"Or I walk out of here, of course, and keep looking on my own. *You're* safe no matter you do. But you won't know who finds them."

"What will you do with them?"

"I shook her head. "I won't kid you. I don't know myself. Let me point out that I says find them. I can go back and take the Tre-house apart. Somebody there

"Save your friends a lot of trouble, Terri. Where'd they go?"

"I won't tell you."

"I shrugged. "Ok but you're making a lot of trouble for 3MJ, and the result will be no matter what. I sort of like the old boy, but——anyway, good luck." She turned

"Wait."

"Yes?"

"Damn you. Leave the others alone. Chicago. They wanted to go to Chicago, so we em there. To the museum. The big one, Science and Industry."

"Museum. Right. Thank you. Now we've got one more problem. You'll want to call

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that, so a couple of my troops will sit with you for the

"the day. You're not under arrest unless you want to be, but you're incommunicado

"few hours." Lee went toward her car, stopped, looked back. "FIJAGH," she said.

APTER SEVENTEEN

"... *Better than a Plan*"

cerpt from the electronic journal of Surrealistic Housekeeping, Adrienne Martine-
ed.:

A little lemon juice is good for stains, a bit of gallium and germanium will do
s for dope. I mean how much flip-flopping can a body take, land's sake? PNP is
supermarket abbreviation for pineapple, is it? And don't forget heavy metal music,
Who could? Such *lovely* melodies)
ange is a Taurus, of course. (Boeuf l'Orange!) But what of the rest of the zodiac?
your sign There is Pisces, after all. How many fish swim in the ocean of night? Or
rius. No, I'm not sure what that means, either. But it must mean *something!* Tap
ur cosmic connection and feel the vibes of the universe. I'm sure you'll come up
omething useful. Let's see . . . Aquarius is obvious; a bit too obvious, I'm afraid. As
nini, they had better quit cloning around. And Aries has taken it on the lamb.
y. I wouldn't try to pull the wool over your eyes.
e all know how important the Sweepstakes is, so I know you'll all send your
in promptly.

w, the next article on surrealistic housekeeping is one you have all been asking
w do you keep watches from melting on the arms and backs of your sofas and
Why, it is simplicity itself, provided, of course, that you have enough lace Dalis .

* * *

Redden threw the printout down in disgust. "All right," he said to Moorkith. "*You*
what it means!"
aptain Arteria seems to understand this stuff," Moorkith said.
ne's on a special assignment," Redden said.
e! "Where?"
amned if I know," Redden said. "But she gets results."

* * *

ere was a TV in the lobby of the Museum of Science and Appropriate
logy. Lee Arteria was just showing her credentials to the manager when the
ster said, "More on the ice nudes, from Winnipeg. Gerald Cornelius and Anthony
were found on foot on the Fargo highway, both suffering from frostbite. They told

of being rescued from their wrecked truck by a tribe of naked and near-naked
s."

of Lee Arteria's assumptions came crashing down around her ears. They'd done it
they'd moved the Angels out of the United States across the Ice in a microwave
to keep them warm—and Lee Arteria was haring south on a wild goose chase.

ne, *Whitehead*.

the broadcast continued. A black-bearded man said, "They were lovely. Thin,
hairless, and their skin was pale blue. Some of the men offered us their wives.
they were evolved from Eskimos, or maybe they just learned their mores from
s. Their skin was cold to the touch. I mean, when in Rome, sure, but if I had it to
ver again—"

ace Hyde. The breath went out of Arteria in a whoosh. So that's where they went,
nd Mike Glider, after they tried to get into Sherrine Hartley's house and almost got
Over the Ice.

d to hell with them. Lee Arteria was after bigger game.

e looked around the empty garage. "Milkheim Low Fat Milk," she said, and noted
r casebook. "You're sure about this?"

e maintenance mechanic nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, ma'am, that's what they
nted on them. 'Milkheim.' Means 'Milk Home' in German. Now Mr. Cole, he
hem trucks by names, a name for each one of 'em. One of them was Larry, and I
ember the other, but when there was three, one of them was Moe, I remembers
t a big store by those trucks, Mr. Cole did. Always taking care of 'em, giving me
to look after them, keep them ready to run, but he never took 'em noplac."

ell me about Cole," Arteria said.

eyed her suspiciously. "What call you got to be asking about Mr. Cole?" he
led. "He's a nice man. Touched in the head some, yes, ma'am, some people
he was plumb crazy, but he's a nice man, no trouble at all if'n you, didn't mess
with his trucks. Or his rocket ship."

ocket ship." Lee smiled. "We just want to help Mr. Cole. Dr. Cole, actually. He
ry famous once, did you know that? He has earned a pension from the National
e Foundation, but there was something wrong with the paperwork."

e Jefferson nodded sourly. He understood mistakes in paperwork.

o all I need is his signature, and he can collect his pension," Lee said. "It's not a lot
ey, but I bet he can use it. Is he around?"

o, ma'am, leastways I haven't seen him. He used to sleep in that rocket, but a
of days ago a lot of people come here and took them trucks away, and his. . . and
ther stuff that belonged to Mr. Cole, and I ain't seen him since."

lot of people," Arteria said. She smiled. "Tell me about them."

Milkheim Low Fat Milk.' Two big Peterbilt tanker trucks," Arteria said. "Look, this is a long shot, we'll really look like idiots if it doesn't work out. I can't afford to look like an idiot, can you? Right. So what I want is a quiet request to State Police to find the location of any truck that says Milkheim and report it to my fax number. Find it and report, but don't stop them. But don't ask Wisconsin or Minnesota or the others. *Right*, Billings. Do not ask them. Yes, Billings, *exactly* right, it means you have to make requests to the others one state at a time, and I'm sorry, but you see how it is. This is nothing but if it pans out we may both get promotions. Right.

* * *

Fang guided the milk truck through the interchange and onto I-25 South. The Denver skyline glittered before him: tall, boxy, glass towers cut at strange angles. Fang squinted and tried to imagine that they were a growth of immense quartz crystals set in the heart of the High Plains. By aliens. Uh-huh: aliens. After cutting their teeth on Great Pyramids and Easter Island self-portraits, the space gods had finally hit their stride with immense crystalline structure. White quartz, black quartz. Quartz as clear as glass; quartz as stony quartz.

Suppose someone discovered Denver's alien origin, *and the aliens were still around!* They would be real estate developers. Good. That was good. Who was in a better position to develop "a crystal city" than its developers? Come to think of it, who was more alien? Hidden purposes *did* they have behind their weirdly shaped erections? Maybe. The aliens are metaphors for mindless, runaway development. That made the scenario scary. So, the aliens realize they've been found. What do they do? They capture Our Heroes and turn them into bug juice. Alien Cliché number one, vintage 1950.

They capture Our Heroes and take them on a tour of the universe and invite them to join the galactic confederation. Alien Cliché number two, vintage 1980. It's damn Hollywood. No matter what kind of aliens you had, they were already used

to, wait. Remember Nancy Kress's "People Like Us?" That's it. The aliens are neither benign nor malevolent. They do what they do for their own reasons . . . like the Europeans who built Clarke's *Rama*. Like the Europeans coming to America. The Spaniards for gold; the Incas were just in the way. The destruction of the Amerind societies is simply a spin-off of Europeans doing European things for European reasons. Good title: "Spin-off."

Fang was so deep in the story that he didn't see the flashing red light behind him for several seconds. *Oh shit! But I wasn't speeding, dammit.* He pulled over carefully and got out on the shoulder.

e Colorado state trooper walked up to the cab window and smiled. "Sorry to stop
, but I noticed one of your brake lights is out. The middle one on the left side."
w, shit. Thank you, Officer, I'll get it fixed at the next truck stop."
es, I think you ought to. OK, just wanted to let you know." The trooper turned
hen turned back again. "Driving alone? Where'd you sleep, last?"
nly ten hours, Officer. Really."
ll right. We're strict on that in Colorado." He walked back to his cruiser.
ng let out a deep breath. I am sleepy, he thought. And there's sure no hurry, they
ant me to be in Albuquerque until tomorrow afternoon. I'll get that light fixed and
ome z's. He was careful to accelerate smoothly and level out, his speed just at the
fter a while the cruiser passed him and went on ahead, leaving him to his
s.
it's the same with the aliens who are building Denver—and all the other strange
ox downtowns. Aliens doing alien things for alien reasons. Only human
rism would suppose that they came to conquer or assist *us*.
Our Heroes discover the aliens and the aliens don't do anything. Who would
it anyway? They don't even bother to capture the protagonists and tell them . . .
it. The reader has to know what's coming down, so someone's got to explain.
he sent the story to Ted Bistrop at *Fantasy & . . .* Nothing was ever explained in
ies *he* published.

* * *

e fax machine was built into the car's dashboard. It startled Arteria with its
, wheep."

TERBILT 18-WHEELER TANKER MARKED MILKHEIM LOW FAT MILK
EEDING SOUTH ON I-25 AT DENVER. DRIVER OLD FART WITH BEARD.
RADO STATE HIGHWAY POLICE OBSERVED MINOR SAFETY
TION. NO CITATION ISSUED.
LLINGS.

Denver. What in hell do they want with a truck full of rocket fuel in Denver?
er it is, I've got some driving to do if I'm going to catch up.
r suitcase was already in the trunk. Her telephone and fax were connected to the
phone system, so she didn't have to tell anyone where she was going. She took
os.
t Denver. Colorado Springs? USAF Space Command had been there, when there
pace Command. It was the reason Arteria had joined the Air Force. Fifteen years
en ten, you could kid yourself that the United States might go back to space, get
again, stop retreating from the Ice.

t now. Now—

e Milwaukee alderman had upset her more than she wanted to admit.

w I can never go to space. I catch criminals.

was a job she mostly liked. She was good at it, good at solving puzzles, and she

e power that being an OSI Special Agent aye her. Twitching the nerves of the

nes, she liked that, too.

t Denver! West of there. Edwards! It came as a sudden flash, as things often did

and it took her several minutes to construct what her subconscious had leaped

ngels Down. Fans to the Rescue. What to do with Angels. Send them back to

. How? Dr. Cole's broken Titan, but that wouldn't do it. What would? What was

that was left was the only working rocket ship in the United States. *Phoenix*, sitting
nder Ridge at Edwards Air Force Base.

* * *

orning in the desert.

ex watched the sun come up across Bob's shoulder, teasing streamers of fog from

gish Washita River that ran parallel to the highway. The fog slithered across the

dusty ground and wrapped itself around the sparse stands of Lone Pine and scrub

at dotted the otherwise empty land. The pale light of dawn created a wash of

green and brown; a weird, alien vista of mist and grass and sand.

What do you think of it?" Bob asked. "Quite a sight."

ex shook his head. "I was just getting used to the green."

h, this part of Oklahoma used to be green, I'm told. You didn't see real hardpan

until you hit west Texas. Now there's no rain and in a few years there won't be a

f green left hereabouts."

ex looked at the sleeping form beside him. "I should wake Gordon up. He could
poem about it."

ere must have been something in his voice, because Bob gave him an odd look.

ave something against poetry? "

ex shook his head. "Never mind. It's not important." Bob said nothing. Finally, to

silence, Alex continued. "Gordon is irresponsible." He looked at the sleeping

n, just to make sure he *was* sleeping. "He likes to write poetry when he should be

omething else."

poetry? About what?"

ex scowled. "Love poetry, mostly. The last time he got inspired, we nearly lost an

ay of tomatoes. So they put him on probation. That's why he was assigned to the

with me." He rubbed a hand over his face. Two-day stubble scratched his palm.

n felt oily, dirty. He hoped it was not much farther to the next safe house. He

let his beard grow out, like Gordon was doing. Clean-shaven Downer males were

ook, Bob, I haven't said this before because . . . well, because. But the only people
sign to dip trips are the expendables, like Gordon."

nd yourself?"

eah-da. Me, too. Nothing more useless than yesterday's hero. I'm no good for
work anymore. I can't even work in the command module because I get the
whenever—oh, hell. I don't want your, pity. It's probably just as well that I'm
own here."

on't be too sure of that. Being stuck."

o, Bob, don't mistake my orbit. I want to get back upstairs more than anything I've
anted. Almost anything. Not adventure; not glory. I'm just homesick. *Freedom's*
netown, and I miss it. But I really don't expect it to happen. And if it doesn't . . .
can make a life for myself down here."

anging around the docks," Bob said with a half-smile.

hat?"

ever mind. Don't dismiss *Phoenix* out of hand, though."

haven't. But there's more to a successful launch than stealing a ship and taking off.

I know what's involved. Maybe this Hudson character does have the ROMs.

the IMU isn't locked up so tight as all that. But eighty-eight thousand liters of
ydrogen?"

ou want—"

orty-four thousand liters of LOX? Someone will notice!"

b shrugged. "You want me to tell you it's all worked

. That we've got a plan? We don't. But, hell, we've got something better than a

ex didn't ask him what that was.

* * *

e fax wheeped again.

DDEN AWARE OF MILKHEIM REQUEST AND REPORTS. PLEASE

E ME ON SECURE LINE SOONEST.

LLINGS

, *crap!* She watched for a telephone.

illings? Arteria."

es, Captain. I don't know how Redden got onto it, but he found out about your

to the highway patrols. He's got all their reports coming to him, but there's more,

a trap in Albuquerque."

rap. What kind of trap?"

"I don't know, ma'am. Something about a fannish church, but he sure wasn't going to give any details."

"Do the fans own a *church*? —Albuquerque, fine. And he's intercepting reports about trucks."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll give you a moment. "All right. Quietly cancel our request for information on trucks. Do it in a way that makes it look like we're embarrassed about asking. Then let me know what you can find out about that church. I'm nearly to Sante Fe, I'll get on to Albuquerque. Ask around and get me a clue. Any clue. But don't let them know I'm out there."

"Well——"

"I'm pretty sure I know where they're taking those Angels," Arteria said. "And why the odd purchases. You were right, Billings, it's fans. Now if we do this my way, the credit will get all the credit. That means you and me."

"Yes, ma'am." He sounded enthusiastic.

"When you've got the other stuff done, get my chopper and our crew and take it to the Air Force Base in the Mojave. OSI official investigation."

"George Air Force Base. Bring your helicopter and crew, and come myself. That's like the back side of the moon, Captain."

"I know."

"All right, ma'am."

"Good man. I'll meet you there."

"A fannish church in Albuquerque. There were a lot of fans in New Mexico. Fair number of writers, too. But a church? With luck Billings would find out something."

"The Arteria drove steadily. She was just passing through Sante Fe when the fax came. "Wheep! Wheep!"

UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD OF THE WAY. FORMERLY CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY. NORTHEAST AREA ALBUQUERQUE BASE OF SANDIA TAINS NEAR TRAMWAY STATION. REDDEN AND MOORKITH ON THE MILKHEIM TRUCK AT OUTSKIRTS ALBUQUERQUE. TRUCK STOP. REDDEN ASLEEP. REDDEN DOESN'T KNOW YET.

"She smiled faintly to herself. So. Redden can think ahead, too. Good move, setting a trap for that church. The Angels may well stop there on the way west."

the Angels were caught by Redden and the New Mexico Police, the Air Force
t get any credit at all. What I need, she thought, what I need is to get them to
s. Once on an Air Force Base, they're mine. *All* mine.
which means I ought to do something about this trap . . .

* * *

Sherrine was almost tired enough to pull Bob out of the bunk alcove. She kept
because they were already in Albuquerque. The church couldn't be far. A pew
make a hard bed, but a *long* one. Sherrine was looking forward to that. So, she
l, were the Angels.
The roar of the huge motor changed timbre. Trouble? Something else? Numb in the
the mind, she still recognized the sound just before six motorcycles roared up
the rear-view mirror.

She held the truck steady. This ship-on-wheels must be terrifying to a cyclist.
They drove past. All but one. Harry Czescu (why had Harry joined a covey of
bikers?). He was waving her over, arm windmilling in seeming terror.
There was no place to pull over. At a Y-intersection she angled right, no longer
for the Universal Brotherhood of the Way. Still looking . . . but Harry was
leading her forward, to follow him.
Sherrine called, "Who's awake?"
"Yeah-da."

"Alex, get Bob up. Shake him if he's settled." Like salad dressing . . .
Harry led and she followed. Onto the I-40 freeway and onward, west. Flagstaff was
hundred and forty miles away. She'd need fuel much sooner than that.
Sherrine? What?"

"Harry's got us back on the I-40."
Bob rubbed his eyes. "He wouldn't do that lightly. What happened exactly?"
She told him. He said, "The way to read Harry is, he's seen something seriously
and he's right. He'll try to fix it, but badly. So stop when you see a *decent*
"

She drove. She wondered about Fang and Larry. *Both* trucks had to reach the
. What was going through Harry's mind? A man you couldn't trust to buy the beer

turnout. She eased into it . . . signal, keep it smooth, don't panic yet. Brought the
both to a stop.
Don't panic. Sherrine eased out of the cabin and down. Where the hell was Harry?
None, it looked like. Nope, that was him coming back. The Angels were sliding out,
plummeting down to the dirt, distrusting gravity.
Harry pulled into the cloud of dust, bringing more. "It's a trap! We've got to keep
!"

"What about Fang? And Jenny?"

left Jenny on watch in case I missed you. I'll have to go back for her. I found Fang

g it off while he waited for dark. Jesus. I think I lucked out. After I saw the

I found a bunch of bikers and pulled into the middle of them. They got me close

. I gave him the word, and then I caught up with the bikes." Harry patted the metal

f his motorcycle. "*Goood* boy. I don't know if I was followed or not. But someone

we're here, and someone else must have—Jesus, we've got to get—"

Bob's voice was soothing. "We can't outrun anything except on the straightaway. So

can't you tell us about this trap?"

Harry's head sagged. Then his body followed. He was doing a back stretch, hanging

the hip bones. He came up, rolling for full effect. "That's better. Yeah. The church

fine. I went past it, figuring to park a decent distance away, and I saw the

rd. I saw just enough that I pulled into a Taco Bell and Jenny and I took a pew

window so we could study it. Here."

He handed across a notepad. The printing was Jenny's:

ARMON BY THE REVEREND NEHEMIAH SCUDDER IF THIS GOES ON

h . . . *huh*."

"What *is* it?"

the crushing power in an Angel's hand was always a shock. Bob said, "Literary

ce, Gordon. Robert Heinlein, 'If This Goes On . . . ,' in which the Reverend

iah Scudder turns the United States into a religious dictatorship . . . incidentally

ting space travel, come to think of it. So it's a definite warning."

oo bad we can't rescue whoever left it," Harry said, "but those trucks come *first*."

eah. Back aboard. Sherrine sleeps, I drive. Harry, you get Jenny *now*, and then we

the services of the Oregon Ghost. We need a source of gas not much more than

miles away, and refuge in Flagstaff."

the Ghost's instructions took them to a fueling station and a decent chili joint in

New Mexico, sixty-five miles east of Albuquerque. Hours later, approaching

ff, they switched from I-40 to the old, worn Route 66. Then to asphalt, then

the roads grew narrower and harder to drive. Why were they being led *here* in

n-wheeler trucks?

Bob had to fight the wheel because of potholes. It was midafternoon; he had been

since dawn, and he was puffing from fatigue and the thin air. Sherrine knew that

couldn't have the strength in the arms to spell him.

Hotel up ahead: long two-story buildings with porches. A more compact, more

structure must be Registration. A few bulbs in the signs were dark. There weren't

ars. The drive-in next door was dead. Nobody had bothered to change the letters
marquee:

I FI RILLER
TO SSY

ne city must have moved a highway on them," Bob said. He was driving dead
ow, hunched like an ape over the wheel. "In Flagstaff they're always doing that. It's
ath for a motel. Or a drive-in." He pulled between paired pillars into the
ay.

ctocon," Sherrine said, "used to be in Santa Cruz."

o men were running to meet them . . . then a dozen. More. The first were guiding
k. Bob was muttering to himself as he followed them toward one of the long,
ved buildings . . . with a face missing at the narrow end. They guided Curly into
ning, into a shell two stories high.

razy. Do you suppose they never finished it?"

muggling. The customers weren't stopping anymore and import duties kept going
guessing, of course," Sherrine said. "Pull up to the end. They re lowering some
false front behind us."

* * *

was not a big con. Four long buildings enclosed brown lawn and a pool. They had
ver just one of the buildings; they stayed clear of the Registration building,
ng the hotel restaurant, newsstand, etc. Rooms along the side that faced a wall had
e the dealer rooms, Con Suite, Art Show, and a couple reserved for programming.
ur people talking on a panel stopped when the procession hove into view; then the
ollowed their audience over the low railings.

elcome to Microcon!" And the fans surged around them, hugging and shaking
Alex had time for one glimpse of Gordon's bulging eyes before they were borne

only Hotel Liaison eats at the hotel restaurant," a fan said. "We don't want to be too
but we do need to keep track. So far so good: nobody's been asking about tall
en."

e rooms were all bedrooms, all the same size; but doors could be opened between.
pstairs rooms were the Con Suite, and that was where everyone was eating.

ere was a punch bowl filled with a pinkish liquid of uncertain genealogy. Several
of homemade wine lined the windowsills. Tables pushed against the walls had

of popcorn and corn chips and various dips, and a vat of soup sat on the floor.

was great variety to the food, and a flavor of panic and improvisation.

am sorry there isn't more," Buck Coulson apologized. "Times are tight. Be sure to keep your glass handy so you don't accidentally use someone else's."

Members were hard to gauge because the convention was so broken up, but Alex counted more than thirty people.

He was half-reclined in a chair and footstool, delighting in his ability to sprawl. Being here was wonderful after scores of hours of being wedged into a bouncing truck. He eavesdropped with half his attention, and watched the women.

Sherrine was asking Tom Degler, "You worked up a convention just for us?"

"We don't need a good excuse. A bad one is fine." Degler's face was surrounded by a mass of bright, red hair; full beard, hair tied up in back with a rubber band. His legs, Alex could see between the knee socks and shorts that he wore, were also hairy.

"*ly adapted to an ice age*, Alex thought.

"Best work," Sherrine said.

"Well, but you're still carrying the Navstar transponder, right? And you had to have a rest. It's a long drive across Oklahoma and the panhandle. Ever since they caught O'Rafferty, there's been no safe house on that leg of the Fanway."

Maybe a third of those present were women. All pudgy or burly, of course, in Alex's opinion; but not bad looking. Not bad looking, at all. Either that or it had been a *long* time.

"They caught O'Rafferty? Oh, Tom. The old guy was a past master at staying hidden."

Degler shrugged. "They reeducated him; but no one can tell the difference. He didn't see everything skewed sideways and upside down from Tuesday. But of course he's being watched, so we stay clear of him, now." He shook his head sadly.

"Say, The Ghost let us know when you'd be arriving; so last night I made a few calls. Kind of a welcoming party." He looked around the Con Suite, a bedroom with the beds removed, a few chairs, fans sitting on the carpet. "This is all that's left of the old Worldcon and Bubonicon and the others. Slim pickings, eh?"

"Worldcon wasn't much bigger," Sherrine told him.

"Speaking of Worldcon," said Barbara Dinsby, "did you hear? Tony Horowitz got arrested to distract the cops during your getaway." Dinsby was a thin woman with dark red hair. She wore no makeup and tended to lean toward you when she spoke. Alex considered her the second prettiest woman present. According to Degler she had several stories on the samizdat network, one of them critically praised.

"Bob raised his eyebrows. "Horowitz?"

"Sure. When the chips are down, we all play on the same side."

"Did he make bail?" asked Sherrine.

remont took care of everything. And Tony's book sales have tripled. Everyone on work has been downloading his manuscripts; and half the pros are lining up for red world project."

Sherrine craned her neck. "So, Tom. Who'd you snag for Guests of Honor?"

Degler beamed. "Well, you, actually."

"What?"

"Sure. Are there any fans more worthy than you and Pins, here?"

Alex ginned at Sherrine's sudden discomfiture. "Don't fight it," he said. And, in a

serious voice, he added, "You deserve it."

But . . . "

Degler put his hand on Alex's thin shoulder. "Gabe and Rafe, of course, are the Pro

,"

Alex looked at him. "Now, wait a—"

"What do we have to do?" asked Gordon.

"Not much," Degler told him. Just mingle with the guests; talk to them. You get a

on membership . . . "

basebo."

And you have to make a GoH speech later tonight."

Alex opened his mouth to protest, but no words came out.

"Tom," said Bob, "they aren't actually SF pros."

Degler grinned. "They *live* science fiction. That's close enough."

"But I can't come up with a speech, just like that," Alex said. "Not that quickly."

He rescues of *Peace* and *Freedom*, when it was clear that the boosters had

ized the orbits, and Lonny invited him to address the assembled Floaters from his

bed, he had been unable to say anything coherent. Lonny, damn his black heart,

probably known that.

"Don't worry," Degler said. "Just make it up as you go along. You're a spaceman!

Could get up there in the pulpit and preach from the Albuquerque phone directory

and get a standing ovation."

Indeed, he could. As the fans milled around his chair, Alex discovered that anything

was soaked up by his eager listeners. The little-orbit-to-orbit "broomsticks" that

de between the stations? Fascinating. (And five minutes later he heard two fans

g out a story about witches in space.) The details of hydroponic farming?

ly interesting. Especially the painstaking attention to detail that Ginjer Hu

led.

Floaters were gearing up out by the pool; the laughter was louder than the singing.

Sherrine settled onto the narrow arm of his chair. "Comfy?"

Very. Next best thing to floating."

o let's float?"

peered up at her elvish I've-got-a-secret smile. He said, If you have antigravity, chased our tails a long way for your amusement."

he laughed like bubble-wrap popping. "Alex, it's possible to float in water. The just took Gordon out to the spa——"

eah, water."

forget how much water there is. We walked across a frozen river, I've seen the Mississippi, I don't know why it keeps hitting me like this——"

ut if Gordon and Barbara Dinsby are out there, every horny male and curious fan g to be stripping down, too, so if you want to float——"

ead me."

was turning chilly. There was a stack of towels on a webbed recliner. The pool had en empty, but the spa was bubbling and steaming. It was eight feet across,

, with people-sized indentations in the rim. Gordon and the red-haired woman ready in, and nestled comfortably close. In the dark around them, fans were

g down.

errine began to strip off her clothes, standing up. Awesome. Like a dancer, Alex , or a gymnast. He sat on one of the webwork recliners to get his shoes and pants e-assed fans were beginning to slide into the water. Two had kept their underwear

he law speaks," Sherrine said, "as follows: you can wear anything you want in the r dark. Bob really did go in in the top part of a tuxedo once."

rbara Dinsby was scratching Gordon's back in slow, luxurious circles, while twisted around to talk to her. Thurlow Helvetian was scratching Barbara's back. egler slid into the water behind Helvetian, and a short woman moved up behind circle-scratch.

errine, entirely naked and entirely lovely, slid into the water ahead of Gordon.

's hands rose in the air; his fingers flexed like a pianist's. Sherrine waved

ously to Alex, and Alex slid in ahead of her.

e spoke against his ear, a warm breath within the steam and roar of bubbles:

h or massage?"

cisions, decisions.

e huckster was a skinny gent with an unruly mop of salt-and-pepper hair;

hat elderly, but with a twinkle in his eye. He wore a colorful, billowing shirt and

ehind a table stacked high with books from which he importuned passing fans. He

getting much action. They were all wet from the spa, and the night was driving

.

i," he said to Alex, "I'm Thurlow Helvetian. May I shamelessly try to sell you a
ou can try," Alex allowed as he paused at the table. He was bundled up now, and
dry, and still warm. "You'd have better luck with Gordon. I'm not much of a
Then again, Gordon's still in the spa."
lvetian nodded to himself. "Start slow." He rummaged about on the table and
d triumphantly with a cloth-bound volume. "Here. *A Night on the Town*. This is a
ampler of my work. All short stories, so you get it in small doses."
lex studied the book. The cover bore a stamp: Certified Elf-Free! "Fantasy."
ational fantasy," Helvetian assured him. "Fantasy with rivets. It means getting the
right, making sure it all hangs together logically."
y *matushka* once said—" Alex turned and saw that Gordon had come up behind
ordon was surrounded by a group of five femmefans, including Barbara and
e. "My *matushka* once said that the secret of realism was to describe the thumb so
at the reader thinks he has seen the entire hand."
lvetian nodded. "That's right. It's got to be consistent and realistic or you lose the
hat if it's a fantasy?" Alex asked.
pecially in a fantasy," Helvetian replied.
eah-da." Gordon's head bobbed vigorously. "A dragon you may believe in, or a
veller, but a time-travelling dragon asks too much of the reader. H.G. Wells never
ore than one—"
ordon? Save it," Barbara said. "It's time for your speech."
ordon's mouth opened and closed, and he half-turned to run.
lex, isn't it? You're next. Or if Gordon freezes up, you're first. Work it out between
hurlow, you're not going to miss the GoH speeches, are you?"
didn't used to go to the program items . . ."
e Angels looked at each other. Neither had anything planned. Neither wanted to
together," Gordon said.

Mir was old. A tested, fully manned space station, more than the United States ever
t old," Gordon said. "We had a Buryat shuttle up when everything stopped, but
s useless, not much more than a missile without guidance. We made it part of the
and rifled it for parts. There was not much on the moon, but we could work with
ere was because of all that lovely working mass free for the taking—" "
nd oxygen. There's infinite oxygen in lunar rock."
o we had Moonbase. We even expanded a little. And in orbit, *Mir* and two shuttle
om which to make *Freedom*. One shuttle, ruined. And three NASPS."

the room was filled with rows of chairs. Behind them there was still standing room; cony doors were opened wide.

These thirty people were more than he could have gathered aboard *Freedom*, without crucial functions untended. All these solemn eyes . . .

Now, each of the NASPS is different," Alex said, "and neither of them could carry because each was an, experimental hypersonic ramjet airplane. *Piranha* couldn't reach orbit without an auxiliary tank at takeoff!"

And of course these were no longer available."

You get a bubble for two and the rest is fuel tank and motors. So landing it and back to orbit—"

Gordon was really enjoying himself. Nobody in *Mir* or *Freedom* had ever looked at this. He said, "You would do only for the joy of it, and it would cost in hydrogen war. But we found we could convert all three to dive into the atmosphere and return with too much loss of delta-vee. Without that, we would not have nitrogen."

These solemn eyes. Where was all this support when space was being abandoned as an unwelcome gift? Only thirty, though they seemed like more. But those who stood on the desert to watch the shuttles land numbered up to a *million*. Where were

coming from the Ice.

Gordon was saying, "The scoopship's cabin was a sounding box for vibrations far beyond the ears' grasp; as, high over the northern hemisphere, her hull began to sing a bass that my bones could feel . . ."

"I've lost track of my cup," Alex said.

"In the old days," Sherrine whispered in Alex's ear, "there would have been plastic or styrofoam cups."

"Nonbiodegradable plastic or styrofoam cups," said Degler, appearing out of nowhere.

"Bullshit," said Sherrine. "Plastics are recyclable. Shred it and melt it and make new. The fact that no one *bothered* gave plastic a bad rep."

"Well, not quite," Degler said, fingering his beard and grinning. "There are EPA rules that forbid the recycling of certain plastics. The styrofoam used by fast-food chains is chemically recyclable; but the EPA forbade it because"—he gave an exaggerated shrug—"because it had once touched food."

"Yeah, and they replaced the stuff with coated paper, that was also nonbiodegradable and not recyclable. So the rules had zero impact on the environment and the landfills . . ."

"Why are you laughing, Tom?"

"What if it was on purpose?"

"What do you mean? "

ex noticed that a small crowd had gathered around them, listening intently to what had to say. He saw Bob Needleton and Barbara Dinsby and the huckster, Thurlow an; Gordon's head topping them all. *We really do stand out in a crowd*. Gordon en letting his beard grow ever since St. Louis, but it was not much to speak of yet. e had called it a beatnik beard, whatever that meant.

aler glanced left and right, and leaned forward. Everyone else instinctively leaned him. "I meant, what if it was on purpose? There was a company in California that chemical wastes from other companies; processed the waste and broke it down; d the end products as feed stock. Closed loop recycling. The state EPA shut them

hy?" asked Alex.

gler eyed him, and again glanced conspiratorially around the room. "Because the les required that chemical wastes be put in fifty-five-gallon drums and stored."

hy, that is pomyéshanniy," Gordon said. "If we did so on *Freedom*, would soon not afford to waste waste. Is too valuable."

he Downer Greens were serious about recycling and waste reduction, Alex they should be clamoring to communicate with the stations. Who—on Earth or new more about the subject than the Floaters. *It isn't just our quality of life, it's s*.

actly," said Degler. "So why do so many environmental regulations wind up, g the environment? I say, what if it's on purpose?"

an't be," said someone in the crowd. "What purpose?"

eah, who would gain?"

ne Babbage Society? "

o, the *Greens*. The Greens would gain job security," said someone else.

b security how? They're pledged to clean things up."

o they aren't," said Tom Degler with a grin. "They're pledged to advocate rules apparent purpose is to make someone else clean things up."

at's right. There's a difference. The rules only require actions, not results."

ave a question," said an elderly fan. "Why did the Greens become so popular

the '90s, which was *after* the worst pollution had been already cleaned up? None

kids remembers the old days, when coal smoke blanketed every city and the

ga River caught fire."

ex had finally figured out why Degler grinned all the time. He was watching funny s inside his head. "This is your hobby, isn't it?"

gler grinned at him. "What is?"

nrowing out wild ideas and watching people play with them."

o, this is my profession. Dropping seed crystals in a supersaturated solution.

ng is my hobby."

airman Buck Coulson produced a giant cake covered with chocolate frosting, in the shape of a manhole cover. He presented it to Degler as Con Chair. Degler a tear from his eye. "I'm touched, folks. I am truly touched."

ell, Tom," said Bob. "We've known that for years."

kay!" said Buck rubbing his hands. "That's three uses." He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and made a note.

ex looked around for help. He saw Sherrine nearby with a glass of bhlog in her hand and beckoned to her. Sherrine giggled and weaved her way to his side. "What did I mean, that's three uses?" He had to lean close to make himself heard over the noise of the room party. The jostling crowd pressed Sherrine against him just as he bent close. He didn't about to complain.

mmm," said Sherrine, lingering against him for just a moment, bracing herself with her arm around him. "Egscyooze—I mean, excuse me. I'm sorry."

n not."

ave some bhlog?" She held her glass up to him.

o, thanks. I had one. It ripped the top of my head off. What's in that stuff?"

h, I don't know. No one does. It's a closely guarded secret known to no one."

e giggled again.

ou're drunk."

e pressed a finger against her lip. "Shhhhhh. Maybe no one will notice." She drank from her bhlog. Then she pointed at the cake. "Chocolate-covered manhole covers are the only idea Tom ever threw out that never went anywhere. What can you say about chocolatecovered manhole covers?"

ex smiled. "Not much."

cake for Tom, that's three. A source of food on an alien planet, that was first."

hat was the second?"

er diction became careful and solemn. "The American Dental Association thinks sugar is bad for children's teeth."

must have been almost one in the morning. There was only a handful of fans still about in the Video Room. Sherrine sat tailor fashion near the door, talking tête-à-tête with Dinsby. The others had wandered off. Some were dozing on the floor. Buck was inefficiently bored to turn on the TV. He sat splayed in the sofa changing channels at intervals with his phaser. Tom Degler snored beside him.

ouched in the armchair with his head buzzing, Alex let his mind drift with the TV. He could not stay on one channel long enough for anything to make sense. If, after hundreds of bhlog, anything could make sense.

for relief of hemorrhoids," the TV declared, "use—°!°—the President of the States—°!°—couldn't imagine anything more exciting—°!°—building value in step of design and construction—°!°—don't miss all the action—°!°—with —°!°—But what if lance discovers us, darling—°!°—coming up next—°!°—e Hartley—°!°——ll right, let's move em out—°!°—for Captain Spaulding, can explorer—"

"Wait!" said Alex suddenly alert. "Buck! Back up a couple channels."

°!° and a photograph of Bob and Sherrine graced the screen. "—of those ed of harboring the fugitives. Hartley is a computer nerd. Her boyfriend, on, is a scientist. Needleton's van was used in the getaway. It was found in kee—"

"See Spot," snarled Buck. "See Spot run. Run, Spot, run."

"Quiet!"

—seeing them should contact the State Police. Captain Lee Arteria of the U.S. Air Office of Special Investigations is leading the pursuit. Outdoor shot of a hard-officer in fatigues. "We're piecing the evidence together, Heather," Arteria told rser. "There are several promising lines of inquiry—"

Alex grabbed the phaser from Coulson's hands and stabbed at the buttons until the went black.

Bob spoke without turning from the screen. "The backdrop. It was the Museum of e and Industry in Chicago."

Coulson frowned. "Arteria looks familiar. I've seen him somewhere before. At a rt show?" He shook his head. "A long time ago."

Had Sherrine seen this? Alex twisted and looked by the door. Barbara and Sherrine one. *But they were there earlier.*

He left the Video Room and wandered down the corridor. An open room door fans carpeting the beds and floor. Other doors were closed and silent. The Con utting down for the night.

Downstairs in one of the function rooms, he found Dinsby in a circle of femmefans ding Gordon.

"... syllables, accents or feet," Gordon was saying.

But English stresses are too strong for syllabic poetry, which is why haiku does not English. Accentual poetry is the native English structure. As in Beowulf, which r beats per line with central pause. Is also the limerick like you hear in nursery and rap. But accent structure can degenerate into mere broken prose,' like free which is basic form used for advertising copy. Was Chaucer who invented the foot, combines accent and syllable— "Yes, Alex, what is it?"

Alex put a hand on a table to steady himself. "I'm looking for Sherrine. Have you r?"

ne was with me earlier," Dinsby said. "I came out here for the midnight poetry
saw her leave the room party a few minutes ago. I think she went outside." She
to the side door on the right.

tside, the night air was a knife in his lungs and the stars hung like diamonds on
He exhaled a cloudy breath. Not as cold as it had been up north; but still . . . The
was low in the west, casting pale, pearly shadows. One of the shadows moved
and Alex headed toward it.

e was hunched up with her knees tucked under her chin and her arms wrapped
her legs. Alex hunkered down beside her. She looked at him; looked away and
er sleeve across her nose.

ou shouldn't cry during an ice age," he told her. "Your eyes will freeze closed."
r open. I'd rather have them freeze open. Better to see if anyone's chasing you."
ou saw the news clip, then."

e said nothing, but Alex could sense her nod. "I won't make a very good 'wanted
ll I? If they showed Fang or Crazy Eddie on national TV with everyone in the
asked to turn them in . . . they'd throw a party."

ey think they can't be caught. They have faith in their own wits."

m in real trouble, then. My instincts are no damned good."

our instincts are the best."

m drunk, and I'm depressed, and I'm cold."

ex didn't think he could do much about the first two complaints. He put his arm
her. "Do you want to go back inside? It's warmer there."

could feel her shake her head. "No. I'm fine now." She snuggled against him.
ould have thought it could get so chilly in the desert?"

ex pointed to the sky with his left hand. "No clouds. The ground radiates its heat
en space. I bet you could make ice that way."

ou can."

h."

ook at the moon," she said. It was three-quarters full and just kissing the horizon,
by the lens of air. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

ot so beautiful as the Earth, looking back."

ave you ever been there? To the moon."

o." And now he could never go. Alex can't go out and play because he might get a
ed. I don't even have a suit anymore.

d like to go there. I've always wanted to go there. Ever since I read *Space Captives*
Golden Men. I forget who wrote it. A juvenile. These kids are kidnapped by
s—we could still imagine Martians in those days—and taken to the moon; and
rays wanted to be . . . to be. . ."

She turned and buried her face against him and he hugged her tight. "I'll take you where you promised. *Don't make promises you can't keep.* "Someday, I'll kidnap you and take you to the moon."

"Yes, Alex." She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was a soft, lingering kiss and Alex felt himself respond to the promise. He shifted his arms and hugged her tighter and kissed her back. "Alex, make love to me."

"What, here? Now? It's too cold."

"No, I laid her head on his shoulder. "You don't want to?"

"—yes, dammit. Yes, I do. But—"

"When you forget your damned courtship rites and your damned propriety. You're in the desert now. All the habitat rules are suspended."

"Except cold!" he laughed.

"She grabbed him and ran her hands down his body. The moon had set and the desert was as black as death. The galactic spiral was a garland draped across the sky. They explored under their clothing, exploring each other; never quite exposed to the night cold but feeling warm enough with the effort. Alex discovered that if you were careful and if you wanted something badly enough, you could accomplish anything. None of it was illegal."

"It was better than a plan."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The LASFS

Steve Mews and George Long pedaled through the decaying neighborhood at dusk. Steve looked around and whistled "Man, this place would make Harlem look like Bel

air. Steve Mews grinned. "Yeah, but it's not so bad. Besides, we're the meanest S-O-B's in the

neighborhood," George Long looked it. He was an enormous black giant. Steve had been trying to get to work out for years, but Long always said, "Hell, I'm a nurse! Sometimes I wonder what a frail old geriatric patient thinks when he sees, or *she* sees, Rosey Grier get laid down on her with a bedpan and a mucking great hypodermic. You get me doing sit-up and back-belt stuff and they'll arrest me for breathing."

The house was huge, a six-bedroom mansion built in the 1920s during the good old era. It hadn't been painted in years, and now stood almost isolated. There were other houses on both sides of it but they'd sunk even further into decay, not quite abandoned, but inhabited by people who just didn't give a damn. Mews led Long up the driveway to the garage in back. There were other bicycles there. The garage was dimly lit by a single electric bulb.

"Big place," Long said. "I knew Los Angeles fans had a clubhouse, but this is something!"

"Heh, heh. You don't know the half of it." Steve swept his hand around. "There was a lot of stuff going through. The Greens got that stopped, but the whole area had already been zoned. Nobody can get permits to build here, or to tear anything down either. It's all a bit stupid, but it's good for LASFS. Glen Bailey knew it first because he's a Green."

"Glen shied off a bit. "You've got a tame Green?"

"Lennie's not tame. But he's definitely one of ours, and he got us this house. They're paying us a caretaker fee to keep the druggies out!" He grinned. "Of course, they aren't paying the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, Inc. They're paying the LA Safety First Insurance Co. The checks still read LASFS."

"You're still incorporated?"

"No, they yanked our *Inc.* 'Not in the public interest.' I keep forgetting."

ere were more lights at the big house. Steve led the way to the back door and d, then stood in the dim pool of light from the porch lamp. After a moment the ened. " 'Lo, Steve," a large elderly woman said.

Lo, June. This is George Long."

know George," she said. "You're a long way from NESFA."

ng nodded. "New England's getting cold. I'm moving out here," he said. "By way dcon."

ran into him at Minicon, then on the Amtrak," Steve said.

he opened the door and led them into a kitchen. There were a dozen fans talking, g in doorways as fans did. Most didn't know George Long, but June was taking the introductions. "Is Merlin here yet?" Steve asked.

pstairs."

e stairway was ornate, with magnificent wood bannisters. There was mahogany oting in the hallways, and the ceilings were carved plaster. Most of the splendor decay, but here and there someone had worked to restore it.

e upstairs room was locked. Steve knocked and waited. Finally the door was by a tall man with stringy gray hair and bad teeth. He stood in the doorway.

"

need to get on-line."

erlin Null, LASFS Senior Committeeman, frowned at Mews. "The rules are, you and I do it if I think it's safe."

erlin, this is Stone from Heaven business."

ll thought about it. "Have to check." He came out into the hall, carefully locking r behind him, and led the way down the hall to another room.

C. Miller, often called Cissy for reasons no one remembered, was Chairman of the . He sat at a table in the old butlers pantry making a list. Miller was a large, round ay haired as most LASFASians were. His wife, Ginny, looked half his age, but ays had.

Steve wants me to log him on," Null said.

ller nodded knowingly. "It's all right. Steve, when you get done, we've got a e for you."

ackage?"

an Express," Miller said. "From Curtis. Address 'Bottle Shop Keeper, care of Mews.' I gather he wants you to deliver it."

hat figures. See you in a minute."

ck inside the locked computer room there were three people at a poker table. had been dealt, and there were poker chips in front of the players. No one really uch about illegal gambling, but it was a cover for the locked door.

ll locked the door again, then opened a cabinet. Inside were more poker chips and
Null reached past them to open the back of the cabinet, exposing a computer
. Null pulled it out. "OK, what?"
APANET," Steve said. "I need to get on."
ll typed furiously. There were the odd tones of a modem dialing, then locking on.
Null stepped back. "You got it."
ve typed gingerly. "They call me Bruce."
ello Bruce. Enter your password>:
am new in town."
elcome Bruce. Down, alter. Down I say! Be a good Imp and let me talk. Bruce,
ys they're looking forward to greatest burgers in the universe for lunch tomorrow.
tomorrow. Treasure hunt has gone well. Time to see the bottle shop wizard.>
oger Dodger." Steve stepped back from the console.
hat's it?" Null asked.
hat's a lot," Steve said. "Now I need to see C.C. again. I'm going to need some
arting with a car and somebody to drive."

e drive from Los Angeles through Mojave took nearly three hours in C.C. Miller's
owered car. Interstate 5, the main north-south California artery, was still
ned, but when they turned off into the Antelope Valley and headed toward
le the decay in America's infrastructure was obvious.
ey crossed the San Andreas Fault line. "Lucky so far," Miller said. "We've been
ng The Big One for years . . ."
ey said at Minicon that the Ice would definitely trigger it," Steve said. "Guess
uld close the highway for good."
mdale was half-deserted. They passed a stand of dead trees and grapevines. "Can't
agree with the Greens on that one," Steve said. "Sucking water out of
ento to grow Christmas trees and grapes in the desert never did make sense."
would if you had enough electricity to make the fresh water," C.C. Miller said.
ell, that's science fiction."
ey drove through Mojave, past the faded signs proudly announcing *Phoenix* and
r. Now Mojave was a small road town, as it had once been. They turned east.
sign told them it was twenty-five miles to the turnoff to the Thunder Ridge Air
Museum.

ere had once been a fence and guard post at the North Entrance to Edwards AFB,
guardhouse was boarded up, and the fence had been knocked down by
weeds piling against it. There had been some maintenance, though. The blacktop
the ridge from Highway 58 had potholes, but Steve didn't think it was much

than 58 itself, and 58 still had traffic, if you could call a truck every five minutes. The view across the Mojave Desert to the north was spectacular. So was the Dry Lake bed to the west. *Where the spaceships used to land. A million people lined out on the desert to watch the first shuttle landing*. . . The museum stood at the top of a ridge: several concrete block buildings, a house, a large concrete pad, and big cylindrical storage tanks. The security shack at the main gate to the facility was empty, but the gate was open. They drove on up to the main building, a huge structure. Most of the windows were boarded up, but not all, and there was a light inside one office.

Rory Hudson was tall and thin, graying a bit. He wore a silver-tan shirt and a desert hat that looked a bit like the old films of Indiana Jones when he wasn't carrying a rifle and a pistol. He came out of the office and watched as C.C. and Steve got out of the car.

"The museum's only open Friday and Saturday," he said. "Sorry, it's a long trip, maybe I can't show you a little anyway." He waved toward a big corrugated aluminum structure. "That's the shuttle hangar's in that hangar."

"We'd love to see it," Steve said. "Thanks."

Hudson led the way over in silence. The wind whistled off the Mojave Desert and whirled around them, rattling the corrugated metal of the hangar building. They went in through the small, people door set in the enormous hangar door. It was almost as loud as being outside, but it was a relief to be out of the wind.

The interior was gloomy inside. Hudson gave them a moment to let their eyes adjust. The roof was eighty feet or more above them, held up by a network of girders that looked awfully complicated just to hold up a roof.

The *Columbia* stood in the center of the enormous room. It looked like a giant ice cream cone, sixty feet high, standing on its big end. At the slightly rounded base it was half as wide as it was high. It stood alone, with no scaffolding around it.

Hudson threw a switch, and banks of spotlights came on.

The nose was rounded. Holes a foot and a half across ringed the base: not one big hole for a motor, but a couple of dozen little ones. There was a small door, high up. The hull was big enough to need hosing down, but it didn't seem to have been cut in half or anything. The damn thing even had windows.

Steve stared up at it. Beside him C.C. said, "Your big mistake was, rockets are supposed to be phallic symbols."

Hudson nodded. "Wrong shape. Too short, too. The tailfin on a 747 stood taller than that one."

"Yeah, oh, well, the shuttle wasn't any better—"

rmally Steve would have joined in. Somehow he didn't have the heart. There had
affolding; it had been wheeled into shadow to display the beast better. Like the
urn, laid out horizontally so the tourists could see it better.

—Saturn, too. What kind of a phallic symbol is it that comes apart during launch?"
eah, but it did *get* there, Gary."

use. "Yes. Well, *Phoenix* hasn't been well maintained, as you can see," Hudson
he'll never fly again." He looked closely at Steve. "I've seen you before. You
with a tour about two years ago."

ews nodded. "You must not get many people here."

ot many black people," Hudson said. "And you cried then, too."
h."

an I show you anything else?"

es. What I'd like to see is outside," Mews said. He led the way away from the
g, away from where *Phoenix* stood under the tin-roofed hangar. Away from the
ks. Off past the parking lot.

dson frowned but followed as Steve went out to an empty area. "Safe to talk
Steve asked.

dson nodded. "Safe everywhere. No bugs here, if there ever were any. Things
rate, and nobody cares about a dead bird anyway. She'll never fly again. Talk
what?"

ne sure looks dead." Steve sighed. "But I've got a package for you. Wade Curtis
tell you it's a Doherty Project."

ry Hudson's face went quite slack. He shied back a bit from the small parcel
pulled from his jacket pocket. "Doherty Project."

bsolutely."

dson took the package and opened it. Inside was a half-pint bottle of clear liquid.
beams?"

awater," Steve said "And we took that shipping tag off a compressed air cylinder.
poem written on it. It's to be pinned to the ground with a knife."

dson stared out across the desert. "For Mare Imbrium," he said slowly. "Yeah. All
ou're real. At least you sure come from Curtis. Like a ghost after all these years.
hat's up?"

ngels down. You heard about it."

ure. So?"

e rescued them."

here? Where are they?"

ews pointed east. "About ten miles that way. The Astroburger stand, at Cramer's
corners. Waiting for you to say it's all clear. They've got two tank trucks of jet fuel,
ROMs that Cole was keeping for you."

Harry Hudson stared at him. "But—you mean—" "Hope you've got your bags packed," Steve said. "It's time."

* * *

The motorcycle came up an hour later. Harry and Jenny got off and stretched tiredly. "Hello, Gary." "Hello, Harry. OK, you're real, too. Are there really Angels out there—" "The chili Ortega Astroburgers didn't kill 'em," Harry said. He looked around the parking lot. "Can we work alone here?" "Until Friday," Gary said. "And I can close the gate then, if there's good reason." Harry had a small radio, the kind that used to be sold in pairs as children's toys. He flipped the antenna. "Gabriel, this is Rover. All clear." He listened for a second and then said, "OK. Now, do you have a beer? It's been days. I mean literally." The tanker trucks wound slowly up the hill. Hudson watched with binoculars. "They're full," he said. "They are full," Harry said. "One diesel fuel, one JP-4. Enough to make the hydrogen bomb." "X—" "Not for a bird that will never fly," Hudson said. "Well, bullshit," Harry said. "You haven't been saying that so long you believe it, have you?"

"Harry—" Harry shrugged. "Okay, but you're scaring the kids. Look at Steve. He's turning blue." "I am not." "Not that man a mirror!" "Harry, there's no launching pad, *nothing*." "Sure," Harry said. "Gary, one thing, you better let the Angels in on this right away. When they finally set eyes on Cole's Titan, they were ready for self-immolation." Hudson was sweating, and it wasn't the heat. "Harry, why don't I just put up a neon sign?"

"It's gonna get conspicuous anyway, isn't it?" "This is just what I've been avoiding for fifteen years. More. Some of the Air Force would like to daydream, but a real launch? If they see . . ." "You're gonna be conspicuous. That's all. What can you *do* that won't show right away?" "Making fuel is noisy. Your grocery bill is gonna go up. You'll have to wheel the tanks out—" "No, that's the one thing I don't have to do. Bring them in, Harry. Just bring them."

* * *

The truck was crowded with four in the truck. The Angels hadn't wanted to be separated from each other, and Gordon hadn't wanted to travel without Barbara Dinsby. *New love*

love, Bob Needleton thought. They look cute together. Of course it meant that he was riding with Fang in the other truck. It might be maybe that's all right too. It was pretty clear that something was happening with Alex and Sherrine. And we're leaving her behind, too. If that rocket works I am going. I have earned a place. I thought of the rescue! Harry was waiting at the turnoff into Edwards. He waved them on, then passed both to lead the way. Bob was glad that the road was twisty and full of holes. He needed the distraction.

* * *

Arteria drove past the turnoff into Edwards and went on for another mile before stopping. Even then she stayed well inside her car, so that the sun wouldn't flash off the windows. She watched as the trucks ground slowly up the hill. It was far so good. And Moorkith was still looking for the Angels down by the Mexican border, certain that they were being smuggled out of the country. Arteria grinned broadly. It's too late, Moorkith, my lad. They're on Air Force property now. They're

* * *

Harry Hudson shook hands with Alex, then Gordon. He prolonged his grip on Gordon's hand. "Weak arm, strong grip. Do you have any trouble standing?" Gordon grinned broadly. "Stronger every day. Steve has—" Harry Hudson pulled his arm to the right and back. Gordon fell over. Harry Hudson's left arm caught Gordon's elbow and pulled him back upright. Nobody was looking at Gordon's gaping astonishment. Harry Hudson said, "Sorry. I had to *know*. So. It's decision time." "What's to decide?" Harry said. "They need to go to orbit, and you have the only ship that will get them there." "Sorry—" Miller said. "You're right," Fang said. "God damn." "So I just fire it up and go," Gary said. "So simple. Why didn't I think of that?" Gordon asked, "is it real? Will it fly?" "It's real but—" Gary caught himself. He took a deep breath. "It's a real rocket ship. It goes straight up on a pillar of fire. It even goes into orbit. Barely. Almost." "Nobody wanted to say it, so they all looked at each other until Jenny Trout said, 'It's good is that?'" "I don't get much chance to explain this. We have here a *prototype*, and it isn't the final thing. When we were doing the planning, I took the most optimistic assumptions. It's not? But the FAA had some rules that apply to airplanes. My stockholders wanted a heat shield. The landing, legs—" "No landing legs? Sorry," Alex said. "Of course it has to land. I'm too used dippers."

ure. *Phoenix* comes down on its own tail fire, just like all the old *Analog* covers, e the LEM. I made the legs so slender it won't stand up unless the fuel tanks are empty. But they still have to take a recoil, and my stockholders wanted them beefed up. Hudson's bony shoulders rose and fell. "Everything got just a little heavier. But, dammit! I'd have put a bigger cabin on the real thing. It'd fire passengers around the world in under two hours. Every president of every company or country would want one. And with the zero stage it could have reached *geosynchronous* orbit and that would have been . . ."

body had said anything about a "zero stage." Alex was about to comment when she went on. "The zero stage would have been cheap as dirt. Same fuel and oxygen tanks, same pump system, same legs—because of course it lands independently! Half as many motors and no heat shield. You could serve a dozen *Phoenixes* with two zero stages because they recycle so fast."

o where is our zero stage?"

paid the lawyers for awhile, and then I was bankrupt. The Greens sued me. "Holes in the ozone layer, yada yada." Hudson shook his head violently. "Sorry. Not the subject. You want to know what you need *now*."

C. said, "Yeah. You can't get to orbit?"

can *barely* get into an *elliptical* orbit with the low end eighty miles up. The zero stage pulls it down fast. But another ship could rendezvous and boost it the rest of the way. That must be what you were planning with the Titan, wasn't it?"

eah. What else do we need?"

quite a lot—"

Will these help?" Bob Needleton held out a package wrapped in foil. "Cole said we need more ROMs."

ry took the package. "That's a spare set, but yeah, after all these years it's worth a program comparison."

nd we brought you the fuel to make the fuel," Sherrine said. And—fans have been collecting things to go up with the Angels. Seeds, chemicals, supplies, all kinds of stuff."

ll that stuff isn't coming up here!" Hudson exclaimed.

o, no, it's going to a safe place in Los Angeles," Miller said. "We'll bring the zero stage's needed from there."

udson nodded.

an—may we see the ship?" Barbara Dinsby asked. She was holding tightly onto Alex's hand.

udson sighed. "Yeah, sure." He led them into the hangar and turned on the lights.

od, that's beautiful," Jenny said. "Beautiful. Starfire!"

ex walked slowly over to the ship. He ran his hands along the sides, then stooped up into the engine chambers. When he stood again his face had changed.

ou can fly it, Alex?" Gordon asked.

doesn't need a pilot," Alex said. "It's up to Mr. Hudson, I think. But it's clear he has been taking care of this ship. He looked up at the roof scaffolding. "Does it even?"

st once," Gary said.

nce is all we need," Alex said. He looked straight at Hudson. "Commander—our leader in the habitats—I'll start over. We thought it would be pointless to say anything to Lonny Hopkins about spaceships. Now . . . does he have a decision to make? Do I call him? I wouldn't want to unless this was all real."

et me think about it," Gary said.

on't think too long," C.C. Miller said.

ry frowned at him.

he heard from Ted Johnstone in Phoenix. He works for the Highway Department.

ice are looking for milk trucks. They're being real quiet about it, but they're

h, shit," Fang said.

ne church," Harry said. "That's—"

hat's fine," Jenny said. "So first thing is we get the damn trucks under cover, right? Like there's room in here."

ctually, there's a garage made for tanker trucks," Gary said. "I'll show you." He went toward the door, then turned back. "Hell, I don't know why I'm stalling. I've been waiting for this all my life. Major MacLeod, you can tell your boss that with any luck we can be launching you within a week."

ree fans had wheeled the scaffold up to the *Phoenix*. Hudson climbed up to the top and used a key, tried to open it.

then Alex was up there with him, climbing barefooted, using his toes. He felt no fear climbing this spiderweb of metal, but he didn't trust gravity. He set himself and went alongside Hudson, and the oval plug-shaped door swung back.

ree heads poked in: Gary, Alex, Gordon. And a fourth: Sherrine. Sherrine said,

ere were four seats, two with control consoles, two without. There were tanks, and struts, and oxygen lines. Hudson waved and pointed and lectured. "We were set for a month in orbit. A lot of this could come out, because we don't need that much. I could have got another couple of seats in. Of course I don't have the seats, but I can sweat. Glue in an exercise mat and two, pillows for knees and head, that's all it takes. It's a matter of what cargo you're willing to give up."

our." Gordon scowled. "I should be reassured that it will not shrink by more yet."

ex said, "After Chicago, after Titan, I wouldn't have believed *this* much. Gordon, we can get home again!"

a."

e stilyagin's enthusiasm left something to be desired. No seat for Barbara? Others ay, too . . . but Gordon wouldn't meet Alex's eyes.

ey sat in the large workroom outside Hudson's office. In better times a dozen ers would have sat at the desks and drafting tables there. C.C. Miller had his ok and was ready to make a list. "All right. Dr. Hudson, what do we have to do

etails," Gary said. "First things first. We clean out the tanks. The hydrogen tank eed a lot of work, but there's a fair amount of work to clean the oxygen tank. eed alcohol."

lcohol," Miller said. "What kind?"

anything would work, but since there will be people working in that tank, we'll hanol so we don't poison them."

C. wrote it down on his list.

ow much alcohol?" Harry asked.

allons."

allons." Harry shook his head. "All right. I'll see what I can do." He grinned.

to be the first time I ever convinced LASFS that they ought to buy me enough to God knows I've tried."

ow many people do we need?" C.C. Miller asked. "To clean the tanks, other

Well, maybe ten," Gary said. "Moving scaffolds, just standing watch, that sort of But they'd have to be reliable."

hey will be," Miller said. "I've got Lee Jacobs rounding up a crew. They'll come van, as soon as some of the other stuff from the treasure hunt comes in. Gary. you a bit surprised by some of what they've rounded up."

dson said, "Can you keep most of the LASFS away? I'll look conspicuous enough a horde of fans looking over our shoulders."

hat I can do, *maybe*, is make it official. Announce that anyone who comes brings es. I worried about that. What are a dozen of us going to eat? Nobody gets in a bag of groceries per. Nobody will do that twice. Fans can't afford it."

dson nodded reluctantly.

fter we clean the tanks," Alex said. "What then?"

e have to get hydrogen. That's not hard, the pipeline's already in place, we just tap e main pipeline into Mojave. We'll have to go turn it on, but the valve's not d."

"Don't anyone notice?" Sherrine asked.

"Not for a couple of weeks," Gary said. "And by then with any luck——"

"Right," Miller said. "What happens after the hydrogen's flowing?"

"Compression," Hudson said. "We run the turbo compressor and liquify the hydrogen. Takes about three days. Make it four to be sure."

"What about the LOX?" Harry asked.

"That takes about three days, too, but it's quieter," Hudson said. "That takes a diesel engine. The hydrogen compressor is run by a jet engine."

"Jet engine," Sherrine said. "Aren't they noisy?"

"A little," Hudson said. "Hell, a lot."

"Do we have to run a jet engine for three days," Miller said. "Don't you think they will notice?"

"We thought about that for ten years," Hudson said. "I've got a cover story. This is a research facility as well as a museum. We'll say we're doing hydrogen energy research. I can double-talk it. I've even got a grant request to show around. It should work——"

"And if it doesn't work, we're all dead," Alex said.

"Would it help if we had a high ranking Green space cadet up here?" Miller asked.

"Green space cadet? Contradiction in terms," Hudson said.

"C. Miller grinned. "That's what you think. OK, what comes after you make the hydrogen?"

"We need the IMU," Hudson said. "I know where it is."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I actually get along pretty good with some of the Air Force johnnies over at the base. They keep hoping we'll be able to take *Phoenix* up again. But, you know, I'm not a professional thief," Hudson said. "Somebody's got to break in and steal the IMU. I think we do that last thing. I can double-talk the compressor if we get unwanted attention, but there's only one thing we could be doing with the IMU."

"How long does it take to install?"

"Hudson shrugged. "Half an hour, but it's better if we can run some tests. Four or five tests after installation."

"And then?"

"Launch," Gary said. "And I get to find out what free fall feels like."

"You're going then," Miller said. He made another note.

"Well yes I'm going," Gary said. "I've waited all my life. Not to mention what they'll do for stealing my own ship. I'd take Annie, too, but she's in New York. Laid up for weeks with a cracked ankle. Lousy timing."

"Makes sense." C.C. wrote rapidly. "So. There's you, and the two Angels. Say about a hundred pounds. How much more can we lift?"

"Four thousand pounds," Gary said.

ah. One seat open, and still room for supplies."
ex shook his head. "Before you start filling those seats, you better let me talk to
nder Hopkins. He's going to have something to say about that."

ig Daddy, this is *Piranha*. Big Daddy, this is *Piranha*."
a, *Piranha*, we relay you. Be standink by."
lex! Are you all right?"

etter than all right, Mary. Is the Commander there?"
n here, MacLeod. What's your situation?"
amned good, that's what my situation is," Alex said. "I feel like singing, that's

re you drunk?"
o, sir, not drunk. Not on booze, anyway. Commander, we have a spacecraft."
ere was a long pause. "The transponder says you're in the Mojave Desert.

r?"
es, sir. *Phoenix*. We can—Gary Hudson says we can lift off in about five days.
argo. About two tons of cargo. Seeds, computer chips, vegetables, minerals—you
, they seem to have found it for us."

udson. Gary Hudson. He's still alive?"
es, sir, alive and in charge. You know him?"
know about him."

ex couldn't get any information from the tone of voice. "Sir, he wants to come up
. But wait until you hear what all we can bring with us. Look, I know Hudson's a
d, and you don't want more crew, but—"

hat's funny," Hopkins said.
r?"

MacLeod, I'd far rather have Hudson than you; He's a ship designer. And that
Is Hudson there?"
es, sir."

ut him on."
ex had set up the radio in Hudson's office. He motioned Hudson in and took off
dset. "He wants to talk to you. Commander, this is Gary Hudson. Gary,
nder Lonny Hopkins."
ello, Commander." Hudson put on the headset. "Yes. Yes, sir, it's the old *Phoenix*,
believe she'll work, but it's going to be close. We'll get into an elliptical orbit, but
not enough fuel to rendezvous. You'll have to come get us."
ex listened for a moment, then felt useless. Maybe they wouldn't want him to
I'd *far rather have Hudson than you*. It made sense, but it still hurt. He went out

main engineering bay. The others were grinning like crazy, but their faces fell when they saw Alex's expression.

"What did he say?" Gordon asked. "It is impossible after all?"

"Uh? No, as far as I know everything's fine. Last I heard they were talking details, but it didn't sound like anything was a showstopper."

"Then what is eating you?" Sherrine asked. "We're here! It's working!" Her expression didn't match her words. She looked almost as down as Alex did.

"S—"

"Alex," Hudson called. "Your turn again."

"Yes, sir," Alex said. "Of course I can't tell without really inspecting the ship, but everything looks all right. Gary started the diesel compressor, and that works. We don't need to fire up the jet turbo expander until the hydrogen is flowing, but the unit's in place. It's just the way Hudson explained it, we make the fuel, steal an IMU, and go. Five days."

"All right," Hopkins said. "And meanwhile there's all that cargo." There was no doubt in his mind but Alex could see Hopkins rubbing his hands together. "And the ship! The ship's OK. Now for passengers. I'm told it seats four. I don't have to tell you that we really need more drones up here. Hudson's fine. Hudson's wonderful. Gordon's wonderful. He will be very pleased to get him back. That's two. But then there's a problem. A problem, sir? I'm all right, I won't have to do any EVA on this—"

"You might, but that's not the difficulty." Commander Hopkins paused for a moment. "MacLeod, I'll come get you. But bring your own woman."

"Sir."

"We understand each other, MacLeod. Shall I get Mary in on this loop? I can, and I don't want to have to. I have to have to."

"MacLeod, I wouldn't risk the fuel for you. You know that, I know that, Mary knows that. You're bringing up treasure beyond price, and you'll have a new job up here, coordinating with our friends on the ground, because, although you don't seem to have a problem with it, I have: that ship can land and take off again. We can send it back down for supplies."

"It's not a bitch, Alex thought. Of course it can. We were so concerned with getting *up* there. —" Yes. I see that."

"I don't want someone else to coordinate with the ground people. You seem to understand them, but there's nothing else for you to do between flights, so it's you. Only I don't want you hanging around Mary while you do it. She's pregnant, you know."

"No. I didn't know."

"It may be yours. It's not mine."

put up. I've been sterile since the Lunar reactor flared. I was impotent for a while, now I'm still sterile, but I'm not impotent. And you will stay away from Mary. I want you to be sure of that. Bring your own woman, MacLeod."

"So I'm in." Sherrine smiled.

Sherrine considered that. "I'll come, of course. But you get to tell Bob."

Sherrine, there's room for five, or six, or whoever we *have* to take. It's a trade, a trade for cargo—"

"I'll get him aboard. But without you, *I* don't go. And I'm on record, I could live with that. Would you live with me on the ground? Marry me?"

"I *come*."

"Why aren't we smiling?"

Sherrine lunged. Alex thought the impact would knock him backward, but she was her mass and his, too. What muscles she had! And she felt so good. Why hadn't she been doing this ever since Flagstaff? And she buried her face in his throat and said, "I wanted, damn. Four seats. Would you have asked me anyway?"

"When I got up the nerve."

Time was getting damn short, Alex! How long would you have waited?"

"Oh . . . just about thirty seconds too long, judging by past performance. But it's all right? Lonny Hopkins as Cupid." He pulled back to see her face. "It's not okay." "It's okay," Sherrine said. "I'm tougher than you think."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Death Will Not Release You . . ."

Stakeout could be a peaceful, lazy, catch-up time. Arteria hadn't done stakeout in years. She played a box of cassettes from Books by Mail while she watched and waited. Some science fiction was still approved. The box was labeled as "The Sheep Look On" by John Brunner.

She had a perfect site, on a hill high above the old Rogers Dry Lake. Her binoculars and telescope camera lenses could see most of Thunder Ridge.

Vehicles came: vans and campers, six to ten passengers each. Numerous grocery stores went into the concrete buildings. Nothing heavy. The tanker trucks had vanished long ago; they certainly hadn't come down the hill again. Vehicles came and went. They stayed.

Not a lot of manpower there. What work would need all those hands? Most of it must be done in the hangar. Meanwhile, a city of tents and campers was going up on the ridge.

It had been like this in the days when the shuttle landed. Much larger crowds then, of course. Several square miles of Nature's own parking lot, with guides to set them in rows. Tents, vans, a line of huckster tent-booths selling food, drink, badges and patches, and paintings, commemorative mugs and T-shirts. At night, little coal fires, music, and a whiff of marijuana; tiny parties and profound silences, while hundreds of thousands of people waited for dawn.

Everybody else always saw it first. Then there it was, nose pointed *way* down, the boxiest glider. You'd hear *BooBoom*, a double sonic boom from the nose and the tail, and a bulge at the tail.

Afterward the Air Force raked up their several square miles of garbage and ran a bulldozer over the black spots where fires had been, and it was as if the crowds had never been.

Fifty to thirty of them, now; no more. No spacecraft would be landing tomorrow. Were they singing? Did they tell old stories? Lee Arteria the outsider, the watcher, stood and wondered what she was waiting for.

Heep! Wheep! Wheep! Captain Lee Arteria tore off the fax sheet and spread it.

WE'RE HERE AT GEORGE AFB. TWO SQUADS AIR POLICE, TWO PILOTS,
HELICOPTER AND ME. STANDING BY FOR ORDERS. COLONEL
WHY WANTS TO KNOW WHERE THE HELL YOU ARE. I TOLD HIM YOU
A BIG CASE BUT I'D FIND OUT.
LLINGS

ah. I'm going to have to do something pretty quick or get off the pot. But when? By
she got license plates and photographs of conspirators: half a dozen cars and
with a dozen people—sensitive fannish faces on Thunder Ridge.
What good was this doing? Especially now. One call, and the Air Police would
find the place. Her chopper would come. Imagine the consternation when she

far there were no decisions to make. The astronauts—she was quite certain that
so they were—had made no attempt to leave the base. Everyone else could be
found and tracked down.

What are you waiting for, dear? Lee Arteria had always liked the chase better
the kill; but this was different, very different.

The motorcycle started, was coming down the hill now. Two people on it. The usual
tall bearded driver. No guitars. It was just dusk, not much light, and they were
too fast for her to see the face of the rider, who was wearing a helmet anyway,
but clearly wasn't the thin older woman who usually rode back there.

There was a tool kit strapped to the luggage carrier. The motorcycle reached the
top of the hill, but instead of turning north onto Rocket Site Road—on her new, map
labeled Ecology Ruin Drive—the motorcycle turned west. That road led around
Dry Lake and down to the south entrance of the base, into the area still guarded
by Air Force. What in the world would they be doing there? They'd need papers—
when the road turned southwest, the motorcycle continued due west. It passed just
past Arteria's hill and continued out across the dry lake. *Curiouser arid curiouser—*
Night was falling fast now. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. What in hell can
she be planning?

She got out her best night glasses. There was just enough moonlight to let the big
stars follow the unlighted motorcycle across the lake—
They stopped about a quarter of a mile from the fence, left the bike, and went on foot
toward the fence.

Not quite to the main fence. To a smaller fenced compound outside the main base.
No figures huddled near the fence on the far side from the base. No one was likely
to see them—no one not watching them in the first place, anyway. In a few minutes they
were inside the fence and alongside the corrugated aluminum building. Either the door
was unlocked or they were good at lockpicking, because it didn't stop them for long.

ey went in. Arteria timed it: nine minutes and a couple of seconds. Then they were in, out the door, pause to repair the fence, then out on the lake, running to the highway. They walked it for half a mile, then started it up and drove without lights. The wind covered the sound as they drove back up to Thunder Ridge. Arteria got out her map of the base. It took a while to find the area that the bandits frequented, but there it was:

HYDROGEN PIPELINE VALVE CONTROL BUILDING

The main hydrogen pipeline led down from the north, across Edwards, and on toward Dryden. Two smaller lines branched off at Edwards. One went from the valve building into Dryden. The other went around the dry lake and up to Thunder Ridge.

* * *

"Flicker'n any weasel," Harry said. "Got in, broke the lock, turned on the valve, and closed the lock back so nobody'll notice even if they look."

"They can find the hole in the fence," C.C. Miller said.

"Bob Needleton said, 'We did a pretty good job of restoring the fence, too. It's like a hole in the wall, if they know to look they'll find it, but that's the only way. The real question is, how much hydrogen coming through?'"

"There's pressure," Hudson said. "We're bleeding out air now, but if there's pressure, we'll have hydrogen by morning. OK. Well done. Tomorrow comes the real work."

Harry was weeping. "Shame," he said. "Goddam shame." He crawled out of the tank, dripping, like the first fish that tried to conquer the land. He was wearing white coveralls, black boots, and a big white painter's hat. His face and beard were nearly covered by black cloths, and he wore white gloves. He stood up in the sunlight, leaning heavily on his cane, and blubbered. "Goddam crying shame."

"How horrible. All that scotch." Fang's voice echoed like a thousand metal ghosts. "He popped out of the opening, swathed in white like Harry's and smiling a goofy grin. 'Liter . . . rary reference.'"

"It's in a good cause," Hudson said. "Harry, you're supposed to clean that tank, not use the solvent."

"I didn't drink one damn thing. Not one," Harry blubbered. "Poor LASFS. Nothing to do anymore. All they had."

"Drink, no," Fang said. "Woosh! But a man's got to breath. Doesn't he? Hee!"

"Anyway, I think that's enough for Harry," Hudson said. "You, too, Fang. Who's

"How horrible! All that scotch!" *Mad* magazine, fifties," Fang said. "When the hangover comes in, we should breathe summa *that*. Hangover."

"I'll take a turn," Jenny said. "I'm with Harry, though. Distilling the alcohol off good and bourbon is a hanging offense." She took Fang's protective garments as he handed them off. "Cheer up, Harry. You've never been so drunk, and the LASFS paid

The noise began at noon, the high-pitched scream of a jet engine. Arteria's camp was three miles from Thunder Ridge, but it was still noisy. She swept her binoculars over the area. The fans had clustered around one of the big cylindrical tanks, had opened and gone inside two and three at a time. They came out staggering. Now they had the tank sealed off and they'd started the big jet engine on a stand next to the other buried tank. Other fans were carrying things into the big hangar that housed the Arteria had never seen.

There was other machinery running, too. A big diesel engine belched smoke on and still put fumes into the air. That one seemed to be attached to the larger of the two cylinders. After a while the lines from the diesel began to smoke. It was not smoke. Condensation, even in this dry air. LOX! They're making LOX, which is liquid oxygen. They explain their working on the tank, cleaning it out. LOX, and hydrogen. Arteria had never seen anyone liquefy gasses, but it was clear that's what they were doing. They must be entirely crazy—like the Jonestown massacre, whole communities of people had, and this little clump of madmen must think—but *why* did they think they

As the anticipation grows, in the crew that waits below, in the silent burst of stars at the dawn.

Starfire! Starfire! We can know the promise of the stars . . .

Unless I stop it. I'm supposed to stop it.

Arteria was still watching when the Green Police car drove onto the base.

* * *

The car glowed iridescent green like a bottlefly. It wound up the side of the hill toward Thunder Ridge. Harry dove into his saddlebags and came up with a pistol. Jenny pulled one from her boot.

"No, dammit," C.C. Miller said. "Put the damn hardware away." He had to shout, to scream, to be heard over the sound of the compressor. "They're police!" Harry said.

C.C. was bobbing and weaving to stay out of the line of Harry's weaving revolver. A hangover wasn't much better than Harry drunk. "Harry, we don't have time. Shut up and get yourselves under cover! We'll fix it!"

"We'll be watching," Jenny threatened. She pulled Harry into the blockhouse.

"So damned close," Hudson said. "Another couple of days—"

"Come and meet them."

h, joy."
meet them on their own territory. At their car. It's supposed to be reassuring,"
said.
e Green car pulled up and two men got out. C.C. Miller waved to one of them, a
an with a beard so black that it looked dyed. "Hello, Glen!"
ello. This is official. Captain Hartwell, Green Police. Dan, this is C.C. Miller.
Gary Hudson. He's in charge here."
Hartwell was tall and thin. His look was grim as he stared at the let engine. "What is
e shouted.
Hudson indicated the office area. "It's quieter in there." He led them inside. With the
d windows closed they could almost talk.
ll right," Hartwell said. "What's going on?"
hydrogen economy experiments," Hudson said. "We're liquefying hydrogen and
. Then well burn them. If we can increase the efficiency of hydrogen burning by
cent, we can save enormous amounts of energy. Just enormous. And with the
getting longer, and everything colder——"
ou mean the glaciers coming," Hartwell said.
ell, yes, but I wasn't sure you guys believed in them," Hudson said. "I've talked to
—"
ome fuggheaded Green Police," Hartwell said. "Yeah, but you can't judge us by
Niven's law. No cause is so noble that it won't attract fuggheads."
ell—yes," Hudson said. "But wouldn't expect you to believe *that* either."
e're not all fools," Hartwell said. "Man, that noise pollution is *savage*, and the
isn't much better. If you can really justify this you'd better tell *me*, quick, because
e is sure as hell going to notice."

* * *

at as well I didn't move, Captain Arteria thought. The Greens Cat there even faster
I have guessed. They'd have beat me in.
d now what? Call the helicopter, go down, and claim them. It's still an Air Force
/ait . . . hell, now who's come to join the party? She swung the binoculars to the
f a dust plume just starting up the hill. *More Greens? Oh, Lord, it's Earth First.*

ack letters on the car's iridescent green flank read REMEMBER THE GREAT
KA OIL SPILL!
hey should change that bumper sticker," Sherrine said to C.C. "You knew one of
C. said, "Glen's ours, roughly speaking——" And then Glen Bailey had nearly
t them. C.C. yelled above the jet roar, "Where's your friend, Glen?"

udson's still lecturing Hartwell. Some fur haters called in a violation in the
, so I grabbed him and came. Hartwell was never in fandom, he just used to read
f, so I've got no strings on him, but he kind of caught the bug. He'd wipe out all
uting factorties if we have to, but he'd rather put them in orbit and on the moon
they can't hurt anything and turn the Earth into a park like the good guys wanted to
pirals and—"

C. held, up both hands. "Okay, okay. Sherrine, what were you—" "
he bumper sticker," she said.

o?"

looks . . . All right, the Great Alaska Oil Spill. I was in grade school," Sherrine
remember my father shouting at the television and cutting his Exxon credit card
ps. He shouted in my face about greed and profit. The Sound was going to be
d for years. So the next summer I asked him why the TV people didn't go back to
and show people how polluted it still was. Daddy gave me a funny look and never
ned it again. The Greatest Oil Spill in History, and it wasn't worth a one-year"later
up."

en was still looking at her. She said, "Then Saddam Hussein covered the Persian
th oil and made it all moot. So our bumper sticker looks fairly silly, doesn't it,
or? And in ten minutes an Earth First police van is going to be up here and on our
—"

C. was shaking his head and smiling while Inspector Bailey said, "You don't get it.
n doesn't listen. I mean he's dead, of course, but he didn't listen any better when he
ve, let alone to infidels from Satan's own United States. Why would anyone be
g in Iraq's ear when they don't listen? Corporations listen. McDonald's switched
per to plastic even when it would *hurt* the environment, because the Greens told
. Remember the boycotts against South Africa? The Soviets made them look like
ys by any civilized standard, but they just didn't fucking *listen*, so what would be
nt in—"

nough, Glen," C.C. said. "Did you get enough from Gary? Can you talk to Earth
out hydrogen experiments?"

eah, have some faith, Cissy, I'll have them dying to put their support behind—" "
eah, good, good." Then they all ducked as the Earth First van pulled up in a wave

* * *

boy and a girl, both tall and lean and dark-haired and well under twenty, spilled
he van and pointed and jabbered. Noise! Smoke! See? See? Three uniformed
first cops, two women and a man, followed them out more slowly. Glen walked up
them.

errine said, "Those kids must be the ones who turned us in."

Sherrine, I don't want to be recognized, but one of us should be there," C.C. said.

"I don't want them thinking Glen's a flake."

"I cherish the thought!"

"I'm not *like* that. He's bright, but there's a glitch in his programming. Too much LDS
sixties, like Mister Spock." Sherrine laughed, but C.C. went on earnestly. "He can't
think by himself. He has to be stopped."

Glen talked. The Earth Firsters nodded. The boy and girl listened, ready to offer what
they saw.

Hudson and Hartwell came out of Hudson's office and sauntered toward the Earth
First van.

The kids had moved closer to the compressors. The noise was horrendous, and the
girl put her hands over her ears as she stared at the spinning jet turbine. Sherrine
watched as the girl moved around toward the front of the engine. The danger area was
marked off with a low rope barrier, but it would be easy to step over it. "Hey!"
Sherrine screamed and ran toward the girl. "Stop!" The screen over the jet intake would
stop birds, but it might not be strong enough to hold a one-hundred-pound girl. *Talk
about mixed emotions!* Sherrine thought.

The boy had moved closer to the exhaust, and now stood with his nose wrinkled as
he put his hands over his ears. Eager to be offended. When he saw Hudson and the
Earth Firsters gather near the police van, he got the girl and led her over. Good. They did not
want an injured civilian.

The Earth First cop talked while Glen smiled and nodded.

Sherrine strolled up; but what would she *say*? How do you talk about hydrogen? The
Earth Firsters are water vapor, utterly pollution free, and what else is there? Now Glen was
talking again. "So, Michael. You were on your way from Las Vegas to L.A. for a, what, a
celebration?"

"Yeah, outside the premiere," the tall boy said. "Anyone wearing fur, she'll at least
know what we think of her! The rest of us went on in the other car, but Barb and I
thought we'd better report what we saw. Jeez, you can *smell* it, the filth they're putting in
the air."

"Kid," said the male Earth First cop, "have you noticed it's getting chilly lately?"
"Sure, the Ice is coming." The boy named Michael looked elaborately around him at
the edge of the desert. "Okay, I've seen them on TV, the glaciers, but they don't affect the
ground, they don't affect the blood spilled. Wearing fur was murder when the goddam
Earth Firsters were still whimpering about global warming, and it's still murder today!"
"I don't question that, but it seems to me," Glen said to the speaker, "that all of your
Earth Firsters are women. Isn't that sexist? I mean, men wear fur, too, not often, but—"

The Earth First policewoman said, "He has a point, kid. Sexism is politically
correct, too. I think you need to target an equal number of fur-wearing males."

w Barb was glaring at Michael. The boy said, "Uh . . ."
nd why just fur?" said Glen. "Leather is the skin of a dead animal, too!"
rth First glanced down at their boots. So did both of the kids. Sherrine hadn't had
nything at all. Glen let them argue—fur versus leather, wild free beasts versus
eld prisoner until their deaths, hide and meat versus fur alone. The teens' respect
orms was fading. The cops were getting angry.
en said, "What we could do is, we should station teams outside biker bars and
ye on leather-clad *men* as they come out."
e jet motor roared in a sudden silence.
hat would be more correct," the girl called Barb bellowed. "We'd include men as
women. And it would show that we care as deeply about homely cows and other
producing animals as we care about cute, furry rabbits and minks."
ichael said, "Barb—"
, that *would* be fun, Sherrine thought. Glen was right: the attacks on fur-bearing
lass women *were* sexist. Let's see what leather-clad bikers do when Michael and
it on their jackets. Sherrine was trying to swallow a grin . . . and Earth First turned
Hudson and Hartwell with evident relief.

* * *

body seemed to be under arrest. Just a shouting match. Lee Arteria still didn't see
presence could swing events one way or another.
e watched the Earth First cops begin a search. Hudson would have his papers in
f course assuming the cops even recognized the spacecraft. Presently they drifted
till the desert roared and black smoke drifted, and still there were no arrests.
w the cops got back into their van; the teens argued, then got in, too. The van
ff. Minutes later, the Green car followed.
w the hell did they work that?
d where did it leave Captain Lee Arteria?
nity check: they were still liquefying hydrogen and oxygen. They had come to see
x . . . possibly they'd had contingency plans, but they'd come to see *Phoenix* first,
at they saw must have looked like a working spacecraft. Crazy amateurs . . . but
d Gary Hudson to tell them whether *Phoenix* was in any way crippled, and they'd
Hudson sane.
ey were planning to launch.
ey were still gathering. The grandest gathering of pro-technology buffs ever to
-engine roar and hot kerosene exhaust into clean desert air was still gathering.
d oxydizer, the stranded dipper pilots as passengers, maybe Hudson himself as
. what else did they need? Cargo? *That's what the fans were up to, all that weird*
argo for the space habitats! There had been a lot of stuff, boxes, paper bags, at

e cooler. Course programming: they must have that solved. Copies of the
ns stored away. So. What else would they need to launch?
e Arteria smiled. Yes!

LLINGS, TELL COLONEL MURPHY THAT WE'RE ABOUT
O MAKE THE MOST IMPORTANT ARREST OF THE DECADE.
TH SPACEMEN PLUS THE WHOLE NETWORK THAT SMUGGLED THEM
SS THE COUNTRY. USAF AND OSI WILL GET EVERY BIT OF THE
T.
LL HIM TO HANG ON FOR THREE MORE DAYS AND WE'RE SET. THIS
GET HIM A BRIGADIER'S STARS. NOT TO MENTION PROMOTIONS FOR
ND ME.
TERIA

* * *

ey only turned on the lights in the hangar when they had to, and never at night.
nted windows must be visible for tens of miles. It was near dusk, and the daylight
the windows was dimming, but Harry Czescu and Bob Needleton continued to
argo. "Sarge" Workman helped for awhile, but he was the only jet mechanic they
d they needed him to keep the turbo expander working properly. Gordon joined
ot tired and quit.
thing was large, nothing was heavy. They climbed about within the cabin space,
g everything with lightweight nylon cord. Heavier stuff on the bottom, then sturdy
ages. Guinea pigs and guinea hens and rabbits expressed anxiety in their diverse
s.
ake sure you don't cover up the front of the cage," Bob said. They need air."
each your grandmother to suck eggs . . ."
net would cover everything once it was all in place. The paper in the cages would
ut just before they closed up the *Phoenix*. Or maybe not. The cages stank, but after
anics were organics . . .
other load in place. Back out, and down to ground level. Harry lit a cigarette. He
t about the only one on Thunder Ridge who smoked. He took two puffs and
off the end, put the butt back in the package. "OK, do we want to glue the mat in
or wait?"
b didn't answer.
ghten *up*, Pins. Nobody thinks—" Harry looked up. "Hi, Sherry, C.C. Alex, they
e you an exercise mat."
i, Harry." C.C. rubbed his hands together briskly. "Okay. What can we give up?
nose mice are gengineered to produce juvenile growth hormones. That'd let the
grow their bones back, right?"

that's what I'm told," Alex said.

You need the seeds a lot, the guinea pigs and guinea hens and rabbits not as much.

at supplements, of course. No bull semen, to bowdlerize a phrase. Sausage packed ice?"

sausage, no. Eat it before we take off, if it's that good and won't keep. Dry ice, *hell* bon we want, but oxygen comes almost free from lunar rock. Did anyone think of a lamp black?"

C. ran his eyes down the list. "I don't think so. I'll see what we can get when. How do you want these metals? And the honeycomb blocks? They're heavy."

is not really my department, C.C."

Alex, you and Gordon are the only ones who can make these choices. And five fingers . . . Where the hell is Gordon?"

Alex waved toward the shadows where he had seen Gordon with Jenny Trout. "I told you I needed him, but——"

Bob Needleton said, "I confess I do not see why the fifth wheel has to be me." His nose was noticeably pink.

Alex said, "Gordon. Sherrine. Hudson. Me. You. Shall I take the exercise mat?"

Bob was having trouble pulling the words out. "*We* pulled you off the Ice. The rest of us. There's only me and Sherrine left——"

Alex said, "Hold it."

Bob said, "Hold it, my foot. *You* and Sherrine have been——"

You wanted to *know*, Bob. Sherrine had the *right* to know. Sherrine has to go into the hangar because I slept with the Commander's wife."

Bob Needleton gaped, then, grinned. "We-ell. That's a better story than I expected."

Well, it's true. Sherrine doesn't go, the Station Commander says he won't pick me because I'm a fan. Maybe you can live with that, but I won't volunteer to stay. I won't."

Bob looked at Sherrine. "All right——"

Sherrine said, "I've already told me."

Bob didn't ask, Sherry. But why not six? Gordon's got a woman, too. What are we going to give up for Barbara? Dammit, where the *hell* is Gordon?"

Two voices echoed oddly, as if the entire hangar space had answered——"

Bob wanted fan on Chthon and Sparta and the Hub's ten million stars, wanted fan for singing silly in a thousand spaceport bars.

That's what we really want, we'll build a starship when we can; we could just make orbit then I'd be a wanted fan."

Enough of this," Alex said. "Excuse me." He walked toward where Jenny and Bob were leafing through notes, nodding, singing:

wanted fan for building spacecraft, wanted fan
dipping air,
ending microwave transmissions, building
bitats up there.
the glacier caught us last time; next time
'll try to land!
d when Ice is conquered, it will be by wanted
s!"

ny said "Gordon, that's nice. A little premature, maybe, hi, Alex, even a little
imistic——"

i, Jenny. Gordon, we're deciding your fate while you play. This is how you came
the first place, remember?"

nd this is why I stay," Gordon said. "That verse I wrote for you, Alex. *And when
s are conquered, it will be by wanted fans!*"

ex became aware that the others had followed him. He said, "Gordon?"

am stilyagin, Alex. Nothing has changed. But there is room for poets here, and
ts, and I can always catch the next flight with Hudson's wife. My voice is needed
stay. Four seats, four passengers. Tell my family I kiss them from below. No, let
d that again," he said, while Sherrine and Bob and Gary Hudson looked at each
Wait, now——"

errine took Alex's arm and led him into the shadows. She said, "Do you see what I

h, sure. If the *Phoenix* went up missing me *and* Gordon, it'd be a disaster. Lonny
t be voted dog catcher. So you don't have to come, but why don't you come
? Please?"

errine smiled. "Okay."

op toying with my affections and give me a straight answer."

l come if I have to sit in your lap. Now we need to finish loading. Alex, didn't you
didn't want the plastic corn?"

eah. I appreciate the work that went into getting it, but we don't need plastic that
nd we've got better use for the soil, and it doesn't even breed!"

ell, it was here. Some dedicated fan sneaked it aboard."

amn. We'd better find it before it gets buried."

ey climbed the scaffold. Sherrine asked, "How do you make love in free fall?"

ex laughed. "Superbly. It takes a tether."

ey eeled into the cabin. "Look inside things," Sherrine said.

eah. Sherrine, this could be your last chance to make love in a gravity field."

mm."

"You could even find a, what did we call those things, they were soft and you spread over them—" You're kidding, right? Bed." Bed."

* * *

Hudson laid out a map of the Dryden Research Center portion of Edwards Air Force and pointed to a building. "In there. Room G-44. There are three security containers in the room, and the IMU is in the lowest drawer of the middle one."

"And you're sure?" Bob Needleton asked.

"Yes, of course I'm sure. Actually, there are five of the damned things, but that's the one they keep one of them, the one that's been tested most recently."

"And when was that?" Sherrine asked.

"About a year—no, more like two years. Twenty months ago. Major Beeson took it over and we ran tests on the whole *Phoenix* electronics system. Worked like a charm. Then they took the IMU back, packed it in foam, and put it in the safe." "And it hasn't been moved since?" C.C. Miller asked.

"Not that I know of," Hudson said. "And why would it? Its where it stayed between tests."

"Then's the next test?" Needleton asked.

"Maybe never. Beeson was transferred. There's a civilian named Feeley in charge of technology studies at Dryden now." "Feeley?"

"Yeah, the troops call him Touchy Feeley, of course. He's a Green."

"And brain dead, I suppose," Miller said.

"He's not brain dead, he's soul dead. Everything's kept in order, though, all the lab work gets done away every day, all the reports filed on time."

"Well of a way to run a lab," Needleton said. "But I suppose it's as well. Makes it easier to find your IMU will be right where it belongs." He studied the map. "Harry, it looks like you can go in from the hydrogen valve compound. Get inside there, and then open a new tunnel to the main base. Fang, you've been watching the base, did you ever see patrols at the entrance?"

"Nothing," Fang said. "Guards at the gates, some people in the operations building, some flight crew at the flight line. Nothing else."

"Not much to guard anymore," Hudson said. "One time, they had the hottest test pilots and spaceships in the world here. Spaceships, too. Now—"

"Yeah," Needleton said. "OK, Harry, I guess we're set. Let's do it."

They laid the bike on its side next to a mesquite bush and walked the rest of the way to the fence. The twisties holding the fence together hadn't been disturbed in the three

nce they'd broken in to start the flow of hydrogen. Thunder Ridge was fifteen
way, and the sounds of the compressor and turbo expander were lost in the howl
esert wind.

damn moon," Harry muttered. "I like moonlight, but there's too damn much of it."
early full, Bob Needleton thought.

God! Ten hours! Dawn tomorrow, and I'm up and out of here, off this Earth. If
rt doesn't pound so damn hard it wakes up the guards . . . Sherrine would be
oo, but not the way he'd thought. Oh, well. I get the best consolation prize there
trip, too. Four seats, and one's mine!

e Hydrogen Valve building had its own fence, but there was a gate from that area
main Dryden compound. Harry inspected the gate and its lock, then whispered,
good lock. It might be easier to cut a hole in the fence, but that'll be more
ble when there's light. What should I do?"

'hatever's quickest. By the time there's light everyone in the country will know."
ok out his wire cutters and started in.

om G-44 was in a temporary building constructed in the glory days of the 1950s.
e engineering room on Thunder Ridge, it had space for far more desks and
g boards than it held. Even so, many of the desks seemed unused.

bank of three security cabinets stood against one wall. Harry went over and rubbed
ds in anticipation. "The middle one," he said. He ostentatiously took out a nail file
gan to rub it over his fingertips. "No sandpaper—"

arry, damn it, get on with it," Needleton whispered. "Right." Harry opened the
and took out a drill, pliers, crowbar. "Well—here goes—but you know, just in
"

"What?"

arry pulled on the drawer. It opened.

ike I said, just in case. And there's your gizmo, I think." He lifted' out a plastic box
it on the desk. "Let's see—"

arry, be careful, don't drop it—"

ot me. Yep." He took out a smaller box that had been nested in foam packing.

ere we are. One IMU—"

e room lights came on.

arry, damn you—" Needleton shouted.

e?"

ello-o!"

ey turned. An Air Force captain in combat fatigues stood at the door. The captain's
hine gun didn't quite point at either Harry or Needleton.

h, shit," Harry said.

ow what?" Needleton said. He eyed the distance to the gun. There were two desks
ay. He glanced at Harry, who nodded slightly.
eath will not release you," the captain intoned. The submachine gun was pointing
at Harry's navel.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A Fire in the Sky

any Trout stared down the road. "Where the hell are they?"

Maybe the lock was tougher than Harry thought," Sherrine said.

"Wouldn't be the lock," Jenny said. "Harry's good with locks. I'm sure glad Bob's on the way. Where the hell *are* they?"

"There's something coming." A light, a long way away. Fantastic, how far you could see from here.

"Two lights! It's a car!" Jenny shouted. "Get Hudson."

"Jenny, for God's sake put that gun away!" Sherrine said. "Gary!"

C. Miller came running out of the office. "Jenny, for God's sake, shooting people isn't the answer to everything!"

"Nutsy, sometimes it is!"

"Not this time," Gary Hudson said. "Look, if you start a fire there'll be a fire. I've got the Air Police up here long before any possible launch window." He stared moodily at the approaching headlights. "Whatever we do, it has to be done *quietly*."

"Oh. Okay." Jenny put the gun back in her boot.

Miller edged closer to Fang and spoke in a low urgent voice. "Stay with her, just in case. We can't just give up now!"

"No, and we won't," Miller said. "But there're more ways to fatter a cat than just to throw a head in a sea boot."

"What?"

"I've read Sturgeon's other law. Just go wait with Jenny."

The car was a small gray sedan, totally inconspicuous if you didn't notice that it had no windows. It pulled up in the pool of light in front of the office, and Bob Needleton got out of the driver's side. He was moving slowly, carefully. Harry got out of the passenger's side, moving the same way, as if they were underwater.

"What the hell is going on?" Gary Hudson demanded. Somebody slid out of the back of the car and quick like a striking shark.

Bob Needleton said, carefully, "Gary Hudson, this is Captain, Lee Arteria, U.S.A.F. Office of Special Investigations."

h, shit——"

Death will not release you." Captain Arteria's voice carried even over the roar of the engine. Headlights glowed on the intruder's blue uniform and compact machine gun. A wide, toothy white smile. The Air Police captain moved like a man in free fall, Alex thought. Like Steve Mews. Strong and dangerous.

Gary Czescu and Bob Needleton had stopped moving. The night seemed to wait. Alex cleared his throat and said, "Even if you die."

Pay your dues! Pay your dues!" Was that a man's

voice or a woman's?

See Arteria?"

Right. You're . . . Miller? C.C. Miller. Director of the LASFS.

Chairman now," Miller said.

Gary Hudson demanded, "Will someone *please* tell me——"

He's a LASFS member," Miller said.

Or was," Bob Needleton said.

Arteria said, "Nobody leaves the LASFS. Death did not release me, nor

me. It took me a while to figure that out."

Which is all very well, but where is the IMU?" Hudson said.

I have it here." Arteria handed across a box. She held her weapon like a prosthetic

limb. Hudson took the box while trying to evade the machine gun's snout.

And you better get it installed fast." Arteria glanced at her watch. "It's twenty-three

zero now. By oh-eight-hundred, oh-eight-thirty tops, this place will be crawling with

OSI, blues, Greens, Army, Immigration agents, Post Office inspectors for all I

care. OK." Gary Hudson held the box gingerly, like a hot potato. Small wonder,

he thought, considering what—who—had come attached to it. "Okay. And, Alex, better tell Jenny to stand down."

Alex went.

The hangar was larger from inside than it had looked from across the ride. *Phoenix*

was proudly, enshrouded by scaffolds now. They turned on all the lights. That was safer

than using flashlights. Furtive lights might be investigated immediately. Working lights

wait until morning.

Good, it's beautiful," Lee said.

Not as beautiful as when she flies," Hudson said.

It really will work, then."

Hudson gave her a sour look. "I don't want to seem ungrateful, but you're about the

best person to ask that. Yes, *Phoenix* is ready. More precisely, I'm enough

good that it will work that I'm going up with it."

Hudson took the IMU and climbed up into the well above one of the landing legs. The opening was barely large enough to admit him. A few moments later he came out far enough to take a wrench out of his pocket, then climbed back in. Finally he emerged with the IMU.

"All's well?" Lee Arteria asked.

Hudson grinned wider. "Yeah. Now let's check things out." He led the way up the

The cabin was crowded. The only empty spaces were the four seats, which could just be reached from above. Chickens protested the disturbance when Hudson turned on the lights. Lee watched from the hatchway as Hudson wormed into the command chair and flipped the panel toward him. He threw switches. Lights blinked yellow, then green, and the video screen came alive. Hudson typed furiously at the keyboard.

"Not damn," he announced.

"All's well?" Lee asked.

"Like a charm." He typed more commands. "There. I've got it in a test loop, but I don't expect any problems."

"And you can launch when?" Lee asked.

"About ten minutes, or at oh-six-forty. We won't be ready in ten minutes."

"Six and a half hours," Lee said.

* * *

Arteria Moorkith was trying to be polite. After all, this was an Air Force Base, and he was talking to Air Force officers. It wasn't easy, though.

"I admit, she lied to me," Moorkith said.

"How?" Lieutenant Billings asked.

"He said that message on the sermon board, 'Sermon by Nehemiah Scudder,' would be in."

"And it didn't. What makes you think they went anywhere near your church?"

"I Murphy demanded.

"We know they went through Denver, and they crossed the California border at least four days ago. *Four days!* And you've known it all this time, and didn't tell me!"

"I sent you a memo," Billings said.

"Through channels," Moorkith said through his teeth. "Yeah, and we all know how the game is played. All right, but it's played out now. I have a directive here from the National Security Council putting me in charge of finding these enemies. Do you acknowledge my authority?"

"Murphy braced. "Yes, sir." He didn't pretend to like it.

"Good. Where is Captain Arteria?"

"We don't know exactly," Billings said. "She's communicating through the Mount Airy relay station. That serves the entire Mojave Desert. She could be anywhere out

ut for all I know she's here in Victorville. This is where she told me to wait for

orkith grimaced. "Colonel, I am ordering you: find her. I want to know where
Lee Arteria is."

"Why?" Murphy demanded.

ecause I think she has gone over. Find Arteria, and we'll know exactly where those
uts and their fannish friends are. I'm sure of it. So find her!"

* * *

heep! Wheep!

he tore off the fax sheet, read it and handed it to C.C. Miller.

SS IT'S GETTING STICKY. MOORKITH IS HERE WITH FULL
ORITY FROM THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL TO TAKE CHARGE.
ALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL TOLD HIM TWO MILKHEIM TRUCKS
SED THE BORDER AT NEEDLES FOUR DAYS AGO. MOORKITH IS
. MOORKITH IS VERY UPSET. MOORKITH IS FURIOUS. HE'S
MING AT COLONEL MURPHY. THE COLONEL IS SCREAMING AT ME.
RECT ORDER FROM COLONEL MURPHY: CAPTAIN ARTERIA, YOU
REPORT YOUR LOCATION AND CIRCUMSTANCES IMMEDIATELY.
HY.

OLONEL MURPHY SAYS I HAVE ONE HOUR TO FIND OUT WHERE YOU
ND GET A FULL REPORT AND THEN HE'S SENDING THE AP'S LOOKING
OU.

C SAYS THAT BUT I THINK HE SENT THEM OUT ALREADY.

HOPE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING BECAUSE ITS GETTING
ER THAN HELL AROUND HERE.

LLINGS

ller read it, then handed it to Bob Needleton. They all stood in a group around
ar, reading in the light from the office windows behind them.

hat does look sticky," Bob Needleton said.

is sticky," Lee said. "Up to now I might just get away with saying you

wered me. I'd look like an idiot letting you and Harry get my piece away from me
e way you telegraphed your moves, but I could talk my way out of a court martial.
ave direct orders to tell my colonel where I am and what I'm doing. That's not a
nymore. That's Leavenworth."

o what will you do?" Miller asked.'

he looked around at their faces as they stood in a circle around her car. At the desert
. Then at the open door to the hangar. She could just see the base of *Phoenix*.

She still held the submachine gun. She stood for another moment, then got into the car and laid down the machine pistol, and began to type furiously at her fax machine. Miller and Harry looked at Miller. They both looked at Hudson. Hudson shrugged. Lee Arteria got out again and retrieved her weapon. "There. Take the big tank trucks to the fields at Taft and abandon them. Have somebody follow in a car to take the trucks. Then call this number and tell the duty sergeant where you left the trucks. Get out from there fast. Keep going on north to wherever you want to hide. Meanwhile, I've got the Air Police watching Cajon Pass to San Bernardino. About the time they get that close, they'll get the tip about the trucks in Taft. Go on, move! This ought to buy us a few hours."

Hudson nodded warily.

Miller said, "Sarge, Mark, a truck each. Bjo, you've got a hydrogen car? Fuel up and get out from there and keep moving. Sarge, you're in charge."

"Right." Lee Arteria stood up briskly. The gun had never left her side. "Now as to my price." "What's your price?" There was something in Bob Needleton's voice that said he knew. What had passed between them in the car on the way here? "I'm going up," Lee Arteria said.

Hudson shook his head emphatically. "We don't have time to repack. It's packed for you and we're only six hours from liftoff—" "My seat, Pins."

Needleton said, "Captain, I never said I wasn't going."

Lee Arteria heard what you told me, coming here. You're staying to teach, you're staying to teach, you're giving up and leaving, you're not sure what you'll do up there, you'll be in a can with the woman who kicked you out and the man who took her. You're in a jam state, Pins. Well, I'm flipping you over."

Arteria was moving forward; Bob Needleton was backing up. He didn't seem to be afraid of it. His jaw thrust out mutinously. "If I give up my seat it'll be to something that's up there. What are you doing?"

Arteria was opening zippers. She was wearing lots of zippers. She said, "I've done this to cover for you. I go up, or I go to Leavenworth. I caught you people! Fair and square and then I covered for you."

"Do you have to go underground. So do most of us. You can hide as easy as me. You know more about how to do it."

"Not good enough," she said. "You can't stop me."

"I can try. Maybe I can kill you before you summon help, maybe I can't."

"I don't have to summon anyone. If I don't report in, they'll know where to look."

"I don't believe you—"

Arteria laughed softly. She was moving toward him while dropping things: the machine gun. Her leather jacket. A holdout gun from one boot, a knife from the other, the boots. Handcuffs, the fancy pin in her hat. Bob Needleton watched in horror, nothing, and nobody else moved.

Maybe it's a bluff. Maybe you, couldn't alert your squad because you waited too long. Bob's threat might have been more effective if he weren't backing up toward the Operations Planning Room.

Every cop on Earth knows my face." Handcuffs, a mace delivery system, a weapons armory. And her pants. Blouse. "They're all going to think . . . *know* I betrayed

She looked quite dangerous, Alex thought. She had muscles . . . smoother than steel, but powerfully differentiated. She looked to Alex like an alien life form, and she was female every second.

Arteria was almost nose to nose with Bob Needleton. He'd backed up against a flat surface. She wasn't wearing anything at all now. She said, "What about a woman of your bearing age?"

Okay," Bob said, "you're a woman."

Open the door," she said.

Door?" Needleton became aware of the flat surface behind him. He found a handle, Bob and turned it and backed through.

Arteria said, "I'll be taking your seed with me."

Don't, uh—"

He didn't ask."

um.

Edson was smiling broadly. "Wonderful! Just like 'God's Little Acre.' "

Shouldn't we be trying to rescue him?" Sherrine looked at the stunned faces around

* * *

Edson climbed out of *Phoenix* and gathered the others around him at the ship's

Everything all right," he said. "It's set. We launch at oh-six-forty-four on the dot. Commander Miller has the rendezvous set. He'll go when we report success."

Who do you need here for the launch?" Miller asked.

Once we get the roof opened, no one. We'll open that in half an hour, then you'll scatter, and I mean scatter. Get off the base and take off in all directions. Can you go straight north across the desert?"

We can," Harry said. "But maybe Jenny and I ought to stay. Stand guard."

And do what? Not that I need to ask," Hudson said, as Jenny reached toward her

Look: just now I won't be wanted for anything but stealing my own spaceship. I

d in a foreign country and the lawyers can take care of it. Kill somebody and have extradition warrants out everywhere we can land! Not to mention that a lot of Air Force johnnies who right now sympathize will be gunning for me. I have to get back to Earth to get Annie! No, thanks, Harry."

last stand?" Jenny said.

o."

Imagine my relief," Harry said. "Look, we'll be going out last, right? I'll take a coil of stainless steel wire and close off the gates. We can drop broken glass on the road

"

"Well, that's all right," Hudson said. "But nobody gets hurt!"

except maybe us," Jenny said.

that's what it takes to get this ship up——"

Yeah, Harry," Jenny said. She put the pistol back in her boot. "Where's that wire?"

Now. One more thing," Hudson asked. "Where's Arteria?"

Everyone looked at each other. "She's still——" "She's with Needleton——"

that would help to know her weight," Hudson said. "Harry, go ask."

"Well, all right——" Harry walked across the square from the hangar to the

engineering building, and stood on the porch outside the closed door to the Operations

Planning Room.

He stood there a while, then came back. "Actually, you won't be *very* far off if you weigh a hundred and fifty pounds."

Harry Hudson activated the speaker system. It wouldn't matter now, voices wouldn't

cut through the noise of the turbo expander. "MINUS EIGHTY MINUTES AND

GOING," the computer said. *Damn, it feels good to hear that again!*

The door to the Operations Planning Room opened, and Lee Arteria came out

wearing the silk kimono that Hudson kept in the shower in his office suite. "Yours,

right? I like your taste," she said. "But someone seems to have moved my clothes."

Next room. You won't need all the weapons, you know."

I don't need any, do I?"

Hudson frowned. "Not by me. But I haven't told them upstairs about the change in

the messenger list. Not too late to rethink it."

Nothing to rethink. This career's over."

Do you run away. What do you think you'll do up there?"

She shook her head. "I'm not useless you know. I have an engineering degree. Air

Force ROTC. I wanted to work in the space program. I got my commission, but they

needed engineers, and they did need police investigators. I was good at that, but I can

do anything." She smiled slightly, a thin, wistful smile. "I can make babies. My

biological clock is going tick, tick, *brrinnngg!*"

"K, you convinced me. I gather you already convinced Dr. Needleton."
"Let's say he's no longer objecting."

* * *

"All right, the hour's up. Where is she?" Moorkith demanded.
Colonel Murphy looked embarrassed. "She ordered the helicopter to meet her at an
above Cajon Pass, but the place was empty when they got there. We're searching the

searching the area."
"Yes, Mr. Moorkith. She may be hurt, or taken prisoner."
"Don't believe one word of that," Moorkith said. "And neither do you. She's gone
helping them! That's what's happened. Now, Colonel, unless you want to explain
to the Secretary of Defense, you will cooperate with me."
"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to think! What could have persuaded her to help the Angels? She must
they'd be caught."

Lieutenant Billings had been listening quietly. Now he drew in his breath sharply.
Moorkith looked at him. "Well, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing, sir. Just a thought."

"Put with it," Moorkith said.

Billings shook his head. "Sir, it was nothing——"

"Tell us," Colonel Murphy said.

"Maybe they won't get caught, sir."

Murphy frowned. "Billings, there's no way! There's no place in this country, *on this
continent*——oh.

"What in hell are you talking about, Colonel?" Moorkith demanded.

"Nothing, sir."

"God damn you people! You know something, you know something——" He stopped

looking thoughtful. "So. Not on this continent. Not on this planet, right? They have a

to get back to orbit, don't they? What is it? Where?"

"No place," Murphy said. "It's silly."

"Believable or not, Colonel, this is a direct order from me acting with the authority of the

National Security Council: how might they get those Angels back into orbit?"

Murphy and Billings looked at each other helplessly. Finally Murphy said, slowly,

"*Phoenix*."

"There's a *rocket ship* in Phoenix?"

* * *

MINUS FIFTY MINUTES AND COUNTING. TAKE YOUR LAUNCH
POSITIONS. CLEAR THE BASE AREA. CLEAR THE BASE AREA."

Bob Needleton was buttoning his shirt as he came out of the Ops Planning Room. He carefully looked away as he came out onto the porch. "Where is she?" he

getting aboard," Harry said. "Uh—you're not going to make trouble?"

Uh? No. She goes. I'll be staying here to fight the danelaw."

He went down to the *Phoenix* hangar. The roof was open now, open to the stars shining brightly in the high desert. The moon was just going down, and there was the tinge of dawn to the east, but straight above was cold and dark and clear.

Sherrine and Arteria were climbing up the scaffolding. Hudson and Alex stood at the twenty feet above.

"Go with God," Gordon shouted.

Go!"

Bob Needleton waved. "Good-bye, Sherrine. Captain Arteria . . . Lee. Name them the kids in Doc Smith's *Children of the Lens*. Guys, I'm *hungry*."

"There's food left over," Harry said. "Look we've all got our escape assignments. We're to go in Lee's car. They thought that would be appropriate. If you're—Sandy here—well, he knows the area."

Hudson got into the ship.

"CLEAR THE BASE AREA."

"I guess that's it, then," Bob Needleton said. "Seems like an—I guess it's over. From here to the Desert." He stood at the door to the hangar, reluctant to leave, until Harry waved him away.

They reached the car. Sandy Sanders was already in the driver's seat.

Wheep! Wheep!

The fax machine startled them.

CAPTAIN LEE ARTERIA THIS IS COLONEL ANTHONY MURPHY.
URGENT. MISTER JHERI MOORKITH WITH AUTHORITY OF THE NATIONAL
SECURITY COUNCIL HAS ASSUMED COMMAND OF OPERATION FALLEN
LENS. HE HAS DECIDED THAT THERE WILL BE AN ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE
USAF JURISDICTION BY ILLEGAL LAUNCH OF A USAF EXPERIMENTAL SHIP
NAMED PHOENIX AT PRESENT HELD IN A USAF MUSEUM AT EDWARDS
AIR FORCE BASE. YOU ARE HEREBY ORDERED TO DO ALL IN YOUR POWER
TO PREVENT THE LAUNCH OF THE PHOENIX ROCKET. FYI MOORKITH LEFT
EDWARDS TEN MINUTES AGO WITH LIEUTENANT BILLINGS IN YOUR
HELICOPTER, DESTINATION EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, REPEAT,
DESTINATION EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE.

"Holy shit," Needleton said. "How do we tell Hudson?"

issy and Gordon are still in the blockhouse," Harry said. He looked at his watch. "I
ey are."

arry, run this over," Bob said. "Have him read it to Hudson."

hen what?" Sandy asked.

hen nothing," Harry said. "Hudson ordered us not to fight, and it don't matter
y. We can't fight a chopper. Can't even mess up the landing areas, there are too
p here. Get Bob out of here, Sandy."

ndy looked to Needleton. Bob nodded. "Let's go," he said. "Who knows, if enough
n away, maybe they'll chase *us*. Let's go."

ller read the fax and shook his head. "I've got a bad feeling about this—" He
d the intercom button. "*Phoenix*, we have a problem." He read the fax.

ere was a long pause.

kay, we got it," Hudson said. "Not that there's much we can do. We wait. Know
yers?"

edwards," Lee Arteria said. "Moorkith said Edwards, so that's where they're taking
know Murphy, if they were coming to Thunder Ridge he'd have said Thunder
I think we're going to make it!"

utting it damned close," Hudson said. "Miller, get your people out of here. We
able to shave a few minutes off the launch time. I'll talk to Commander Hopkins.
ople, get out. Now! Go!"

INUS TWENTY MINUTES AND COUNTING," the computer said.

nd who do you think it's talking to?" Sherrine asked.

o one, I hope," Gary said. "But you never know about fans. And Harry."

Ye're blind in here," Arteria said. "If I'd been thinking we could have rigged up a
communicate with whoever's in my car—"

ob Needleton," Hudson said.

lex, is it always like this?" Arteria asked. "Waiting? I'm beginning to know what
ls must feel like—"

Phoenix, this is *Freedom*," a woman's voice said.

oger, *Freedom*."

am patching in a relay. Stand by."

lex, this is Gordon. We relay to you."

oger, Gordo. Good to hear from you. What's up?"

ot you, but Air Police helicopter has landed at Edwards main base."

ighteen miles from here," Hudson muttered. "Ten minutes flight—"

ve," Arteria said.

nd they'll hear the compressor," Hudson said.

"don't think so," Arteria said. "We drove a good halfway here before we heard it—
can see the lights up here with no trouble at all."
h, shit," Hudson said.
INUS FIFTEEN MINUTES AND COUNTING."

* * *

"All right, now where is this *Phoenix*?" Moorkith demanded.
Phoenix, sir?" the operations sergeant asked. The name tag on his coverall said
aniel." "It's in a museum up on Thunder Ridge."
Thunder Ridge? Where's that?"
e sergeant pointed. "You see them lights up there across the lake? That's Thunder

Moorkith turned to Billings. "What in the hell are you up to?"
r? You asked to be taken to Edwards. We're at Edwards."
od damn you, you knew I wanted to get to the *Phoenix*!"
Billings kept a straight face. "Sir, you told Colonel Murphy I was to take you to
ls. I took you to Edwards. I assume you want to clear this activity on U.S. Air
property with the base commander. Sir."
nd where is he?" Moorkith demanded.
e operations sergeant looked at Billings, then back at Moorkith. "Sir, he's in
ond. He doesn't live on base."
hen who the hell is in charge here?"
r, that would be the Officer of the Day, Major Cobb."
nd where is he?"

the Operations Office, sir."
ou bastards are going to give me a runaround all night, aren't you?" Moorkith
led. "You're all in this together. You're finished, Billings, you and Murphy and
you're all finished!"

es, sir. Did you want to see Major Cobb, sir?"
o, I want you to take me up to Thunder Ridge."
es, sir. Sergeant, see that this chopper is fueled up and—"

amn it, NOW!"
ut, sir, we're low on fuel. And, Sergeant, I thought I heard a funny noise in the
earing. Probably nothing, but you better check it out."
ergeant MacDaniel fought with a grin and almost won. "Yes, sir."
pace cadets," Moorkith said. "Sergeant, get me a car. That car. Right there. Are the
it? Good. You two, you guys with the guns, come with me. Now. Lieutenant,
ou get your helicopter working, you can use it to get up on that ridge and stop that
or you can stuff it up your ass. Either way, Billings, either way, you are finished.
Do you understand me?"

Well, not quite, sir. Now I suppose it's pretty astonishing that a bunch of Air Force would have an interest in space—" and you can quit stalling, too," Moorkith said. "All right you men. Get in the car. Sergeant, open the fucking gate, and don't give me any problems about that." Sergeant MacDaniel shrugged. "Yes, sir. Give me a moment to get the keys."

* * *

Sergeant Glen Bailey drove the Green Police car through Mojave and east on Highway 58, keeping his eyes on Thunder Ridge more than on the road. Any moment he thought. Any moment. As he drove he sang softly to himself.

And the Earth is clean as a springtime dream,
And factory smokes appear,
For they've left the land to the gardener's hand,
And they all are orbiting here . . ."

* * *

Bob Needleton looked at his watch. "Stop," he said. Sandy pulled over to the edge of the road. Needleton got out and leaned on the car. He looked south, to Thunder Ridge, and waited. It was just before dawn, a few stars left in the west, none in the east, but it was still dark on the ground. Not quite dawn, Needleton thought. Not by Mohammed's son, can't tell a black thread from a white one— There was a flash on Thunder Ridge. Then another, even brighter.

Jheri Moorkith could see the big hangar through the fence. The base area of Thunder Ridge was deserted, but there were lights everywhere, and the roof of the big building a hundred yards away had been swung open. The Air Police car stopped, and Airman Tsurasaki got out. "Gate's locked," he shouted. "No keys." The hangar was just ahead, but there was no way through the locked gate. Jheri Moorkith was tempted to scream, but managed to be calm. "Shoot the lock off," he

Sergeant Malcolm Lincoln sniffed. "Sir, that works better in movies than the real thing. Maybe I should get a hammer out of the trunk and open it with that?" "I don't care how you do it, open that gate!" Two blows of the hammer smashed the lock, but the gate still wouldn't open. "It's stuck," Sergeant Lincoln said. "Joey, get me the bolt cutters out of the trunk." There was a bright flash from the hangar. The corrugated aluminum walls shook, and there was thunder. "Hurry!" Moorkith screamed.

the hangar walls fell outward. *Phoenix* began to rise, slowly, majestically. Moorkith
to face the Air Policemen, who were staring at the slowly rising rocket. "Shoot it!"
th ordered.
shoot it?" Sergeant Lincoln asked.
es! Shoot! Shoot! Damn you, I order you, shoot it!"
r—"
ive me that damn gun!"
Malcolm Lincoln never took his eyes off the ship as he unslung the submachine gun.
exactly as he'd been taught, he slipped the clip loose and opened the bolt. He
the empty weapon to Moorkith.
eri Moorkith fumbled with the cartridge clip. He saw nothing as *Phoenix* rose.
geant Malcolm Lincoln watched with a faraway look as *Phoenix* flew upward,
ow. Thunder washed across him, and his ears hurt but Lincoln was grinning like a
s the rocket climbed she caught the growing light of dawn, but the jets were
r than the dawn as *Phoenix* rode a fire into the sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Cruisecon

The big sailing ship had been designed for cargo, a high tech windjammer with four masts and sails that looked like airplane wings standing on end. They shifted constantly as *Gullwhale* raced at 18 knots through the Caribbean toward the Windward Coast. She could make 20 knots in decent winds.

Chuck had his videocamera bolted to the deck. The view tilted with the ship, heeled fifteen degrees. "February 31st, 23,309. This is *Gullwhale Crossing*, a magazine published by Chuck Umber. Rick Foss, what are we doing here?" Foss was a lean, bearded man with a mad smile and an absurd hat. "We are here to Cruisecon, the first World Science Fiction Convention ever to be held at sea." "And how did this come about?"

"Perfect timing. I notice we're coming about. Well, *Gullwhale* was a Green research ship, expensive even by NASA standards, but clean as clean can be. What she couldn't do was make money. Between the U.S. environmental regulations and the unpredictability of the wind, nobody wanted to risk sending cargo that way."

"So we got her cheap," Chuck said.

Chuck grinned. "I got her damn near free. This is her shakedown as a passenger resort ship."

"Hotel bill and food all in the convention registration fee. Quite a coup Rick."

"I didn't tell them it was a science fiction convention, of course. I just guaranteed to ship up with people who don't mind being a week late so long as it doesn't cost any more. But we're not in U.S. waters now—"

From the rail Poul Dickson shouted, "Ach, ja, now we can sing ze old songs!"

A heavy-set black man stuck his head out of a doorway. "Land ho!"

Chuck swung the camera around to catch him. "Ken, shouldn't you be up in a crow's nest?"

Ken patted his ample bulk. "It'd never hold me. We've got Grenada on radar. We're two hours away, but you should think about wrapping it up."

Chuck grinned mysteriously. "I may have another surprise for you, Chuck."

Ken was talking to Bruce Hyde and Mike Glider. Bruce, you left the rescue party to set any traps at Sherrine's apartment. I take it that was for misdirection?"

uce said, "Sure. At best we'd get the law looking in the wrong direction. At worst, the owner's written permission to be there, and a key. We went in through a / anyway, picked up a few of Sherrine's things—still nothing—walked *out* the door and boarded Mike's van and drove north."

obody stopped you?"

o, but they were following us. I guess we could have stopped, but—"

wanted to cross the glacier again," Glider said. He held newsprint from the

al Enquirer under his chin, for the camera, under a wide toothy smile. The

e said:

E NUDES ORGY ON GLACIER!

uce said, "We took the same track as before, with the Angels' death beam toned little—"

ow many of you?"

—So we could—Huh?" Bruce laughed. "No, no, just me and Mike, fully dressed.

ssed to Fargo and went straight to the local TV station—"

ide in plain sight," Mike said.

—and told them about joining the mating rituals of a tribe of naked semi-humans

le blue skin. Don't look so disappointed, Chuck."

ve all got away clean after the launch. Maybe everyone got an extra day or two

e of Moorkith," Glen Bailey said. "You remember how it looked when *Phoenix*

?"

erry Czescu nodded briskly. "I kept thinking, 'Ours always blow up. Ours always

o.' But it was going smooth as silk—"

remember the vapor trail, sprawled all over the sky? They used to call that 'frozen

g,' the Germans did, I mean. It's in Willy Ley's books," Bailey said. "In the

they thought their rockets were going wild—"

s just stratospheric winds blowing the vapor trail around," Mike Glider said,

g his head into camera view. Umber scowled.

eah, but it *looks* like something spun by a spider on LSD. The Green bigshot cop,

th, he saw the frozen lightning and thought the *Phoenix* must have crashed. He

arching the desert for *Phoenix* while the whole gang drove away."

missed it all," Ann Hudson said. "I was in New York. I tried to follow it on the

ut how much could I trust? Gary didn't try to call me till he was already in orbit."

ut you're going up this time."

ou bet. God help Gary if he already knows how to mate in free fall. Chuck, I want of this tape to take with me."

That's why I'm hurrying. I want it finished and copied before the ship takes off

no trouble," C.C. Miller said. "We just drove off. We even got the clubhouse out before the Greens came sniffing. But there are *tons* of it. If the Angels don't I think we'll just leave it in Grenada."

Do you mean it's aboard?"

Oh, yeah. We sold the bull semen, but we've still got the plastic corn and acorns and bomb and powdered chlorine and five cartons of earthworms, and there's a package I know what's in it but it wants out BAD . . ."

Gordon, nobody spotted you?"

He could walk, even then," Gordon said. He got out of his deck chair and spread his arms and bowed. His head nearly brushed the floor.

C. Miller said, "Today I could hide him on a basketball team."

What have you been doing since, Gordon?"

For our viewers, they know. I publish *Wind Chill* in sections. Now Baen Books, they

I can publish because I won't be on Earth."

Where are you going up?"

Sure. Alex says my family ready to skin him if he can't produce me, so I go with

Bring a copy of *Wind Chill*, tell everyone——"

There was a sharp sound, loud above the wind, and a sharp crack! "Hold it," Chuck

and he swung the camera around. "It was——got it."

High in the sky over Grenada, a dot, descending.

It comes down just like a falling safe, only faster," Chuck said rapidly. "Those

should be lighting any . . . any minute now . . . it's broad daylight so they won't be conspicuous . . . shit fire, will you *light*?"

"The phoenix is slowing," Gordon said. "Rockets must be lit. See? Slowing."

Yeah. Sorry. Ni . . . ice."

The cone had settled behind trees.

Harry laughed. "Your faces! The rocket was too far away to show much, but you

saw it land, that's something. Okay, Gordon, you published autobiographical

novels, but there's a novel, too, isn't there?"

I am working on it. Should finish, how do you say it, Real Soon Now."

He did a verse for the song, too," Harry said.

What song?"

Lonny's song," Harry said. He took out his guitar.

The others gathered around, fifty fans on the deck of a sailing ship, staring across to

the horizon where a spaceship had landed.

the Angels fell. And rose again," someone said. "And by God we did it!"
luck was still filming. Harry began to play. Jenny sang, and the others joined in.

*Wanted fan in Luna City, wanted fan on Dune and Down,
wanted fan at Ophiuchus, wanted fan in Dydee-town.
across the sky they want me, am I fattered?
s I am!
could just reach orbit, then I'd be a wanted fan.*

*Wanted fan for mining coal and wanted fan for drilling oil,
went very fast through Portland, hunted hard like Gully Foyle.
ilt reactors in Seattle against every man's advice,
uldn't do that in Alaska, Fonda says it isn't nice.*

*Wanted fan for plain sedition, like the singing of this tune.
NASA hadn't failed us wed have cities on the moon.
t weren't for fucking NASA we'd at least have walked on Mars.
d if I can't make orbit, then I'll never reach the stars.*

*ader's Raiders want my freedom, OSHA wants my scalp and hair,
'm wanted in Wisconsin, be damned sure I won't be there!
he E-P-A still wants me, I'll avoid them if I can.
ey're tearing down the cities, so I'll be a wanted fan!*

*Wanted fan on Chthon and Sparta and the Hub's ten million stars,
wanted fan for singing silly in a thousand spaceport bars.
t's what we really want, we'll build a starship when we can;
could just make orbit then I'd be a wanted fan.*

*Wanted fan for building spacecraft, wanted fan for dipping air,
nding microwave transmissions, building habitats up there.
the glacier got us last time, next time we'll try to land!
d when the Ice is conquered, it'll be by wanted fans.
d when the stars are conquered, it'll be by wanted fans!"*

e End

knowledgments and Other Thuktunthp

llen Angels is sold as science fiction, but one could quibble with that: while the clearly fiction, the science is it real.

m: Although the *Phoenix* spaceship doesn't exist yet, it or something like it could today for between \$50 and \$200 million dollars.

ce built, *Phoenix* would operate the way airplanes do. It takes about the same of fuel to fly a pound from the United States to Australia as it does to put that n orbit. Airlines operate at about three times fuel costs, including depreciation on raft. *Phoenix* wouldn't run much more. The operational costs of any system on how much you use, it but given the low-cost regime *Phoenix* works in, it be used a lot.

course airlines have about one hundred fifteen employees per airplane; but most need to sell tickets. The SR-71 program (which didn't) ran with about forty ees per airplane. NASA, with four spacecraft, has over twenty thousand people ed to support shuttle operations. This may explain why *Phoenix*, which wouldn't ore than fifty people to operate, would charge less than one percent of what charges to put cargo in orbit.

m: Despite all the talk of global warming, there is just as much scientific evidence coming Ice Age. Experiments have failed to detect solar neutrinos in the quantities d, and astronomers tell us that we are going into a new period of minimum solar . The last such prolonged period was known as the "Maunder Minimum," and ed with what has come to be known as "The Little Ice Age." Moreover, ogic evidence shows that in the last Ice Age, Britain went from a climate a bit than it enjoys now to being under sheet glaciers in considerably less than a .

* * *

course our story is fiction. Many of the characters are fictional, too. But some are n composites of real people; some are real people with their names changed; and ppear here under their own names. A few have even paid to be in the book! We l certain fan charities to auction off the right to play themselves in *Fallen Angels*. e the book takes pace in an indefinite future we have made free use of an author's change details of age, or occupation, or city of residence.

aders who find the action of the book surprising must consider that we have, if g, tamed down the reactions of organized science fiction fandom had there really downed spaceship in a society that hates science and technology.

to the society portrayed here, of course much of it is satirical. Alas, many of the ts—such as the Steve Jackson case in which a business was searched by Secret Agents displaying an unsigned search warrant—are quite real. So are many of

-technological arguments given in the book. There really is an intellectual on-
movement to denounce "materialist science" in favor of something considerably
old and unforgiving." So watch it.

References

There are many literary references in *Fallen Angels*. A few are explained in the text;
are left for the delight of readers familiar with science fiction and fan publications.
is worth explaining here. In Robert A. Heinlein's early work "Requiem," the
es in a successful voyage to the moon. He is buried on the lunar surface by
ions who have no grave marker other than a shipping tag for a compressed air
r. When Mr. Heinlein died, he was, according to his instructions, cremated and his
attered at sea from a U.S. Navy warship. Some of us feel it would be appropriate
r him by placing a pint of seawater and a suitably inscribed shipping tag on Mare
n. The poem to be inscribed is R. L. Stevenson's "Requiem."

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgment of everyone who has, either directly by commenting on the
ript, or indirectly through his or her life and example, contributed to this book
require a volume a great deal longer than the book itself. We therefore apologize
taking the easy way out: as you might suspect, this section is being written the
before the final manuscript is due.
The song "The Phoenix" is copyright 1983, by Julia Ecklar, and is used by
ion of Julia Ecklar. The song "Starfire" is copyright 1983, by Cynthia McQuillan,
d with her permission. Both songs and many others much worth listening to are
ned on tapes sometimes available at science fiction conventions. Excerpts from the
Black Powder and Alcohol" and "Bring It Down" are used with permission of
Fish, and are available on her tape *Firestorm*.
We do want to acknowledge the special help of Gary Hudson, President of Pacific
an Launch Systems, Inc., who generously helped us get *Phoenix* right. We only
at we had the money to let him build the rocket. Any one of us would be glad to
with him. Ann Roebke Hudson deserves equal thanks. Clearly, any mistakes in the
and technology are ours, not theirs.
We also thank Jim Baen, our editor and publisher, and Toni Weisskopf, Executive
at Baen Books; we suspect that few books have ever been delivered this close to a
sly scheduled publication date.
to everyone else, you mostly know who you are. Thanks!

Larry Niven
Jerry Pournelle
Michael Flynn
Hollywood, California,
and Edison, New Jersey, 1991