

THE STARMAN SAGA
Volume 2

**THE SEARCH FOR
THE BENEFACTORS**

Revised and Reissued

The cover illustrates a scene on page 519.

THE STARMAN SAGA
Volume Two

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THE BENEFACTORS

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by Michael D. Cooper

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About the Author

Michael D. Cooper is the pseudonym for Jon Cooper, Mike Dodd, and David Baumann, each of whom played a vital role in creating the Starman series. Jon Cooper plotted the stories, Mike Dodd suggested creative plot elements and supervised the stories' scientific accuracy and plausibility, and David Baumann wrote the text, fine tuning details and developing the characters. Cooper is a computer programmer, Dodd is a social worker and zeppelin builder, and Baumann is an Episcopal priest and martial arts master.

THE STARMAN SAGA

Volume 1: The Dawn of the Starmen

Mutiny On Mars (May 19-July 22, 2151)

The Runaway Asteroid (July 24-September 10, 2151)

“The City of Dust” (July 30, 2049-August 2051)

“The Flight of the *Olympia*” (2110)

“The Caves of Mercury” (2112-2113)

“The Orphans of Titan” (August 2, 2130)

“A Matter of Time” (October 12, 2150)

Journey to the Farthest Planet

(January 1-August 22, 2152)

Volume 2: The Search for the Benefactors

Descent Into Europa (August 7-December 25, 2152)

The Treasures of Darkness (March 18-May 6, 2153)

“The Eight Treasures” (10085 B.C.)

“The Sand Tomb” (Summer 2060)

“The Infestation at Sulphur Creek” (June 1, 2153)

“The Plight of the Bumblebee” (June 13, 2153)

“The Ultimate Code” (September 26, 2153)

“Return to Europa” (October 15-December 31, 2153)

Doomsday Horizon (July 30-August 19, 2156)

Volume 3: The War of the Light

The Heart of Danger (September 1-November 9, 2157)

The Last Command (March 11-May 4, 2160; June 2161)

“A New World” (March 12-13, 2161)

“Stars of the Deep” (October 7-15, 2165)

Paradox Lost (summer 2168, but relating events

that took place March 21-April 23, 2155)

Master of Shadows (Summer 2169-June 26, 2170; 2171)

Volume 4: The Starman Companion

Cover artwork

Jonathan Cooper

Internal illustrations

DESCENT INTO EUROPA

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THE TREASURES OF DARKNESS

David M. Baumann

“Return to Europa”

David M. Baumann

DOOMSDAY HORIZON

David M. Baumann

CONTENTS

Volume 2 of the Starman Saga: The Search for the Benefactors

	page
Descent Into Europa	11
The Treasures of Darkness	172
“The Sand Tomb”	467
“The Eight Treasures”	488
“The Infestation at Sulphur Creek”	501
“The Plight of the Bumblebee”	514
“Ultimate Code”	544
“Return to Europa”	556
Doomsday Horizon	576

BOOK 4: DESCENT INTO EUROPA

They will seek me diligently but will not find me. (Proverbs 1:28b)

ALL CHAPTER TITLES ARE ALSO TITLES OF BOOKS
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Chapter 1: A Microphone for David

A SLEEK BLACK SPACECRAFT emerged from hyperspace. Behind it was a huge gas planet; ahead was a scattering of planetoids, tumbling boulders, and coarse dust that formed a vast ring around a yellow sun. The craft was an unmanned Xenobot supply vessel that was due to arrive in the proximity of a certain outpost in the Asteroid Belt.

The spacecraft itself was not of Xenobot manufacture. The Xenobots had seized it from one of the many civilizations they had overpowered, plundered, and exterminated. It did not take them long to learn how to use most technology others had developed, but they had little capability of developing any on their own. Merciless and brutal, the Xenobots callously attacked any civilization that had something they desired and took by force whatever they wanted.

In all the Xenobots' long rapacious history, only one race had effectively resisted them—the race they called their “ancient enemy.” Though the two races had fought in more than one star system, a decisive battle between them had taken place long before in Earth's Solar System. The fierce combat had been immeasurably costly to both sides, but at the end the Xenobots had been driven back to their own planet and pounded almost back to the stone age.

Their defeat had not taught the Xenobots to keep their distance

from the race that had defied them; rather what had been indifferent cruelty toward all races had become implacable hatred focused against one. Thousands of years had passed, and now the Xenobots had regrouped and were unwaveringly committed to finding, reengaging, and eradicating their foe.

The supply ship approached the outer edge of the Asteroid Belt. Soft starlight fell through a thick inspection window upon a multitude of crates in the tightly packed cargo space of the supply vessel. Several crates contained a number of robotic attack drones. Other crates held nanobotic replicators, listening equipment, advanced propulsion systems, or mining equipment.

The ship, scarred from battles through which it had flown, was intended to supply the Xenobots' allies in the Belt. The attack drones, for example, had been requested by Beowulf Denn for his use in sabotaging projects of Starlight Enterprise. The nuclear explosives were intended for a man known as the Banjoman who wanted them for extortion plots and other criminal activities on Mars. The advanced propulsion systems were slated to replace outdated machinery used aboard a host of smuggling ships in the Asteroid Belt.

The Xenobots themselves cared little about the civilizations in the Solar System. The peoples of this average sun were not advanced enough yet to have much technology that would interest them, though the denizens of the third planet were becoming worrisome. For that reason, the Xenobots had corrupted some of them and were using these unwitting agents to undermine their own civilization so that the Xenobots would not be distracted from achieving the vengeance that was driving them forward. The Xenobots' efforts in the Solar System were directed single-mindedly toward tracking down the enemy that had defeated them. They had pursued them across the starways before, and would not rest until they had found them again.

The Xenobots had no idea that there was an Earthman with the same goal, though he was motivated by a very different reason. For him, the search would soon become almost an obsession.

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Stars shot their multi-colored flames through the clear sky like a fragile dusting of glass. Their light fell through the floor-to-ceiling window of the spacecraft *Starventure*, covering Starman David “Zip” Foster in a soft spray of silver. He was looking pensively into the star-sprinkled heavens from an easy chair in the spacecraft’s lounge. The red-headed Starman was alone. The clock on the wall showed that it was a few minutes before midnight.

The *Starventure*’s time cycle was the same as the Earth-Lunar system, and was set to the same time zone as Amundsen City. Amundsen City filled Shackleton Crater at the south pole of the Moon; with a populace of eight million people, it was the largest single population center in the civilized world. It was also where David’s family lived.

Derf Bors, captain of the *Starventure*, had informed the crew that day that the ship was precisely on schedule. Eighty-five days earlier the sleek, white craft had lifted off from Nyx, the most distant dwarf planet in the Solar System, and had set course toward its home port on the Moon. Touchdown at the spaceport in Amundsen City was anticipated in another fifteen days—3:00 p.m. on Tuesday, August 22, 2152.

David Foster sighed. He had not been idle during the long journey from the deeps of space beyond the orbit of Pluto. His fellow Starman, Mark Seaton, had been able to copy a few files from the computer banks of the base on Nyx that had been founded, then abandoned, by the mysterious and elusive interstellar race which the Starmen had come to call “The Benefactors.” David had scoured the files, enlisting the help of selected researchers of Starlight Enterprise in Amundsen City and the team that was exploring the pirates’ asteroid.

That asteroid, a huge spacecraft that Lurton Zimbaro had directed toward the Earth at terrific velocity, had been redirected and was now in orbit around the Earth. Nearly a hundred researchers from Starlight Enterprise and several other

organizations were now in residence on the asteroid.

This research team had discovered that the asteroid, once a large chunk of solid iron, had been hollowed out and made into a marvelous spacecraft and dwelling by the Benefactors. The team of Earth people was charged with extracting as many of its secrets as it could.

David turned his gaze from the starry host outside the window and gave his attention back to his work, spread out before him on a wide table. He slid the easy chair farther under the mahogany surface, leaned forward, and turned toward the pencil microphone that was positioned on its base amid the clutter of note pads, loose sheets of paper, books, charts, and two open laptop computers. One laptop was off to one side and displayed a three-dimensional cutaway mockup of the asteroid. The other, positioned directly in front of David, showed a blank screen.

“In conclusion—” began David. The words appeared on the screen of the laptop in front of him. The microphone was voice-activated and attuned to David’s voice alone. “The pirates’ asteroid,” he continued, “which I will refer to henceforward as the Benefactors’ Asteroid, is 44.67 miles long at its longest axis and 25.88 miles in diameter at its widest point. Average width of the walls is approximately five miles. The primary access portal is at one end, where the great airlock is located. Seven concealed ports have been discovered, spaced roughly equidistant from each other.

“The interior of the asteroid is approximately 37 miles long by 16 miles in diameter at its widest point. Total volume of the inhabitable portion is slightly in excess of 6,100 cubic miles.”

David paused and looked down at his notes. His brow furrowed and his lips tightened.

“Of this volume, nearly one-fourth, or 1,500 cubic miles, is unaccounted for. No evidence of any means of access has been discovered in spite of the most painstaking search, yet this space comprises half of the central portion of the interior of the asteroid. Measurements prove that this space is not solid iron,

but is, in fact, as hollow as the rest of the inhabitable portion of the asteroid.

“Question—” stated David with determination.

“Question is,” said a voice behind the Starman, “what’s keeping you up this late for so many nights?”

David’s shoulders lifted in mild irritation. “Pause message, save file,” he said into the microphone, and turned to face his visitor. There were, in fact, two of them. “Hello, Joe. Hi, Mark. What’re you doing up?”

“I asked you first, Zip,” said Joe Taylor. Joe was a little more than six feet tall, but thin and gangly. Brown hair with slight curls formed the perfect complement to an expression that habitually looked as if Joe were about to perform some act of mischief, or had just completed one.

Mark was a massive, powerfully built young man. Broad shoulders and chest filled his uniform, and strong brown eyes looked out from a well-shaped face under straight black hair.

Zip answered Joe’s question. “I just finished going through all the data we have on the most likely location of the Benefactors’ main base in the Solar System—for the third time, I might add, just to make sure.”

Joe’s eyebrows lifted briefly, then he rolled another easy chair over with his foot and sat down in it, resting his right elbow on the table and facing Zip. Mark pulled a chair over next to Joe and sat down as well.

“Sit down,” invited Zip wryly.

“We already did,” said Joe.

Mark spoke for the first time. “So what did you find?”

Zip’s brow furrowed again as he reached for his coffee mug. As he picked it up, the piece of scrap paper he had set it on stuck to the bottom and fluttered up with it. Impatiently, Zip took the paper off and placed it back on the table. He brought the mug to his lips but didn’t take a drink.

“Room temperature,” he said and put the mug back down. He turned to the other Starman.

“It’s Europa,” he announced. “It’s got to be. In some ways

obvious, too obvious, but still, all the evidence points there.”

Joe nodded, encouraging Zip to continue. Mark was leaning back in his chair with his chin sunk almost into his chest. His hands were pressed together, with his forefingers touching his lips. He watched Zip intently.

“Our people on the asteroid have put a lot of effort into deciphering the language in the Benefactors’ records; numbers, distances, names of planets and asteroids, and so forth were the easiest to figure out.”

“Sure,” said Mark, who was noted for his skill in linguistics. “Math is math all over the universe, and the names of known objects should not be difficult to learn. Grammar’s more challenging and abstract concepts are harder still.”

Zip nodded.

“We compared a number of files from the asteroid and Nyx, and came up with some common information. Charts of the Solar System, travel distances, and so forth, gave us a lot of information. Two pieces in particular are of special interest. One I’ve already shared with you: it appears that the Benefactors did establish a primary base as the center of their operations, and I’ve concluded that it was on Jupiter’s moon, Europa.

“At first, I thought that the asteroid itself served as the base. It’s certainly large enough to do so and can be moved as a spacecraft; but the researchers aboard it tell me that it’s beginning to look as if the asteroid was built for another purpose, or purposes. We know that the Benefactors were fighting the Xenobots—they were the Xenobots’ ‘ancient enemy’. So the asteroid served at least as a massive warship—maybe the flagship of a great fleet, but I don’t know about that yet. At any rate, the asteroid *wasn’t* the primary base.”

“Why Europa?” asked Mark.

“I’m getting there,” answered Zip. “We know that the Benefactors were basically humanoid in size and shape. That means that they couldn’t establish a base on Jupiter or any of the giant planets unless they knew how to manipulate gravity. Maybe they could, but I’m assuming at the moment that they

couldn't."

Joe lifted his eyebrows and nodded again.

"Mm hmm," said Mark, encouraging Zip to continue.

"Europa's the obvious choice just because, next to Earth and Mars, it's the only object in the Solar System with the basic building blocks for life. Now I don't think that was important to the Benefactors; they were advanced enough technologically to be able to build a base just about anywhere they wanted. They had a small base on Nyx, for the love of Mike!"

"Go on," said Joe.

"Then why Europa? Because the Benefactors were at war with the Xenobots, and the moon itself made it easy for the Benefactors to conceal their tracks. The surface is completely covered with ice. If something causes a portion of the surface to melt, it refreezes instantly. That means no doorways, no airlocks, no hatches, no obvious abandoned artifacts such as we found on Nyx. The ice is also a natural barrier against the radiation from Jupiter. Besides, the distances are correct, and we've thoroughly mapped all the smaller planets and all the moons of the giant planets and there's not a sign on any of them—except Titan, of course—that any living presence had ever been there."

Joe and Mark glanced at each other.

"Makes sense, Zip," said Joe. "Almost too easy."

"You mentioned two pieces of information, Zip," said Mark. "What's the other?"

Zip smiled. "I know when all this happened. I know when the Benefactors were actively present in the Solar System. Their charts of the System show the planets as they were in their time—precisely 12,237 years ago—at least that was the last time that the planets were in the alignment the Benefactors' maps show. It could have been many hundreds of thousands of years before then, but the twelve thousand figure is the most logical."

Joe suddenly sat back. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "A long time! What have they been doing since then?"

"That's what we want to go to Europa to find out!"

Mark leaned forward and waved his hand. "Wait a minute,

Zip! There's still more to learn right here. There are aliens aboard the asteroid, I'm sure of it! I saw them just last year."

"They may have left, Mark. That's what Richard Starlight told us at the time. There's no evidence of them now."

"But—" began Mark.

"But," interrupted Zip, holding up his hand. "But there is a huge amount of inhabitable space inside the asteroid unaccounted for! I was just making the entry in my notebook when you two insomniacs came by. I think Richard is wrong and you are right! I think there may be a number of native inhabitants of that asteroid aboard it right now! We know they are friendly to us—they've proven that more than once—but we also know that they are not going to make contact with us on our time schedule.

"But we need them. The Benefactors know much more about the Xenobots than we do, and they have experience in fighting them. We've learned that the Xenobots fear them. We need desperately to find the Benefactors if the Xenobots are preparing to attack our civilization soon."

"So..." said Joe, letting the word trail off.

"So we go back to our families. We enjoy a time of rest. And then..."

They all spoke in unison. "We go to Europa."

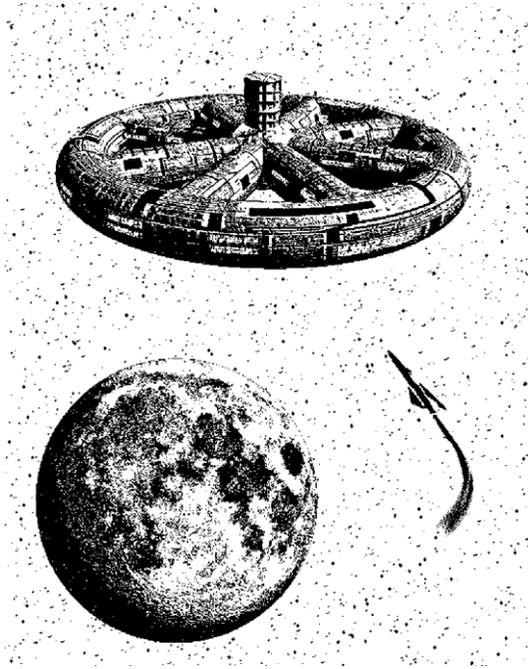
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Robert Nolan had left the hospital in Amundsen City after a stay of six weeks. He had checked himself out against the strong counsel of his physicians, who expressed dismay at his inadvisable, even dangerous, determination to leave. His emotional condition was highly precarious, and his view of the world alarmingly unbalanced.

Though Richard Starlight and Allen Foster had made several attempts to visit him during his stay, he had refused to see them or anyone else who made the effort to contact him. Nolan had ignored all messages sent to him, virtually cutting himself off from everyone who cared about him and tried to express that

concern by the available means. Trembling under tension like a taut piano wire, the hapless man viciously scrawled his signature on documents relieving the medical staff of any responsibility for his subsequent mental state, strode out of the facility, and returned to his private quarters in the complex of Nolan Mining Enterprise.

This complex was an immense metal and glass wheel, half a mile in diameter that rotated slowly above the Moon in an orbit about 500 miles above the gray surface. It was the primary manufacturing and launching headquarters of the company Robert Nolan had founded and single-handedly brought to a position of interplanetary prominence and trust.



Robert Nolan returned to his private quarters in the complex of Nolan Mining Enterprise.

Now its reputation was in shambles and its founder had kept himself isolated for nearly half a year. The company had taken on no new projects, for none had been either offered or sought. Morale in the company was unimaginably low. NME maintained its existing operations, but a significant percentage of its top scientists and researchers had either left or were looking to leave.

Nolan's chief assistant and second-in-command Beowulf Denn had taken de facto control of the company, but it was a losing battle. Some department heads were trying their best to continue their work and inspire their employees, but there was no leadership from the founder.

Nolan made appearances on rare occasions, but his emergence from his self-imposed exile did more harm than good. Rather than inspire his team, his slow, silent tours of the complex brought about a funereal hush. He had lost almost forty pounds since the catastrophic accident aboard the *Starventure* and the tragic news conference during which he had collapsed. Since his return to NME headquarters, he had not maintained the exercise program essential for Earth people who live on the Moon or on satellites. What little flesh was left on his bones was flaccid; his appearance was cadaverous.

He passed workstations without a word. If anyone braved making a remark to him, Nolan merely stared at him for a moment before moving on wordlessly. It was widely taken for granted that he would not survive the year.

Once, as he finished yet another melancholy tour of the NME complex, Beowulf Denn followed Nolan back to his apartments. After Nolan had opened the door, Denn pushed in after him and shut the door behind them.

Nolan spun with a look of fury in his sunken eyes and tried to shout, "Get out! Get out!" Only a squeaky, grating whisper came from his throat, for he had not spoken to anyone for many weeks. As Denn made no move to obey, Nolan lifted his right arm and swung with all his might, as if all the anger in the universe were behind the blow. To Denn, it was as if he had been struck by a small child.

This revelation of his utter powerlessness seemed the last straw. Robert Nolan lifted his face to the ceiling and shrieked in futile agony, with tears streaming down his cheeks. He began to fall to the ground, but the large man caught him, lifted him up, and carried him gently to the nearest sofa and laid him down, then took a seat nearby.

The curtains were drawn, and the apartment was so dark that its furnishings seemed gray. Robert Nolan blubbered in his misery, but Denn took no notice and made no response. He merely watched with an expression of apparent indifference.

At length, Nolan stopped weeping. His eyes stared at nothing, and he gulped every once in a while like a child who had worn himself to exhaustion after a tantrum. When Nolan's breathing had become steady, Beowulf Denn spoke.

"It's not your fault," he stated evenly. After a moment he continued. "It's all their fault, those Starlight people." Robert Nolan hadn't moved, but it was clear that he was listening. For the first time in half a year, something had caught his attention. His body had become rigid.

"Starlight Enterprise banked success after success, always stealing the limelight from us. Whatever we did, whatever we invented, whatever discovery we made, whatever success we had, they were always a step ahead of us." Denn's voice sounded surprisingly bitter.

"But when you invented the active shielding, at last we were ahead of them. They came aboard the 'dwarf planet project' in second place. But the risk was all ours; they had little to lose if something went wrong. And when something *did* go wrong, they couldn't get out of it fast enough! That act put on by Allen Foster at the news conference pinned all the blame on you! —and in front of the whole universe! No one can convince me that that little scene hadn't been set up by Richard Starlight himself!"

A light, tiny but vigorous, appeared in Robert Nolan's eyes. His nostrils quivered and his mouth turned up slightly into a painful smile.

"And now they've finally succeeded in ruining Nolan

Mining Enterprise while they move on into more success and fame!”

“We’re ruined?” Nolan’s expression showed sudden dismay; his voice was a quivering whisper.

“Almost,” said Beowulf Denn, as if in passing, as if bearing the interruption patiently. “Almost. We will be if we don’t make some changes fast.”

“What changes?” asked Nolan. His second-in-command was holding out hope for survival when he had thought there was none, none at all.

For nearly two minutes, Denn said nothing.

“What changes?” asked Nolan again. He tried to turn from his position on the sofa so that he could see Denn, but the other had placed his seat so that he was out of the range of vision of the fallen man.

“Do you remember when you sent me to Ceres five years ago?” said Denn at last, as if reluctantly.

“Yes,” whispered Nolan, his voice barely audible.

“I made contact with a great power there—rather, I should say it made contact with me. Great power. Power that will put Nolan Mining Enterprise onto a firmer footing than it has ever known before. It will leave Starlight Enterprise in the dust.” He paused. “Would you like to know more?”

“Yes,” repeated Robert Nolan. His voice sounded like dry leaves moving together in a dark, late autumn breeze.

Chapter 2: The Rocket’s Shadow

THE FIRST FEW days after the *Starventure* returned home were chaotic. The largest crowd in the history of Amundsen City packed the spaceport and its environs to greet the crew that had traveled closer to the sun and farthest from Earth than any human being had done before, had successfully landed on the dwarf planet, and had captured the last of the pirates who had threatened Earth with catastrophic destruction months earlier.

Captain Derf Bors was kept busy with a round of interviews, and the Starmen were hardly less in demand.

Twenty-five persons were aboard the ship when it landed at Amundsen City, eleven of whom were prisoners. Lurton Zimbaro, the leader of the pirates who had terrorized Earth and Mars with an attack of asteroids undetectable by normal means, was quickly arrested and kept in solitary confinement. His last five cohorts and the five traitorous crewmembers of the *Starventure* were also taken into custody.

The euphoric greeting afforded to the triumphant crew overflowed to the companies that had sponsored the mission. Richard Starlight was caught on camera standing with the families of the Starmen. The beaming smiles of Allen Foster and the head of Starlight Enterprise made it appear as if the shocking affair of six months' earlier had been forgotten.

This touching moment was upstaged when Beowulf Denn brought Robert Nolan in a wheelchair to the edge of the tarmac to greet Captain Bors and his loyal crewmembers. Commentators pointed out that Derf Bors was quite probably the finest space pilot alive and that he was a valued member of Nolan Mining Enterprise, hand-picked for the expedition by Robert Nolan.

Nolan's first public appearance since he had collapsed on stage the day the active shielding had failed was greeted with joy. A close-up of his gaunt face, trembling with happiness when Derf Bors approached and embraced him, brought many hundreds of thousands of watchers to tears. The widespread, public vilification of Starlight Enterprise and Nolan Mining Enterprise was quickly relegated to the past.

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A few days later, the three Starmen were sitting comfortably with Richard Starlight in his office at the top of the SE building. The office covered nearly an entire floor of the tower. In all directions, its walls were treated glass. The gray landscape of the Moon stretched away everywhere one looked.

They had disdained the formal meeting table and were sitting in the northwest corner of the room, diagonally opposite from Richard's personal workspace. A trayful of cookies was set out, as well as a large pot of Darjeeling tea—Joe's favorite. Richard's pet parakeet "Scarlet" chirped quietly in a huge cage behind his desk, making a pleasant background to the informal discussion that was going on.

"Excellent reasoning, Starman Foster," Richard said. Zip had just finished explaining his theory that the Benefactors had built a primary base in the Solar System twelve millennia earlier, and that the base was most likely located under the ice of Europa.

Richard's well-chiseled features looked out from under a full head of dark hair, slightly tinged with gray. "You know that the first landing on Europa was over 100 years ago, when a small bathysphere traveled through the ice and entered the sea below?"

"Yes sir," answered Mark. "It was 2039. The bathysphere relayed data for only ten minutes before ceasing to function."

"But in those ten minutes," rejoined Zip, "it showed that the water is 28° Fahrenheit—very livable with our current technology—and that the bottom of the ocean was twenty-three miles below."

Joe jumped in, lowering the cup of tea from his lips. "And since Europa's gravity is only about one-sixth that of Earth—maybe even a little less—the pressure gradient is going to be less severe; a sub can have six times the crush depth on Europa than it has on Earth! Why, twenty-three miles on Europa is the equivalent of only about four miles on Earth!"

"I'm not arguing with you, Starmen!" laughed Richard. "I'm not even trying to dissuade you. In fact, I think you ought to go!"

"Whoopee!" shouted Joe. Zip and Mark looked at each other with wide grins.

"More than that," Richard continued, "I'm going to recommend that you take one of the mantaships designed by Starlight Enterprise for undersea travel and exploration. I will also make some informal contacts with high level personnel who have, or may have, special information about Europa—ship

captains and researchers who've made recent journeys there, security officers, and the like.

"I'll even provide special funding from a discretionary account that I have, provided by a secret supporter of Starlight Enterprise's unusual projects."

"Discretionary account?" queried Mark.

"Secret supporter?" added Joe.

"Unusual projects?" asked Zip.

"Yes. A very wealthy gentleman on Earth, a Mr. Harry Tanwick VII, likes to spend his money on worthy projects that can't get funded anywhere else. He has a foundation for this purpose, and a good chunk of his money is designated for the Special Projects Discretionary Account of Starlight Enterprise."

"Why haven't we heard of this before, sir?" asked Zip.

"The source of Mr. Tanwick's money is—unusual—and he likes to stay out of the public eye."

"Can you tell us about it?"

Richard smiled broadly. "Back in 1940, someone created an annuity with an initial deposit of \$100 in the name of Harry Tanwick—Mr. Tanwick's ancestor six generations ago. No one ever claimed it and it grew over the years, eventually becoming an enormous fortune!

"Twelve years ago, Harry Tanwick VII opened an account with the same firm which was managing the annuity. As he was making the deposit, the old annuity came up in the records. Mr. Tanwick was able to prove that he was the direct descendant of the original Harry Tanwick, and the money became his!

"In gratitude for this good fortune, he vowed that he would give 50% of the income to support worthy causes that could not otherwise find funding. And there you are! He'll be funding your mission to Europa."

"Well, many thanks to Mr. Tanwick!" exclaimed Zip.

"Tell us about the mantaship, sir," said Joe. Mark nodded, whispering "yes" under his breath.

"Mark has probably heard about these," began Richard. Zip reached out and selected two almond cookies, then poured fresh

tea into his cup. He added half a teaspoon of sugar and stirred the tea with an antique silver spoon engraved with the letter “R”.

“For some time, designers of air and sea vehicles have looked to the natural world for their design ideas. A few years ago, Starlight Enterprise began to build seacraft based on the body type of a manta ray. Its shape is almost that of a flying wing, but the body is a little more substantial than that, and there is a tail for stability.”

“Yes, sir, I *have* heard about these,” contributed Mark. “There are fewer than a dozen in existence, aren’t there?”

“Yes; there are nine at present. One of them is on Mars, being used by Space Command to study the depths of the Martian oceans. The oceans there are so young, of course, that there is little to see on the bottom, but the researchers want to study the bottom in its early formative stages. The other mantaships are on Earth—the only other planet with oceans.”

“As I recall, the mantaships not only *look* like manta rays, they also *maneuver* like one! They actually *swim!*” said Mark. “The wings are covered with electroflex material, so that the craft can make just about any movement that a manta ray can make!”

“Can’t wait to fly that baby!” exclaimed Joe.

“You’re right, Mark. It has a flattened, sculpted cockpit. It is, in effect, an undersea rocket with wings powered by artificial muscle tissue called biopolymer. It lends extraordinarily high efficiency to the maneuverability of the craft.”

“Can we go see one?” asked Zip.

“I’ll make the arrangements,” answered Richard. “Most of them are based in Aquapolis, the underwater city built on the edge of the continental shelf south of the mainland of Florida. I’ll contact our division there and arrange for you to take one for a test dive. The man in charge is Ralph Q. Coxhead. He’s a legend in Aquapolis. Many times his designs and distinctive projects have achieved what most people thought was impossible.”

“We get to go to Aquapolis?” enthused Joe. “Wow, that’s

terrific! I've never been to any of the undersea cities!"

"I've been to one, a small settlement off the West Coast of the United States," contributed Mark, "but I've never been to Aquapolis. It was the first of the cities built in the oceans. I know that people began to build the underwater cities after the horrific nuclear devastation of the last century. Many people chose to leave the land entirely and begin new lives in a number of undersea settlements."

Zip continued the explanation. "If I remember correctly, Aquapolis was founded in 2101 as the world's first permanent underwater habitation; now it's also the world's largest, with a population approaching a quarter of a million people."

"I know that Earth boasts a vast ocean population," added Mark, "not only resident in domed underwater cities, but in floating cities as well—gigantic interconnected globes and enormous teardrop-shaped metropolises, suspended below the ocean's surface yet close enough to the surface to receive a moderate amount of sunlight. The city I visited was one of these, essentially a farming community."

"Aquapolis was founded as a research center, but the farming cities were quick to follow," said Richard. "They were desperately needed after the nuclear destruction. Fifty years after its founding Aquapolis still maintains a large number of research complexes. As the population grew its citizens brought in other industries as well: ocean farming, fishing, hydrate mining, manufacturing, and futuristic design. It was very much a planned community, and now it's rapidly becoming a major world cultural center. It's not only a showpiece, it's a fully functional city!"

"I can't wait to see it!" exclaimed Joe.

~

Robert Nolan's health began to amend. His muscle tone gradually became firmer as his eating habits improved and he returned to the exercise regimen he had let lapse. He gained

weight and his face filled out. Nevertheless, he held aloof from his one-time friends, including Richard Starlight.

Richard called him up sometime after his meeting with the Starmen and gave Robert a quick run-down on the proposed mission to Europa, but Robert showed no interest. He responded to Richard's pleasantries with brief, non-committal answers. Clearly perceiving that he was being given a brush-off, Richard cut the conversation short. He was pleased that Robert was showing marked improvement in his health, but was deeply grieved that their old friendship appeared to be cooling.

For several days, Robert kept the knowledge of the mission to Europa to himself. Then he decided to confide in Beowulf Denn. "We'll have to see that that mission fails," Denn announced. "Starlight Enterprise needs a good failure on its record. This one must be spectacular!"

Chapter 3: The Feathered Cape

THE *STAR RANGER* scudded into the topmost layers of Earth's atmosphere. The teeming lights of the Indian subcontinent appeared directly below the Starmen as Joe piloted the spacecraft on its journey to Aquapolis off the coast of Florida. It was late evening in the Indian Ocean, and the lights revealed the locations of the major centers of population.

The western bulge of Africa rotated away behind the Starmen as their ship sped westward. The Starmen wanted to circle the globe before landing in Florida, so they took advantage of the long approach to gaze out of the crystal clear cockpit and view the beauties of the blue-green-brown planet below them. Flying lower and lower, more and more slowly, Joe selected the course that promised the most rewarding view.

"Cloud cover over most of the west coast of the U.S. Sorry, boys!" announced the pilot. "I'll steer us over the north Pacific and see if we can get a good nighttime view of Japan." The line that divided day from night on the Earth was drawn on the

Pacific Ocean.

Before long Joe provided a breathtaking view of the lights of Hokkaido and the Kuril Islands, then flew over Asia. Only a few lights were scattered over the southern Russian expanses, with major cities standing out like white holes in a black cloth.

After a while, the brick-red spacecraft completed a circuit of Earth and winged its way over Europe as the people there entered evening. Mark opened up the radio channel and contacted the control tower at Flamingo near the southern extremity of the mainland of Florida. Flamingo was the port of access to Aquapolis.

The Executive Director of Starlight Enterprise's Aquapolis Division, Ralph Q. Coxhead, was a mechanical genius with a consuming interest in yachting, graphic arts, engineering, mathematics, and finance. He had virtually carte blanche in running SE's scientific compound in the great undersea city.

"Clearance granted," said the voice over the radio.

"We're in," said Mark to Joe. Joe brought the *Star Ranger* over the Bahamas. Zip looked out to the right and saw the islands of the Little Bahama Bank, brilliant green and white set amid the rich sea blue. A moment later on the left Andros Island became visible.

The craft moved lazily over Key Largo at the beginning of the keys, hugged the southern coast, and then came into sight of Flamingo. The dark green of the Everglades spread northward, but the city itself was lined with a brilliant white strip that was the beach. A wide cape of land jutted southward into the turquoise waters of the Straits of Florida.

The cape was home to hundreds of thousands of gulls, cormorants, and other birds associated with the sea. A cacophony of squawks and screeches filled the air throughout the daylight hours as the birds scavenged for food among the tide pools and shallows. The site was a distinctive mark of Flamingo.

The small but busy spaceport at the city provided docking space for a hundred or so privately owned spacecraft that belonged to local residents. Other than that, its traffic was almost

exclusively connected with Aquapolis.

The easiest access to the undersea city was through Aquapolis Port, adjacent to Flamingo. From there, several monorails ran directly through clear tubes along the sea floor to the main entry into the domed city. Most commuters and visitors took this means of traveling to the city from the mainland.

Those who wished to visit the undersea city by sea-shuttle departed from Flamingo harbor, covered the ten miles directly south from shore into the Straits, then descended the hundred fathoms down to one of the airlocks that gave access to Aquapolis. The Starmen, not having had much experience with the ocean and wanting to prepare for their descent into Europa's waters, decided to travel to Aquapolis by this fashion. They planned to charter a craft for the purpose.

"Beautiful summer's day," observed Zip as Joe landed the Starmen's spacecraft. He took advantage of the presence of a runway to land it on three wheels rather than its tail fins. Usually, to save fuel spacecraft that touched down on Earth landed on wheels like an aircraft.

"I'll say!" agreed Mark. "You don't get days like this on the Moon! Sometimes it almost makes me want to live on Earth—almost!"

"The hurricanes might give you another idea," said Joe, triggering the switch that opened the cockpit.

"Mmmm, smell the sea air," said Mark, lifting his head a little and sniffing. The smell of the nearby salt water surrounded the Starmen as they climbed out of the spacecraft. A light, moist breeze carried the sounds of the birds on the cape.

"It's an hour or so before noon here," remarked Joe. "Anyone want to get something to eat before we head out to Aquapolis?"

"Seems a little early for lunch, but why not?" said Zip. "We're not meeting Coxhead until 2:00 p.m."

The Starmen walked leisurely across the tarmac into the lounge of the Flamingo spaceport. The walls were decorated with enormous, stylized depictions of pink flamingos with the Everglades in the background. End-of-the-summer travelers

crowded the waiting areas and corridors of the port. More than once the Starmen caught glimpses of people pointing in their direction, then smiling and turning to talk to their friends. The red Starman uniforms they wore made them easy to identify.

Suddenly the Starmen heard a child's voice. "Can I have your autographs?" Mark looked down and saw a small boy holding a pad of paper and a pen. His beaming parents were watching from a few feet away.

"Huh?" said Mark.

"Your autograph, blockhead, your autograph!" said Joe. "You're famous, you know! You walked on the farthest planet!"

"Yeah," said the child. "And captured the pirates, too!"

Mark went down on one knee so he could look the boy in the eye. "What's your name?" he asked, taking the paper and pen.

"Jonathan Blaine," said the boy. "I'm six!"

Mark wrote, "To Jonathan Blaine, best wishes from the Starmen, Mark Seaton." Then he handed the paper to Joe. Joe and then Zip signed their names as well, and Zip handed the paper and pen back to the boy.

"Thanks!" cried the boy, and ran back to his parents. The boy's father nodded his thanks to the Starmen.

"Wow! That's the first time I've been asked for my autograph," Mark said to Joe and Zip as they walked on. "Feels kind of funny!"

"Yeah," said Joe. "Now we have to be good for the whole rest of our lives!"

Zip snorted. "There's a restaurant called 'The Everglades'. Let's eat there."

The Starmen sat at a round table and ordered lunch. To go with their meals, each ordered a large glass of freshly squeezed orange juice—a specialty of the house.

A tall, pretty waitress about twenty years old, wearing a name-tag that said "Heather," brought their orange juice and took their orders for hamburgers and french fries. Shortly after she had sent their orders to the kitchen, she approached their table.

"Excuse me," she began shyly. "There're some people at

another table who want to know if you are going to Aquapolis. If you are, they'd like to offer you a ride."

Zip turned to see the people whom the waitress had indicated. A middle-aged man and woman were seated two tables away. Their lunch had just been served, and they were looking in the Starmen's direction. They wore badges with the logo of Starlight Enterprise prominently displayed.

"Thank you," Zip said to the waitress. "I'll go talk to them." After she had left, Zip asked Mark and Joe, "You game?"

"Sure," said Joe. Zip got up and went over to the other table.

"Thank you for your offer," he began, extending his hand. "We are going to Aquapolis after lunch, and would appreciate a ride. My name is David Foster."

"No need to introduce yourself, Starman Foster," said the man as they shook hands. "We know who you and your companions are, of course. We're glad to be of service to you. I am Dr. Scott Crossfield, and this is Dr. Erica Krafft. We work in Starlight Enterprise's section of the city and will be glad to take you there after lunch."

"Pleased to meet you," said Dr. Krafft. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you, but no. My friends are waiting. Please go ahead with your lunch. We'll get acquainted afterwards. Thank you again for offering to take us to Aquapolis."

"Not at all," said Dr. Crossfield. "We'll be waiting for you in the foyer."

"Who were they?" asked Mark after Zip had taken his seat again. "Scott Crossfield and Erica Krafft. They work at Aquapolis, and will take us there when we're finished eating."

Just then Heather brought their food, along with refills on their orange juice. That put an end to the conversation for the next few minutes.

Chapter 4: 100 Fathoms Under

“AQUAPOLIS is one of the wonders of the world!” Dr. Krafft proudly informed the Starmen as they were strolling through the seaside portion of Flamingo. She was a woman in her mid-fifties, conservatively dressed in a dark brown skirt and peach-colored blouse; attractive golden hair swept back over her ears.

The two scientists and the three Starmen were walking at a gentle pace down a narrow promenade with shops on both sides. Striped awnings extended from left and right and almost met in the middle, shielding pedestrians from the direct rays of the noonday sun. The sound of the birds on the feathered cape came to their ears, and the soothing sound of the surf provided a definite calming effect on the Starmen. Even Zip, who was almost always on the move, seemed comfortable with the slow pace.

The Starmen had already informed the scientists that this would be their first visit to the undersea city. Scott continued the conversation:

“As you know, Aquapolis is a sprawling metropolis of many interconnected domes. The first domes were built by Starlight Enterprise and secured on the ocean bottom before any other construction took place; the water was then pumped out. Using prefabricated materials, the oldest part of the city was finished in less than a year.”

“But it took over a dozen years to plan it!” contributed Erica. “And it’s been expanding ever since!”

“It’s a fantastic sight!” exulted Scott, his eyes shining with excitement. He was about fifty years old, of delicate build, slightly owlish brown eyes, and thinning but curly brown hair. “I’ve lived there going on six years now, and I still feel the wonder of it! It’s a huge tourist attraction, a resort, and a model city, in addition to being one of the world’s foremost research centers!”

“Scott and I are colleagues in the marine bio-engineering department,” Erica said. “We came into Flamingo for lunch.

Scott's department—futuristic design—uses extremely high-speed digital cameras to record the activities of marine creatures, especially their movements associated with propulsion and maneuvering. Then his team can measure their speed precisely and discover how they achieve their most effective movements."

"Fascinating idea!" contributed Mark. "Study what already exists in nature with its proven methods, and adapt that when designing vehicles."

"Fascinating, yes, but not new, Mark," said Joe. "The Wright Brothers studied birds in flight before designing the wings of their first airplane back in 1903."

"Joe's right," said Scott. "What we are doing that is new is developing technologies that will allow us to adapt nature's phenomena in ways that human beings couldn't achieve even ten years ago."

"Like the mantaships," said Zip with conviction.

"Yes, indeed," said Erica. "Like the mantaships! They are our newest invention. They were just removed from the 'experimental' classification and are ready for production. We're quite pleased with them!"

The group came to the end of the promenade and entered the strand—the wide sidewalk that bordered the beach. With a gesture, Scott indicated that they should turn right.

"Sounds as if you are part of the mantaship team, Dr. Krafft," said Zip. "It's the mantaships we've come to see." He squinted a little. He was sensitive to the bright sunlight and was not used to it. The sun was directly overhead; shadows were as short as they could possibly be.

"Indeed she is part of the team," interjected Scott. "She is part of the 'inner circle' that designed the biopolymer wings."

"Please call me Erica," she said to the Starmen. "And I must say that I am more than satisfied with the performance of the mantaships! There are 93 people on the team that designed, built, and tested them over the past eight years, and that doesn't include the sixteen people testing one of the craft on Mars!"

"Here is our sea-shuttle," announced Scott Crossfield. "We'll

be in Aquapolis before too long.”

The five people left the strand and made their way along an attractively curbed brick walkway that led to the dock area. When they approached the dock, the sidewalk turned to thick, dark, wood planks bolted to rails. Their feet, which had made tapping sounds on the bricks now boomed hollowly as the party moved onto the wood.

To their left the ocean extended to the horizon without a break. A few gulls sailed over the waves, fluttering their wings only occasionally as they rode the breeze like gliders. The overhead sun created countless sparkles on the undulating billows and flashed blazing silver lines on the wave crests as the surf rolled in.

“Here we are,” repeated Scott, approaching a bright, golden yellow craft at the near end of the dock. Red lettering revealed that it was called the *Molly*. It had a bulbous but streamlined shape with a clear canopy built into its lines. There were short wings on either side that held hydrodynamic mechanisms at their ends. Scott approached it and said, “Molly, open canopy.”

The canopy opened upward. “Be our guests,” he said, gallantly stepping back and inviting the Starmen to enter.

Zip ducked under the canopy and moved into the far side of the back seat. Joe, the tallest of the three Starmen, took the middle seat, and Mark sat at the right hand position. Scott entered the shuttle and slid to the far side of the front seat, and Erica took the remaining seat behind the wheel.

“Molly, close canopy,” she said, and the canopy closed and sealed. When the seal had been checked and secured, Erica said, “Molly, check systems.” A flash of lights on the control panel blitzed through a preset pattern, then a comfortable but artificial voice said, “Ready.”

“Molly, one quarter mile short of Aquapolis,” said Erica. “Twenty minutes to descent, then relinquish control,” she added. The *Molly* began to move. Erica turned so she could address the Starmen. “The shuttle is automatic, of course. It plots its bearing to avoid other seacraft and arrive at its destination at the time we

set. We usually make the trip in ten minutes, but I thought you'd enjoy a more leisurely jaunt, so I've made it twenty. Then I'll take manual control and give you a tour of the outside of the city before we enter the airlock."

"Thank you, Erica," said Zip, speaking for all the Starmen. "I'm sure we'd enjoy that."

The *Molly's* propulsion system was quiet and efficient. The small craft wove its way through the other boats in the harbor, and then went through the breakwater into the open sea. Picking up speed, it oriented due south and began the ten-mile journey to the place of descent.

Mark looked out the window closest to him and smiled when he saw that three sea gulls were keeping pace with the travelers. Before long, they dropped behind. Zip looked to his left and saw two or three other shuttles ahead of them.

Almost before they knew it, the *Molly* slowed and then came to a stop. It moved gently in the swell.

"Aquapolis below and slightly ahead of us," announced Scott. "Here we go! Prepare for a fantastic sight!"

Erica said, "Molly, descend." The ship took seawater into its reservoirs to reduce its buoyancy and began to sink. The water sloshed over the window until the sea closed over the top of the canopy. Erica gripped the wheel and pressed it forward; the nose of the yellow seacraft pointed downward and began to move. Each of the Starmen felt a thrill of anticipation.

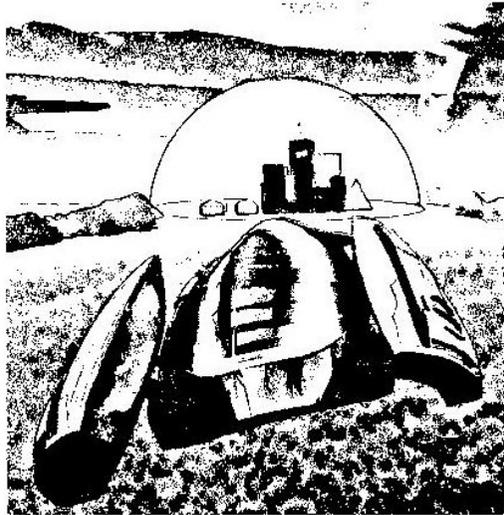
Almost imperceptibly the water around them changed color, turning from bright turquoise to a rich azure, then to heavy moss green and finally to dark violet. Occasionally shafts of sunlight struck the surface waves just right and a pale beam of light appeared momentarily, shifting with the pattern of the billows above. In such radiance the water danced with uncountable numbers of tiny flecks and drifting seaweed. Once or twice a fish shot through the pillar of light.

No one spoke. The number of fish began to increase, showing an enormous variety of shapes, sizes, and colors.

"Aquapolis is built near a coral reef that supports a lot of

fish” Scott informed the Starmen. “The amount of fish we’re seeing now shows that we are getting close to the city. Look ahead and see what you can see.”

The Starmen, who had been occupied with looking sideways at the fish that swam by, turned forward. Mark gasped, Joe whooped, and Zip smiled widely. Before them appeared a great number of lights as of a city at night, all enclosed in a dome-shaped mist of pallid light, like fog with illumination behind it. Rectangular and pyramidal silhouettes loomed through the mist.



Before them appeared a great number of lights

“Aquapolis,” said Erica. “This is the northwestern extremity, where the building began fifty years ago. I’ll take you down to where you can get the best view.” The bio-engineer brought the *Molly* down to the sea floor and into a channel that led directly toward the illuminated dome. The yellow sea-shuttle cruised slowly along the channel, with shallow banks rising on both sides. The glow from the dome ahead provided otherworldly illumination to the undersea formations around them.

All at once the channel came to an end as it intersected a broad canyon with a floor made entirely of sand. A range of low hills formed the opposite side to the canyon, beyond which the dome was located.

“This is amazing!” Mark managed to say. “We’ve all seen photographs and movies of the city, but there’s no way any reproduction could prepare someone for a first view like this!”

“To be frank,” smiled Scott, “that’s why Erica and I decided to offer you a ride here. We knew it would be like this and we wanted to share the experience of you first-timers.” The Starmen laughed.

“We’re glad you did!” said Zip. “We’re very glad you did!”

“There’s more to come,” said Erica as she brought the *Molly* across the canyon, and then lifted the sea-shuttle up and over the dome. Even Zip gasped at the view that opened up before them. Hundreds of illuminated domes, some of great size, spread out into the distance as far as they could see. There were glass towers and connecting tubes, through which many vehicles were passing. The coral reef spread to right and left, and many thousands of fish swam around the reef and among the watery interstices of the undersea city.

To the right, several enormous clear commuter tubes came into the largest dome. The tubes had been built on the ocean floor and extended back out of sight, obviously connecting Aquapolis Port to the mainland. Dozens of small submarine craft like the *Molly* moved around the domes, heading toward or out of many airlocks.

“There’s a whole aqua culture here!” breathed Mark. “Look at the garden!”

“Where?” said Joe, leaning to the right where Mark was pointing.

Just below and to the right were many acres of cultivated plants, waving in the gentle rhythm of the sea. A number of people in watersuits moved among the crops, tending to the plants. Tiny streams of bubbles rose from packs on their backs. Shifting pillars of light moved through the violet waters,

illuminating the fields dimly.

“That farm is run by a department of medical research,” said Scott. “Those plants produce some of the newest medicines. There are plenty of farms for food crops, too.”

“Well, I’m impressed!” said Joe, sitting back.

“Ready to see Starlight Enterprise, Aquapolis Division?” asked Erica.

“The sooner, the better!” responded Zip.

“Molly, Starlight Enterprise port,” said Erica to the sea-shuttle’s voice-activated navigation system. *Molly’s* automatic pilot took over, and the seacraft picked up speed, cruising over the tops of the domes. When it reached the third dome after the first, the ship dropped down almost to ground level and entered an airlock.

As soon as the *Molly* docked, the outer portal was sealed by a rotating set of plates that moved like the iris on a camera lens. The water was quickly drained to a depth of a few feet. The yellow sea-shuttle floated peacefully in its dock.

“Molly, open canopy,” said Scott. The glass unsealed and opened. “Welcome to Aquapolis!” said the man, turning to the Starmen.

~

Robert Nolan sat quietly in his private quarters aboard his satellite complex. His attitude had improved during the previous few weeks. He was resting now after a long workday.

He glanced down at a sheaf of papers. Two companies had contacted NME that day, wanting to begin negotiations for new projects. Nolan was pleased. His company hadn’t had any new business for almost half a year.

Beowulf Denn’s words about Richard Starlight and the Starmen seemed a little overblown now. *Maybe Wulf was just tired out and angry, the way I was*, thought Nolan. *He couldn’t have really meant what he said about harming Starlight Enterprise.*

Still, there was that talk about another power of some kind.

That couldn't have been the result of anxiety or frustration. It was intriguing and frightening.

But things were looking up now. Maybe things would get better on their own. Maybe he could just ignore what Wulf had said about that power.

Chapter 5: The Flying Stingaree

SCOTT CROSSFIELD and Erica Krafft had taken the Starmen to their appointment with Ralph Q. Coxhead, then, with a cheery farewell, had left them to get back to their work. After introductions, Coxhead had not wasted any time in taking the Starmen to the hangars where the mantaships were kept. A slideway had taken them several hundred yards from a central atrium near the office complex to an elevator. The elevator descended one level through a transparent tube that resembled the corner tower of a medieval castle. A short walk brought them to the undersea hangar area.

Coxhead was both business-like and kindly. He was about fifty-five years old, a slight man with short, bristling gray hair and intense brown eyes. His eyes were attentive but not invasive. For twelve years he had been Executive Director at SE, Aquapolis. Right now he was intent upon showing the Starmen one of the mantaships.

The curious ship floated on the water in a wide slip in the hangar; several others mantaships were docked in the same locale. Their slips were set side by side in a spacious dome where most of the SE underwater craft were docked. The surface of the ocean was nearly a thousand feet above them. In one quarter of the dome were facilities where repairs and maintenance were performed. The research and construction factory was located elsewhere.

The mantaship was an intensely dark, blue-gray color with black trim. Its surface was completely non-reflective, as if it were hide rather than artificial covering. A wide strip windshield

was situated at the front of the body. The fuselage was low-slung and drew back to a blunt point, after which it quickly narrowed into a tail-like appendage. The wings swept out in an attractive streamlined shape. The crew quarters were about eight feet across and twenty feet long, with about fifteen more feet to the end of the “tail”; from wingtip to wingtip was about forty feet.

“You’ll like it, Joe, I’m sure,” said Coxhead. His right hand was on Joe’s left shoulder and his left stretched out with an open-handed gesture. “You’ve got quite a reputation as a pilot and I’ve heard you can fly just about any aircraft that’s been built, but I can guarantee that you’ve never taken control of anything like this!”

“What makes it unique, sir?” asked the tall Starman. Joe was looking with frank admiration at the undersea craft in front of them. Zip and Mark stood to Joe’s immediate right.

“You probably know that the mantaships were patterned after the manta or sting ray, also called a stingaree.”

Joe nodded. Mark and Zip were also paying close attention to Mr. Coxhead’s comments.

“Our design went much farther than simple body shape and function, although it certainly includes that. The ‘skin’ is made of a tough, flexible, non-adhering, non-reflective substance. It actually feels like the skin of a marine animal, and it moves like it too.”

Joe dropped to his knees and reached out to the wingtip of the undersea craft. He pressed his fingers into it. The surface seemed to give a little, and for a brief time it left dimples where his fingers had pressed.

“We designed the controls so that the pilot almost has to *think* like a manta ray to navigate this craft,” Coxhead continued. “You can imagine that the pilot *wears* the craft—he ‘puts it on’ rather than merely ‘sits in the pilot’s seat’—do you follow me?” Coxhead’s eyes fixed inquiringly on Joe’s as he offered the explanation.

“Uh—not exactly, sir.”

“Well, it’s hard to explain. Let’s get aboard and I’ll show you.

Come on!”

Coxhead stepped out directly onto the ship’s left wing, and was followed by the Starmen. He strode over to a hatch that became visible only at close range.

“Mantaship, open hatch,” he said. The hatch opened inward and revealed a steep descent into the ship. The interior had been designed to make the best use of limited space. Gauges, cables, cords, informational displays, and pipes, trimmed unobtrusively with color-coded labels, ran along both sides of a narrow corridor. Small storage areas and cabinets were set into the walls on both sides of the passageway.

“Lockers, supplies, galley, restroom facilities and all that are located at the back,” said Coxhead with a quick gesture over his shoulder. “What you’re interested in is up here.” He led the way forward, with the Starmen close on his heels.

“The mantaships run on nuclear bionics,” he continued, “so there’s no chemical exhaust. That and the ‘skin’ mean you won’t pollute anyplace you take this ship, and you won’t leave any telltale signs when you maneuver.”

As they approached the cockpit, the space widened to show four seats, two in front and two behind. Each was set within a gyro-balanced framework that allowed it to remain oriented upright regardless of the pitch of the ship. The occupants also strapped themselves in with safety nets to keep them safe and comfortable as the craft gyrated.

An unusual structure was positioned in the central forward section. A small, contoured seat was held in place on a flexible shaft that emerged from the floor. A helmet with oversize goggles came down from the ceiling on a similar, snake-like conduit. From a console in the front emerged another conduit about two inches in diameter that bifurcated into appliances that led to openings for the hands, easily adaptable to any conceivable motion that a person could make.

“Wow!” shouted Joe. “I get the idea right away!”

Zip nodded his approval of the setup.

Mark wore his customary smile of deep satisfaction.

“I’m glad you like it, gentlemen,” said Coxhead, with a tone that showed that he wasn’t surprised at their reaction. “Now I’ll show you how it works.” He took his place on the seat, pulled the helmet over his head, and then placed his hands into the glove-like fixtures. The helmet covered his head as far down as his nose and ears but left his mouth visible.

“Ralph Coxhead,” he said, and the appliances adjusted themselves slightly. The seat raised a few inches, the helmet whirred quietly and changed shape, and the front console moved forward a little.

“Mark,” said the Executive Director of SE, Aquapolis, “I’m sure you’ll recognize all the communications and navigational equipment. Would you please inform the base that we’re taking the ship out for an hour or two?”

“Yes sir!” said Mark, leaping to the familiar controls.

After he had received clearance, Coxhead said, “We’re away!” His hands pulled back slightly, and the mantaship moved away from the dock. When it was clear of all possible obstructions, he drew his right hand backward and pressed his left forward; the ship turned clockwise in place.

With a sigh of satisfaction and a smile that the Starmen could see, Coxhead pressed both hands forward and down. The mantaship sank beneath the surface of the water and moved ahead.

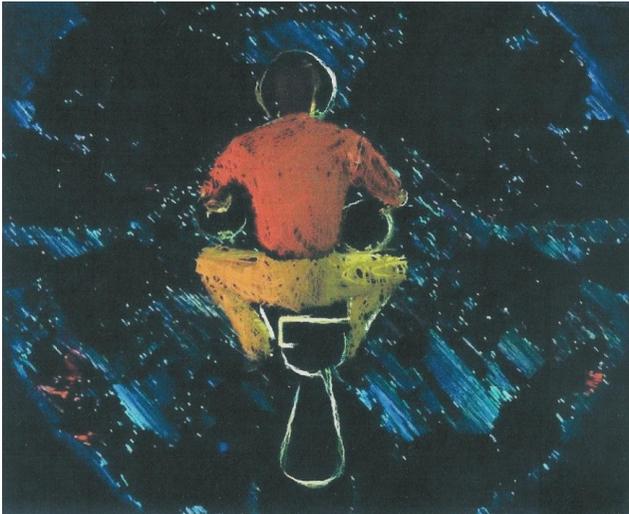
“This helmet not only shows you what you can see from the window ahead of you,” explained Coxhead, “it reveals everything you could see if the window were eyes. Your hands and arms control the speed and direction of the ship almost as if you were flying. You see, to pilot this ship you almost have to ‘become’ a manta ray.”

The mantaship passed underneath the bottom of the wall of the dome into the free waters of the ocean. Distant sunlight filtered down in shades of violet, lilac, and lavender. The wings of the ship rippled as the ship shot forward at a brisk speed. On both sides thin strands of seaweed grew upward from the bottom like leafy ropes hanging down from above. Numerous bright fish fed

among the fronds.

When they reached the point where the continental shelf dropped off into darkness, Coxhead brought the ship to a standstill. “Mantaship, release,” he commanded, and the helmet and gloves opened up to loose him. “You try it now, Joe,” he said. “It is as easy as it looks. It’ll just take me a moment to add the voices of all three of you to the voice-recognition command system.”

For the next two hours, all three Starmen took turns piloting the mantaship. They put it through many maneuvers and learned the intricacies of its control system. At the end of their excursion Zip took the ship to the bottom of the deep sea, miles from Aquapolis and over a mile below the sunlight. Powerful lights illuminated the view for nearly a hundred yards in every direction.



Mark was kept busy on the radar screen, plotting their course as the screen revealed mounds, chasms, cliffs, and currents, and alerted him to any large moving objects nearby. “There’s a lot more to navigating this vessel than a spacecraft!” he exclaimed

more than once. “You can’t let go for a minute!”

At the end of two hours, Ralph Coxhead said, “Mantaship, show coordinates for home,” and the heading the pilot and navigator needed to return to the dock in Aquapolis appeared on the navigator’s screen. Joe took the mantaship back to Aquapolis and docked it smoothly in the slip from which they had departed.

As they emerged from the ship, Joe was ebullient. “I dub this ship the ‘*Underbird*’!” he said.

“It’s not designed after a bird, Joe,” said Zip. “A manta ray is a sea animal.”

“I know that, Zip, of course, but when you’re at the helm, it feels as if you’re flying!” rejoined Joe. And so the Starmen called it the *Underbird*.

The Starmen stayed for a full week, soloing in the craft on the second day, and putting it through its paces. Zip took many notes about the requirements the ship would have to fulfill if it were to be used in the oceans of Europa. They spent up to four hours each day in the *Underbird* and four additional hours researching their voyage. They collaborated with the SE designers and craftsmen, and put together a list of design specifics to leave behind when they returned to the Moon.

“About four weeks, I think,” said Ralph Coxhead to Zip as he scanned the completed list on the Starmen’s last day in Aquapolis. “We can do this in about four weeks. Come back then and we’ll test it.”

“We won’t be doing the test here,” said Zip. “We’ll give the *Underbird* its big test in Antarctica.”

“Antarctica?” queried Coxhead, looking up at Zip with surprise.

“Antarctica,” confirmed the leader of the Starman team. “We’re going to descend into Lake Vostok. That’s about as close as we can get anywhere in civilized space to simulating what we’ve got to do on Europa.”

Ralph Coxhead rocked back in his chair with amazement showing in every feature.

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“This is the coldest spot on Earth,” said Starman David Foster. “One of the few places on our home planet where we have to wear our spacesuits.”

“71° below zero,” observed Joe Taylor, checking the instrument pad that was strapped onto his forearm. “It’s warmer on Mars than it is here!”

The Starmen stood huddled together off to one side of the work area in Vostok, Antarctica. It was early spring on the seventh continent. Thousands of square miles of wind-rippled snow spread unbroken as far as the eye could see, except for a low ridge of jagged upsurged ice in one quadrant. The windows in their helmets had darkened slightly in the fierce glare of light on the white field that extended in every direction.

It was impossible to gauge distance. Above them a pearlescent sky stretched from horizon to horizon. A horned moon hung a few degrees above the skyline. Its bare, pale pink sliver provided a starkly beautiful presence in the otherwise featureless spread of ice and sky.

It was four weeks after the Starmen had departed from Aquapolis. While engineers in the undersea city had been outfitting the *Underbird* for its mission in the oceans of Europa, others had been preparing for the test of the mantanship in Antarctica.

The time for the test had arrived; the *Underbird* had been delivered the day before to the last continent, and had been checked out by the technicians on site. An hour earlier, the Starmen had set the *Star Ranger* down at Vostok Base, about 550 miles from the South Pole.

Lake Vostok had been discovered in 1996 after researchers had combined decades’ worth of seismic studies, radar surveys, and satellite imaging. It was a large, crescent-shaped pristine fresh-water lake located more than two miles below the surface of the loneliest continent, and had been buried deep under the ice for eons.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, researchers stationed at what was then a Russian scientific outpost had

mapped the lake. They had sent small robotic probes to test the waters for the existence of microbes, nurtured near geothermal vents that provided heat and minerals enough to sustain life without light or oxygen. The outpost had been abandoned during the Collapse, and then left untended for seventy years.

Only in the past generation had geophysicists re-established a permanent presence at Vostok. A research center barely twenty years old stood not far from the site of the old Russian outpost. Several large gray aircraft with the SE insignia on their fuselages were tied down on the ice. The *Star Ranger*, upright on its three fins, stood out like a flame on the colorless landscape.

Landing on wheels was not possible on the ice fields of the Antarctic. To accommodate spacecraft, the residents of Vostok Base had set out a landing pad on a leveled space. The pad was made of prefabricated, heat-absorbent interlocking squares.

The Starmen's small talk was an attempt to mask their anxiety. For a month they had known the nature of the test they had to make with the *Underbird*, but only when they had actually arrived at Vostok and seen the site with their own eyes did the full nature of their peril wash over them.

Fifty yards away was the mouth of a shaft that the engineers from Starlight Enterprise had sunk during the previous three weeks. It was eighteen feet across but nearly two miles deep. The engineers had drilled the hole with high-pressure superheated water jets that turned the hard-packed glacial ice to steam. The steam rose through the shaft and dissipated into the atmosphere.

A ring that fit precisely inside the shaft followed the cutting instruments to seal and fortify the sides of the hole to prevent its collapse. The ring was filled with liquid nitrogen and froze the walls of the shaft harder than steel. Once each day, the ring made a full descent and ascent to keep the wall of the abyss hard.

Several days earlier, the excavation team had broken through to the waters of Lake Vostok. The high pressure in the lake had caused the water to rise quickly upward into the shaft until the water reached a point of equilibrium. At that point, the topmost portion froze over. When the *Underbird* made its descent, it

would break through the newly frozen barrier and then enter the water-filled shaft below in an area that consisted of large, nearly transparent “gem” ice made up of frozen water from the lake itself.

A huge derrick, loaded with several enormous spools of thick cable, had been set up close to the gaping orifice. The cables were three miles long. The Starmen were to enter the *Underbird* and then be lowered by the cables to the bottom of the pit. After they entered the water of the buried lake, the cables would then be released and the ship would travel freely.

To preserve the purity of the waters of the buried lake, the exterior of the mantaship had been scoured for contaminants. Such unmanned exploration of the lake as had been carried out in the past had first measured the lake’s purity and then maintained it with procedures which were as little invasive as possible. The same policies were being followed in this case that were observed when any spacecraft first touched down on any alien body, whether it be a planet, moon, comet, or asteroid.

Once the craft entered the waters of the lake the Starmen would explore it, travel through its frigid waters and impenetrable darkness, and practice the maneuvers that would be necessary on Europa. Then they would return the mantaship to the opening, reattach it to the cables, and be drawn back to the surface.

In anticipation of the descent, the Starmen wore grim expressions. Joe, usually irrepressible, had peeked casually over the edge of the pit and felt an unexpected spike of panic rise up in him. He had slowly backed away. Zip and Mark quickly picked up on his stark apprehension.

One of the technicians on the far side of the abyss raised his hands to form a megaphone and shouted, “We’re ready, gentlemen!” Twenty or so men and women stood in a group around the derrick, and three operators were stationed in the cab. The *Underbird* was poised on the edge of the aperture, ready to be lowered.

Zip stepped out briskly. “Let’s go,” he said. “It won’t get any

easier.” Joe and Mark followed him closely. In a moment they were inside the *Underbird* and strapped into position.

Zip was in the pilot’s seat. He quickly ran through the checklist of operating systems and confirmed his communication channel with those who would remain on the surface. The *Underbird* would stay in constant audio and visual contact with the technicians in the derrick’s cab.

When all was ready, Zip said, “You may proceed.”

“Good luck,” said the topside communications officer. He pulled on the cables and the *Underbird* left the ground, stern first. The operator moved the derrick so that the *Underbird* was suspended nose down directly over the abyss.

Even though all three Starmen knew that the craft was securely attached to three thick cables, any one of which could bear the weight of the *Underbird*, they involuntarily gasped as the ship was moved over the edge. Their seats moved on gimbals to keep them upright, but their eyes were drawn straight downward. The powerful lights of the *Underbird* sent beams into the hole, but the Starmen could see no bottom.

Zip reached his right hand over his head and stretched his left in front of his chest and pointed toward his right shoulder. Outside, the *Underbird’s* wings rolled up around the body of the craft. Then he released his hands from the control gloves, pinning the wings in place. Slowly, the *Underbird* descended into the vertical tunnel.

Minutes passed. No one spoke. Each Starman strove to control his breathing and relax. The deeper they went, the easier the descent became. The view never changed and there were no indications of danger or difficulty.

“How you all doing down there?” came the voice of the communications officer.

“All fine!” answered Zip immediately. He was surprised at how confident his voice sounded.

“Looking forward to it!” added Joe. He turned and looked across at Mark and mouthed the words, “And I really am, too!” Mark smiled and nodded.

Nearly half an hour later they could see the barrier made up of the frozen waters of Lake Vostok that had risen in the shaft a few days earlier.

“Bottom in sight,” reported Zip. “Slow the descent.”

“I can see it,” said the voice from above.

“Thirty yards,” said Mark, who began to keep a careful eye on the instruments.

“Touchdown!” announced Zip.

“That’s one big drop for a man, ...” began Joe.

“Stow it,” said Zip. The sound of many people laughing came through the communicators. Everyone’s nervous tension was relieved considerably by Joe’s words.

“Taking control now and beginning the *Underbird*’s descent,” said Zip. He manipulated the controls that sent superheated water into the ice in front of the *Underbird*. Steam immediately rose and flowed around the side of the ship.

“Can you see okay?” asked Mark.

“Yes, the filter’s working fine,” responded Zip, “—not that there’s anything to see! But we’ve already evaporated about five feet of the barrier.”

“Good. Just a couple more feet until we get wet.” Zip didn’t answer; he just kept moving the *Underbird* forward.

Joe found that he was gripping the sides of his seat so tightly that his fingers were feeling the strain. With a lop-sided grin, he released his grip and massaged his fingers.

Zip slowed the cutting mechanism almost to nothing, moving the *Underbird* ahead inch by inch. Before them was a sheer white wall of ice. Suddenly the entire barrier disappeared, and the view changed instantly from white to utterly black.

All three of them inhaled sharply, and Joe clutched the sides of his seat again. He had the sudden impression that he was falling. Liquid washed up against the front window.

“We’re through!” exclaimed Zip. A crowdful of cheers came through the speakers, with cries of congratulations.

“You’ve got a bunch of people about to turn blue up here!” exulted the communications officer. “We can’t see anything on

our screens. How's it look to you?"

"Can't see a thing, either," said Zip, "but we're fine! Going to the bottom of the shaft now!" For several hundred yards Zip paid out the cables and the mantaship passed through the deepest portion of the shaft. Before long they reached the terminus and the *Underbird* eased into the enormous sub-ice cavity that was Lake Vostok. Then Zip put his hands back into the control gloves and regained command of the wings, unrolled them, and caused the *Underbird* to resume the shape of a manta ray.

"We are entirely submerged in the water of Lake Vostok," he said, "and are releasing the cables."

All three cables detached. Their homing devices would allow the *Underbird* to find them again without difficulty, but for now the craft was entirely disjoined from the people topside.

The *Underbird's* powerful lights came on.

Through the helmet, Zip could see features that Joe and Mark could not, since their field of vision was limited to what they could see through the window.

"I can see a great ice ceiling above us, as far as the light shines," said Zip. His friends could see nothing but darkness ahead.

"Let's descend," said the Starman leader, and he moved his gloved hands slowly forward and down.

Chapter 6: Assignment in Space

THE *UNDERBIRD* swam deeper into the waters of Lake Vostok, the purest lake on Earth.

Zip gave the order: "Enhanced radar, Mark!"

"Aye aye, Zip," responded the navigator. He changed the viewing mode in the headset Zip wore. To Zip, it suddenly seemed as if he were flying a plane. The terrain below had been made visible to him by computer-enhanced perception. The Starlight Enterprise engineers were planning to upgrade the enhanced radar to sonarvision, so that by the time the mantaship

was ready for its journey to Europa, it would be able to display images directly on the windshield of the craft for the entire crew to see.

On the wall at Joe's left, a three-dimensional chart appeared, showing the contours of Lake Vostok in a pleasing, pale green grid on a black field. The position of the *Underbird* was indicated by a bright red blip. A fine orange line showed the site of the tunnel to the surface.

"The pressure down here is crushing," Zip informed his crewmates. "It's about 360 times the atmospheric pressure at sea level. Should be a good test for our descent into Europa."

"Bottom coming up soon, Zip," warned Mark.

"I can see it distinctly in this headset," said Zip. "Very plain—almost no features at all."

"It's about 3,000 feet deep at this point."

"Get right down to the bottom, Zip, and cruise along close to the solid formations," urged Joe. "We'll have to do that on Europa. I wish there were some interesting features where we could put this fish through its paces."

"Some of the geothermal vents are about four miles ahead," said Zip. "Let's go there and see what we can find." The *Underbird* swam at a good clip, its wings rippling like the manta ray after which it was designed.

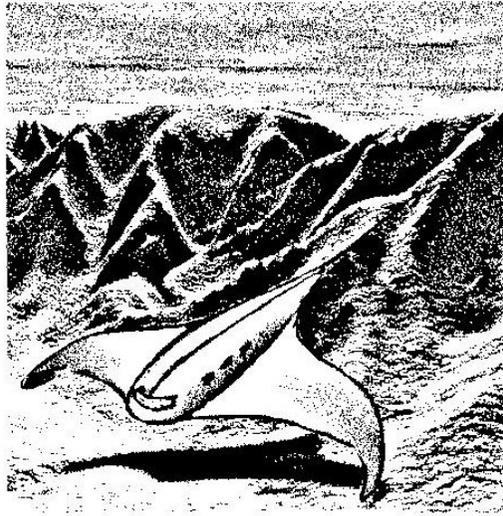
The bottom of the 170-mile-long lake was slanted downward from south to north. The *Underbird* had entered the lake at its upper portion and soared downward at a very slight incline. The position of the red blip on the chart next to Joe showed that the lake's northernmost extremity was about 150 miles ahead of the *Underbird*.

The bottom of the lake was visible now to ordinary sight through the front window—a smooth layer of sediment undisturbed for ages. As the *Underbird* soared by, its wake raised clouds of tiny particles like a vapor trail.

"Take over, Joe," said Zip. "Geothermal vents ahead." Zip slowed the SE undersea craft to a standstill, and the two Starmen traded places.

“Joe Taylor,” said Joe. The *Underbird’s* voice recognition system adjusted the pilot’s equipment to accommodate Joe’s lanky frame, much different from Zip’s compact physique. “Ah, that’s better,” said Joe as the seat, helmet, and gloves conformed to his size. Now under Joe’s control, the *Underbird* glided ahead to the site of the geothermal vents. In the otherwise plain floor, a few rock formations were growing. Three large openings among them showed dark in the illumination cast by the *Underbird’s* powerful lights.

“Water temperature is almost 70° here,” announced Mark. “If it weren’t for the pressure of 360 atmospheres, you could swim here comfortably with nothing more than a scuba tank.”



“Bottom coming up soon, Zip,” warned Mark.

Joe put the *Underbird* through its paces for about half an hour, and then turned the helm over to Mark. The undersea craft performed beautifully, making sharp turns, stopping suddenly, turning loop-the-loops, and scouring the sides of the lake. The final test was to cruise near the ceiling and track any

indentations. In the ocean of Europa, the Starmen would be looking for signs of handiwork—evidence that anyone had been present before them.

An hour and forty-five minutes after Zip had released the *Underbird* from its suspending cables, the Starmen brought the mantaship back to the terminus of the shaft. With unerring accuracy, they found the thick strands hanging in place. Magnetic coupling restored the connection and Zip gave the order to the topside crew to bring the *Underbird* back to the surface. The test had been completely successful!

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Three days later, Starman David Foster was concentrating intently at his workspace at home in Amundsen City. It was Friday night, and friends had invited his parents, Allen and Beth, out for the evening. Kathy, his eight-year-old sister, had gone to bed an hour earlier. David glanced quickly at the clock and saw that it read 9:57 p.m. He returned his gaze to the computer screen before him and furrowed his brow.

He was reading through the files on the Benefactors' asteroid that had just been sent to him from the office of Richard Starlight. The highly sensitive material had been encrypted by three different methods. Eventually it would be made public, but for now the information was so shocking that access to it was restricted to fewer than two dozen people—all of them personally connected with Richard Starlight and thoroughly trustworthy.

Zip scrolled down the screen and read:

... The data we have gleaned from our study of the pirates' asteroid shows that it was more than just a spaceship for travel within our own Solar System: it was a vehicle capable of traveling between stars. Information extracted from the engines, the

ship's computers, and slight irregularities in the ship itself (e.g. atomic distortions that could only be caused by jumps through hyperspace) conclusively show that the asteroid has traveled very long distances through hyperspace. Data from the computers on the asteroid reveal that the computations necessary to make hyperspatial jumps are stored in the asteroid.

Unfortunately, we could not activate the requisite systems. While the machinery appears to be complete and in place, its systems are securely locked; the central computer that governs the systems and allows them to be used is missing. This essential item we call "The Key" is a tool independent of the systems available to us and has not been located anywhere on the asteroid in spite of the most thorough search. We will continue our examination of the asteroid's propulsion system, but we are certain that it is possible to achieve the equivalent of faster-than-light speed, and that the key to attaining it can be found here.

"Hmmm," muttered David. "Obviously this is why these files are highly restricted." He was impressed and excited. He continued to read:

We have drawn a few additional preliminary conclusions after the initial research conducted aboard the asteroid during the past twelve months. We present them in order of probability:

First, the alien civilization that devised the asteroid was clearly very

similar to humans in physical makeup. This is not surprising, since general biology teaches that the humanoid form (i.e., a recognizable head, a body carried in a vertical posture, two lower limbs used for purposes of locomotion, two upper limbs used for manual tasks, and a torso for the central vital organs) is simply the most logical configuration for a species which lives, within certain broad parameters, in an environment similar to our own.

The nature of the people of Titan, the description of the two aliens provided by Starman Mark Seaton who claims to have seen them on the asteroid, the computer files accessed by Starman Seaton on Nyx, as well as the design of the instruments and living quarters aboard the asteroid, make this conclusion inescapable. In short, the race that designed the asteroid looked like us.

Second, it is most likely that this civilization originated from a neighboring star system. Data the Starmen gathered from the base on Nyx and information our research team has extracted from files aboard the asteroid suggest that this race had bases in other star systems. We have already shown that it was a civilization capable of interstellar travel.

Furthermore, since the explorations of our own Solar System show no sign that they were resident here for any appreciable length of time, they must have originated somewhere else. Their three-moon insignia which has been seen on Mars, Titan, Nyx, and the asteroid itself supports this conclusion, since there are no bodies in

our System which match the configuration of planet and moons seen in this symbol.

Third, and with some hesitation, we suggest that the base on Nyx was probably a fueling station on the outskirts of our System, due to the high concentration of Helium-3 on the dwarf planet. It may have been used as a stopover place to transport the Titanians to Titan, though this is no more than a guess.

Some time subsequent to the Titanians' migration, however, some event caused the aliens to abandon their asteroid in the Belt, with perhaps only a small number left on board to watch over it. The base on Nyx fell into disuse and was abandoned.

We can make no conclusions regarding the cause of these events, other than what we can draw from the sketchy information provided by Starman Seaton. The two aliens the Starman saw aboard the asteroid gave evidence that they were anxious about some hostile power. We must also point out that the sight of these two aliens was limited to only one witness, who admits that he was wakened out of sleep at the time of their appearance. Furthermore, even if his testimony is accurate, reading the emotions of aliens whose speech is unknown to any human being is, at best, highly speculative.

However, the existence of the Xenobots on Nyx, whose spacecraft, according to Starman Seaton, were identical to those in the files he saw aboard the asteroid and which have been found and verified in the files in the base on Nyx, lends credence to

Starman Seaton's conclusions. The data from the expedition to Nyx is a matter of ongoing research and belongs to a different department of Starlight Enterprise.

"What are you reading, David?" The Starman swiveled his chair and saw his sister standing in the doorway. Her dark red hair was haloed by illumination behind the little girl. Signs of sleep were in her eyes. Pink and tan stars, spaceships, and teddy bears in space suits formed a pattern on her white pajamas.

"I just finished reading something about the pirates' asteroid, little one," he answered. Without turning his chair back toward the desk, he leaned over and closed the file he was reading. As the print disappeared, David's sister crawled into his lap, then sat facing the screen with her brother's arms on both sides of her as he rested them on the keyboard.

"It's kind of hard for me to work with you sitting here, Kathy," he said kindly.

"Just for a minute," she said sleepily.

David smiled affectionately, pulled her closer to himself so that he could support her more comfortably, then reached a hand out and opened the file he called, "EUROPA". He peeked around the side of Kathy's head so he could read the file and opened the section designated "Crew". At the top of the list, he read:

Captain: Yancy Dufaure. Graduate of Starlight Academy, 2130. Rating, BAAA. Born Marseilles, France, May 8, 2113. Citations, none. Commendations, 14.

A list of awards presented by Starlight Enterprise and Space Command followed.

SE's top pilot, thought Zip with satisfaction. He began to scroll down to check the personnel file of Noah Kitsualuk, the Eskimo who was joining the crew.

As Zip read the file, almost imperceptibly Kathy's head

mining and manufacturing organizations.

Now this had to happen! His archrival, Richard Starlight, had bested him once again! Robert's one big mistake had been corrected by Starlight Enterprise before NME had even had the chance to fix it. A sob escaped his lips, but he quickly controlled it.

This time, he, Robert Nolan, would not fall. He steadied his shaking knees and controlled his breathing. His hands gradually rolled up into fists.

Behind him, watching silently, Beowulf Denn smiled.

Chapter 7: The Scarlet Lake Mystery

RICHARD STARLIGHT had given Zip complete authority to organize and command the mission to Europa. He had provided funding from the SE special discretionary account supported by Harry Tanwick VII and had lent to the Starmen personnel from various departments; most significant was the assignment of Yancy Dufaure and his ship, the *Silverfire*.

Dufaure, Starlight Enterprise's top pilot, had graduated from Starlight Academy twenty-two years earlier. Now he was 39 years old, with a distinguished career that showed no signs of slowing down.

Starlight Academy rated its graduates in four categories: Leadership, Health, Character, and Academics. The Starmen were drawn only from those graduates who received a AAAA rating. Dufaure had received a B rating in Leadership, thus disqualifying him from being considered for the title of Starman. Looked to for direction by others on his team during one of the most critical and rigorous exercises of the Academy, he had suddenly been overwhelmed by a feeling of personal inadequacy and had withdrawn from the exercise. As a result, he was deemed unsuitable for leadership in dangerous situations and his rating had dropped to a "B", but in every other way was a model of excellence. Over the years, he had risen through the ranks to

become a respected, by-the-book space captain without the excessive rigidity that so often characterizes such personalities.

Though he had not flown spectacular, newsworthy missions like those to Pluto or the Deep Space Expedition which David's father Allen had commanded, Dufaure's log included several exploratory flights to Io and Ganymede, as well as several of the tiny moons that orbited the greater planets.

His most impressive achievement had been when Planetoid P101 had entered the Solar System in 2145 at enormous velocity on a collision course with the sun. Dufaure had made the intricate calculations necessary to intercept the planetoid, and had then landed safely on it. The *Silverfire* remained on the speeding body conducting experiments until the last possible moment for safe departure before it slammed into the sun. Until the *Starventure* had sailed past the sun on its journey to the Solar System's most distant dwarf planet, Yancy Dufaure held the record for the closest approach to the daystar.

On the mission to Europa, the *Silverfire* would carry a crew of twenty-two, including the three Starmen. The other crewmembers were to be selected by Dufaure and approved by the Starman leader. That list was now complete. Zip was pleased that a few of those chosen had also been on the *Starventure* when it had journeyed to Nyx. Three of them were on assignment at the space station at LaGrange Point Five, one of two places where the pull of Earth's gravity precisely cancels the pull from the moon. The L5 Station, as it was commonly known, was first built and launched in the early twenty-second century. Since then, the station had expanded until it was a major point of commerce and industry.

Zip's confidence in the French pilot shot up when he noted that Dufaure had tapped Noah Kitsualuk for service. Kitsualuk was an Eskimo, born in Pangnirtung on Baffin Island. He was a construction engineer with a specialty in arcology—designing structures best suited for the environment in which they were located. His presence was especially welcome since Zip planned to build a base on Europa deep enough under the frozen surface

to protect it from the lethal radiation belts surrounding Jupiter. An enormous igloo would cover the base, and Kitsualuk's gift for engineering would be needed to build it. His aptitude for constructing igloos had been evident from his childhood.

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With just over a week to go before scheduled lift-off from the Starlight base in Amundsen City, Zip was in his home office ensconced deeply in the preparations. He had just completed the arrangements to take the newest version of the Real Time Transmitter, or RTT, that had been the subject of his first assignment as a Starman. Mark's father, Keith Seaton, had put over a year's work into improving the system that had been first tried at the time the pirates had taken over Mars. The *Silverfire* would carry an experimental portable model.

Zip's desire to find the Benefactors had risen to a high pitch in the previous weeks, but during the past few days he had become discouraged. He had spent much of that time poring over contour maps of the massive amount of territory that the Starmen would have to search in their effort to locate any sign that the Benefactors had ever established a presence on the Jovian moon. Reliable information was sparse at best, and Zip sank farther and farther into despair as he realized just how little there really was.

In the early years of the twenty-first century and in the years immediately after the end of the Collapse, several crybotic probes had landed on Europa, two of which had managed to penetrate the ice covering without malfunctioning, and reach the frigid ocean beneath. Then they had released hydrobotic probes to search and analyze the ocean. The second hydrobot had discovered small amounts of twenty-one different kinds of microbes, some very primitive and some remarkably complex, but neither probe had penetrated very far into the ocean before it became inoperable.

In 2110, one satellite had been put into permanent orbit around the icy moon; its instruments remained operable for eleven

months—enough to produce the first contour map of the land under the oceans. Thirty years later, another satellite made a second map of the ocean bottom before the radiation burned it out. Three manned ships had briefly touched down on the surface, but no human beings had set foot outside; the protective capability of normal space suits was insufficient to guard someone from Jupiter's deadly radiation.

Just after Zip had thanked his mother for bringing him his lunch, waited for her to leave, and then set it down out of his way, his compad announced that a message had arrived from Oritz Konig. The Starmen had talked with Konig when he had called them to Starlight Enterprise's headquarters in the north of Mars. Konig, the capable head of SE's security department, had taken personal charge of the safety measures on Mars after the disastrous takeover by the pirates under the leadership of Troy Putnam over a year earlier. At the time of their visit, Konig had informed the Starmen that SE was planning to establish several secret bases on Mars that could serve as reserve outposts in case of a similar assault or other disaster.

Zip pulled out his compad and noticed that the message had been sent less than half an hour previously. His heaviness dissipated a little when the clean-cut visage of Oritz Konig appeared on the small screen.

"Zip!" said the cheerful voice. "How are you? Richard has told me about your plan to explore Europa and search for signs of the Benefactors' presence. I have some information that may help you narrow down your search. We actually ran across the data a few months ago, but I didn't realize what it was until I heard of your plans.

"I'm sure you are familiar with Final Ilien—the Wind People's oldest settlement on Mars. As you know, Final Ilien was established about a hundred years ago in the ruins of an ancient civilization. Colin Teagarden, the founder of the Wind People, discovered it, homesteaded it, and claimed it for his people. Four generations later, they're still there.

"We made contact with them a while back to ask their

cooperation in establishing a base in their territory. Normally they would have refused, but in the light of the pirates' assault last year they decided to cooperate—at least on a limited basis. I was allowed to visit the settlement.

“The civilization whose ruins provided the home of Final Ilien was rather primitive. A few researchers over the years were allowed to study the site and learned some basic information about the original inhabitants. But the Wind People did not show the visitors everything—until this time of greater need, they kept back some of the most fascinating discoveries. After I gained their trust, they showed me something amazing. Far beneath the upper ruins the Wind People came upon a section that showed signs of an advanced civilization. There is information there you will want to have that is directly connected to some sort of activity on Europa.

“Get back to me and let me know if you want to stop by Final Ilien on your way to Europa. Mars is in a good position now for your journey, so you won't have to go too far out of your way. If you want to see the data yourself, let me know and I'll make the arrangements. If not, I'll encrypt the data and send it to you. Konig out.”

Zip's heart was beating fast. He exhaled loudly and smiled broadly. He immediately sent a message back to Konig.

“This is terrific news, Oritz! I can't tell you how happy I am to hear from you! I was just about to conclude that our quest was hopeless! There's far more water in the oceans of Europa than in all the oceans of Earth! Our search for a base there would be *impossible* without some sort of clue!

“We were *sure* that the Benefactors had visited Mars, but had no direct evidence, except the tenuous evidence of the NPACs. Joe and Mark and I will definitely visit Final Ilien. Could that community house the base that we are looking for? Maybe there is no need for us to go to Europa after all!”

He sent his message and then waited impatiently for the return. He paced around in his office, aimlessly scanning the titles of a few books but finding none to interest him. He

returned to the computer on his desk and glanced through the map of the oceans of Europa but could not focus. After about an hour Zip's compad alerted him to another message from Konig, which he eagerly accepted. Konig's voice sounded encouraging.

"On the contrary, Zip—Europa is the very place you need to go! Final Ilien contains a small base where the Benefactors had established a presence on Mars, but there is evidence of major doings on Europa! You'll find it in their files."

Zip answered back immediately. "We'll leave as soon as we can—a few days, probably—and I'll let Yancy complete the preparations here. We had planned to make a stopover at the L5 Station to pick up the final three members of the crew, but Yancy can do that on his own. He can meet us in Eagle City a day or two later."

Zip signed off and took an exultant breath, said, "Wow!" to no one in particular, and then set about informing Mark and Joe of the change in plans. He wanted to lift off in the *Star Ranger* as soon as he could—maybe the day after tomorrow! He turned to the tray his mother had brought him—now the chicken sandwiches and grapes looked mighty appealing! He brought a sandwich to his mouth and took an enormous bite.

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Four days later the *Star Ranger* was on course for Mars. The Starmen had bade farewell to their families and lifted off without fanfare. It was a pleasant, even encouraging parting, Zip thought. Their enemies were incarcerated and the civilized worlds were at peace.

The crew of the *Starventure* had left various instruments on Nyx to run a number of experiments. One of them was programmed to detect and report the landing of any spacecraft, and it had remained silent. Earthmen were confident that the Xenobots had not returned to the planet of shadows, and there was no other evidence of their presence in the Solar System.

The break between Starlight Enterprise and Nolan Mining

Enterprise was apparently well on the way to being healed. Robert Nolan had initiated contact with Richard Starlight and offered assistance with the mission to Europa. Although Nolan had made no mention of his previous icy aloofness, Richard interpreted his cordial offer as an olive branch. Robert had congratulated Richard on SE's breakthrough in finding and fixing the flaw in the active shielding Nolan had designed, and offered to install into the *Underbird* the newest model of NME's communication system.

Nolan's communicators were renowned throughout the Inner Planetary system for their compactness, effectiveness, and reliability. Deeply gratified at the return of his friend's warmth when he had given up hope of ever renewing the connection, Richard had gladly accepted Robert's offer. Yancy Dufaure had overseen their hasty installation the day after the Starmen had departed for Mars in the *Star Ranger*.

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The Starmen's ship touched down near Final Ilien amidst a rainstorm. The reddish brown sands of the Martian northern hemisphere extended in every direction, almost featureless except for the occasional ridge that stuck up from the trackless sand like a reptile's backbone. A hundred yards away from the concrete landing pad was a small, cultivated woods—perhaps a square mile or two of pine and spruce, redbud and oak, hemlock, and many sugar maples. The walk from the landing pad to the entrance to Final Ilien led through the woods.

Mark had long been deeply moved by the beauty of nature and missed the seasons he knew as a child growing up in Montana. He looked out the window of the *Star Ranger* now and saw that the woods were burning with yellows, golds, oranges, and fiery reds. The northern hemisphere was well into autumn, and the almost constant winds blew leaves from the woods like sparks from a fire as they gusted eastward to a small lake. Its surface was nearly covered over with the fallen scarlet foliage.

Anticipation surged through him. Mark loved autumn more than any other time of the year, and longed to be among the trees. He recalled that the Martian year was 687 days long, and that each season lasted almost 172 days. He smiled and nodded to himself, and thought that he could enjoy 172 days of autumn on Mars if he could spend it in a place like Final Ilien.

Without a word, the three Starmen descended quickly from their ship, the heavy drops blowing around them in a quirky wind. When Joe, the last in line, had hit the concrete they scuttled toward the woods. The wind wrapped them in its wings, and the rain swept in waves across the slick sands and washed in sheets into the large pool off to the left. The pool was evidently the settlement's major source of water, a reservoir they had dug from the ruddy sands and lined with concrete, and upon which they drew for irrigation and domestic use.

At least two dozen windmills stood like gantries in the proximity of the landing pad and in sites farther south. Their wheels were turning rapidly in the wind, churning wind into energy and sending it to the storage batteries in the settlement, most of which was located under the sand. The Wind People lived in what had been a simple community of the mysterious inhabitants who had disappeared without a trace thousands of years before.

The Starmen came under the meager shelter of the woods. The trees grew slowly in the thin Martian air and were gnarled and twisted from long exposure to the winds, but patient care and perseverance had enabled them to survive. Many were two or three generations old and were over forty feet tall.

The land dipped slightly downward in the direction of Final Ilien. In many places it was ridged by roots and the Starmen had to watch their step. There was little undergrowth, but the leaves and needles of many years blew in the sudden gusts of wet wind, and sheets of rain continued to fall from the overcast sky. Streams of water ran down and off the tips of the branches. Overhead, ragged, dark gray clouds made the world seem to close in.

“I love this kind of weather,” exclaimed Mark after several minutes of silence. “We see rain so seldom.”

“Armstrong Forest has it regularly,” suggested Zip.

“I know, and I go there often when I’m home,” rejoined Mark, “but *this* is natural rain.”

“Some people find rain to be depressing,” said Joe, pushing his way through a thick stand of spruce and hemlock.

“Not me!” said Mark.

“Here’s the end of the woods,” said Joe a while later, “and here is Final Ilien.” The woods thinned out quickly. Before them rose a large glassy-silver dome, partly grounded on the sand and partly on a tumble of boulders that marked the beginning of a low ridge to their left. There was an airlock in the dome. It had no lock, so Zip led the Starmen into the dome, where they removed their helmets.

Inside was a large nursery for flowers, potted fruit trees, and vegetables. The air had a rich, moist, loamy smell, spiced with the fragrance of many flowers. Ranks of plants were situated on both sides of a narrow central aisle. Hundreds of pots held flowering plants and bushes, and the fruit trees had been distributed throughout the area. The rain drummed loudly on the surface of the dome overhead.

A door at the opposite side of the dome opened, and a woman about thirty years old walked in. She had long, dark blond hair pulled back and tied in a thong. Her countenance glowed with rustic health, and her clothes were simple and functional.

“I’m Emily Boone,” she said. “Welcome to Final Ilien. My husband Gabriel is below. I’ll take you there in a moment, as soon as I make some adjustments in our irrigation system. We haven’t had a rain like this for a long time, and it’s welcome.”

Zip introduced himself and his companions, and then added, “Thank you for allowing us to visit you.”

Emily brushed the words aside. “Not at all,” she said. “We live independently and want to keep to ourselves most of the time, but like most folks, I suppose, we want to do our part whenever there’s a need. Mr. Ortiz is a fine man and we’ve come to trust

him. If we have something here you need, you're welcome to it. He seemed to think you'd be excited about what we've got." As she spoke, she straightened a few kinks in the plastic tubing that carried water to the fruit trees. "Well, I won't keep you waiting. We heard your ship come in, of course, so I came out to meet you and take you down."

Without further delay, Emily led the Starmen out the far side of the airlock, through a set of airtight doors, and along a corridor covered with glass. The precipitation continued to beat, and water ran down both sides of the passageway. Less than fifty yards along the path, however, the glass covering met solid rock and made a sealed joint. The way continued into a tunnel carved from the rock itself. The sound of the pounding rain fell into the distance until it disappeared entirely.

Ahead, a natural gray light came through the end of the tunnel. The patter of rain began again, this time sounding a little gentler than before. In a moment, the four people came into a large rotunda from which over a dozen passages led. Overhead was a large dome, made of crescent-shaped pieces of glass joined by a filigree of intricate metalwork.

"Beautiful!" breathed Mark.

"Yes, it's beautiful!" agreed Zip. "You Wind People have done some incredible things here!"

"Oh, we didn't make that window," explained Emily. "That was there when my husband's great-grandfather found the city. He moved the community here a hundred and one years ago last summer—Earth years, that is—but we reckon that the window is several thousand years old. The ancient Martians, or whoever built and first lived in the city, made it. There are many lovely things like that in Final Ilien, but that's the most spectacular. They were a fairly simple people but valued beauty even in the most utilitarian implements."

"Let's show them what they came for, Emily," said a deep voice. The Starmen turned and came face-to-face with a short, stocky, muscular man with thick brown hair and beard. He had come out of one of the doorways behind them.

“My husband Gabriel,” said Emily. The Starmen introduced themselves and shook hands with the man.

“Follow me, Starmen,” said Gabriel and walked to one of the passages ahead of them. There was no door. The five people walked down a stone avenue, softly lit by tiny light bulbs spaced with apparent randomness along the passage. Soft light cast hazy shadows. The walls, floor, and ceiling were made of large dressed stone, skillfully set together.

“How many people live here, Gabriel?” asked Joe.

“Fifty-seven—many of us direct descendants of the first inhabitants. Once in a while we add someone to the community from outside, and sometimes people leave us. We’re well settled in now and just finished our first Earth century here.”

“So Emily was telling us,” said Mark.

Gabriel Boone led the Starmen along several passageways, down stone staircases, and through rooms that were used for storage but seldom visited. Joe lost count of how many levels through which the party descended, but estimated that it was at least twelve. An impression of heaviness under great stones grew upon the Starmen, and a smell of rock dust that had settled thousands of years earlier permeated the atmosphere.

“Almost there,” Gabriel said, as they entered a room about forty feet square. There was no exit except the door through which they had entered. The stone ceiling was twenty feet above their heads, and a massive pillar stood in the center of the room. Gabriel moved unerringly to the wall opposite the entrance. Without preamble or hesitation, he pressed on a portion of the wall, and a section rotated on an axis with a quiet grinding noise. Joe, wearing a pleased smile, looked sidelong at Mark and Zip.

“This is it, Starmen! Here’s what you came all this way for!” announced Gabriel. He led the way into the next room.

The wall between the rooms was about three feet thick, but as the company passed through the portal, they may as well have crossed a boundary of time. Inside the room were banks of controls such as the Starmen had seen before on the Benefactors’ asteroid and on Nyx.

“Whooo!” cried the usually sedate Mark as he pressed by their host and laid admiring fingers on the controls.

“This is wonderful! Amazing!” cried Zip. “How did you find this?”

“Pressed on the wall one day, Starman,” explained Gabriel.

“Yeah, Zip—pressed on the wall,” said Joe. Emily smiled.

“What else is there?” asked Zip, not missing a beat. His fervor for finding the Benefactors had returned strongly.

“There are a few other rooms—living quarters, mostly. This is the only room with the equipment you see here. We showed it to Mr. Konig when he was here a few weeks ago. He opened quite a few files, checked records, and the like. Some time later he called us and said you’d be interested in this one here.”

Gabriel pointed to the screen that Mark had already brought up. It was covered with symbols, a few of which the Starmen were now able to recognize but not decipher. Mark looked up at Zip and raised his eyebrows.

“Sure, Mark, open it,” said Zip. Mark pressed the indicator. Instantly a silvery-gray sphere appeared, with patches of brown and scored with innumerable lines.

“Europa,” whispered Zip, his eyes glistening. “It’s Europa. Europa!” He chuckled. “Let me take over, Mark!”

Zip took Mark’s place at the console and began to work the controls. The others watched over his shoulder.

Minutes went by as Zip tried various combinations.

“Ah!” he muttered as the image changed to show the contours of the ocean bottom below the ice. After a short time, about a dozen red dots appeared in several places, with three green dots concentrated in one area in the shape of a small scalene triangle.

For half an hour, Zip and then Mark tried to extract more information from the file, but nothing more appeared.

“Okay!” said Zip. “Let’s scan all those points and see where they lie on the map of Europa we’ve already got from our own research! We’re meeting the *Silverfire* in Eagle City tomorrow morning, and then the journey to Europa begins in earnest!”

The Starmen bade farewell to the Boones at the airlock that

led back through the woods. Outside, the rain had turned into a soft mist. The clouds to the west were backlit by the pale sun, and wore startlingly bright fluorescence like the crests of breaking waves with sunlight behind them.

Chapter 8: The Ruby Ray Mystery

THE JAUNT from Final Ilien to Eagle City, the capital of Mars, was a matter of only a few minutes. Mark initiated contact with the control tower to ask for landing clearance before the *Star Ranger* had even completed half of the journey.

When the space traffic technician appeared on the screen, Mark smiled.

“Hey Zip, Joe—look, it’s Monica Veloso! She’s graduated and gone to her first posting!” The face of a young woman beamed out from Mark’s viewscreen, grinning with sudden, pleasurable recognition. She had thick, black, straight hair that framed a dark face with clear skin. White straight teeth showed in her warm smile.

Monica Veloso had been a year behind the Starmen in Starlight Academy. She came from Jacareacanga, a small city in the back parts of Brazil, and spoke only Portuguese. When she was 15 years old, a research team from Starlight Enterprise had visited her city on a project and discovered that Monica was a prodigy in electronics. Recognizing her gifts, Richard Starlight had granted her a scholarship for study at Starlight Academy. She had gone through the Academy with an automatic translator.

Zip and Joe stepped behind Mark so that the communicator screen could show all of them. “Hi, Monica!” exclaimed Mark.

“Oi meus amigos!” she said. “E muita bom reve-los. Sejam bem vindos a Eagle City!” The autotranslator changed the Brazilian’s native Portuguese into basic English. What the Starmen heard was, “Hello, my friends! It is good to see you again. Welcome to Eagle City!”

The autotranslator made it appear that she was speaking

English while retaining the tone of her own voice. Similarly, Monica could hear the Starmen speaking Portuguese in their own voices. To effect the translation, there was a delay of a few seconds between exchanges.

Monica cleared the *Star Ranger* for landing. The brick-red ship came in horizontally, passing over the northeast wall of Eagle Crater and coming to rest on the tarmac of Eagle City. Once the ship was on the ground, Zip cruised into a hangar off to one side of the small but busy interplanetary spaceport. The Starmen planned to leave their ship at Eagle City for the duration of the mission to Europa—a matter of several months.

After a quick reunion with Monica Veloso in the Eagle City tower, the Starmen made contact by radio with Yancy Dufaure. The captain of the *Silverfire* assured them that he was on course and on schedule, and expected to land on Mars about mid-morning the following day.

“Well, then,” said Joe, rubbing his hands together after they had signed off. “We’ve got nothing to do and nowhere to be until tomorrow morning. Let’s go visit our friends!”

Zip and Mark agreed, and the three set out for the “Lizard’s Watering Hole”, an establishment under the able proprietorship of Donal and Doris McTaggart and frequented by locals and passers-through. The McTaggarts came from Edinburgh, Scotland and still sounded like it although they had been on Mars for over thirty years.

The two of them maintained close contact with the Tunnel People who, for a variety of reasons, had to avoid living openly and so sought shelter in the forgotten tunnels under Eagle City. The Tunnel People and the McTaggarts had been instrumental in nursing Zip after he had been wounded in the assault on Mars and in helping take the city back from the control of the pirates.

More than a year had passed since those events and the Starmen were eager to see their friends again. Starmen had little time for socializing, for they were frequently on assignment and traveling aboard ship.

A brisk half-hour walk through the streets of Eagle City

brought them to their goal. They passed enthusiastically through the main door of the establishment. It was late afternoon and the tables were filled; nevertheless, the proprietor saw them at once.

“Ach, Zip Foster, as I live and breathe! It’s guid to see you! Mark! Joe! Welcome, welcome to me place o’ business! *Doris!*” he shouted over his shoulder. “Come see who’s oot here!”

Zip, Mark, and Joe stayed up late chatting, renewing old acquaintances, and meeting regular patrons of the Watering Hole. When they were finally left to themselves, they climbed the stairs wearily but happily to their rooms and slept through what remained of the night.

In the morning, bright sunlight poured through the plate glass windows of the main dining area, but being so late in the year it failed to convey much impression of warmth. Donal McTaggart more than made up for it with oversized helpings of oatmeal, thick slices of freshly-made bread with honey, large slabs of white and yellow cheese, and dark steaming tea.

“This bread is *delicious!*” exclaimed Joe to their host, talking around an enormous mouthful. “Where ever did you get it?” Because of climatic peculiarities, baking bread on Mars was extremely difficult and usually ended in failure.

“Ach,” said their beaming host. “It’s a secret, that is, but I’ll wager you won’t miss your guess.”

“*Marjie* made this?” asked Mark, with amazement.

“Aye! An’ she spent most of the night in the effort, too, she did,” winked the hospitable Scotsman. “Nothin’s too guid for her Starmen!” *Marjie* was one of the Tunnel People. She and her husband Richard were close friends of Donal and *Doris* McTaggart.

“Please give her our thanks,” said Zip.

“When she sees that there is none left, it’ll be thanks enow—but I’ll tell her!” Donal assured his friends.

By 10:00 a.m., Zip, Mark, and Joe were back at the spaceport. The *Silverfire* had landed an hour earlier, a shining silver ship on three fins, brilliantly reflecting the high morning sun. Captain Dufaure had personally overseen the refueling of the ship and was now supervising his crewmembers as they made safety checks of every system and made sure that the cargo was secure.

Dufaure was completely bald and had a powerful build. Everyone who served under him respected him; he was universally noted as a man of deep integrity and honor, both confident and humble.

When he saw the Starmen walking across the tarmac toward the *Silverfire* he didn't wait for them to reach him. He strode toward them and greeted them with a smart salute. He looked impressive and smart in his forest green captain's uniform.

"Good morning, sirs!" he said crisply. "We will be ready for liftoff in less than five minutes. I am at your disposal."

"Good morning, Captain!" said Zip. "We'll get our equipment from the *Star Ranger* and bring it aboard. Your preparations should be completed by then and we can take off."

A quarter of an hour later, the *Silverfire's* engines ignited and the ship lifted up over the rim of the crater. Within moments it had turned away from the sun on a course that would take it around the other side of Mars and speed it through the Asteroid Belt on its way toward Jupiter.

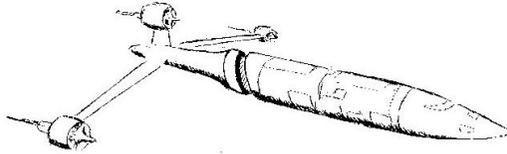
The Starmen planned to make a brief social call on Montezuma Vly, the reclusive asteroid miner and inventor whom the Starmen had met when they were tracking down Lurton Zimbardo. The course changes and the time required for deceleration and acceleration would add seven days to the length of their journey to Europa, but Zip was willing to take that time for the sake of the friendship that had begun a year earlier.

Two days out from Mars, Zip, Mark, and Joe were chatting in the Starmen's private lounge, secure from any possible eavesdroppers. Having discussed the search for the Benefactors' base for at least the twentieth time, they had taken on a related

topic.

“You know what really intrigues me about the Benefactors?” began Zip. “We’ve talked about their battle with the Xenobots, but let’s not forget that the Benefactors’ asteroid was not just designed for travel within our Solar System,” Zip continued. “It could travel between the stars. That means it could jump through hyperspace.”

“Ah yes,” said Mark with a longing sigh. “I’ve thought about that a lot.” Mark loved engines, especially those designed for space travel. The ability to travel faster than light—or the equivalent: to travel through hyperspace—had been a dream of human beings for more than two centuries. Now that discoveries on the Benefactors’ asteroid had shown conclusively that such travel was possible, Mark was so excited that he often found it difficult to sleep. His mind wouldn’t let go of its implications or the hope that hypertravel for people of Earth would be achieved in his lifetime.



The Silverfire.

“I’m dreaming of the possibility that the ‘key’ to the system, which nobody has found yet on the asteroid, might be found on Europa!” Mark’s black hair fell over his forehead as he spoke with animation. Almost impatiently he ran his fingers through his hair to sweep it out of his eyes.

“Maybe there will even be a functioning hyperdrive unit on Europa!” suggested Joe. His level of excitement, rooted in his skill as a pilot, was only slightly behind that of Mark.

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The unusual banana-shaped asteroid known as “Montezuma’s Castle” hung in space a mile below the *Silverfire*. The SE ship had come into orbit around the double asteroid—the “Castle” and Adamant, the large, roughly spherical companion from which Vly’s home had been broken off eons before. Zip had contacted the miner and received permission for him and the other Starmen to visit.

“He sounded glad to hear from us,” said Mark as the Starmen boarded one of the shuttles.

“He sure did,” agreed Joe. “I think he really likes visitors once in a while!”

“*Some* visitors,” added Zip, pulling his helmet over his head. The Starmen tested their communication systems; then Joe, in the pilot’s seat, coordinated with the shipboard engineer and blasted away from the *Silverfire*. As they had done a year earlier, they landed in the center of the asteroid, its horns rising up on either side of them. Joe bolted the ship to the rock and the Starmen debarked.

Walking carefully in their “smart grip” asteroid boots, they came to the external entrance of Montezuma Vly’s retreat. Before long they were sitting in Montezuma’s cluttered workstation. Howard, one of the miner’s seven koalangs, was curled up on the floor by Vly’s feet. Vly had had to move a stack of papers to an already crowded shelf and shove two boxes of bolts aside so that each of the Starmen could find a place to sit.

“I’m immensely grateful to you for rescuing my friend St. George,” began Montezuma Vly after the customary greetings. He was referring to the time the Starmen, George St. George, and his partners had escaped from imprisonment on what had then been the pirates’ asteroid.

“You could just as accurately say that he rescued us, Mr. Vly,” said Zip.

“Well... either way you all got your liberty and saved the free world or something.” He handed around bottles of a curious blend of juice. “I like to drink this while I work. It’s refreshing, nourishing, and doesn’t keep your hands too busy when you’ve

got a project going.”

“If I’m not prying too much, Mr. Vly,” began Zip, “how did you resist the pirates when they tried to land here last year by force?”

“I’m sure George told you about that,” replied the miner. He tipped his bottle of juice and took a gulp of the orangy-purple liquid. “It was the greegles, of course.”

Mark looked sidelong at Joe. Joe avoided his glance and took a sip of the juice. He smacked his lips a little too ostentatiously. Mark was certain there was something behind the Asteroids’ legend of the greegles, while Joe considered them to be so much star wash.

“What happened?” asked Zip, neutrally.

Vly shrugged. “The five ships appeared—I had seen them coming a long way off. One of the parasites aboard demanded access to my home, and threatened me when I refused it. I ignored him, and the greegles cut four of the ships to pieces in about five seconds. The greegles have highly advanced laser beams that are more accurate and more finely tuned than anything I’ve ever seen.

“They didn’t hurt any of the space vermin. They were in their suits and suddenly found themselves floating helplessly in space. They clumped together around the remaining ship like flies around a rotting apple, got aboard the bucket the greegles left them, and then shot off without another word.” He shrugged again and took another swig of his drink.

“Just what are the greegles?” asked Joe.

“I don’t rightly know,” answered their host with a furrowed brow. “The first person to run across them was a spaceman named Stephen Avery—’bout forty years ago, it was, maybe more. Luckiest fellow I ever knew. Set out as an asteroid miner and made a fortune in less than a year. Retired at the age of 27 and lives back on Earth now. He’s the one who told me about this chunk of stone you’re inside now, more’n thirty years back it must be.

“He found the greegles on Adamant. Little metal critters a

few inches tall. Mechanical, not biological at all. I've been on Adamant a lot, and seen 'em several times. They appear to like me—I guess because I respect 'em. 'Live and let live' is my motto; *one* of my mottoes, anyway. I've heard of people who've claimed to have seen greegles in other places in the Belt, but nothing like the numbers on Adamant.

"I leave 'em alone and kinda keep people away from 'em, and they've protected me the one or two times when people couldn't take No for an answer. Good neighbors."

Joe pursed his lips. Mark could tell that he was thinking about what he'd heard.

The Starmen related to Montezuma their adventures on Nyx. He was particularly interested in their account of the Xenobots and the Benefactors, and Zip's theory about the base on Europa.

"I'd like to hear more about it," he said. "If it's not too much trouble, and if you have time, and if you think about it, and if you don't mind, send me a message now and then about your exploits."

As they were leaving, Montezuma handed them a bright disk.

"The complete works of Bach?" queried Mark with lifted eyebrows.

"Of course. A replacement for the one I gave you last time. Try not to let this one get destroyed by scum."

"We're not fighting any bad guys this time, Mr. Vly," said Joe.

"There're always bad guys somewhere, Joe. The ones you don't know about are the most dangerous."

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The crescent Earth showed in the lower right corner of the massive window in Robert Nolan's living quarters. Robert was lingering over his morning coffee, with the remains of his breakfast on the plate he had pushed over to one side. Beowulf Denn, who had invited himself to the meal, was speaking.

“We’re still stalemated in the search on the asteroid for the ‘key’ to the hyperspatial drive,” he announced.

“Nothing new there, then?” said Nolan, absently stirring his coffee.

Denn shook his head. “At this point, I don’t think there is anything like that on the asteroid to be found—unless it’s in the part that no one can get into. I urged the team leaders just to cut through the iron walls and get in there by force, but they said they’d tried to cut through the walls already. That was when you were—occupied with other concerns—so I didn’t mention it to you at the time.”

Beowulf made it sound as if his discreet reference to Nolan’s alarming slide into mental imbalance and despair was a sensitive and caring expression of professional concern. In reality, his frequent allusions to the matter kept Nolan constantly but subtly aware that he owed his recovery to his second-in-command. He was not yet aware that Denn had taken advantage of his vulnerability and was inveigling himself more and more into a position of control over Nolan’s company, his thought processes, and his very life.

“Oh? What did they find?”

Denn dabbed at his lips with the green cloth napkin before he answered.

“Beyond the iron was an impenetrable wall made of an alloy no one on Earth had ever seen before. It was impossible to analyze by any technique ever developed. They couldn’t cut through it—in fact, they couldn’t even find out what it’s made of.”

Nolan turned and gave Denn his full attention. A look of wonderment was on his face. Denn glanced at him for a second, and then turned to gaze out of the window.

“That means that we must turn our attention to the next likely site where the ‘key’ might be found,” he said.

“Europa?”

“Yes, Europa. We don’t know if the ‘key’ is there, of course, but we’re launching a ship in a few days that will find out.”

“Starlight Enterprise already has a ship on the way. In fact, we gave them a communication system—the faulty one. But in spite of that, they’ll still get there before our ship will.”

“We gave them more than a defective communication system. They will arrive first—in fact, we *want* them to—but only our ship will return with the ‘key’, if it’s there to be found.”

Chapter 9: Zip Foster Rides the Gray Planet

JOE’S PEAS began to float above his plate. A moment earlier he had felt that odd sensation as if the floor had dropped away. His startle reaction had caused him to nudge his plate, and now the peas were floating casually upward.

The Starmen were dining with a dozen or so crewmembers of the *Silverfire* five days beyond the far perimeter of the Asteroid Belt. They were seated at a long table with five to a side and one at either end. Joe sat at one end and Zip sat at the other. Mark had placed himself in the middle of one side.

“Hey!” Joe exclaimed as he watched his vegetables fly away.

“Something’s wrong with the gravity grid,” said Mark. “It’s gone out.”

The gravity grid provided artificial gravity in spacecraft by establishing a field between two plates fixed in the hull of the ship. It could be disengaged when necessary, but was normally activated during flight. The *Silverfire’s* grid was clearly malfunctioning.

Captain Dufaure’s voice came over the intercom.

“Everyone relax. The onboard computer regulation system for the gravity grid has developed a bug. We’ll have it fixed in a few moments. Every other system is green.”

“Hah!” muttered Joe. “No problem then. I’ll just eat the mashed potatoes till they fix it.” He brought a forkful of the food to his mouth. As he looked up, he noticed that Zip was engaged in earnest conversation with Noah Kitsualuk, who had entered the dining area and stood behind Zip’s chair. Zip had turned to

face him. Kitsualuk held a handrail that was standard equipment on spacecraft for zero gravity conditions.

Joe's face broke slowly into a mischievous smile. He laid down his fork and unobtrusively reached for a water bottle that lay on a counter to his left. He held it in front of him and gently squeezed it. A silvery ball of water the size of a marble formed at the end of the spout, held together by surface tension.

Joe continued to squeeze. The ball grew to the size of a tennis ball, then to the size of a grapefruit. He stopped squeezing and slowly set the water bottle aside. The silvery sphere of water hung in place, slightly wobbling from internal currents, resembling an underinflated balloon.

The crewmembers closest to Joe had stopped eating, their eyes glued to the water ball. With excruciating care and precision so as not to break the surface tension, Joe pressed on the sphere with all ten fingers, as if he were making a free throw in ultra slow motion. He directed the ball straight down the table and released it.

Inch by inch it made its way forward, bobbing and quivering, advancing inexorably toward the leader of the Starmen. Zip was still chatting with the *Silverfire's* engineer, oblivious to the watery disaster coming his way.

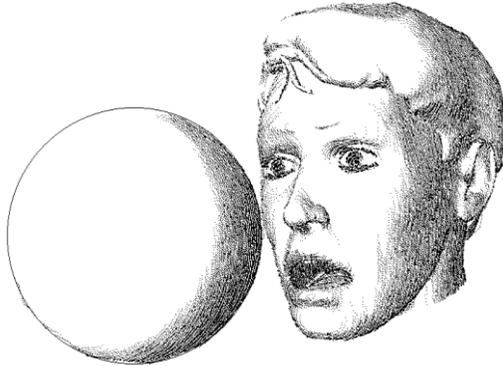
One by one, as the sphere entered their range of vision, diners dropped what they were doing and fixed their eyes on the liquid bomb wobbling its way down the center of the table. For a moment, Mark lowered his head and covered his eyes with a hand, then looked up again.

Kitsualuk was making an earnest point with his right hand upraised when he suddenly saw the shimmering globe approaching the back of Zip's head. He stopped speaking in mid-sentence and his eyes opened in abject surprise. His mouth opened and his eyebrows lowered.

Puzzled, Zip took a moment to register that something decidedly unexpected had cut off Kitsualuk's conversation. Then he turned to see what the Eskimo was looking at. The ball of water, still slightly churning, was six inches from his face and

sailing blithely onward.

Zip gasped, his eyes opened as wide as they could go, and he was beginning to shout, “Wh—?” when the ball collided with the end of his nose. It splashed all over his face and broke into hundreds of particles. A mist formed around Zip’s head.



Zip gasped, his eyes opened wide

Instantly the atmosphere conditioner captured the tiny particles and whisked them away, so that neither Zip nor anyone else would inhale more than was safe.

At the other end of the table, Joe was laughing so hard that he had floated off the floor.

“Oh, my,” he gasped when he was able to catch his breath. “Oh, man, was that beautiful! Oh, the anticipation was exquisite!”

Just then the gravity grid came back on and Joe dropped to the floor. Taken by surprise, his eyes goggled wide and he clutched at the table, managing only to strike the near edge of his plate and flip it over. The mashed potatoes splattered onto his forehead and right cheek, and a significant amount slid down the front of his shirt.

“Ah, nuts!” he griped disgustedly.

~

Several days later, Jupiter filled most of the window in the control deck of the *Silverfire*. The spacecraft had entered into an orbital trajectory that would intercept Europa, the smallest of the four major moons of Jupiter. With his customary quiet efficiency, Yancy Dufaure was coordinating the efforts of his crew so that the ship under his command was on target with pinpoint precision.

Zip, Mark, and Joe were in their quarters, gazing out of the large observation window. At the very edge of the window the sun was a small glowing pebble, and close before them was the largest planet in the Solar System. The Starmen could see the clouds undulating and whirling with graceful, slow precision, yet they knew that the apparent slowness was an illusion made possible by their distant vantage point. The wide reddish-orange bands marked zones in the cloud cover that raced around the planet at speeds of more than 340 miles per hour.

“Starmen?” The calm, confident voice of Yancy Dufaure came over the intercom to their accommodations. “This is Captain Dufaure. We are coming up on Europa, and will be in close orbit around the object in about twelve minutes.”

“Thank you, Captain,” replied Zip. “We’ll join you on the bridge at once.” He and the other two quickly made their way forward. The striped bulk of Jupiter lay on the left side of the window, and dead ahead a small pale sphere showed through the glass. Beyond it was a field of stars.

In spite of the beauty of the scene taken as a whole, all eyes were on Europa. The captain and pilot exchanged quiet conversation, but the Starmen kept their attention on the view ahead. Zip in particular felt his excitement rising as details of Europa’s surface became perceptible. Somewhere within that icy satellite he hoped to find evidence of the presence of the interstellar race he had dubbed the Benefactors, whose presence and technology provided the only hope he had for a successful defense of Earth against a possible attack by the Xenobots.

“How is the active shielding working, Captain?” asked Mark.

“Beautifully, Starman Seaton,” replied the Frenchman. “Mr. Nolan certainly proved his genius when he invented that instrument. Our detectors are showing that no harmful radiation of any kind is penetrating the ship.”

Zip nodded. “You’re talking about charged particle radiation, correct? I remember that the radiation belts around Jupiter are composed mostly of particles.”

“That’s right, Starman. Jupiter itself only emits some infrared rays; it also has a strong magnetic field, but that can’t bother us. The real danger to us is the belts of highly charged particles. There is a whole gamut of radiation—electromagnetic rays, radio waves, ultraviolet rays, gamma rays, x-rays, fallout, dangerous cosmic rays, free neutrinos, and who knows what else—but it’s the particles that concern us here, and Robert Nolan’s active shielding is working nicely.”

“Can you measure the thickness of the ice, Captain?” asked Zip.

“Anywhere you like, anytime you like, sir,” replied Dufaure. “If you prefer, we can make a map of the entire planet or a portion of it, showing the thickness overall, although that will take a little time.”

“Such maps have been made before, Zip,” suggested Mark; “I’m sure they must be in the files aboard ship.”

“Not only are they aboard, Mark,” replied Zip, “but I have looked at them. The most current was made over a dozen years ago. I’ve compared that map with the information we pulled out of Final Ilien, and I want to confirm my choice for a landing spot with a current measurement. When your landing surface is ice, things can change in twelve years.” He spoke to Dufaure. “I’ll just need a single measurement, Captain.” He provided the coordinates.

By this time, Europa filled most of the screen. Zip moved to the spot where he could see best and gazed over the terrain. The surface was about twenty miles below. The curvature of the

horizon arced at the top of the screen with the darkness of space beyond. Directly below the *Silverfire* was an amazingly wrinkled expanse of water ice, scored in a bewildering number of directions. Gray and brown fields in random geometric patterns filled the screen, separated by ice ridges.

After a moment the *Silverfire* slowed, then appeared to stop. It had attained orbital speed at the precise velocity of the satellite's rotation, thus remaining stationary over one particular spot on the surface.

James Zeavin, planetary geologist, took the measure of the ice's thickness. James was one inch short of seven feet tall. His ability to squeeze his impossible frame into small spaces such as a shuttlecraft had earned him the nickname "Folding Jim". He had a long thin face with the sharp features of classic good looks. He combed his straggly blond hair back over his head with his hands.

"Two point seven nine eight miles thick at the designated mark, Captain," Jim announced. "We're just two degrees north of the equator."

Zip, overhearing, gave a satisfied nod. "That's close to the measurement twelve years ago—two point eight one miles. The difference might be accounted for by a better instrument."

"Or a better operator!" contributed Jim. Captain Dufaure gave Jim a glance of mild disapproval, but Joe met Jim's eye and winked.

"I'd like to make a few more measurements, but I'll do that from the surface," announced Zip. "Can you have the ship land at the site, Captain?"

"Of course, Starman Foster." Captain Dufaure gave the orders, and the *Silverfire* slowly descended. Twenty-eight minutes later, the ship touched down.

"I'm sure this will be the site of our operations," announced Zip. "If I'm right, the Benefactors built their base directly below us. The ice is relatively thin at the equator, and the topographical map shows a land mass rising up from the bottom of the sea. There's no other landform similar to that anywhere else on

Europa. The highest point is just over thirteen miles down and a little northeast. On this moon, that's not far. Even more significant, all the topographical maps of the ocean bottom we've got, including the most recent, show a sort of 'hot spot' on the slope of the land mass below us.

"Most importantly, one of the three green dots that showed on the map of Europa we saw in Final Ilien is located at that point. The other two are approximately eight and eleven miles away from it at points that are a little farther down. The red dots are scattered over about eight hundred square miles in a rough half-disc shape with the green dots near the center.

"I'd like the three of us Starmen to select a crewmember and take a shuttlecraft on the surface to various points and make a concentrated detailed topographical map to see if there is evidence of anything artificial down there. In the meantime, Captain, I'd like Folding Jim to do a concentrated detailed topographical study of the mountaintop directly below."

"Very good, Starman Foster. Shall I have Mr. Kitsualuk begin to build the base?"

Zip nodded. "There's nothing to lose if I'm wrong, and I don't expect to be wrong. The ice is thicker almost everywhere else on the moon, and in those few places where the ice *is* thin, the bottom of the sea is much deeper than it is here. There are no other contenders anywhere else on Europa for first place in seeking the site of the Benefactors' operation."

Captain Dufaure went off to give the orders for Noah Kitsualuk and his assistants to smooth the surrounding ice and begin constructing an enormous igloo over the ship. Although Nolan's active shielding would protect the ship and the base from the lethal radiation, a thick barrier of ice was equally effective and was not subject to equipment failure.

"Here are the coordinates of the red dots on the map we found in Final Ilien. I've divided them up into three sectors," said Zip to Mark and Joe, handing each of them a small disk for their shipboard computers. "Find somebody who's not needed for Kistualuk's work, and we'll get going on our scouting

expeditions to these sites right away. I'll meet you on the flight deck in a few minutes."

While the Starmen hunted companions for their exploratory expeditions, Noah Kitsualuk's assistants began to unload the heavy construction equipment. Moments later, the Starmen gathered on the mothership's flight deck with three other crewmembers. Mark had invited the ship's cook, Cathy Torrez, to accompany him; Joe had brought the physician, Matthew Herchenroeder; and Zip had asked the navigator and second-in-command, Sarah Pletcher, to be his partner.

The three two-man crews made sure that their active shielding units were functioning and then took off in the shuttlecraft in three directions. Each craft kept in contact with the other two and with the *Silverfire*.

Travel over the surface of Europa was not difficult in the small craft. The Starmen stayed close to the gray ice, skimming over smooth, featureless fields. At times they had to rise over upthrust seams and promontories in the ice where plates the size of small continents had rafted together in uncanny frigid orogeny.

The three crews located the proper coordinates, touched down, stepped out onto the eerie wilderness of ice, and set up the necessary equipment. It took only a few minutes at each site to gain a detailed contour map of the land far below them. Zip had asked that each map cover about five square miles.

Jupiter hung above the explorers. "Looks like a huge weight about to fall on us," observed Mark at one point to Cathy Torrez, his companion. "It makes me feel a little uneasy, but I guess we'll get used to it." White cloud layers made of frozen ammonia were spread over the surface of the gas giant, hovering above the brightly colored yellow and red bands that characterize the fifth planet.

About an hour and a half after they had left the *Silverfire*, all three ships had returned. Seated in a compact scraping machine, Kitsualuk had already cleared a large area around the mother ship to a depth of several feet. Prior to that he had investigated

the shape and strength of the ice below the surface and measured it for the strength of the radiation it had absorbed. Most of the base would be constructed far underneath the level where the radiation could penetrate.

As soon as the three shuttlecraft docked, Zip took the records of their excursion and headed for his workstation in the Starmen's quarters. He laid them on the desk and then ran to where James Zeavin worked.

"Did you get the map done, Jim?" he asked.

Jim turned a solemn face to the flame-haired Starman. "I did, Zip, and a very thorough map it is, too—but I'm afraid I didn't see anything out of the ordinary in it. It's a mountain that rises pretty far out of the average depth, and there is a hot spot on one side, but that's all there is. No sign of anything artificial anywhere in the area."

Zip was stunned. This was a possibility he hadn't expected.

"Did you broaden the search? How many square miles did you scan?"

"You asked me for five square miles around the hot spot. When that scan didn't produce anything unusual, I expanded it to cover the whole mountain. That's over 200 square miles. I'm sorry, Zip, but the only thing down there is mountain."

Chapter 10: Divers Down!

FOR A SECOND Zip was shocked speechless. Then he rallied.

"But you've just done a topographical map, right?"

"Right you are!"

Zip lifted his head and sniffed. "Try a subsurface scan. There *could* have been some external signs of a base or city, but if it exists, probably most of it, maybe all of it, must be inside the mountain. If the Benefactors were at war with the Xenobots, they would have concealed any operations here."

"Aye aye, Zip, sir," said Folding Jim. "I'll move over to the Harrison fluxon scanner and have a report for you in an hour or

so.” He turned back to his instruments with a smile and a jaunty toss of his head. His hair whipped out of his eyes and he gave full attention to his work.

Zip returned to the Starmen’s quarters. Mark and Joe were already transferring the results of their brief excursions over the face of Europa to their onboard computer.

“Let’s see what we’ve got down there,” said Zip as he pulled up a chair to Mark’s right. Joe was standing behind Mark and leaning over his chair as the big Starman’s fingers were tapping rapidly over the keyboard.

“I haven’t loaded all the files yet, Zip,” Mark replied without looking away from the screen.

“That’s okay. Just pick one of the files you’ve already got. Whatever’s left can be loaded later.”

“Okay.” Mark brought up one of the files for investigation.

“Which one is it?”

“This is the first one that Joe surveyed.” Mark pressed “Enter.” Pale, fine green gridlines on the screen’s black background showed a contour map of a rolling terrain, like foothills to a higher range of mountains. To the left, the territory smoothed out to a plain with only slight variations in elevation; to the upper right, narrow compacted ridges rose upward, suggesting greater heights beyond them. The map ended before the higher portions appeared. A small red dot showed on the side of one of the hills. Mark focused in on the dot.

“Nice targeting, Joe,” murmured Zip.

Details appeared as Mark zoomed in on the place where the dot was located. The field of vision narrowed more and more until the view spanned an area that was only fifty yards across. At that magnification, details began to get fuzzy.

“Enhance it,” said Zip.

Mark activated a feature of the topographical program that filled in details of a map by extrapolating from incomplete or inadequate data. A series of roughly rectangular depressions appeared with mounds beneath them that resembled slag heaps.

“There you go!” burst out Joe. “There’s your evidence!”

Congratulations, Zip!”

Zip smiled with deep satisfaction. “Looks to me like some kind of digging operation. Let’s load and check the rest of the files.” Mark reached for the other portable files the shuttlecraft had brought in.

“You go ahead,” said Zip. “I’m going to get a chemist or planetary geologist or somebody to find out what’s in those hills down there. We’ll learn what the Benefactors were after.” He headed for the *Silverfire’s* lab section where he hoped to find someone who was not spellbound watching Noah Kitsualuk’s igloo-building project.

Most of the crewmembers who were not otherwise occupied were observing the Eskimo engineer at his work. Having already cleared and smoothed about six acres of ice with his mechanical scraper, Kitsualuk had removed several robotic constructors from the ship’s hold and moved them onto the plain. Three assistants were seated in the constructors, working under Kitsualuk’s directions. He was coordinating them with a monstrous keyboard almost like an organ console, cutting huge blocks of ice and depositing them in slabs around the landing site. Cutters, shovels, and cranes were working interdependently at great speed.

The walls of the igloo would be fifty feet thick at the base. The blocks were being cut from a pit just off center of the circular base Kitsualuk had cleared. As the chunks of ice were cut, the pit became larger. It would lead down into harder, more stable ice than that found on the surface. The actual operative base would be built at that level. Kitsualuk estimated that it would take him about two days to build the huge igloo and four days more to finish the base in the ice.

While he worked on that project, his assistants would cut the passages and rooms below the surface. The base would have three levels. The upper level would house the largest equipment, especially the shuttlecraft. The middle level was designated for the workstations and laboratories. The lower level would house the kitchen, refectory, and living quarters.

Zip found the *Silverfire*'s lab deserted, so he went to the crew's lounge. A few of the technicians were there, crowded at the window watching Kitsualuk's crew work with the construction equipment.

"Adam?" he said, addressing a young man who was engrossed with the operations outside. "Could you help me a moment?" Adam Snell was a planetary geologist.

"Sure, Starman Foster. What do you need?"

"I've found evidence of some digging at the bottom of the ocean. I'd like the site analyzed for what may be down there."

"Wow! That's great news! I'll be glad to check it out for you!"

Zip and Adam went to the lab. Zip provided the coordinates of the site he wanted investigated; then he left Adam to his work.

Things are popping, thought Zip. Folding Jim was running a scan on the site directly below, looking for traces of the fluxon particles whose presence indicated areas of measurably lower density than the material that surrounded them. Adam was analyzing the site where there was evidence of digging, and Mark was loading the files the Starmen had measured. Outside, Noah had made a remarkable start on the base.

Zip's brow furrowed a little with anxiety. He'd taken a huge risk in putting this mission together. He hoped that his drive to locate the Benefactors would not lead to a dead end. The evidence of the digging was highly encouraging, but there was still no assurance that the Benefactors had ever been on Europa, much less had a base there. His companions Joe and Mark, Captain Dufaure and the rest of the crew were investing a lot of time and work into his theory—not to mention Richard Starlight and others back at SE!

The eighteen-year-old Starman trudged back to the Starmen's quarters. For him, this was the moment where he felt the most pressure. He entered the room where the other Starmen were still working.

"How's it going, Zip?" asked Joe, glancing up as Zip walked in.

"Fine. Noah's doing some amazing work. Adam's checking

the makeup of what's below."

It was obvious that Zip was preoccupied, so Joe didn't press it. He turned his attention back to Mark and the files he was examining. Zip went over to the Starmen's private communications center and sat down.

For a few minutes he sat quietly without moving. Mark glanced at him briefly but said nothing. Then Zip began a message to Kristina Bethany on Titan. He didn't give her any details of the finds—merely reported that the *Silverfire* had landed safely and that Noah Kitsualuk was building the base. He tapped into the ship's videographic system and attached a photograph of the progress on the enormous igloo. After he sent that message, he sent one to his parents and then one to his sister. Next he sent word to Richard Starlight, doubly encrypted, with a detailed but unofficial report on their findings. Then, as an afterthought, he sent a brief but friendly note to Montezuma Vly.

"Zip?" came the voice of Folding Jim on the ship's intercom. "You there?"

"Right here!" Zip answered. His hands froze on the keyboard.

"You were right!" said Jim. "It looks as if there's an extensive cave system inside that mountain. I can't tell exactly *how* extensive, or whether it is natural or manufactured. There's something very strange about the land down there. Even the powerful scanner beams on this system don't seem to penetrate very far into it. I rather doubt that land that's been covered with ocean forever could have a natural cave system in it. 'Course, there's a whole raft of geologic formations on Europa and most of the other planets and moons that we can't explain. But anyway, there's a major system of tunnels down there."

"Thanks, Jim! That's terrific news!" Zip signed off. Things were looking up!

Two hours later, Adam reported that there were several heavy elements at the site where the topographical map had shown evidence of digging. Most intriguing of all, there was evidence of an element with an atomic number higher than was considered possible and whose existence had never even been theorized in a

laboratory before, much less discovered in nature—especially in a stable state.

“Now I can’t be absolutely sure of that, Zip, without some kind of confirmation, but either my instruments have suddenly gone blooey or there’s something new and amazing down there!”

Zip was overjoyed now. “Thanks, Adam! That’s the best news I could have had! I’ll do my best to bring you up a sample when we get the *Underbird* that deep!”

Once Zip had closed the connection with Adam, Joe spoke up.

“A new element! I wonder if that’s something needed for the Benefactors’ hypertravel!”

“My thoughts exactly!” said Zip, with a grin that showed he was trying to contain his excitement.

~

Six days later, Noah Kitsualuk had finished Starlight Enterprise’s European base. A great igloo with walls fifty feet thick at the base enclosed about four acres on the surface of the Jovian moon. Fifty yards under the surface of Europa, the topmost of the three stories of storage, working, and living quarters had been constructed—well below the danger level of exposure to the radiation belts.

The huge igloo contained the *Silverfire*, but the crew had transported all essential equipment including the shuttlecraft to the base under the ice. The crew had also carefully unpacked and assembled the parts of the Real Time Transmitter. Captain Dufaire would have the primary responsibility for its use.

Passages led from the subsurface base back to the interior of the huge igloo as well as to the outside beyond its walls. In both places of egress, Kitsualuk had constructed ice houses with airlocks.

Throughout the ice base, he had sprayed a sealant that guaranteed that it was airtight. It was also an insulator so that the rooms could be comfortably heated without danger of melting the ice from which the base had been cut. For the duration of the

mission, Kitsualuk would monitor the base for atmospheric leaks, stability, and safe levels of radiation.

When all was in readiness, Zip gave the order to excavate the hole through which the *Underbird* would be lowered. Special machines similar to those tested in Antarctica would be used to prepare the well through which the Starmen would be dropped. The drilling machine utilized a large number of small lasers to vaporize the ice. Steam was a by-product, which escaped upward and outward. Kitsualuk made an opening at the top of the igloo about four feet in diameter so that the steam would escape into the vacuum of space.

A second machine followed after the first and sealed the sides of the hole so it would not collapse. The dimensions of the channel were almost the same as those necessary to reach Lake Vostok in Antarctica.

The excavation would cease about seventy feet from the break-through point. The *Underbird* would descend to that level. The ship's master mechanical engineer, Gray Bennick, would take an assistant and follow the descent of the mantaship in a small car of his own, a two-passenger elevator that would use the cables as avenues of descent and ascent. Gray bore the nickname "Tricker" because he was able to devise mechanical devices that met the need for tools in extreme situations. To date, he had never encountered a challenge that had bested him.

After the *Underbird* had reached the seventy-foot level, the two mechanics would construct a strong barrier across the shaft. It would be embedded securely in the sides of the hole. A huge double door in the middle of the barrier could drop downward to allow the *Underbird* to pass through, but when the door was sealed, it would make an airtight barricade. The barricade would protect the liquid water of the European sea from the severe cold of deep space. Without that protection, when the *Underbird* broke through the ice, an eruption of quick-frozen water could cause a damaging explosion or another reaction difficult to predict with certainty.

Once the barrier was in place, the Starmen would cut through

the last seventy feet with their own shipboard lasers. Near the bottom of the shaft Bennick would construct a second barrier with a double door. When this barrier was finished, it would establish a large airlock. The two-passenger elevator could then be used in case of an emergency.

Bennick and the two planetary geologists, Jim Zeavin and Adam Snell, had planned the shaft and airlock mechanism together, realizing that the nature of the surface of Europa was highly unpredictable. The outside of the Jovian satellite was an eerie mix of ridges and crustal plates that had a history of breaking apart and rafting together. Large continental plates of ice occasionally came together in places of subduction, while in other places they could drift apart and expose sections of open ocean that quickly froze over into fresh ice. The uncertainty of the nature of the surface was higher near the equator, but fortunately the landing site showed ice that was established, hard and dependable. The nearest area of slush was over a hundred miles distant.

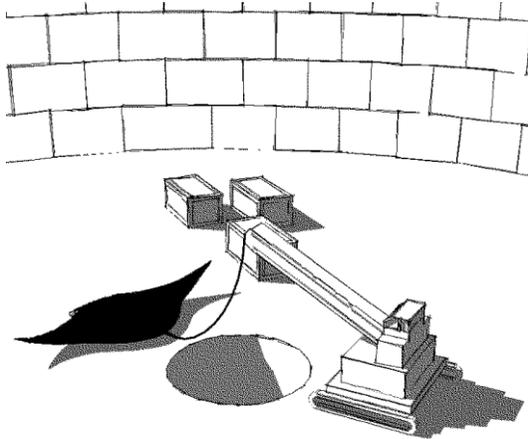
While the hole was under construction, the *Underbird* was unloaded from the *Silverfire*'s hold. Zip had it triple-checked for safety. After it had been thoroughly examined under Captain Dufaire's supervision, Zip had the Starmen perform a check of their own.

Zip intended that the mantaship's first dive would be a trial run of less than a day's duration. The Starmen planned to pass through the ice, enter the frigid waters, and practice various maneuvers. If the ship performed to their satisfaction, they would descend to a depth of five miles—roughly halfway to the bottom—and make a thorough check of the ship's systems. Then they would return to the surface for yet one more thorough examination of the entire ship. The cables that would drop the *Underbird* into the sea would remain in place. A locator beacon was fixed at the end of the cable, sending a signal that could be read from fifty miles away. After the first dive, if all systems checked out, the Starmen would make a second descent and proceed to the bottom to complete their mission.

Three days after excavation of the hole had started, the machines had dug to the seventy-foot level from the bottom of the ice. The excavators were then withdrawn to the surface of Europa under the igloo, and moved to one side. A crane was assembled adjacent to the hole and the *Underbird* was attached to it. Noah Kitsualuk closed and sealed the small aperture at the top of the igloo. Enormous spools of heavy cable were prepared, and the elevator car was positioned nearby.

Captain Dufaure wanted to have a special dinner for the entire crew the night before the first descent, but Zip turned down the idea.

"I'm too nervous," he said. "Let's have a celebratory feast when we return successfully."



*A crane was assembled adjacent to the hole
and the Underbird was attached to it.*

The night before the *Underbird* was to begin its journey into the silent, utterly lightless oceans of Europa, the Starmen ate sparingly in their own room. They were more nervous than they had ever been. Dread was at least as powerful as the anticipation of entering a realm that no human had ever seen and the hope of

finding incontrovertible evidence of the Benefactors' long-term presence in the Solar System.

The next morning, every member of the crew breakfasted together. The Starmen's feeling of dread from the night before had receded somewhat, and excitement rode high.

"Well, let's go!" exulted Joe. He drained his coffee cup, looked toward Zip and then Mark with raised eyebrows.

"Let's go!" repeated Zip.

The three Starmen pushed back their chairs and headed for the opening that led to the top, followed by the rest of the *Silverfire's* crew. All systems had been connected and checked the night before, but they were checked one more time.

"Good luck, Starmen," said Captain Dufaure, shaking the hand of each one. The rest of the crew stood around them and called out encouragement. The Starmen entered the *Underbird* to the sound of applause. Mark shut the door and Zip took the pilot's seat first.

The crane lifted the mantaship up and suspended it directly over the hole that led almost three miles straight down. As he had done weeks earlier in Antarctica, Zip wrapped the wings around the body of the ship, and on his signal the crane began to lower it into the penumbral gloom of the icy shaft.

Chapter 11: The Phantom Shark

IT WAS NEARLY AN HOUR before anyone spoke. For the first few minutes of the descent Zip had kept in touch with the surface crew, checking out the NME communication systems for the umpteenth time. After that, there was nothing more to say. The *Underbird* just continued to descend.

The Starmen had left behind all traces of illumination. When Zip experimentally switched off the *Underbird's* lights, the darkness closed in like a thick woolen coat. Sounds were magnified. The creak of a seat as Joe shifted position, Mark clearing his throat, the breathing of the three men. As a

background to all else, there was the quiet thrum of the cables that held the mantaship and tied it to the surface. Zip put the lights back on.

“About three hundred yards to go,” said Mark quietly. The announcement startled Zip from a reverie. Joe remained motionless at his station. Zip turned his attention to the controls.

“We’ll reach the last barrier in a minute or two,” he reported to the surface.

“Aye aye, Starman Foster,” came the disembodied response.

The lights of the *Underbird* showed the smooth, circular sides of the deep pit, but faded into the darkness ahead. After a moment, the darkness seemed less severe. Fifty yards farther, and it was obvious that the *Underbird* was approaching the bottom. A rough, gray wall of ice appeared in the forward screen.

“We’re there,” announced Zip. “You can send Bennick down now.”

“Okay then, Zip!” Up on the surface, the two-passenger elevator car was connected to the cables, and then Tricker Bennick and his assistant entered it. On a signal, the engineer began the descent. It took only about fifteen minutes for it to reach the *Underbird*.

“Greetings, Starmen!” said the cheerful voice of the master mechanic. “We’re right on top of you. We ought to have the barrier set up in an hour or so. Just sit tight!”

A large load of material had been packed behind the elevator car. The two men used the top of the elevator as their workstation and set about building the barrier. A framework was fastened to the sides of the shaft all around, and then a prefabricated set of beams and panels was assembled. In less than the time Tricker had estimated the barrier was complete.

“We’re finished,” he announced to the Starmen and the crew at the top of the shaft. “The double doors are closed and we’re going back up for another load. Go ahead, Starmen! We’ll come back down and build the second barrier after you’ve entered the water.”

“Thanks, Gray,” said Zip. “Jim, I’ll take control of the cables

now. We're going down!"

"Okay then, Zip!" came the encouraging but far distant voice of Folding Jim, who was at the controls of the crane in the great igloo. "You're in charge!"

The elevator car returned to the surface while Zip prepared to cut through the last portion of ice that separated the Earthmen from the waters of Europa.

"'Bout seventy feet thick, Zip," said Joe. "Then beyond that wall is the surface of the deepest ocean man has ever found. I don't know if I'm excited or scared."

"Both, definitely!" put in Mark.

"Me too," said Zip. He activated the laser cutters. The ice in front immediately began to turn into steam. The *Underbird* made a gradual descent as the ice vanished. The cables continued to pass through a fixture Gray had specially constructed in the barrier. Through another special construction, the steam was allowed to pass through without breaking the airtight blockade. In less than ten minutes the last part of the ice disappeared from before the *Underbird*.

"Hmph!" snorted Joe. "I'm sure glad we took that practice spin in Antarctica! That's about the most frightening thing I've ever seen!" A circle of primordial blackness had opened up in front of the Starmen.

"More frightening than when a whole squadron of Xenobots was attacking you on Nyx?" asked Mark.

"Absolutely! I could *see* those walking horrors and I knew what they were trying to do to me! *This* kind of fear goes deeper!"

"It's in your mind, Joe," observed Zip. "We all feel it, but it'll be different before long. We'll feel comfortable soon enough, I'll bet. Ready?"

"I'm always ready! Let's go!"

Zip touched the communicator again. "The last barrier is down. We're passing through the last ice now and are preparing to enter the water."

"Good luck, Zip! We're all with you!" It was the voice of

Yancy Dufaure. The encouraging voices of several people speaking all together followed the Captain's words.

Zip pressed forward and the *Underbird* maneuvered through the ice barrier. The sides of the shaft through which it had traversed fell away behind them. They were surrounded by darkness on all sides.

"How much farther down is the water?" asked Zip.

"About twenty feet," answered Mark, keeping his eyes fixed on the indicators in the navigator's pod.

"That's a pretty sizable space between the water and the bottom of the ice," said Joe. "What's in it?"

"A lot of methane, but surprising amounts of carbon dioxide and oxygen," reported Mark. "The distance between the ice and the water won't be that much everywhere on Europa, I'm sure. It's about thirty or thirty-five feet here because the ice is relatively thin."

"Here we go," said Zip. He had been inching the *Underbird* downward. The darkness was so thick that he couldn't tell where the surface of the water was, even with the lights on. He only knew they had entered it when he saw the nose of the mantaship pierce the surface.

He eased the ship into the liquid. The three of them watched tensely as the line of water passed up and over the window. The buoyancy of the ship changed, and the tension on the cables was released. They were fully immersed.

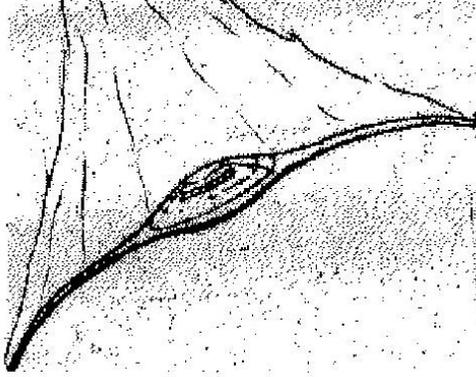
"The ocean of Europa!" breathed Mark, with awe. He took a measurement. The water itself was 28.2° Fahrenheit, and appeared as black as oil.

"Like swimming in India ink," said Joe, "Uncountable billions of trillions of gallons of water that has never seen light! And the land is more than ten miles straight down! Yeeow!" He shivered.

"I'm releasing the cables," announced Zip into the communicator. His hand pressed a switch. There was a click and a slight shudder ran through the mantaship. They were floating freely in the largest ocean in the Solar System.

“Well, we’re here in Europa,” said Zip. “Let’s see what’s below. Mark, turn on the sonarvision.”

“Okay, Zip,” said the big Starman, hunched over his navigational controls. Mark powered up the instruments the ship would need to navigate in a sea of unimaginable darkness. After a moment, he pressed a button on the right of his console.



They were fully immersed.

Every window in the *Underbird* lit up. The sonarvision sent out diffuse, omnidirectional radiation that made it possible for the onboard computer to generate a picture of the terrain in all directions and display it on the windows of the ship. The Starmen could see the terrain almost as if the mantaship were an aircraft above the surface of a planet. The computer even provided artificial, conjectural color to what it detected.

“*Man*, that makes a difference!” exclaimed Joe. “Now it looks as if we’re flying! Take ’er on down, Zip!”

Zip started the engines on the *Underbird*, which had been drifting lazily downward. The Starmen could see that the nose of their ship was pointed almost directly toward the summit of a monstrous mountain that rose gradually from a plain in three directions. To one side, it flowed into a short range of lesser

mountains, jumbled together and extending into the distance beyond the sonarvision's capability to measure.

"What's that stuff that looks like clouds?" asked Mark. Large drifts of fleecy patches, rendered dark green by the sonarvision, were strung together in a few places between the mantaship and the ground.

"I was just going to ask you that same question," said Zip. Mark turned back to his instruments.

"Can't tell without taking a little more time," he explained, "but whatever it is, it's got some substance to it. A lot of very small particles, probably. Could be some of the microbes that the previous investigation found—although I wouldn't have expected them to be clumped together like that."

"How far down?" asked Joe.

Mark took the measurement. "About eight miles. The water has remarkable clarity. It's nowhere near as salty as the oceans on Earth, but there are some impurities in it—small items in suspension." He pursed his lips, checking his instruments further. "There are clusters of them—that is, there are concentrations here and there. What we're seeing eight miles down are the heaviest densities, to the point that they are visible to the sonar. There seems to be some currents, too—most unexpected."

"We'll take a closer look on our next dive," said Zip. "Today we'll stick to our plan of descending no more than five miles." He leaned forward slightly and the mantaship surged forward, going deeper into the water.

"How're you doing down there?" came the voice of Yancy Dufaure over the communicator.

Joe answered so that Zip could give his entire attention to the control of the ship. "No problems, Captain! The sonarvision is working to perfection. It feels as if we're in a sailplane over the Sahara Desert!"

"That's good news! We're tracking you without difficulty at this end."

For the next hour, Zip took the *Underbird* through various maneuvers. He took it down a half mile, rotated it sharply,

brought it to sudden stops, moved it backwards, and pushed it to its fastest acceleration. Then he returned to the top and cruised the bottom of the ice in several directions two or three miles from the terminus of the shaft that led to the surface.

“Smoother than I would have thought,” observed Joe as the mantaship sailed within twenty feet of the frozen ceiling. The bottom of the ice sheet showed only gentle changes in gradation, though there were some exceptions. Knobs protruded down in more than one place, like mountains suspended from the sky. In two locations, crooked ravines led upward into the heart of the ice. Although they were slightly above the water line, it was apparent that they had cracked open with the separation of crustal plates and drawn water upwards into them as the ice plates spread. The water had fallen back down and created icicles.

“Ready to go to the five mile level?” Zip asked the other Starmen after they had satisfied their curiosity about the bottom of the ice.

“Sure, Zip!” said both Joe and Mark.

The ruddy pilot directed his attention downward, and the *Underbird* shot almost straight away from the ceiling of ice.

“One mile,” said Mark after a few minutes.

“All systems working,” added Joe.

“Two miles,” reported Mark. The minutes went by.

After about half an hour, Mark announced, “Five miles, Zip.”

Zip leveled the mantaship and held it in place. The summit of the huge mountain below them was noticeably closer, and the layered clusters of cloudy material in the water hovered below like interlaced gauzy strips.

“Can you tell anything more about those clouds, Mark?” asked Zip.

“I’ll take some measurements and analyze them when we get back to the base, Zip. It’ll just take me a few minutes to get the measurements, but about an hour to analyze the results.”

“Go ahead,” said Zip. “Joe and I’ll do a system check while you’re busy.”

For the next ten minutes, the Starmen worked silently at their tasks. Mark kept his attention on the floating material below, Zip checked on the ship's hardware, and Joe investigated the *Underbird's* interconnected systems.

Because they were otherwise occupied, the Starmen were startled when the mantaship's alarm sounded off.

"What's that?" Joe cried out.

"The alarm!" said Zip, tensely.

"I know, but why?" Zip was already at the controls. Mark looked up anxiously, and Joe looked over Zip's shoulder.

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Zip. "There's something out there! Something enormous!"

"A ship?" asked Joe. "Can't be!"

"Something with locomotive power of its own!" Zip punched a button, and a silhouette appeared on the onboard sonar screen. "A fish! It's sixteen miles away but coming closer!"

"How can this instrument pick up a fish sixteen miles away?" asked Joe.

"Because it's about a quarter of a mile long!" said Zip solemnly. "We're taking a recording of it and we're getting out of here! Joe, take over the sonar while I get us back to the surface!"

Zip leaped into the pilot's seat and shot the *Underbird* back to the terminus of the shaft that led back to the base.

~

An immense metal and glass wheel about half a mile in diameter rotated slowly in an orbit 500 miles above the surface of the Moon. A tower two hundred yards long lifted out from the plane of the wheel. At its end was a large control center that commanded a view of every aspect of one side of the operation that was Nolan Mining Enterprise's manufacturing and launching facility.

A small observation bubble was located at the pinnacle of the tower, one level above the control center. Robert Nolan, founder

and president of NME, liked to make frequent visits to the bubble, where he could see the results of his lifetime of labor.

Today Beowulf Denn had asked if he could join Robert in the observation bubble. Denn's somewhat larger-than-average size nearly overwhelmed Nolan's slight figure in the small confines of the space.

"Thank you for allowing me to join you up here," began Nolan's second-in-command.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" ruminated the small man, looking out appreciatively.

"Indeed it is, very beautiful," agreed Denn. The gray wasteland of the Moon showed as a crater-pocked solidity below, but the men had the impression that they were free of its pull. They gazed out over the silver wheel into the starry infinity beyond.

"Our ship, the *Iron Maiden*, reached the halfway point of its journey this afternoon," said Beowulf Denn casually. "The ship should reach Europa the day before Christmas."

Robert nodded, almost absently. "Then we'll be the heroes at last," he said. "They'll need rescuing by then, won't they?"

"Oh yes, they will," smiled Denn. "They surely will."

"Are you sure that the system failure won't be traced back to the communication system we provided?" Nolan turned and looked at his companion for the first time.

"Absolutely. The communication system will work flawlessly, but the connecting processor we added to it will link up with three other operating systems: the shipboard lighting system, the sonarvision, and—most importantly—the part of the safety system that measures the pressure on the hull. The connecting processor will measure their ship's depth.

"When the ship reaches its deepest point, the processor will initiate a self-destruct program that will become operative during their ascent, two miles above their deepest point. At precisely that position, the ship's lights and sonarvision will fail, and the little processor we added will burn to ash. Even the backup system in the ship will crash. All the Starmen'll have left will be

our communication system. And when they try to communicate with the surface, it will blow the circuits of the main system. The Starmen will need rescuing indeed! The crew from Starlight will be relieved to see our ship!”

“Good,” said Nolan. “Then we’ll be the heroes at last,” he repeated. “We’ll owe our victory to you, Wulf!” he added warmly.

“I’m glad to see to it that you get the recognition you deserve,” said Wulf Denn, humbly.

Inwardly he smiled. He hadn’t told Nolan what the real mission of the *Iron Maiden* was—well, he’d keep that little surprise from Nolan for a few more days. But if Nolan thought about it just a little, he’d figure out that if NME was going to find and keep the “key” needed to activate the faster-than-light drive on the pirates’ asteroid—if the “key” was to be found on Europa at all—NME’s claim had to be indisputable. Obviously, then, no report back to Starlight Enterprise from Europa saying otherwise could be allowed. There must be no one left to dispute NME’s claim.

Chapter 12: Danger Below!

MARK SHOOK HIS HEAD with amazement and leaned back from the viewscreen. The Starmen were in their private quarters inside the ice base near the surface of Europa. They had just completed their analysis of the recordings they had made during their dive.

“I was sure that the instruments must have been malfunctioning,” said Zip. “Are you absolutely certain that they’re adjusted properly?”

Mark nodded. “When they detected a fish that size, I was sure that we had a breakdown of some kind. I still can’t accept that a fish a quarter of a mile long can exist naturally in an environment like this. But the instruments are fine.”

“And what about that ‘hot spot’ inside it?” asked Joe. “You’re telling us that it is some kind of nuclear reaction going

on—that the fish lives on atomic energy?”

“So it would appear,” Mark said. “That’s how they can live in complete darkness. They feed off the deuterium in the water. In an ocean this size, that’s an impressive amount!”

“This reminds me of what Dr. Dukas said back at the Academy,” contributed Zip. “‘Whatever the probes send back, don’t take their reports as accurate or complete until you’re there yourself,’ he told us. ‘And even then, don’t be sure!’ There’s so much mystery out there!”

“Down below, in the European sea? I’ll grant you that!” exclaimed Joe.

“Everywhere!” cried Mark, looking Joe full in the face with shining eyes. “*Everywhere* out there!” he added, spreading his arms wide.

“Some kind of fish, a quarter of a mile long,” muttered Zip, his brow creased with concern. “The previous European probes didn’t show anything like this. They froze up too soon. I wonder what else is down there, what else we have to face.” He looked up at his friends and smiled a little lopsidedly. “I’m a little concerned about what kind of food might exist for fish on this strange world. The giant fish may live off deuterium, but there’s no guarantee that they don’t eat anything else, or that there aren’t other oversize creatures down there that might think that the mantaship is some kind of delicacy they haven’t seen before!”

“We’d better get the engineers to put armament onto the *Underbird* so we have some kind of defense system on it,” suggested Joe.

“Good idea, Joe,” said Zip. “Say! What do you think about this? What if the Benefactors engineered that nuclear fish? That is, suppose it’s been genetically altered?”

Joe looked up sharply. “Why would they do that? To serve as some kind of watchdog?”

“If this is the site we’re looking for, the Benefactors may have done more than simply ‘hide’ from their enemies. There would probably be some kind of defense of their base. I want to confer with some experts first. We’ve got some with us, of

course, but now's the time to ask the Captain to break out the RTT system and check in with Dr. Dukas and a few others back home before we go back down."

~

During the next few days, the Starmen shared their findings with the crew of the *Silverfire*, and allowed the scientists to follow up with ideas of their own and pursue their own research.

Katie Essington, the shipboard celestial biologist, was particularly ecstatic about working on the project. She was a new graduate from Starlight Academy and was on her first assignment. She pored over the data the Starmen had assembled and kept in frequent contact with Dr. Dukas, whose enthusiasm for the discoveries on Europa lit up every communication he sent.

"This is great," said Joe. "Everyone's excited about our discoveries. I hope nobody's forgetting that we're the guys who have to go back down there. I can just hear Dr. Dukas telling Katie to advise us to make sure we have a live feed going when Monstro swallows us!"

Mark turned and grimaced at Joe.

"That pun was unintended!" declared the lanky Starman.

To help her assess the risk to the Starmen, Katie wanted to launch two probes into the ocean, to float downward through the frigid water very slowly, taking up to twelve hours to reach the bottom. Technicians helped her design the probes for mobility, but she put together the instruments herself. She planned to send one probe down and check the data it returned, and then make adjustments in the second before sending it to follow.

The crew gathered in the refectory for dinner the evening of the fourth day after the Starmen's descent. Katie breezed in excitedly and announced to the entire company that the first probe was ready and that she would launch it immediately after dinner.

"Why don't you wait until the morning?" suggested Joe.

“Then maybe you can see better!” Katie gave him a withering look as she was going through the buffet line, and then sat down at their table. She pulled her chair in, tossed her head backwards to throw her medium-length brown hair out of her eyes, and picked up her fork.

“I’m doing this for your safety, you know,” she said to all of the Starmen at once.

Joe looked abashed. “I know, Katie, and we appreciate it.”

“We’re just a little nervous about going back down there,” contributed Zip. “We never expected to find anything living. Even the microbes were completely unexpected when they showed up a few years back. The whole ocean is miles from any kind of light, for Pete’s sake!”

Katie took a bite of green salad, and then pushed her rice around with her fork as she chewed. “Celestial biology is a new field. I’m one of the first graduates.” It was hard for her to conceal her pride, but she kept her eyes lowered.

“Although celestial biology is the study of alien life forms, some of our field work was done on Earth. My specialty was working with the sightless fish in the deep caverns of the American southwest. It was because of that that Captain Dufaure asked if I wanted to come along on this expedition. It’s... it’s my first trip away from the Earth-Moon system. I’ve never even been to Mars.” She raised her eyes for a moment, then quickly lowered them again. “But I jumped at the chance to come, just so I could investigate the ocean of Europa.”

There was a moment when no one spoke. Katie shoved the fork into her rice, hesitated a moment, then lifted it.

“Well, Katie,” said Joe, softly. “Is there anything we can bring back for you?” She began to giggle with her mouth full.

“Stop it, Joe!” she laughed, then quickly grabbed for her napkin.

~

By 9:00 p.m., the probe had descended more than a mile into the inky liquid. Katie was seated at the controls of a large

console and the Starmen had arranged themselves around her. The *Silverfire's* two planetary geologists had joined them.

There was no video camera on the probe, but it had several instruments that measured depth, pressure, temperature, and ocean currents. Most importantly, it analyzed the content of the water. An intake tube constantly drew in a stream of water and reported to the surface whatever was held in suspension.

"You've designed that little instrument very well, Katie," commended Folding Jim, the senior technician among them. She smiled her appreciation, but kept her eyes on the instruments. Thus far, nothing of importance had shown up.

"The thing's dropping at less than a mile an hour," said Joe. "The layers of microbes we saw were at about the eight-mile depth. You won't get there until about 4:00 a.m."

"I'll come wake you if you want to get some sleep," said Adam Snell. No one left.

The hours dragged on. The rest of the *Silverfire's* crew was asleep. Twice Mark visited the commissary and made a pot of coffee and brought it to Katie's operations room.

About the second hour past midnight, Katie said, "Ah!" Five nodding heads came up.

"What?" asked Jim.

She pointed a slender finger at a line of figures appearing on the screen. "The level of microorganisms is increasing. It's shot up in the past few minutes. It's up to over 100 per cubic foot. That's more than ten times what it was half an hour ago."

Mark looked at the clock. "You should still be at least a mile and a half above the concentrations we noted on the sonar."

"I know," said Katie. "It must be terrifically thick at that level. And look, there's a mild current at that depth, too. That's about a mile below the deepest part of your dive. It's also slightly warmer than it was at the five mile depth."

Two hours later, the probe stopped reporting information about the content of the water. "The concentration of organic material is unbelievably high," said Katie. "The intake tube is clogged, but I've got enough information to keep Dr. Dukas happy for

years! The microbes are impossibly large and complex, and there are so many of them and so many different kinds that I've got a lifetime of work in front of me already! A large number of them are actually multi-cellular!"

"Congratulations, Katie!" said Zip. "I don't suppose that you've seen indications of any large sea life beyond the huge fish we've already encountered?"

"None so far," she responded. "I'll analyze this data more tomorrow and then I'll send down the second probe, but off-hand I'd say that there isn't anything else down there of the same size as the fish. I want to design the second probe to bypass the layer of organic material and drop below it, and then measure what's between it and the bottom. To do that I'll need some help from one of the other technicians, since I want to add some sonar capabilities to the probe. Maybe then we'll learn a bit more about the ichthyic life on Europa."

~

Two days later, Katie dropped the second probe. It was designed to open its intake tube at the eight-and-a-half mile level, and the tube had twice the diameter than the one in the first probe.

The second probe showed that the concentration of organic material between the thick layer of microbes and the bottom was heavier than that above the layer, but not enough to clog the tube. The probe also indicated that there was a slight current in the water and that the temperature continued to rise, but the sonar showed no unusual presence in the depths.

After a drop of eleven hours and forty-three minutes, the second probe touched down gently on the bottom. At that point, the water temperature was 45° Fahrenheit, seventeen degrees warmer than the surface.

~

"Tomorrow's Christmas Eve," said Mark in the Starmen's private quarters two days later. "Katie's given us all the

information she can get from her initial analysis, and Dr. Dukas said the decision whether to proceed is up to us. He gives us no dire warnings.”

“And he also gives us no guarantees,” said Joe, “but of course we never expected any.”

“We’ve been outfitted with some weapon-grade lasers,” said Mark, “and we can run a massive electrical charge through the hull like a bolt of lightning. In addition, we’ve got the ability to launch a few small electromagnetic pulses. I don’t know if that can discourage a denizen of the deep as large as the one we saw, but it’s more than we had before.”

“Let’s go down. Tomorrow,” said Zip with determination. “I don’t want to wait, not even to have Christmas with the crew. Let’s have Christmas on the bottom. We came to find the Benefactors, or evidence of them, and all indications are that we will find what we’re looking for. We need to remember that our planet may be under threat of attack from the Xenobots, and we can’t stop them if we don’t find the Benefactors. We can’t afford to delay!”

~

Mid-morning the next day, the *Underbird* entered the dark waters of the European sea for the second time. Zip was once again at the controls. As he released the cables, Joe slipped a disk into the console. Classical music filled the cabin.

Mark turned toward his shipmate. “Very amusing,” he said. “I like it.”

“Handel’s ‘Water Music’ it is,” said Joe. “And the first movement is called *Allegro-Andante*. I think that means ‘all ahead full’, or something like that. Anyway, that’s what we’re doing.”

“That’s what we’re doing indeed,” agreed Zip. “Sonarvision, if you please, Mark!” Zip was almost jovial as the mantaship began its journey to the bottom and the real descent into Europa. The Starmen would not return to the surface until they had learned for sure whether the Benefactors had established a

presence on the icy moon of Jupiter. Handel's beautiful composition was the only sound for a long time.

"Six miles," sang out Joe about an hour later. Then, "Seven miles, Zip. We're seeing signs of the organic life."

"Mmm hmmm," murmured Zip. The sonarvision showed that the waters around them were becoming somewhat blurry. A short time later, the windows clouded up. Visibility, even with the sonarvision, dropped to nearly zero.

Mark kept in contact with the base, reporting what they were experiencing. The stream of data he sent up was constant. Joe kept close watch on the *Underbird's* operating systems. Twenty minutes after the Starmen entered the layer of organisms, they burst through it to the far side. The sudden relative clarity of the water was a relief.

"It's about two-thirds of a mile thick," reported Zip to the base. "We're beneath it now. There's a ceiling above us, churning a little bit like an upside-down pond with scum on it."

"Very poetic, Zip," came the voice of Katie Essington from far above.

"The mountaintop is below us and a little to one side. It seems so close now. I'll take us to the opening of the tunnel system, the one nearest the heat vents."

At that instant, the ship's alarm system went off.

"*We're cooked, Zip! We're cooked!*" It was Mark's voice, shouting frantically. Zip could feel his entire system react with shock. He swirled to face his navigator and ripped off the pilot's headpiece. Even in the wan light of the ship's internal illumination system, Zip could see that Mark's face was white.

"What is it?" asked Zip in a tense, quiet voice. Joe was frozen to his seat.

"Silhouettes," announced Mark anxiously as he turned back to his screen. "Fish-shaped silhouettes, coming at us from several directions. There are five of them—no, six now! Seven! Coming in fast! Some are bigger than the one we saw last week!"

"Hide in the organic layer!" cried out Joe. "It's close!"

“No!” shrieked Katie’s far off voice. “You can’t see in it and they probably can! Head for the cave!”

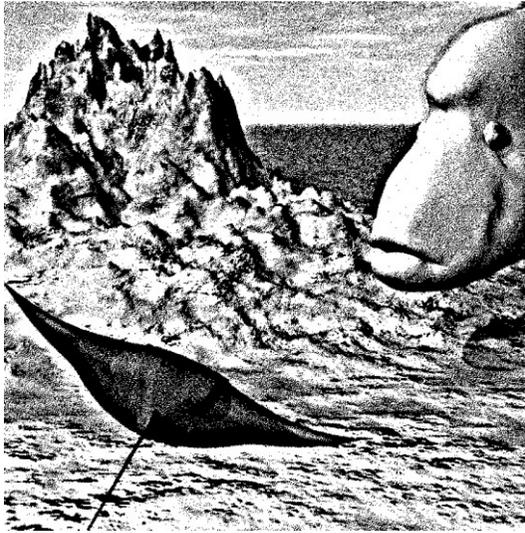
“It’s a mile away,” said Zip with false calmness in his voice, even as he shot the mantaship at top speed straight downward.

“They’re coming fast.” Mark’s voice sounded as if it were being stretched, but he too tried to sound calm.

Like a plane in a fast dive, the mantaship shot toward the ground. “Find me the cave!” shouted Zip. “Find me the closest entrance to the caves! Mark!”

“Keep on course,” returned the big Starman. “You’re heading straight for it. Now slightly up—just a degree or two. You’ll be there in about fifteen seconds.”

“I can see one of the fish now!” bellowed Joe. “It’s trying to cut us off.”



“Find me the cave!” shouted Zip.

“Cut loose with the electromagnetic charge!” ordered Zip. Joe immediately slammed his hand down on a red button that the *Silverfire’s* technicians had installed. An ear-splitting *crack*

sounded throughout the ship, and a blast of white lightning surrounded the mantaship for a moment.

“We’re close,” said Zip through gritted teeth. “I can see the entrance! We can’t miss it now!”

The *Underbird* shot into a canyon with steep, sloping sides. The walls of the canyon dropped into a V and gradually disappeared as the slope merged with the plain, but at the other end the canyon swept in a rounded curve toward the side of the mountain. A smooth round opening led into the massive hulk itself.

“We’ll make it!” yelled Joe. “Go, Zip!”

The *Underbird* passed into the opening. Seconds later, a fish nearly half a mile long swam serenely over the spot where the men from Earth had disappeared. It took almost three minutes for its body to pass the site completely. Eleven other fish like it hovered patiently nearby.

Chapter 13: The Caves of Fear

ZIP PULLED the helmet off, took his hands out of the gloves, and stood up. He stumbled weakly over to a bunker and sat down. He was trembling slightly. The *Underbird* hovered in place.

“What just happened?” he asked, a look of complete confusion across his face. Neither Joe nor Mark answered. They all knew what had happened.

“I thought those fish fed off deuterium,” said Joe after a time of silence. “Why would they chase us?”

“Curiosity,” shrugged Mark. “Who knows?”

“Well, what do we do now?” asked Joe. “We don’t have any way to get out of here and slip past those fish!”

“Raise Yancy,” Zip said to Mark. The navigator tried to make contact with the base in the ice layer nearly fifteen miles above them, but there was no response.

“Must be something in the ground here that’s shielding the radio, Zip,” announced Mark. “I’m even getting a kind of

feedback. The waves aren't penetrating the walls of this tunnel."

"Well, that's not too surprising. Jim couldn't get a very clear reading even with the fluxon scanner. Let's take a peek out of the door and see what's out there," said Zip. "You want to take the controls, Joe? You're our best pilot. I'll watch the systems."

"Okay, Zip." The lanky Starman stood up, stretched his arms over his head and twisted right and left to unkink his back, and then sat in the pilot's seat. He adjusted the settings to match his body, and then turned the mantaship around in place. The sonarvision showed that the entrance to the tunnel was about a hundred yards away. Joe caused the ship to glide smoothly but hesitantly toward the opening.

When they were about fifty yards away, they saw a huge fish swimming powerfully toward the cave opening. At the last second, it shot upward to avoid slamming into the side of the mountain. A powerful current raced into the tunnel, a mighty wash caused by the racing fish. The *Underbird* was caught helplessly in the inrushing surge of water and tossed swiftly backward into the cave, tumbling and rolling out of control.

The tunnel was wide and straight. The mantaship did not strike the stony side of the passage, but whirled along in the churning tide, caught in the disturbed water.

The current was quickly damped, its power dissipated by the great water pressure at that depth. Short-lived as the *Underbird's* tumble was, the Starmen were shaken and bruised. Once the force of the moving water had abated Joe quickly brought the ship under control.

"You two okay?" he called out.

"I think so," coughed Zip. "I pulled a muscle in my back, but it's not too bad. The protective net over our seats wasn't designed for a ship that much out of control!"

Mark was holding his right wrist. "I'm okay," he said. "Twisted my wrist trying to hold onto the edge of the desk here. How about you, Joe?"

"Pulled a few muscles in my sides. The pilot's seat doesn't give you much to hold onto when you're going down the drain."

“Run a systems check,” said Zip. “Make sure nothing’s been wrecked.” A few minutes later, the Starmen concluded their examination and found no sign of damage.

“I guess there’s no going out the front door—not right now, anyway,” said Zip after the three of them had returned to their seats. “Those fish are smart. That tactic took me completely by surprise.”

“Do you think we ought to try the laser on them?” asked Mark.

Zip looked down in thought, his brow furrowed. “Not yet,” he said. “Let’s explore the cave first. If we can’t find any other way out, we’ll come back here and try to shoot our way out if we have to. I’m not sure how effective our lasers will be against those leviathans, but we came all the way here to find the Benefactors. Let’s look for them! As long as we’re in the caves, we’re safe from the big fish.” He looked out the windows. “Have you noticed that these walls are manufactured?”

The sides of the tunnel were completely smooth—as smooth and straight as the sides of the shaft through which the *Underbird* had descended to the dark waters. The tunnel was clearly artificial.

A look of awe crossed Mark’s face, followed by a grin of appreciation. “Signs of civilization far from home,” he said. “You’ve hit it, Zip! We’ve found what you were looking for!”

“Not yet we haven’t,” said Zip, but it was obvious that he was pleased. “But it looks as if we will! It’ll be my best Christmas ever!” His gray eyes glinted with excitement; the episode with the great fish was all but forgotten. “Forward, Joe!” he ordered.

“Aye aye, Zip!” responded Joe, with determination. Joe returned to the pilot’s seat and leaned forward. The mantaship sped onward.

“Keep your eyes on the screen,” said Zip to Mark. “Check our progress on the grid and compute an accurate map as we go. After a while we’ll make a sonar test and see if we can learn more about the interior of this mountain. I especially want to

know where we are in relation to the other green dots on the map we found in Final Ilien and to the hot vent we located when we first landed on Europa.”

“Okay, Zip,” said Mark. “The vent is about ten miles from the opening; in the direction from which the first fish appeared.”

“I know it,” said Zip, “but who knows where this tunnel will lead us? If we get going in the direction of the vent, I want to know.”

~

A sleek, charcoal gray ship reached orbital trajectory around Jupiter. Its course had taken it to the side of the planet opposite the icy moon of Europa so that it would have little chance of being detected by anyone in the SE base. Once it had decelerated sufficiently to maneuver in the immediate proximity of the giant planet, its captain brought the ship into an inside orbit, then gradually approached Europa from the planetside of the moon.

With minimal use of power, the ship drifted to the side of Europa opposite the SE base and hovered about a half mile above the surface. Then it increased power a little and cruised close to the scored and scarred gray and brown ice, slowly approaching the site of the great igloo Noah Kitsualuk had built over the outpost of Starlight Enterprise.

When the ship had reached a point about twenty miles from the igloo, it slowed, became stationary for a moment, and then descended. Without delay a group of six men debarked and erected a stanchion of dull, unlovely but serviceable metal bars. They finished their work in less than an hour.

Then they brought a self-propelled drill from their ship. It was about the size of a man, with fierce, gear-like teeth protruding from one end and a ring of nozzles about half an inch in diameter around the teeth. Quickly the men set the drill into the stanchion, and then returned to their ship.

At the command of the captain, the drill leaped into operation. The nozzles emitted narrow but intense laser beams that turned ice directly into steam. The teeth spun feverishly,

turning what remained of the heated ice into slush and spewing it out the back end of the drill. There, other laser beams vaporized it. A propellant drove the drill downward, leaving a hole about two feet across.

Inside the ship, a young man sat at a console where he could control the drill. He took constant measurements and made slight corrections from time to time. After nearly eight hours, he announced, "The drill is a few feet from break-through, sir."

"Drop the locator," ordered an expressionless man.

"Yes sir." The young man deployed a device only inches across. In a short time the device had reached the bottom of the shaft. He looked up at the captain and lifted his eyebrows.

"Break through and make sure the *Underbird* is below."

The device bored a small opening in the last ice barrier and dropped into the European ocean. At once it sent out a signal. For several minutes, the technician monitored the device. And then there was a quiet but unmistakable buzz."

"Found it, sir. The *Underbird* is almost directly below, near the bottom."

The captain nodded. "Then lower the robots."

"Yes sir," replied the man. He transferred the order to the hold. A large door opened in the side of the ship and a small tractor crawled out onto the ice, hauling a trailer with twenty objects in it that resembled torpedoes. The group of six men followed on foot.

When the tractor had pulled up next to the stanchion, the men unloaded the trailer and connected the torpedoes end to end. At the terminus of the line they attached a small package. Next the men hitched the line of torpedoes to a long cable and the operator lowered it into the hole like a string of sausages.

When the torpedoes had dropped close enough to the waiting drill, the operator activated the package at the top of the line. The package blew open and made an airtight seal in the narrow shaft. Then the drill was started again and before long broke through the bottom of the ice, where it fell through and began a long drop to the bottom of the sea. Twenty torpedoes followed it into the

water.

“The robots are in the ocean, sir,” reported the messenger to his captain. The captain nodded and turned to a technician sitting at another console.

“Are they all operating?”

“Yes sir,” said the man. “They’ve separated. All the fins have deployed and all the engines are under power. Not one failure.”

“Lock them onto the locator beacon and send them off.”

“Yes sir,” said the operative and turned his attention to the screen in front of him.

Chapter 14: The Wailing Octopus

FOLDING JIM was frantic with worry. He had been trying for over an hour to raise the *Underbird* and hadn’t received the slightest response.

“Mark!” he almost yelled into the communicator. “Zip! Joe! Come in!” There was no answer.

At first, only the Captain, Yancy Dufaure, and a few others had been in the communications center with Jim Zeavin. Katie Essington stood behind him next to Adam Snell. Katie wrung her hands and wept silently. Adam stood dumbly.

As the news of the *Underbird’s* frantic, headlong flight from the huge fish had spread throughout the base, the other crewmembers had wandered in. Every other post in the base was abandoned. Now the entire crew of the *Silverfire* stood silently in the room, overcome with somber grief.

“The last message said that they were going to make it!” said Adam for at least the twentieth time. “They *must* have made it into the cave!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” said Folding Jim anxiously. “All I could detect for sure was a strong electromagnetic discharge! Then they just disappeared! But whether they made it inside the tunnel and can’t communicate, or whether one of the fish got them... I don’t know.”

“I shouldn’t have let them go,” said Katie miserably. No one responded. Everyone was in shock.

“Everyone, back to your stations,” announced the Captain. “We’ll let you know if we hear anything.”

~

The *Underbird* moved forward through the large tunnel. Joe kept looking ahead intently in spite of the unrelieved view. The passage appeared to continue endlessly.

“It can’t go on forever, Joe,” said Zip, anticipating Joe’s observation. “Are you getting any readings, Mark, anything helpful?”

Mark was focused on the sonar measurements the *Underbird* was providing, assembling a map of the cave system. “We’ve been going in a perfectly straight line for over four miles, Zip, but it looks as if we’re coming to some sort of ganglion ahead. It’s very fuzzy, but something different is about to happen. At the rate we’re traveling, we ought to get there in about eight or ten minutes.”

After a while, Joe spoke up. “Here it is, everybody.” They all looked forward and saw that the tunnel was coming to an end. A moment later they passed out of it into an immense spherical hollow at least half a mile in diameter. A dozen or more passages led away, with markings over each aperture. The Starmen couldn’t read them, but they were familiar.

“Yahoo!” yelled Zip, echoed instantaneously by his fellows. They screamed and pounded each other on the back. The markings were the familiar writing of the Benefactors!

“Oh, if only the people up top could see us now!” cried Joe after the celebration had died down slightly.

“They must be plenty worried, but there’s nothing we can do about it,” said Mark. “We’ll just have to get back up there safely.”

“Where do we go from here?” asked Zip. “We could sure use a Harrison fluxon scanner aboard this ship now, but who ever

would have thought that we'd have needed one! Well, Mark, do your best with sonar measurements and see if you can trace any of these other tunnels."

For the next half hour or so Mark was occupied with making, tracing, and recording sonar scans. To make it easier for him, Joe cruised the *Underbird* by each opening in turn so Mark could send sonar waves down each tunnel. After a while, Mark concluded his work.

"Sorry, Zip, but sonar can only do so much down here. Something in the makeup of the tunnel walls damps most of the radiation. It's keeping us from communicating with the base and it's not giving me back very many dependable signals from the sonar either."

"What have you got?" Zip and Joe put their heads next to Mark's and looked over his shoulders at the screen. Mark reached out his finger and traced a few lines.

"Right here is the hollow we're in. That's easy to trace. There are fourteen passages that go out from it, and this one here, obviously, is the one we came through. These two here go on for about seven miles in a straight line, then they turn. They spread apart from each other for a distance, and then turn in toward each other at the end. That's where I lose them, but it's also the direction of the hot vent, and the surface of the land is about nine miles away. We may be able to try one of these passages for another exit if we need to.

"These three go off southward, but I can't trace them for more than half a mile before they turn away—one downward and two toward the right. Three miles beyond this one is another of the green dots from the Martian map."

"The way we came in was an entrance, so maybe the others are entrances also," suggested Joe. Zip nodded. Mark continued.

"The remaining eight passages go in widely different directions, two of them deeply into the earth, one almost straight upward, and five directly outward but only from one hemisphere of the hollow. I can trace two of them as far as six miles, but the others from only half a mile to just over four miles.

“These two here,” he said indicating some of the last he had described, “are parallel and probably have many branches that lead off of them.”

Mark looked up at Zip. “If you want my opinion, this is indeed the Benefactors’ base, and the living and working quarters are down these two tunnels. Every other tunnel is a passage to a workstation of some kind. This hollow that we’re in is roughly centrally located among all the sites to which these tunnels are directed, but the living and working quarters—if that’s what they are—are the deepest and farthest from any of the entrances. That makes them the best able to be defended, and the third green dot is located on the far side—could be an emergency exit.”

Zip pulled his bottom lip and furrowed his brow. “It makes sense to me,” he said. “Can you project this information on the holographic table, with the shape of the mountain around it?”

“Sure, Zip. I’ll have to transfer the data to the holographic file, but that’ll just take a moment.”

While Mark worked on the file, Zip and Joe prepared the holographic table. It was a flat surface that could be set up on a pedestal in the middle of the bridge. Three-dimensional maps could be displayed on it.

Before long, Mark announced, “Here we are.”

“Go ahead,” said Zip, and Mark initiated the program. Instantly a ghostly shape appeared, precisely contoured to represent the enormous undersea mountain in which the Benefactors’ base was located. The “hot spot” was shown in a shimmering red glow. Green lines indicated where the tunnels were located inside the mountain, with yellow extensions showing where Mark conjectured they might lead. Three places on the mountain glowed bright green to indicate where the three green markers were located on the map that the Starmen had found in Final Ilien.

“Let’s go down,” decided Zip. “We’ll follow this tunnel first, down to where we hope to find the Benefactors’ living quarters.”

“Aye aye, sir!” said Joe eagerly, jumping into the pilot’s seat. He steered the mantaship toward the yawning opening that the

Starmen hoped would lead them to the heart of the Benefactors' operation on Europa.

When the *Underbird* was still some way away from the entrance to the tunnel, what looked like a flock of birds sped out of the opening.

"Hey!" bellowed Joe. "We've got company—or something!" Mark and Zip had been looking forward as well, and saw the phenomenon as soon as Joe had. Several dozen dark dots shot toward the mantaship and quickly surrounded it like a swarm of bees.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Zip. The creatures were disk-shaped, with several small tendrils that came out of the bottom of the disk near the edge. Overall, the creatures were about eighteen inches across. Luminous eyes on stalks looked out from the top. The eyes could be withdrawn, as became evident after several of the creatures extended their eyes as far as about a foot, then turned the luminescence off and withdrew them completely.

"Cute," said Joe. "I'm still flabbergasted that Europa has life of any kind, but if it did, that's about what I would have expected—not those half mile-long whales outside."

"Natural light, too," mused Mark. "They can produce their own illumination. Fascinating!"

"Here come some more," said Joe. "Look! They're carrying something!" Another swarm of the octopi-like denizens of Europa emerged from the tunnel, each one carrying a small tube.

"Look at that!" repeated Zip. "Tools! Could these creatures be intelligent?"

"And what is the tool for, Zip? That's what I want to know!" said Joe. "I'm getting a little bit nervous!"

"Hold on! Make no motion of any kind! Just hover!"

"They're surrounding us, Zip! I think we ought to move out of here!"

"Okay, Joe! Let's move! Take one of the tunnels that leads to another green spot!"

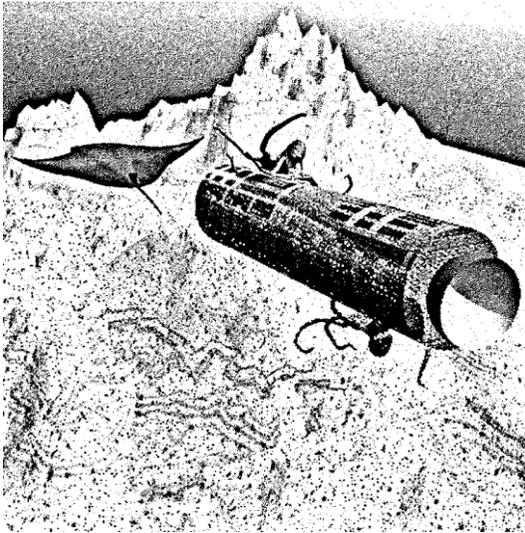
At that moment all the tubes erupted at one time, focusing energy against the hull of the mantaship. The ship rocked with

powerful vibration as the octopi's weapons struck it. An alarm shrieked, and the *Underbird* automatically activated the electric field that the SE engineers had installed as a defense against an attack by the huge fish. The ripple of energy blew the octopi away like a powerful current; many of them dropped the tubes they were carrying.

"Sonar weapons," gasped Zip. "Like lasers, but with sound. Very effective in water. We've got to get out of here! Can't stop now and try to convince them that we're friends!"

Joe turned the mantaship and shot it toward one of the other tunnels.

"They're after us with something else," cried Mark. Behind the ship, the small creatures were carrying a tube several times larger than the small tubes they had carried before. The mantaship was making good headway when the octopi fired the weapon.



The small creatures were carrying a tube several times larger than the small tubes they had carried before.

A wave of electromagnetic energy crashed into the ship. The metal groaned and the lights went out. Powerless, the *Underbird* sank slowly toward the bottom of the hollow sphere, its wings frozen into position and causing the ship to twirl lazily as it sank.

Inside, the three Starmen were slumped over, unconscious.

Though the Starmen couldn't hear it, a siren-like sound mitigated with chirps and wails echoed through the vast chamber. Several dozen of the octopi followed the *Underbird* to the bottom.

Chapter 15: The Veiled Raiders

THE *IRON MAIDEN* raised itself up from the slate-dark ice and hovered a few hundred yards over the surface of Europa. The captain was on the bridge peering through the forward window at the bald, far-off horizon. A large, piercingly brilliant star was directly ahead of the ship—the heart of the Solar System. A smattering of stars covered the rest of the sky that was visible through the glass.

“Proceed,” ordered the unsmiling man. The *Iron Maiden* cruised forward. Shadows on the patterned ice below showed where ridges and bulges broke the smoothness of the terrain. Ahead was a high crest with a gold lining where the sun's light was caught in the topmost escarpment.

The NME ship passed over the ridge. A few miles ahead a huge igloo showed where intelligent hands had worked the surface. Like a huge bubble, it rose up from a smooth plain of ice, caught the gold of the distant sun, and seemed to radiate a frosty glory.

“Let's take it down,” commanded the ship's captain.

“It's in the sights, sir. Ready for your command,” said a crewmember seated at the right end of the bridge control panel.

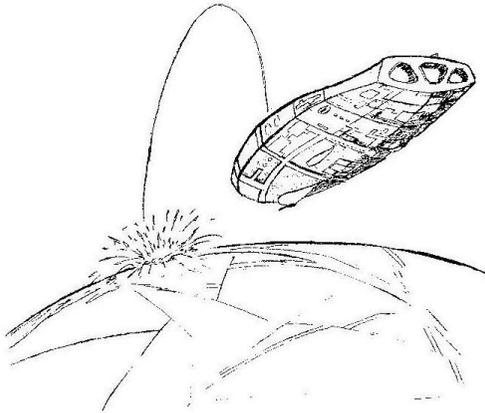
“Fire!” said the captain, quietly but sternly.

There was a muted sound on the bridge as if someone had spat out a seed, and a small black ball flew out of the front end of

the *Iron Maiden*. The ball soared upward in a very high parabolic arc, peaked, and then began to fall toward the igloo.

When it was about a hundred feet above the structure Noah Kitsualuk had constructed and was visible from the NME ship in just about the place where the sun glared through the window, the ball detonated. As if a hurricane had been unleashed, the igloo was immediately crushed flat, its component parts scattered. Loose ice fragments were blown across the surface of the moon like dust in a high wind. Large blocks that the SE arcologist had cut tumbled outward and shattered into pieces that skidded and rolled in all directions.

The blocks that had been topmost in the structure were blasted straight downward, smashing the heavy construction equipment that the igloo had been covering. The *Silverfire* was flattened beyond repair; the gantry and crane over the entrance to the pit that led to the European sea nearly three miles below were crushed and swept aside.



The ball detonated.

In the vacuum, there was no sound, flame, or smoke, and the action took only a second. The igloo and everything on the surface it was protecting were completely destroyed. Powdery

detritus hung in small, thinning clouds that moved away from the site until they disappeared altogether.

Even that didn't make the captain smile. He reached for the communicator that would connect him directly to Beowulf Denn back at Nolan Mining Enterprise.

~

It was Christmas Eve. Robert Nolan was in the sitting room of his apartment aboard the lunar satellite that was the headquarters of Nolan Mining Enterprise.

Beowulf Denn had asked if he might drop by for a few minutes. The large man sat across from Nolan, looking very satisfied. With Nolan's support, he had given most of the crew of NME several days off to spend with their families on Earth or on the Moon below. The usual population of more than 2,000 had been reduced to fewer than 300.

"You're looking pleased with yourself, Wulf," said Nolan.

"Very pleased, Robert," agreed Denn. "I have some good news for you," he added, leaning forward.

Nolan looked at him and with an expression that urged his second-in-command to continue.

"Our mission on Europa has succeeded!" announced Beowulf Denn.

"Already?" asked Nolan with surprise. "Our ship was only due to arrive today, and we've already rescued the Starmen?"

Denn chuckled. "No, Robert. That wasn't the plan. That was never the plan. Let me tell you what the plan really was." His voice was a little hard now. Nolan's smile froze on his face and his expression took on a hint of wariness.

NME's second-in-command continued. "There was to be no rescue. Quite the contrary. There was no chip inserted into the communication system that was designed to disable the ship so we could rescue it. The chip in the communication system was a locator beacon."

"A locator beacon?" asked Nolan. "Why did we need a

locater beacon?”

“Yes, a locater beacon, so our robots could find the Starmen without fail.”

“Robots?”

Denn smiled with eyes like coal. “Our ship dropped twenty robotic fighters into the European sea about twenty miles from the SE base. They were generously provided by the Xenobots—the ‘great power’ I told you about several weeks ago. These fighter drones are faster and much more deadly than anything we had designed before! They were delivered to me here at NME last October by apparently normal shipping means, and I simply loaded them aboard the *Iron Maiden*. They were deployed about an hour and a half ago.”

“Why did we need robotic fighters?”

Denn ignored the question. “And the Xenobots have more weapons to share with us—formidable, crushing weapons that can reduce any SE outpost to rubble, making it look as if nothing had ever been built! In fact, the *Iron Maiden* has already gone to the base where Starlight had set up operations on Europa, and completely destroyed it.”

“Destroyed it?” Nolan gasped.

“Yes. It’s been done. The captain sent me a report that arrived about half an hour ago. I’ll show it to you.” Denn took a disk from an inner pocket and slid it into the console on one side of Nolan’s office. Instantly the screen lit up. With horror, Robert Nolan watched his ship, an NME ship, disintegrate the SE base.

“Wulf!” shouted Nolan. “What have you done?”

“I’ve cleared the way for NME to take possession of the discoveries that lie below the European ice and everything that they mean!” Denn roared back. “That means maybe finding the ‘key’ to the faster-than-light drive we know exists! The pirates’ asteroid proves it’s possible!

“Oh,” he made a dismissive gesture, “we’ll say we tried to rescue the Starlight operation of course, but we were too late. We’ll still come off looking good, and we’ll be terribly sorry for Richard Starlight, but we’ll own all the information and artifacts

that are down there.”

~

To Robert Nolan, it seemed as if time had suddenly slowed dramatically, and all sound faded. An upheaval of monstrous proportions began to rend his mind. His mouth fell agape, and his eyes opened wide but stared at nothing.

The room blew away like mist and a landscape filled Nolan's inner sight. Around him he saw a bleak field of viciously jagged boulders scattered across a pathless field. The ground below his feet was a thick layer of black, broken gravel, extending backward into the near distance. It left no footprints and could hold no sign that anyone had ever walked on it.

A darkly lurid bronze sky hefted up to right and left. A wounded, ochre sun gasped on the horizon with a distorted corona the color of cadaverous blood. The sky directly above was a shroud of starless, smothering purple, nearly black like choking smoke.

Nolan turned slowly around and descried behind him, far off, almost beyond vision, a place where the boulders thinned out and a gentle, scree-clad slope went upward. It was miles away. At the place where sight failed, there was a glimmer that may have been green. There were a few sparkles as if from sunlight on snow.

The pathetic man turned again and looked forward. His heart fell into a chill as cold as death. He was on the periphery of an abyss like the edge of the world. Directly in front of him there was no horizon. The sky simply turned into darkness that kept going. As far as he could see in both directions, a precipice rolled on and on and curved forward like horns until it was lost in far distance. Below him the abyss fell into blackness deeper and thicker than he had ever thought possible. Its sides were sheer and perfectly vertical.

A few scraggly ridges of scored land on the fringes of the pit showed that the sides had some solidity to them, but otherwise the pit seemed obscenely unnatural. The man knew that the pit

went on and on and on.

He felt a rush of fear, coupled with an insane urge to throw himself in. With a cry like a vulture's shriek, he felt himself toppling forward, off balance. As he fell he wrenched himself around and gripped the edge of the pit. Desperately, he clawed at the gravel on the rim and felt it give way under his frantic hands. The pieces he scabbled flew past his head and plummeted silently downward. He was wailing like a lost soul.



He felt himself toppling forward.

At last he managed to clutch something solid. He could sense the immeasurable emptiness beneath his unsupported body; with inhuman strength, he pulled himself back onto the gravel. For a moment he lay panting.

Then he lifted his eyes upward. Yes, he could see far away a glint of sunlight, impossibly remote, on the horizon, where there was an emerald green patch. He staggered to his feet and lurched

forward. He began to run. The gravel caught his feet and drained his energy, but he ran just the same. He watched his footing to make sure he wouldn't fall, but many times he looked up so he could see the light ahead of him. He swerved neither to right nor left. Gasping for breath, drained to the point of utter exhaustion, he ran on.

Before him, he saw again the face of Beowulf Denn. It wore a look of triumph.

"What's wrong, Nolan?" the dark man asked. The words were comfortable but underneath them was a leer. "This is our hour. We'll have it all now! We've won! The Starmen are gone and Nolan Mining Enterprise will find the aliens' base! We'll find what they were mining—maybe even the secret to hyperdrive!"

"I don't want it," whispered Robert Nolan. "Not this way."

"What?" exclaimed Denn with mock surprise. "You don't want it? Of course you do! And I've got it for you!"

"No!" Nolan tried to shout, but his voice was weak. "Tell them not to do it! Disable the robots! Stop them! Call Richard Starlight! Warn them, warn the Starmen!"

Denn laughed. "No, Robert. It's too late for that."

"It's not too late! You may not have destroyed the base—the *Iron Maiden* only destroyed the portion of the base that was on the surface! The rest of the base was under the ice! That's where all the people were! There's still a chance!"

Denn's lips tightened and his forehead creased. "I'll have to radio the *Maiden* and tell them to go back and finish the job."

"No! I order you!" cried Nolan, standing up. "I'm in charge here! I order you to stop them!"

Denn laughed again. "Robert Nolan," he said indulgently. "You're not in charge here. You haven't been in charge for a year. I've been in charge for a long time. Look around you. How many people do you see? We allowed everyone to go home, don't you remember? Who is left aboard? *Only the crew I hired, only the people I picked! I'm in charge, Robert!*"

Robert's face blanched and he rocked on his feet. Beowulf

Denn slowly rose, put a large hand on Robert's chest, and pushed him gently but irresistibly down into his chair.

"No," said Robert quietly, as if into the air. "No. It's my plant." He leaped to his feet. Energy surged into him and he screamed. "Get out of my way! I'll give the orders myself!"

Denn pushed him down into the chair again, none too gently this time. Robert jumped up yet again, and Denn struck him down with an open hand. Robert fell over the chair and sprawled on the ground, stunned and still unbelieving. Sudden fury filled him. He crawled forward out of Denn's immediate reach, and scrambled to his feet.

He saw a display case in front of him. He grabbed a dark and pocked iron meteorite the size of a lemon, whirled around, and threw it with all his might at his adversary. The heavy stone struck the large, grinning man on his forehead with enormous force. Denn expelled a huge blast of air, clutched upward, and fell back to the floor unconscious.

Robert fled from the room. Outside, he composed himself and headed for the shuttleport. He was breathing hard. NME looked like a strange place to him now. Nolan tried to look normal as he walked down the hallway, but he couldn't keep his eyes from flashing as he took in sights that were once so familiar but now seemed stained and ugly. Everyone he passed was an enemy, a traitor, put in place by the most reprehensible traitor of all.

Denn! He had trusted Denn for years. His lips tightened. Denn had saved his life, but only to use him to gain control over the plant. For that he had needed Nolan alive, but now Denn was completely in charge of NME and didn't need Nolan anymore.

Nolan quickened his pace. If Denn returned to consciousness before he could get off the wheel, Nolan knew he wouldn't get off it at all—at least, not alive.

Walking easily he reached the shuttleport in less than five minutes. The left side of his face throbbed where Denn had struck him.

"I'm going down to join the Christmas festivities," he told the attendant conversationally. The man wore an uneasy look, as if

he didn't want to let Nolan go, but didn't know whether he should try to stop him.

"Where is Mr. Denn, sir?" he asked. "Wouldn't he like to go with you?"

"Wulf is in my office. There is a little more work to do before he can come down, but I don't want to ignore the people of NME too long. There's a group down on the surface waiting for us. I'm sure he'll be along soon."

Those words convinced the man that something was wrong. He knew Beowulf Denn was not going to any party. The man's eyes caught the red place where Denn had struck Nolan.

"I think you'd better wait for Mr. Denn here, sir," he said deferentially, but making it clear that he was not going to let Nolan onto his ship.

Without warning, Nolan suddenly struck out with both fists. He landed blow after blow, taking the man completely by surprise. With the fierce energy that had catapulted him to prominence and excellence, Nolan now fought for his life. He felt no fear, only a kind of exultation. The man dropped. Nolan ran for his ship.

Once inside, he initiated the craft's emergency start procedure. He could see several people running onto the deck to see about the fallen crewman, but Nolan blew open the launching tube and shot his two-man shuttle out of the station. Launched at top speed, his head flew back into the cushion.

"I'll go to Richard," he said. "Nowhere else to go, no better place to go." In seconds, the shuttlecraft was miles from the great silver wheel that had been his home and headquarters for two decades.

Chapter 16: The Lost City

CATHY TORREZ, the *Silverfire's* cook, carried in a platter with a steaming, aromatic ham on it. The wooden faces of the diners showed that, in spite of its being Christmas Eve, this was no

festive occasion. They were simply going through the motions of celebrating while their minds were occupied with concern for the Starmen thirteen miles below them.

Suddenly, the entire base, dug out of the ice of Europa, rocked as if in a major earthquake. Cathy's feet shot out from under her and the platter went flying. Steaming sauce made from molasses and brown sugar spattered the room.

The fully-laden and beautifully-decorated table collapsed on one side, and the people seated around it felt a hollowness in their gut, as if the floor had dropped. The lights went out, and then flickered back on weakly.

Cries of dismay filled the room. A few people pulled the fallen table off others.

"Damage control!" ordered the Captain. "Noah! Get your crew and check the vital systems!" The Eskimo and three others ran from the trembling room.

"Matthew!" continued the Captain, now addressing the ship's physician, "Check the crew for injuries!"

"Yes sir," answered the doctor from the corner, where he was covered with an overturned bowl of peas.

"What was it? What happened?" asked Katie. "An earthquake?"

"I don't know what it was," answered Adam, "but it wasn't an earthquake! That's not how they happen on Europa!"

A few moments later Noah Kitsualuk entered the room, his face ashen. "Captain," he began, and gestured that he wanted to talk to Dufaure privately. The two men moved into a corner.

"We've been attacked," whispered the arcologist.

"What?" asked Dufaure quietly, his face showing utter disbelief. "Attacked?"

"The igloo has been leveled, down to its foundations! The *Silverfire* has been destroyed! All the equipment up top is gone!"

The look of amazement stayed on the Captain's face, but his thought processes raced. "Attacked?" he repeated. "It sounds like the work of a concussive bomb! But who would attack us?"

~

Robert Nolan knocked urgently on the door of the home of Richard Starlight, his one-time friend. Richard was pleasantly surprised to see Robert on the threshold and invited him in warmly. Robert came in with a look like a hunted animal. Quickly he took in the Christmas tree in the living room, sparkling with self-lit crystalline decorations and hung with strands of blue and silver bulbs.

“Jan?” called Richard. “Jan, look who’s here!” To Robert he added, “Would you like some cider?”

“Richard!” blurted Robert. “I have to talk to you! Something terrible’s happened!” Richard noted the alarm in Robert’s demeanor.

“Okay,” he said calmly, trying to quiet the frantic man. As Jan entered the room, Richard turned to her and shook his head, then led Robert into his study.

The two men sat in dark green vinyl wing chairs, opposite one another with a glass coffee table between them. Robert quickly related to Richard the events that had taken place between him and Beowulf Denn.

“You see, Richard!” blurted the wiry man, “Denn *had* to have been the spy in our system! Wulf! I can’t believe it! And Richard,” Robert went on as if hearing the horrible facts anew, “he’s killed the Starmen! Those three courageous young men!”

At that moment Jan knocked discreetly on the door.

“Richard, honey!” she said apologetically, opening the door a few inches. “I’m sorry to disturb you. There’s a top priority emergency message coming in from Europa. It’s Yancy Dufaure on a Real Time Transmission! Communications is transferring it directly to your RTT unit here.”

“Thank you, Jan,” said Richard.

Richard turned on the RTT communicator that had recently been installed in his study and swiveled the screen so that both he and Robert could see it. The drawn face of Yancy Dufaure appeared.

“Richard,” he began. “We’ve been attacked! The base has been attacked and the *Silverfire* has been destroyed! We have no casualties, but we need a rescue ship at once!”

Richard’s expression showed his relief that there were no casualties. “I just had the news of the attack from Robert Nolan. He’s with me now. It was a renegade ship from NME that hit you!” He informed the Captain of Denn’s treachery, the attack by the NME ship *Iron Maiden*, the deployment of the attack robots, and Robert’s escape from Denn and flight to the Starlight home.

“I see, sir,” said Dufaure. “And where is the *Iron Maiden* now?”

“I don’t know. Denn didn’t reveal that information to Robert, but you should be prepared to defend yourselves. Denn knows now that the *Iron Maiden’s* attack was unsuccessful. I will order as many ships from Ganymede as we can raise to aid you in your defense. They should arrive in a few hours.”

“Wonderful! Thank you, Richard!”

“What of the Starmen?”

Dufaure gave a succinct but complete report, finishing with the words, “Mr. Zeavin has been trying to reach them for several hours now, sir, but we’ve had no response. I’m afraid it doesn’t look very hopeful.”

Richard’s face collapsed, and he seemed to age several years with the news.

“Do you have any robotic torpedoes, anything you can use to neutralize the attack robots?”

“We are a research crew, sir. We hadn’t anticipated any kind of attack. We have nothing but a few lasers and concussive grenades for excavation, and nothing we can send into the ocean to fight robots like those.”

“I didn’t think so. I’m afraid that for the moment, the Starmen are beyond our help. I’ll see what resources there may be on Ganymede.”

“Thank you, sir. I understand.”

The two men signed off. Richard immediately contacted the authorities on duty at Starlight Enterprise, and ordered fighter

ships from Ganymede to rescue the European team. When his orders had been relayed with a command to keep him informed, Richard signed off and turned back to Robert.

Robert looked Richard squarely in the eye. "I'm so sorry, my friend," he choked. "I've been foolish, and it has caused all this harm. My NME has now become a true enemy."

Richard's eyes filled with tears and spilled over. "I know, Robert. But you're still my friend, and I'm glad you've come back."

At that moment, another urgent message came in from SE headquarters.

"Mr. Starlight, sir!" said the operator. "The Nolan Mining Enterprise satellite has just left orbit! It's pulling away from the Moon! The whole thing, sir!"

Robert covered his face with his hands.

~

Several dozen octopi surrounded the fallen mantaship where it lay dark and unmoving at the bottom of the hollow sphere inside the undersea European mountain. A few of them peered through the windows. Their peculiar eyes goggled, and their innate luminescence flooded the interior of the *Underbird's* cabin with ghostly radiance. The bodies of the Starmen were slumped in their netting.

The strange creatures exchanged subtle chirping sounds. Several of them swam upward to the tunnel from which they had emerged shortly before.

A short time later, three large groupings of the octopi appeared at the mouth of the tunnel, each carrying a large instrument. The instruments were shaped like thick disks, with adjustable attachments at one end and a large propeller-like object at the other. The octopi brought the instruments to the fallen mantaship and affixed them to the lower part of its hull. When they were in place, the propellers were activated.

Under the power of the propellers the mantaship was raised

and then directed toward the large tunnel opening. Crowds of the octopi accompanied the ship, guiding it into the tunnel and down the passage.

For several miles the octopi carried the ship down the smooth tunnel. After one mile, openings began to lead off the main passage. Unnumbered side passages went into darkness, each marked with one or more alien symbols in the writing the Starmen had come to recognize.

After the mantaship had been carried for about an hour, a soft glow appeared in the tunnel. Something up ahead was manufacturing light. Inexorably, the mantaship was drawn forward into the illumination.

Suddenly the walls of the tunnel spread out, and a second hollow sphere opened up. This one was at least five miles in diameter and was filled with artificial structures. Water reached only to slightly above the halfway mark. The upper half was filled with an atmosphere.

In the top half there were buildings connected with glass tubes and metal strands resembling an enormous net. In the submersed section there were countless interconnected structures that looked like sponges. The light emanated from the walls of the hollow itself, as well as from several strategically placed globes that hovered among the buildings in the airy part of what was apparently a symbiotic community.

The octopi guided the mantaship to the surface of the water, and then maneuvered it to a dock at the side of a large building. There they secured it and waited for the Starmen to return to consciousness.

Chapter 17: The Whispering Box Mystery

THE BEAUTIFUL SILVER WHEEL that was Nolan Mining Enterprise veered slowly out of its orbit around the Moon. Other than heading away from the sun, Beowulf Denn had no destination in mind. His fury at being bested by Robert Nolan smoldered

within him and he was determined that Nolan would pay.

Since Nolan had escaped, Denn expected that an alarm would be raised soon, perhaps in even a few minutes. He knew that if he fled NME in a fast ship he might be able to elude the pursuers he expected, but even so he could not leave without making sure that Nolan would rue his hasty act of violence. Denn's forehead was hugely swollen and throbbed painfully.

Once the erstwhile lunar satellite had escaped from the pull of the Moon's gravity, Denn increased its velocity to achieve top speed. He knew it would be an easy matter for ships from Starlight Enterprise to overtake the spinning wheel, but he would do his best to make it a vain pursuit.

In a crisp voice, ignoring his excruciating headache, he issued his orders and his crew responded quickly. Most of the steering jets on the perimeter of the great wheel were pushed to the limit, but the thrust of a few was reduced and some were turned in oblique directions. The spin on the wheel became more and more rapid, and the wheel itself began to wobble on its axis.

Once the jets were set, Denn gave the order to abandon the base. He packed three ships with his comrades, and they launched from the shuttleport located at the center of the wheel. Already the impressive construction was trembling and vibrating, but the three ships managed to launch and then right their course. Pushing them to top acceleration, Denn set a course for the Asteroid Belt.

NME was left abandoned, spinning faster and faster and wobbling more and more out of phase. Internal stresses would tear the plant apart in a short time. With an intense and perverse hope, he hoped that by the time the pursuing ships reached the plant its convulsions would be too uncontrolled to arrest.

Before turning control of the ship over to another, Denn radioed the captain of the *Iron Maiden* to inform him that the SE base on Europa had probably survived the previous attack. The *Iron Maiden* was back at its original landing site, preparing to send a probe into the waters of Europa through the shaft its crew had already drilled. Denn's message was terse. He ordered its

captain to return to the site of SE's ice base and finish the job.

After he signed off, he groaned with the pain of his headache. He staggered to the sick bay, sought some medication, and then collapsed onto a bed.

~

Captain Yancy Dufaure called the crewmembers of the *Silverfire* to a council of war. Wasting no time he organized the defense of the SE ice base. He put Noah Kitsualuk and his assistants in charge of cutting four compartments on the surface in the proximity of the base. A thin slab of ice would cover each compartment. The crew of the *Silverfire* would divide into three groups of five and one of four, and were to arm themselves with laser weapons and hide in the compartments.

Dufaure was hoping that the *Iron Maiden* would not simply concuss the base again but would try to enter it. The defenders could then rush the enemy ship and trap the attackers in the SE base until the ships from Ganymede arrived. If, however, the enemy ship did concuss the base, the crew would survive and could still await rescue from the Ganymede ships.

Dufaure ordered that all valuable equipment and records be concealed behind false walls, and that all weapons and a sufficient number of communicators be taken to the top. He had no idea how much time he had before the *Iron Maiden* returned. If Denn had contacted the renegade ship at about the same time Richard Starlight had contacted him, an attack was imminent. If Robert Nolan's attack on Denn had incapacitated him, the attack could be delayed or perhaps not occur at all. Regardless, the ships from Ganymede were due in about three hours. The crew of the *Silverfire* only had to hold out that long.

Captain Dufaure finished his council with these words: "These are our goals in order of importance. First, survive; second, protect our records; third, capture the enemy! Now move!"

The crewmembers completed their preparations for defense in just under an hour. The *Iron Maiden* zoomed over the horizon

twenty-eight minutes later. The dark gray ship hovered over the site of the remains of the great igloo and without preamble fired a laser canon straight down through the base. The atmosphere escaped with a blast of air that turned to crystal dust instantly upon reaching the surface, then settled onto the field of ice.

The *Iron Maiden* landed and several figures debarked. They hastened over to the opening the laser had cut and dropped several small balls into it. Dufaure, watching from a secure place hidden in the ice, recognized the balls as small concussive grenades, probably timed to detonate after they had fallen fifty feet or so. They were obviously intended to disable anyone who may have had on a space suit when the atmosphere was whisked out of the base.

After the grenades had detonated, more than a dozen additional figures swarmed out of the ship. One of them blew open the airlock with another grenade, and then they all rushed into the opening.

They had been gone only a few seconds when Dufaure gave his order. Three compartments that held the crew of the *Silverfire* burst open and nine people rushed the ship. The other five surrounded what had been the outer door of the airlock where they could easily prevent anyone from coming out of the base if they were not picked off by anyone inside the ship. The success of Dufaure's attack on the *Iron Maiden* was critical to the success of the plan. The five people in the last compartment were to remain hidden as a backup squad that could enter the fray if they were needed.

Yancy Dufaure led the charge to the *Iron Maiden* personally, with Noah Kitsualuk not far behind. In seconds, Noah had placed a concussive grenade of his own against the door of the airlock. He had brought such grenades to aid in excavating the ice, but found this new purpose much to his liking. The grenade blew the door open.

Dufaure rushed into the opening and was greeted by two space-suited men wielding laser pistols. Dufaure expected the barrage and ran in dodging and weaving, but one blast seared

into his suit along the side high up beneath his left arm. It opened up a three-inch gash in the material and severed the connection from the air supply. Almost instantaneously, all the air streamed out of his suit. Kitsualuk heaved a small concussive grenade into the inner end of the airlock and knocked the inhabitants of the ship unconscious.

Dufaure clutched his side and staggered out of the ship. The automatic repair function in the suit could not seal a tear as long as three inches, and air was escaping from his tank in an uncontrolled flurry of snowy mist. Frantically, the Captain opened his utility kit and pulled out an emergency patch. With trembling fingers he affixed it to the rip in his suit and pressed his right hand over it.

Air. He needed air, but there was only vacuum. He knew that if he held his breath, his body's internal pressure would cause it to burst in its weakest places. He ran to the crewmembers who were still concealed, slowly exhaling as he ran. If he could only relieve the pressure by exhaling, he would be safe for a short time—a very short time. Air. He was desperate for air.

His companions saw him coming. A few feet before reaching them, he collapsed. His hand flew from where he had been holding the patch to his suit and his last remaining air burst from his lips. There was nothing to inhale, nothing at all. He couldn't even move his diaphragm. His muscles tried to work against the strength of the entire vacuum of space.

He could feel the darkness coming, but he was at peace. He knew he had done his best.

~

Mark wondered what the light was. It came through the window of the mantaship like a winter dawn, pale and weak but reaching everywhere.

"Merry Christmas," said Joe. The tall, blond Starman was seated comfortably on one of the chairs behind the bridge. Mark looked around quickly and saw that he was in one of the bunks.

"What's going on? What happened?" he asked, running his

hands through his hair and rubbing his eyes.

“I woke up a while back. We were all on the floor, where we fell after the ship got socked by those stun-gun-toting octopi. I tucked you and Zip into your bunks and then crawled into mine. I noticed we were in a dock of some sort and figured that the octopi or somebody had brought us there.

“There was nothing we could do about it then, and we hadn’t slept or eaten in a long time. Being a man of practical nature, I figured we could wait until morning to tackle the situation. So, Merry Christmas!”

“Christmas?”

“It’s December 25, Mark.”

“Where’s Zip?”

“In the back, taking a shower. You can be next. When you get out, I’ll have Christmas breakfast ready for us all.” He turned and walked over to the cooking area and began to hum “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.”

“Joe,” began Mark, then smiled and shook his head. “You frustrate me sometimes with that blasted, over-active sense of humor of yours, but I wouldn’t have any other partners but you—and Zip. Merry Christmas, Joe!”

Zip came down the center aisle with a robe on and toweling his red hair.

“Merry Christmas, Mark!” he said. “We saved you some hot water. It was a real discipline, let me tell you. As I’ve always said, there’s nothing like a hot shower at the bottom of the European sea.”

“Sure, I’ve heard you say that many times!” Mark stumbled down the aisle. Zip and Joe began preparing breakfast.

Hot chocolate, scrambled eggs, sweet rolls, and sliced honeydew made up their breakfast. When the three Starmen had all sat down, Zip was ebullient.

“This is it!” he said to Mark as he pushed a large piece of roll covered with frosting into this mouth.

“What?” asked Mark.

Zip was chewing, so Joe answered for him. “The city of the

Benefactors! That has to be it! Zip was raving about it before you woke up! Look out the window!”

With the sudden realization that he was alive and had the opportunity for a hot shower and Christmas breakfast, Mark had forgotten about the strange light. Now he put down his mug of hot chocolate and moved to the window. What he saw struck him speechless.

What they had seen on Nyx was a temporary base, but this—this was a large, permanent city! Why, he thought, several thousand people must live here! The architecture was recognizably the product of the same race, but here no effort had been spared. The lines of the buildings were superbly arranged. The layout was functional but supremely artistic.

Minarets and cylinders, towers and gantries, streets and bridges, and multi-level buildings stretched and interconnected in stunning beauty. In the light, they were the color of ivory, with hints of deep forest green and occasional sea blue in the trimming or the roofs. Yellow and silver metalwork linked all in a visual elation.

“Where are the Benefactors?” asked Mark.

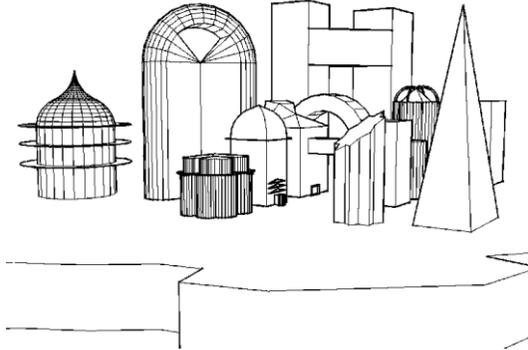
“I don’t know,” said Zip, smiling widely. “We haven’t gone outside yet. We’ll finish breakfast and then explore!”

Hurriedly, Zip, Mark, and Joe polished off everything that was on their plates, washed the dishes, donned their spacesuits, then prepared to leave the *Underbird* and explore the city. The Starmen entered the airlock; when they were ready, Zip opened the outer door. Trembling inside with eagerness, the three men from Earth stepped out onto the wing of the mantaship and looked around them.

The illumination gave no impression of time of day. It shone from the substance from which the massive hollow had been cut by some unimaginable process. Coming from all directions, it cast no shadows.

“What’re the specs out here, Mark?” asked Zip without turning to face his partner. He and Joe swung in a slow circle, taking in everything they could see.

“Temperature is about 42°,” said Mark, checking the instruments on his compad. His face took on a somber look. “Atmosphere is about the same as we ran into on Nyx. Very stale. No one’s been breathing this air for a long time. The city is empty, Zip.”



*Minarets and cylinders
stretched and interconnected in stunning beauty.*

“Yeah—I could kind of feel that as soon as we opened the door. Another place the Benefactors built and abandoned.” The disappointment in his voice came across as a great heaviness.

“Let’s look around,” suggested Joe. He hesitated a moment to see if Zip would agree. Zip continued to scrutinize the surroundings, then turned to Joe and nodded dully. Joe stepped out across the mantaship’s great wing, leaped over a narrow gap, and landed with both feet onto the wharf. Mark and Zip followed.

“Think the *Underbird*’ll be safe?” asked Mark. “If this city is empty, then it must have been those octopi that brought us here, but they’re also the ones who attacked us.”

Zip looked doubtful for a moment.

“I’ll stay if you like, Zip,” offered Mark.

“Might be a good idea. Thanks, Mark. We’ll run our video cameras so you can keep in touch with us.”

The big Starman reentered the mantaship and sat in front of the screen on which he could see and hear what his partners were seeing and hearing. Zip and Joe walked into the city.

For over an hour they roamed through the streets. No door was locked. They entered numerous structures, but there were no artifacts. The furniture was functional but spare, and appeared to be cut from stone. There was some metal in the trimwork and connective structures, but nothing of cloth. The roofs seemed made of tile colored with the compelling blues and greens the Starmen had seen in the Benefactors' work before.

The explorers wandered through arches and along passageways, ascending and descending by means of geometrically appealing staircases. Along the streets, there were large vases, but no plants in them. There was not even any soil. There were fountains, but no water flowed in them.

"This was a residential city," concluded Zip grimly. "This wasn't a research center or a battle station. This was a place where people lived and worked. Families lived here."

"I think so too, Zip," said Joe. "People lived here for a long time. They worked the mines, but it wasn't a temporary outpost. It was a real city. These are homes, don't you think?"

Zip inhaled and exhaled deeply. "Yeah," he said.

Not wanting to leave Mark alone too long, he and Joe returned to the *Underbird*. They entered the ship and sealed the airlock.

"Anybody want tea?" asked Joe, drawing some water into a pot. No one else did. He made a cup of Darjeeling tea, and then sat down with the other two Starmen at the dining table.

"I was right," said Zip after a long silence. "This is the Benefactors' major habitation in our Solar System. But it's a ghost town now. I can't imagine that they would have settled anywhere else among our planets with the sense of permanence that this place shows. But they left a long time ago and never planned on coming back."

At that moment, there was a quiet, scraping noise on the hull of the ship. All three Starmen froze.

"Shall I turn on the electric field?" asked Joe.

“No!” cried Zip. “We’ve been rescued by somebody. Let’s wait to see what they’re doing.”

Suddenly an electronic voice filled the quarters. It spoke in a soft, sibilant language none of them recognized—a melodic tongue that sounded almost like ancient Greek, yet with a high frequency of S’s.

“What’s that?” said Joe.

“It must be the language of the octopi,” exulted Zip. “They’ve put some sort of communicator against the hull! They’re trying to talk to us!” He called out in a loud voice, “Hello! Hello!” The electronic voice stopped.

“What can we do?” queried Joe. “Go outside?”

Suddenly Mark spoke. “N’gatreesha bosgonta varlsept’o d’essningsta?”

The electronic voice replied. “Bosgonta d’esscongta varlsepti. K’venstriklan muwensta konya?”

Zip was overcome with emotion and tears filled his eyes. “Brilliant, Mark,” he whispered.

“Titanian?” asked Joe quietly.

“The Benefactors brought the Titanians to our Solar System,” explained Zip, “and the Benefactors obviously lived in contact with the octopi. They have to speak Titanian. It’s the only way we can communicate with them.”

“But I know so little,” protested Mark.

“It’s all we’ve got,” said Zip. “Talk. What did you just say?”

“I asked them if they spoke Titanian, and they answered that they did. Then they asked who we are.”

“Well, answer them.”

Mark did his best. Concentration wrung his facial expressions as he communicated. Every once in a while he gave his fellows the gist of the conversation.

“I told them we are from the third planet of this Solar System. I said we are looking for the people who built this city. I told them that we are their allies, or want to be. I told them we have been looking for them throughout the Solar System to help us defend our planet against the Xenobots. They were pleased to

hear that, and said that they saved us after mistakenly attacking our ship, because they thought we were of the race who built this city. They saw us through the windows of the *Underbird* after we were unconscious.”

“Well, that proves something else we already knew. The Benefactors look like us,” said Joe.

Mark threw up his hands, then added, “It’s so frustrating! I can’t understand much of anything they say! They are using words I don’t know! I can make them understand me, but I can’t understand the responses. We need Kristina Bethany!”

Zip’s face showed sudden urgency. “Ask them where everyone is!” he urged.

Mark’s voice became gentle. “I already asked them that. I’m sorry, Zip—there’s been no one in this city for a very long time. ‘Many lifetimes of our people,’ they said.”

“‘Many lifetimes,’” repeated Zip in a stunned voice. “The city has been empty for many lifetimes.” The agony in his voice was heartrending for his friends to hear.

“The octopi are the true indigenous species of Europa,” continued Mark. “And the giant fish were brought here by the Benefactors from some other planet. The fish are the guardians of the city, trained to attack all non-native invaders. They have been domesticated, but are not fully sentient beings. This city was built by the Benefactors so that they could live in symbiotic relationship with the octopi—the Europeans.”

“What happened to the Benefactors? Where did they go?”

“The Europeans don’t know. They left frantically as a body during a big emergency, took everything with them, and never came back.”

“Man,” murmured Joe sadly, shaking his head.

“Ask them where they came from!” urged Zip. There was a brief exchange, during which Mark asked several short questions as if for clarification. Zip’s level of excitement rose, and he leaned forward.

At length Mark turned to Zip with a look of frustration. “I didn’t learn anything we didn’t already know, Zip. The Europeans

live at the bottom of a dark ocean. They've never seen stars and don't know what a planet or a sun is. They only know what the Benefactors taught them. They just said that the race that lived here told them that they came from a fertile, verdant planet with three moons. I did learn that the Benefactors called their home 'Ahmanya'."

Zip's face fell. "Ahmanya," he whispered, as if rolling the word on his tongue. He felt an acute, painful longing for something beyond the horizon, almost like a vision of intense splendor. "A beautiful word." He shook his head slightly to clear it, then looked up.

"What were the Benefactors mining?"

There were another few minutes of exchange between Mark and the electronic voice.

"I don't know, Zip. They keep using the same word to describe what is out there, but I don't know what it is. Something technical, I suppose. I asked them to describe it in simple terms, but they can't."

"Ask them if they can take us to the mine. Maybe we can find out for ourselves."

There was a further exchange.

"Yes, they can do that. We have to launch the *Underbird*, and follow the Europeans to the mine. Normal means of access is to go back outside and approach the mine—actually there are several mines—from the bottom of the sea. Apparently they are able to communicate with the guardian fish and we have been given a bill of approval. The fish will not attack us any more. The Europeans will guide us back through the way we came in and then lead us to the mine."

"Let's go," said Zip.

Contact with the Europeans was broken and Joe started the mantaship's engines. "None the worse for wear," he observed with relief.

Slowly, Joe lowered the ship into the water and turned it in place. The Starmen could see a crowd of the Europeans in front of the mantaship. Some were carrying various pieces of equipment,

which he assumed formed the communicator. They began to swim toward the bottom of the huge hollow sphere, leading the *Underbird* to a cavernous aperture.

“Presumably we go in there and that will eventually take us back to the ganglion where we were disabled,” said Mark.

The *Underbird*, being led by a crowd of the Europeans, had gone a few miles down the passage when there was a sudden flurry in the gathering of the octopi. They swarmed in a group in front of the mantaship, forcing Joe to stop. The scraping sound indicated that the communicator was being pressed to the hull once again. A stream of words burst into the cabin. Mark’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Big fish attacked by metal tubes,” he translated. “Tubes move very fast. Twenty come at one time. Fish destroy nine of them, eleven enter passage. Tubes have strong weapon, make big shocks.”

“Sounds like robotic attackers!” exclaimed Zip.

“How could robotic attackers be here?” burst Joe. “Who would have sent them?”

“Xenobots!” yelled Zip. “Who knows? But they can only have one target—that’s us! We’re sitting ducks! Those things never give up unless they’re destroyed, and we can’t maneuver in here!”

Chapter 18: The Flaming Mountain

A FLEET of a dozen ships sped after the renegade space station that had been Nolan Mining Enterprise. There were six battle cruisers from Space Command, four from Starlight Enterprise, and two from NME that had been based on the Moon. Though he deeply appreciated the loyalty of the crews that manned his ships, Robert Nolan had chosen to stay with Richard Starlight aboard Richard’s personal ship, the *Lux Mundi*. The two of them flew alone.

“We should be within visual range of the station in less than

ten minutes,” said Richard. Robert was leaning forward in his seat with both hands spread on the control deck. He wore an odd smile. It could have expressed eagerness, determination, or even disciplined anxiety. His muscles were taut, but not rigid. A vast spread of stars surrounded the phalanx of ships.

“There it is!” cried Robert, pointing. A dull silver point resolved itself incrementally from a blur into a recognizable wheel shape. With a sudden sharp intake of breath he noted that the former lunar satellite was whirling and wobbling out of control. “What’s happening?” he cried out. “Denn has sabotaged it! He’s trying to destroy it!”

Richard grabbed his intership communicator. “The station has been abandoned!” he snapped. “Scan local space for any runaway ships. They can’t be far! We’ll stay with the station!”

“I confirm that order!” was the immediate response from the captain of the ships from Space Command.

Richard decelerated the *Lux Mundi* while the other ships shot onward. Without asking his friend, he knew that Robert would want to be with the spinning space station to its inevitable end. He swung his five-seater in a wide arc around the doomed space station that had been Robert’s life’s work, spiraling in closer and closer until he had matched the runaway station’s speed and direction.

For a long time the two men did not exchange any words and simply watched the tumbling silver wheel. After a few moments, pieces began to fly off the structure. First to go was the high tower that sprang from the center of the great wheel, at whose top Nolan’s private observatory had been built. It twisted in the frantic momentum and then wrenched free of the wheel near its root.

Shortly afterward, small appendages on the rim of the wheel twisted in the fierce momentum. Then the spokes began to shed pieces.

“It was designed just to be in a slow orbit around the Moon,” said Robert in a careful voice. “It could never withstand the stresses it’s undergoing now.”

Richard didn't say anything for several minutes. Then in a husky voice he said, "I'm sorry for you, my friend. This must be agonizing."

"I brought it on myself," responded Robert. "Oh no, I realize it's not all my fault," he added quickly as he saw Richard opening his mouth to protest. "Beowulf Denn did this, and he is a very evil man. But I chose him and made him my second-in-command. I let him inveigle himself into my counsel, and I listened willingly when he turned me away from what is right and true. I was weak and didn't resist until it was almost too late." The frail man shuddered. "You don't know how close it came to being too late altogether."

With a final wrench, what had been the headquarters of Nolan Mining Enterprise came apart at a weak point on the outer circle. A tear in the fabric of the station grew until the rim separated. The imbalance that resulted threw the spiraling wheel into its final death throes. The station separated on the side opposite the first fracture and the two parts of the silver wheel spun away, scattering wreckage across an ever-widening field in space.

For a long time, neither Robert nor Richard said anything. They continued to watch the dispersion of the ruins of the facility where Robert had spent the last twenty years of his life. Richard was quietly but earnestly concerned about the mental state of his unstable friend. Robert made no comment and showed no obvious emotion. Finally he sighed deeply.

"Well! That's that. It looks like the end for me," said Robert with deceptive mildness. Richard winced at the words. "But I know that it's not. NME was not the plant. It was the idea and the people.

"Oh, it's a major loss and a grievous disappointment. But I still have many loyal employees. The people and the idea are still there. This is really a chance for a new beginning. I think I kind of expected it somehow. Things will be different this time."

The radio burst into sound with a hail to the *Lux Mundi*. Almost glad for the distraction, Richard picked it up. "Starlight

here,” he said.

“John Rwakatare here,” said the voice. “We’ve got three ships in custody. All the renegades. I laid hands on Beowulf Denn myself.” Richard and Robert could almost feel the smile on Rock’s face come over the communicator. “It was not difficult. He was in the sick bay with a black and blue lump on his forehead the size of a lemon.”

Robert sighed. “It’s over,” he said. “And it’s just beginning.” He looked out into the blackness of space; a few of the larger pieces of what had been Nolan Mining Enterprises could still be seen, spinning and sparkling. “Guess we’d better alert Space Command to track down as much of that debris as they can find, and destroy it. It’d be dangerous if it’s just...” He sighed again. “...just left out there.”

~

Katie Essington was weeping profusely. “Don’t die, Yancy, don’t die!” she sobbed. The Captain had crumpled a few feet away from the compartment where the last five members of the *Silverfire* crew had been keeping themselves in reserve. She had flung the covering off and run to the collapsed man, who was already turning purple with lack of air and the amazing cold of the surface of Europa. Blood was running from his ears, nose, and eyes.

Unable to wipe her eyes through her space suit, Katie kept shaking her head to clear her vision. Surrounded by those who had been with her, she unhooked her own air tank and clipped its tube to the connector on Dufaure’s suit. Powerfully drawn by the vacuum inside the suit, air whooshed from Katie’s tank to Dufaure’s.

“Don’t die, Yancy,” she wept again. His body remained limp.

“Take him into the ship,” suggested one of the others. Together they picked up the man’s near-lifeless form and carried him to the *Iron Maiden* and into its sick bay. Matthew Herchenroeder, the *Silverfire*’s physician, was at Captain Dufaure’s side immediately.

“He’s still alive,” he said after a brief examination. “His heart is strong and it’s beating regularly.” He clapped an oxygen mask over the unconscious man’s face and covered him with several thick blankets to restore his body temperature.

“It’s midnight,” someone said. “Christmas is here.”

Six minutes later three ships from Ganymede landed. Outnumbered and helpless, the crew of the *Iron Maiden* was taken into custody without resistance.

“Any other casualties?” asked the commander of the SE ships from Jupiter’s largest moon.

“Only the Starmen,” answered Adam. “We haven’t heard from them for more than twelve hours.”

“Who’s in charge since the Captain is down?”

“I am,” responded Sarah Pletcher, the navigator and second-in-command, and introduced herself.

“What do you want to do now, Miss Pletcher?”

“Leave us a ship. We’ll wait. We’ll repair our station and we’ll wait for the Starmen.”

“Very well,” said the commander. “I’ll leave you the *Michael Adams*. We’ll take the prisoners back to Ganymede and then ship them home for trial on the next freighter to make the journey.”

“Thank you, commander.”

“Good luck, Miss Pletcher.”

~

As best he could, Mark explained to the Europeans that they themselves were in no danger from the robotic attackers. The “tubes” would only track down the mantaship and it could not escape in the confines of the tunnel.

After a brief exchange, Mark turned frantically to Joe. “The Europeans say that they will take us to another exit so we can avoid the robots. But we can only go as fast as the octopi can swim!”

“Then let’s get moving right away!” commanded Zip. “Go, go!”

Mark gave the word, and almost instantly the octopi took off at top speed. Joe stayed only a few yards behind them, leaning forward onto the controls of the *Underbird*.

“We can’t communicate with the octopi at this speed,” said Mark.

“As long as we can follow them, that’s all I care about right now!” retorted Zip. His entire body was tense. “If we survive this attack, maybe we can return someday!”

In less than four minutes, the *Underbird* reached the ganglion where the octopi had attacked them the previous evening. Quickly, the swarm of Europeans shot directly toward an opening far down and to the left inside the hollow sphere. The robotic attackers would be coming from the middle right. The *Underbird* shot into the opposite tunnel and sped down the passage.

“I think I know who dropped these attackers on us,” bellowed Joe as he pressed the controls forward.

“Who?” shouted Mark and Zip together.

“Someone from Nolan Mining Enterprise! Think about it! Who else could it be? These things are tracking us with a locator beacon! The beacon could only have been loaded with the communication system NME so kindly provided just before we left!”

The lanky Starman gave his crewmates a moment to digest the information. Hearing no objection in spite of their stunned expressions, he continued. “We know there was a spy left in our operations somewhere. Even after we cleaned the pirates up, he hadn’t been located. With this debacle we not only know he’s part of the NME operation, but I think I know who it is!”

“Denn!” shouted Mark.

“Denn it is!” shouted Joe. “I just now figured out that the traitors we took with us to Nyx were all hand-picked by Beowulf Denn. We all knew that—we just didn’t put it together until now. We all trusted him. He was Nolan’s second-in-command, for crying out loud! We’ve *got* to get back to the base now and warn Richard!”

The Europeans swept into a side tunnel that led off to the upper right. Almost missing the turn, Joe quickly slowed the mantaship and hurled it into the new direction. Zip and Mark were propelled sideways into their protective nets, and then slammed backward as the *Underbird* accelerated again.

Behind them there was a dull concussion. A “whump” passed through the deep water and mildly rocked the speeding *Underbird*.

“One of the robots got blown up,” observed Joe. A second concussion followed seconds later. “Nine left,” he added.

“The Europeans are handy allies!” said Zip. “They must have shot at those robots as they passed through the intersection back there.”

“That means that nine robotic attackers are about five minutes behind us,” said Mark.

“Let’s hope that the turnoff back there slows them down!”

“How’d they find us anyway?” asked Joe, still following the speeding Europeans. “I thought no radio waves could pass through the mountain!”

“They must have caught us through the tunnel,” suggested Mark. “Even a weak signal would be enough to give them the direction.”

“I hope the octopi don’t get tired,” said Zip. “We’ve already gone six miles from the ganglion. The exit must be close ahead!”

Almost immediately, the tunnel widened to show various structures along both sides. For about half a mile, the tunnel was lined with edifices of some kind, many of them set with large transparent windows.

“Some sort of work center,” hazarded Mark. “And look, there’s a large bubble of atmosphere!”

“I’ll take your word for it, Mark,” said Joe. “Right now I’m following the octopi at breakneck speed. My guess is that the robots have just about reached the turnoff!”

The tunnel took an abrupt dip downward. Joe piloted the *Underbird* down the center of the passage.

“Plants!” he shouted. “And there’s the opening!”

A jagged, cavernous entrance appeared in front of the mantaship, with a few straggly strands of plant material growing just inside. The *Underbird* popped out of the cavern, streamed along a short ravine, and then up into free ocean. An expansive field of kelp-like plants was growing from the bottom of the sea, some with stalks that reached upward for up to several hundred yards.

“Straight up, Joe! This material won’t slow the robots!” shouted Zip.

With a quick pull backward, as if pulling the reins in on a galloping horse, Joe pointed the *Underbird* almost directly upward and then put on top speed again. “Thanks, little octopi!” he shouted. “I hope we meet again under more sedate circumstances!” The Europeans were quickly left behind as the mantaship headed for the surface.

“Here come the robots!” cried Mark moments later. “Nine of them!” On the viewscreens he and Zip watched the nine robotic attackers zoom out of the opening at the base of the mountain and orient themselves toward the mantaship.

Both Starmen activated the laser weapons that the SE technicians had installed on the ship between their dives. They fired as quickly as they could, hurling powerful bolts of searing light at their pursuers.

“Blast!” shouted Zip after he missed his fourth shot. “It’s hard to hit a fast-moving target when you’re moving fast yourself!”

“Got one!” yelled Mark a second later. One of the robotic attackers burst into a hideous yellow flame that was quickly damped by the pressure of the deep ocean. Zip redoubled his efforts.

“Coming to the surface in a moment,” said Joe after a time. “How many are still after us?”

“Six,” chorused Zip and Mark. “We’ve only knocked down three of them, and they’re getting closer!”

“Let’s hope they’re all contact bombs!” cried Joe. “We may be able to avoid them for awhile yet if they are!”

“They’re probably not laser attackers, or they’d be shooting after us already, but some at least are probably concussives!” suggested Zip. “They don’t have to get any closer than about fifty yards to do their damage!”

“Well, we’ve still got about half a mile between us, but they’re going to close that in a couple of minutes. Looks as if there’s some sort of bubble above us. I can see the ice ceiling, and there’s a cavity in it.”

“The closest robot is about seven hundred yards away and closing!” shouted Zip a few seconds later. “And the others are not far behind!” He punctuated his last comment with a fierce laser shot. Since both the *Underbird* and the robots were speeding in a straight line, he scored a direct hit! He tightened his lips with satisfaction.

Mark turned his attention back to the pursuers. On his third try he struck another robot.

“Four left!” he shouted. “And here they come!”

Joe sped the *Underbird* almost to the ice pocket, then turned the ship so that it skimmed just beneath the surface of the water. “Our shaft’s about five miles ahead!” he called out. Seconds later the first robot sped through the space the mantaship had been before Joe changed its course; it flew into the airy chamber before flopping back down into the water on the trail of the *Underbird*.

Zip’s hands were flying over his keyboard. “Follow my commands, Joe!” he shouted. “No time to explain, just do it!”

“Aye aye, Zip!” said Joe grimly. “I am yours to command!”

“Sixty degrees sharp left!” Joe flung himself to the right and faced left, then leaned strongly forward. His comrades were flung outward by the momentum, but maintained their concentration as best they could. Mark was still firing his laser, but had little hope of scoring any hits now that the path had become circuitous.

“Mark!” shouted Zip. “Get ready to launch a powerful sonar blast toward the ceiling! At my command! Be ready! Timing is critical!” Mark abandoned the lasers and prepared the sonar

blast.

“Joe, on my mark make a right turn of ninety degrees!”

Joe waited, ready and relaxed for Zip’s command. Behind them, the four robots had turned and were now coming after the *Underbird* in a broad line rather than in single file. Like the radii of a circle, their trajectories would converge on the point that was the location of the mantaship.

“*Now!*” shouted Zip. Joe swung the ship back to the right, tossing the two other Starmen violently to the left. “Next, on my mark, twenty-five degrees to the left!”

Ten seconds went by, and then several things happened almost at once. Zip screamed, “*Now, Joe!*” and immediately afterwards, “*Fire, Mark, fire!*” At that moment there was a powerful explosion that rocked the *Underbird* and rolled it over onto one side. Rather than make the twenty-five degree turn, Joe captured the violent spin of the mantaship and put it through a complete barrel roll. A second later, once the ship was upright once again, Mark fired the sonar blast, about eight seconds later than Zip had commanded.

After he had pressed the button, he gasped, “That was a concussive! One, at least, of those robots was a concussive! And if there are any more, we’ll find out any second now!”

Then two more things happened at once. An enormous chunk of ice fell into the water just behind the *Underbird*, and a second concussive robot erupted. The chunk of ice shielded the mantaship from the immediate effects of the concussion. Then other pieces of ice began to rain down around the Starmen, some quite large but most only a few feet long and many much smaller. The *Underbird* rocked with the passage of the icy chunks, and shuddered more than once as pieces struck the ship on their way down.

Almost immediately, the rain of ice began again, this time from below, as the ice returned to the surface to float on the top of the ocean. The mantaship was stationary now in the water, a few feet from the surface. After a minute or so, the rain of ice stabilized. The ship rocked a little in the aftermath of the

disturbance.

“Wha—, what did you do, Zip?” queried Joe.

“Blasted the ceiling down on the attackers,” replied Zip. “The sonar blast shattered the roof and brought it down on the robots.”

“Uh huh—and on us at the same time!”

“We’d have been out of it if the second concussive hadn’t detonated and knocked us off course.”

“Well, nice move, great thinking, Zip!” commended Mark. “I guess the last two robots are gone!”

“Looks like it. I timed the detonation and directed it so that the massive part of the ice fall would have been right where they were. We only got the edge of it.”

“Shall we head for the shaft now?” asked Joe.

“Definitely! Mark, contact the base, please. We’ve been out of touch for nearly twenty-four hours. They’ve probably given up hope on us.”

Joe took the pilot’s seat again while Mark opened the communication system.

“Mark! Are we glad to hear you!” It was the voice of Folding Jim, responding to Mark’s initial sending. “Hey, everybody!” the geologist shouted. “I’ve got ’em! The Starmen are alive!” Whoops of delight sounded in the background.

Quickly the two parties exchanged stories. The Starmen were grieved to hear of Yancy Dufaure’s incapacitation. “How is he doing now?” Zip asked.

“He’s awake and alert, but exhausted. His systems nearly shut down completely, and he’s only beginning to feel warmth now. Matt says he’ll make a complete recovery, though. Hearing that you’re safe will speed up his progress, I’m sure! Say, where are you now?”

“We’re not far from the bottom of the shaft—four miles or so on a heading of about 45° east of north. We ought to be there in a few minutes.”

“Uh, Zip?” broke in Joe. Zip turned toward the tall Starman in the pilot’s seat. “It’s going to be longer than a few minutes.

The entire left side of the ship is not responding. I think the concussive damaged it. The right side is sputtering. We can't move, except maybe in a small circle, and the remaining power is fading fast."

"We're also taking on water," said Mark, looking down at seepage on the floor.

Chapter 19: Sea Gold

"BREAK OUT the swim fins, Joe!" ordered Zip. "We're abandoning ship as soon as we can! Mark, tell the base we'll be swimming to the portal and we'll need to ride up the cables. Without the *Underbird's* controls, we won't be able to pull ourselves up. Gray will have to help us from inside. Then transfer all of our files to the base, quickly! I'll look for the locator beacon in the communication system, remove it, and place one of our own so that we can find the *Underbird* again if we need to."

The Starmen went into action instantly. Mark immediately gave his full attention to the communicator. Gray Bennick assured the Starmen that he would come down the shaft at once and have the cables ready for them. Then Mark began to send all the data they had gleaned from their exploration of the Benefactors' city and their encounter with the native denizens of Europa.

Joe ransacked the supply cabinets and brought the gear the Starmen would need to swim to the bottom of the shaft. The equipment included locomotors—small, self-contained propellers the Starmen could use for locomotion and steering. He also checked their air supply, compads, and laser pistols.

Zip tore off the equipment panel from the console near Mark's feet and scanned the circuits for the locator beacon. Water began to flow over his knees where he knelt down to peer into the opening.

"Ready when you are, Zip!" announced Joe.

“Everything’s been transferred to the top! I’m ready too!” said Mark.

Zip snorted impatiently. “Well, let’s start swimming then. I can’t find anything out of the ordinary in here. The locator beacon was probably very carefully hidden anyway. We can find the *Underbird* by using Denn’s beacon if we need to, but I just don’t like leaving anything aboard that was planted by enemies!”

The three of them secured their suits and tightened their helmets, then went through the airlock into the frigid waters of the European sea. The life-support systems on their suits kept them warm. Slowly they trod water a few feet above the doomed mantaship. Each Starman had a small sonarvision attachment on his suit that projected the image of the surroundings directly onto the glass of his helmet.

“A beautiful ship,” observed Joe.

“Yes,” agreed Mark.

The mantaship hung motionless in the infinite liquid darkness. Inside, the water level had risen to about a foot.

“It’ll be a while before it sinks,” said Zip. “Let’s get back to the base. It’s a little more than four miles from here,” said Zip, checking his instruments. “Shouldn’t take more than about forty-five minutes or so.”

The Starmen took hold of the locomotors that they had strapped onto their wrists and powered them up. The propellers whirled into action, churning the water and pulling the Starmen in the direction they pointed. Zip led the way by following the setting that showed on his compad. Mark and Joe came after.

After they had been swimming for about twenty minutes, Mark said, “Look down.”

Below them were dozens of pale lights, looking almost like a small city at nighttime, but moving slowly.

“The Europeans,” said Mark. “They’ve found us. I’m glad!”

“Getting near,” said Zip. Moments later the few closest in the field of moving lights resolved into distinct individuals. The silent, soft illumination that came from their eyestalks showed the round bodies of the swimming Europeans.

Before long, the Earthmen were surrounded by a group of about thirty octopi. The procession moved on through the water, now not so dark nor seeming so empty.

“What a beautiful ending to our dive,” said Joe. Like the other Starmen, he was deeply moved by the experience. The Europeans kept them company as they swam.

Before long, the Starmen arrived at their destination: the exit point of the shaft that led directly upward almost three miles to their friends. The cables that had been prepared for the *Underbird* hung down into the ocean.

“Gray?” said Zip. “Are you there?”

“In the airlock, Zip, and ready to bring you up at your command!” The young man’s voice was strong and pleasant.

Before taking hold of the cables, the Starmen trod water just below the surface. The Europeans circled them, the lights of their eyes providing a moving counterpoint to the immense blackness that surrounded them.

“Christmas lights,” said Mark with a big smile. “It’s still Christmas.” The Starmen slung the locomotors over their shoulders, then raised their arms and spread their hands toward the octopi. Several of them came close to the humans, extended their tendrils, and carefully touched the fingers that were held out toward them. Then they swam away.

Each of the Starmen grabbed hold of one of the cables that hung into the water. Zip made sure all of them had a firm grip, then said, “We’re ready, Gray. Bring us up slowly.”

“See you in a minute, Starmen! Here you go!” The cables began to move upward. The three Starmen emerged from the water. Looking downward, they saw the delicate lights clustered below them, visible through the rippling surface.

Before they knew it they reached the bottom barrier of the airlock. The great doors hung open and the Starmen came through into the hollow space between the barriers. The two-man elevator was suspended a few feet above them. At the side of the shaft they saw Gray Bennick working the controls. Once they were clear, he closed the doors. Of the three Starmen, Mark was

the last to see the ocean of Europa with the dreamlike glow below the undulating black surface.

“Boy, am I glad to see you!” said Gray enthusiastically. “We’ll have to go up in two trips! Who’s first?”

~

By mid-afternoon the Starmen had settled back into their quarters in the ice base. Noah Kitsualuk and his crew had been able to repair the damage done by the invaders’ laser beam, and rendered the living quarters airtight once again.

The reunion had been an emotional, joyful experience. Beowulf Denn, the spy who had eluded detection for so long, had been captured along with all his cronies. No lives had been lost among the crew of the *Silverfire*, and Zip’s hypothesis that the Benefactors had a large base in the Solar System had been verified by solid evidence.

After the Starmen had first made contact with the base, second-in-command Sarah Pletcher had used the realtime transmitter to give the good news to Richard Starlight. Richard had been dreading the horrible responsibility of informing the Starmen’s families on Christmas Day that their sons were missing in the depths of the European sea.

Plans were immediately made by the crew of the *Silverfire* to celebrate the happy ending with a Christmas dinner, a feast that would not be interrupted this time. Everyone helped with the preparations. As time permitted, members of the crew took turns sending greetings to their families back on Earth or the Moon. Since the only RTT sets were at Starlight Enterprise and in Richard’s home, these messages had to be sent by radio with the usual time delay.

When all the greetings had been sent, the Starmen gathered in the communication center for a private report to Richard Starlight, using the RTT set. When they came out of the room, all three wore broad grins.

At last it was time to sit down for the feast. Cathy Torrez made

a second entrance with the steaming, aromatic Christmas ham. This time she made it to the table without incident. Twenty-one people sat down. Captain Dufaure had been carried in and set in a large chair of his own, covered with a blanket. He was unable to speak above a whisper, his eyes were badly bloodshot, and he was still exhausted, but even so he was able to offer a brief word of thanks. More than one pair of eyes were moist when the feast began.

The cook had outdone herself. The fare even exceeded the splendor of the previous night's offering. In addition to the ham, there were candied yams, baked potatoes, corn on the cob, an enormous green salad with halved walnuts, a fruit salad, fresh bread baked from dough that had been prepared on Earth, hot coffee, and steaming spiced cider.

The conversation was brisk with people exchanging news of home and sharing tales of their favorite Christmas customs and memories. For dessert, Cathy brought in two three-layer chocolate cakes with vanilla frosting.

Once everything had been cleared away and conversation had died down, Sarah announced that it was time to open gifts. Before lifting off nearly two months before, she had organized a gift exchange among all the crewmembers. Everyone went to the living quarters to retrieve gifts that had been waiting for that moment, and returned with small wrapped packages. There was no tree, so the presents were arranged on the table.

The crew deferred to Yancy Dufaure and suggested that he go first. A gift with his name on it was located and handed to him. With some difficulty, he opened a box that contained a crystal watch from Starman Joe Taylor. Joe then found the present that had been marked with his name. The others followed in turn.

When all twenty-two gifts had been opened and duly admired, Starman Zip Foster stood up and called for everyone's attention.

"There is one more gift to be presented," he said. A few eyebrows were raised in curiosity, and what had been a low murmur of satisfied conversation dropped into complete silence.

"Mark and Joe and I made our report this afternoon to Richard

Starlight. At the same time we conferred with him over a certain matter and we have his complete support in a proposal we made to him. Everyone knows that Captain Yancy Dufaure acted with remarkable heroism last night, leading the attack on the *Iron Maiden* at the risk of his own life in order to save his crew and this mission. We are agreed that with this action, he has completed, long after graduation, all the requirements necessary to become a Starman. Richard has therefore granted him a full AAAA rating. It is my honor at this time, on behalf of Richard Starlight, to offer to Captain Yancy Dufaure the position of Starman.”

The uproar of exultation was immediate. Applause and shouts threatened to precipitate another shakeup of the ice-built facility like that of the previous evening. Yancy fell back into his chair with tears streaming down his face. When the brouhaha had quieted down somewhat, Zip asked, “Shall I take that as an acceptance, Captain Dufaure?”

Unable to speak, the man nodded. The crew of his ship surrounded him with cries of congratulations.

Moments later Zip left the room unobtrusively and went to the Starmen’s quarters to draft the notes for his formal report.

... What we have learned since our encounter with Xenobots on Nyx has made it certain that the Benefactors and the Xenobots were involved in intense warfare, part of which took place in our Solar System more than 12,000 years ago. It is likely that the Xenobots were beaten but not eradicated in this war, and possible that the Benefactors were also hit hard.

The Benefactors’ European city shows evidence of probable long habitation, but it was hastily abandoned at an undetermined time long ago. Perhaps the war weakened both races, and the Benefactors abandoned

all their bases in our System. Or perhaps the site of the war moved beyond our Solar System. There are simply not enough hard facts yet to draw a satisfactory conclusion.

The substance that the Benefactors were mining on Europa has not yet been identified. However, it was clearly of enormous value to the Benefactors—enough to bring them to establish a city at the site, which they took great pains to conceal and protect. The presence of the guardian fish and the Benefactors' symbiotic relationship with the native population of Europa point toward a long-term operation of critical importance.

The Benefactors' abandoned city and mines are safe but empty, except for the denizens of Europa. The Europeans appear to be intelligent, still loyal to the absent Benefactors after a long period of time, and friendly to those who are the Benefactors' allies. The cooperation of the Europeans with us in future exploration is to be expected.

The mission to Europa has not achieved all that I had hoped. We did not encounter any members of the race of the Benefactors. The evidence of their presence we have discovered on Mars, Titan, Nyx, and now Europa is all very old. Were it not for Mark Seaton's probable sighting of two of them on the Benefactors' asteroid, it would be logical to assume that the Benefactors have abandoned the Solar System altogether.

Question: We now know that there are, or have been, four intelligent races in our

Solar System: the humble population of Mars, few in number and which disappeared suddenly, perhaps after contact with the Benefactors; the Europeans; the extrasolar people the Benefactors brought from a distant star system to Titan approximately 12,000 years ago; and we of Earth. We also know now that the Benefactors had dealings with the other three races. Why did they not make contact with us?

Zip paused for a moment. He knew that the Starmen's discoveries on Europa would lead quickly to a major project by Starlight Enterprise and probably others. People from Earth would be returning to Europa in the near future.

He wanted to know what the Benefactors were mining. The spectrum of that substance now on file was not enough to satisfy him. "I'll send down a retriever probe," he mused. "Katie got her probes down before we took the mantaship below the microbial layer, but I doubt that anything can get past those fish now without the Europeans' consent. We can put Mark's voice on the retriever so that the Europeans can tell the guardian fish to let it take a sample of the material and then bring it back. That can be done before we lift off in a few days."

But at the present it was difficult for him to think about it. He was tired and a little depressed. He would put the notes into final form later. He closed the file and opened the one marked "Family Correspondence." His father's 52nd birthday was coming up on January 5. His sister's ninth birthday was the day after. It was not possible that he would be home with them to celebrate. Liftoff from Europa was planned for three days from now, and it would take several weeks to get home. Right now he couldn't think of anything to add to the Christmas message he'd already sent.

He opened up another file and began a message to Kristina Bethany, the cultural sociologist, linguist, and translator for

Elijah Base on Titan. She was fluent in Titanian—one of the very few human beings to have mastered that language. She would be ideal for the team that would establish a presence on Europa, make contact with the Europeans, and begin the exploration of the Benefactors' city and mining operation. He drafted a few notes to her about the project, but again decided to finish the message later and closed the file.

He didn't know what to do now. He had surmised that the Benefactors had had a major base on Europa, and that had been verified. But unofficially the young Starman had pinned all his hopes on finding the Benefactors themselves on Europa. Although everyone else was rejoicing, he was crushed.

"Zip?" came Mark's voice from around the corner. "Zip? Are you in here?" Mark entered the room. Zip looked up at him, wearing an expression of mental exhaustion.

"Sorry to disturb you, Zip." He laid a warm, friendly hand on Zip's shoulder. "There's a party going on, and Starman Yancy Dufaure wants to see you. It was your idea to make him a Starman, and you've made him the happiest man in the Solar System!"

Zip laid his hand over the hand of his friend and smiled up at him. "Thank for coming to get me," he said. "Let's go back to the party!"

Some of Zip's most important questions will be answered in the fifth book of the Starman saga: **THE TREASURES OF DARKNESS**. What he learns will be far different from what he had hoped and expected.

BOOK 5: THE TREASURES OF DARKNESS

*I will give you the treasures out of the darkness
and riches that have been hidden away. (Isaiah 45:3)*

Chapter 1: The Plight of the Benefactors

SOMEWHERE ON THE PLANET that the Starman had long been seeking, three people sat around an ancient stone table. The sides of the table were rough and grainy like undressed marble, but the top had been polished to disclose the ineffable beauty within. Showing three-dimensional splendor like a massive fire opal, the gleaming table revealed strands of dark green veins coursing through an ebony field. Here and there fans of rich blue appeared.

Although the people were humanoid, they were not human. They were proportionately taller and thinner than most humans. Their hair was black or dark brown, and their skin was the color of old leather but supple, almost unlined. Dark liquid brown eyes looked out from each face. Their fingers appeared just slightly longer than a casual observer would have expected. Their garments resembled togas and fell in graceful folds. Though the setting appeared peaceful and serene, the people were clearly disturbed.

They spoke in an old, mellifluous tongue that had once been common on the planets of their own star system but for many centuries had only been spoken in shadows and dark hidden places. To Starman Mark Seaton, the creatures and their language would have been familiar; he had seen two members of this race and heard them converse a year and a half before as he woke from sleep in an asteroid commandeered by the would-be conqueror Lurton Zimbardo. Starman David Foster had christened them “the Benefactors” when he discovered that they

had saved a race of small intelligent creatures from a planet outside the Solar System and brought them to Titan. Further discoveries had convinced him of their immense power and benevolence, and that they were the best hope of Earth against the marauding race of Xenobots.

The Benefactors were heavily involved in council. The three were leaders in their society and were about to decide on a course of action that would determine the fate of their civilization, threatened by the new incursion of the Xenobots.

“It worked!” exclaimed a slender woman, clasping her hands together. “Your gamble paid off, Saadervo!” She tossed her head and threw back long, richly brown hair that had a hint of a wave in it.

Saadervo nodded soberly. “It was a desperate risk, Stenafi, but the Xenobots were getting too close and we had no resources to combat them. The crew and I nearly lost everything when the engines on our cruiser gave out and our ship crashed. As it was, the Maker blessed our efforts with success.”

“Success indeed! Your venture has thrown the Xenobots off completely! Is it not true, Elder?” Stenafi asked, turning to the eldest of the three.

“Yes, it is true.” The Elder sat and thought a moment before speaking further. He raised placid eyes to the other two. “But that has now become our next danger. The Xenobots have been thrown off the track, but now they have no more leads to follow in their search to find us. They must not think that our civilization is dead, for if they do they will stop searching for us and turn their attention to Earth.”

The Elder sighed. “There was a time we could have defeated the Xenobots, but that time is long past. Though we were the victors in the War, we barely survived as a race and had no power to press our victory to completion. The Xenobots rebuilt faster than any of us thought possible, and we cannot overcome them now.” The Elder looked down and shook his head. “I must admit that I never thought I would see their return.”

The Elder’s words cast a pall over the brief excitement Stenafi

had injected into the council. “Well,” he continued. “We can only try to meet the responsibilities that come our way. As things stand now, the Ahmanyans cannot defeat the Xenobots, nor even resist them. If they find us, they will destroy our race utterly, for we are powerless before them. The people of Earth are the only ones who can possibly assist us.”

Saadero spoke up with concern in his voice. “But the people of Earth don’t even know what is at stake! We have long known that they are our only hope, but they do not yet have the knowledge and resources required to fight the Xenobots!”

“Is it not the right time to reveal ourselves to them?” Stenafi interjected with a note of impatience. “If we wait too long, the Xenobots will exterminate both us and them! Do you want to see Earth turned into a desert?”

“Stenafi! Patience and courtesy!” implored Saadero. The woman held her tongue but it was clear that she was not satisfied.

The Elder put his fingertips together and rested his chin on his joined thumbs.

“Soon, Stenafi,” he said, looking not at her but into the design on the table. “I think the time is coming soon. Very soon. But not yet. The Xenobots cannot conquer Earth in force without establishing a solar station to provide the energy for their spacecraft. Even through hyperspace, they can only get near with a few old cruisers and warships. Earth is strong enough to detect a sudden influx of such ships and fight the Xenobots before they can construct a solar station. For the present, the Enemy can only work through the human agents they have deceived or beguiled, and the few of their own race that they have sent secretly into the Asteroid Belt. Time is still on our side, and will be as long as they cannot build a solar station.”

“But not for much longer, Elder,” advised Saadero respectfully. “The Xenobots are not the only threat. The *illunas* is being destroyed! The destruction must stop, or we cannot survive!”

“Your insight is good, Saadero. Waiting too long to reveal

ourselves to the people of Earth is risky,” the Elder agreed, “but it is a risk we must take for a little longer. We cannot risk being discovered by the Xenobots, but neither can we risk letting the Xenobots become convinced that all the Ahmanyans are dead. If that happens, without a doubt they will turn their predatory attention to Earth. Clearly we cannot remain hidden forever. If we do nothing, eventually the Enemy will find us, and we will be helpless—as we are now—to overcome them. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the Xenobots are in their last days, and they will be destroyed in the end—but there is no guarantee that our race will survive to see it.”

“But Elder!” Stenafi exclaimed. “How can they be in their last days? We are the only people who were able to resist them, but we certainly cannot do so now!”

The Elder paused for a moment. “Neither of you knew the time of the War itself, but I did, for I fought in it. Though they have been rebuilding their might, the Xenobots are declining, Stenafi. I have spoken with the Janitor of the First Races, those in our galaxy who remember the dawn of time, and he has told me that long before our War with them the Xenobots were a glorious civilization that reached heights of splendor and majesty that no other civilization has since touched. Since the last War their bodies have continued to decay; they have lost the ability to talk audibly and their thought processes have become dulled. They can no longer invent anything on their own—they can only steal what others have achieved. And now there are internal divisions among them.”

“What is your plan, then, Elder?” Saadervo asked.

“We will draw the three Starmen to us. The one called Mark Seaton already knows of us, and we know that the Starmen are the best Earth has to offer. Let us hope that they will be the harbingers of their race. We must draw them here and reveal the threat to them without revealing ourselves for the time being. We have been lax; our preoccupation with events in the galactic core has blinded us to activities going on at our own doorstep. The *illunas* must be saved if—”

“The *illunas!*” Stenafi broke in. “The rapacious thief has much power and influence. No one yet has been able to resist him. How could even the three Starmen hope to succeed?”

“They cannot be corrupted and they can fight openly, and will do so once they know what is at stake,” the Elder answered. “We cannot live without the *illunas*, but we cannot protect it while we remain hidden. The Starmen *must* save the *illunas* or our race will perish. Besides, the real enemies we face are much greater and fiercer than the one who is plundering the *illunas*. If people from Earth cannot save the *illunas*, then what hope do they have against the true Enemy?”

Chapter 2: Return to the Asteroid

STARMEN DAVID “ZIP” FOSTER, Joe Taylor, and Mark Seaton were relaxing under the spreading branches of a century-old black walnut tree. It was two days before the first day of spring in 2153. Nearly four miles straight up was the top of the dome that enclosed Armstrong Forest in Shackleton Crater at the south pole of the Moon. The complex meteorologines set the seasons in Armstrong Forest to match the time of year in New Washington in the United States, and provided the proper balance of weather and other phenomena needed to keep the biosphere healthy.

“Let’s go camping for a few days,” Joe had suggested when the three friends were relaxing together at his home in Amundsen City. Zip and Mark had quickly agreed. They had been idle for the six weeks since their return from Europa. They had greeted their families warmly, made their report to Richard Starlight, turned the results of their exploration of the watery Jovian moon over to the research and exploration teams that would follow up, and then set out to take a long rest. Even high-strung Zip appeared to be enjoying the idleness.

In the eyes of most people, the search for the Benefactors on Europa had been a tremendous success! They had found

incontrovertible evidence that the Benefactors had indeed established a long-term habitation on Europa. More than that, they had discovered the first native extra-terrestrial intelligence in the Solar System—the octopoid dwellers in the lightless ocean of Europa.

Zip, however, had been gravely disappointed with the mission to Europa and more than a little frustrated. He had not encountered any living Benefactors; their city on Europa had been abandoned in a sudden rush thousands of years before. Zip was not giving up his quest by any means; he already knew what his next step would be. For the time being, though, he knew that he and his friends needed to rest so they would be at their peak during the next mission. He was content to rest and ponder.

So when Joe had suggested a camping trip in Armstrong Forest, he agreed that it was just what they needed. Leaving their distinctive red Starman uniforms behind, the three young men were dressed in the ordinary clothes of outdoorsmen and carried backpacks. Armstrong Forest comprised only about fifty square miles on a circular plain eight miles in diameter under the largest geodesic dome ever constructed; however, the biosphere had been designed ingeniously to give the impression of wide spaces. Tens of thousands of people could reside in it at once and not feel crowded.

It was a few minutes past noon on their fifth day in the forest. The Starmen had tied their rented boat up on the shore of one of the peaceful streams that laced through that part of the forest, then hiked half a mile or so into the woods until they reached a large meadow where they planned to dally for the afternoon.

“These sandwiches are delicious, Zip!” said Mark.

“Fresh-baked bread makes the difference,” explained Zip. “Kathy made me a loaf just before we left. My mother made the curried chicken you just spread between the slices.”

Joe took a close look at his sandwich and noted the thick, moist, sweet texture of the bread. “Not even Marjie Prester can make bread like this,” he observed. “I hope she never finds out

that she's been outbaked by a nine-year old."

"Baking bread on Mars is a different thing from baking it on the Moon," commented Mark as he chewed. Nobody argued, since all three of them knew that very well. By common unspoken agreement their conversation was not about their serious work.

When the sandwiches were gone, Joe offered a box of molasses and pecan cookies, brought out three teacups and saucers, and opened a small thermos.

"Is that Darjeeling tea?" asked Mark.

Joe peered at the big Starman under lowered eyebrows. "My favorite, which I am generously sharing with my friends."

Zip gratefully lifted up his teacup and allowed Joe to pour the light brown liquid into it. Sitting tailor-style, he reached for a cookie and munched it thoughtfully. Looking into the distance, he allowed the sight of the bright green meadow grass to fill his mind. The meadow rolled away downward on a slight slope in front of the three friends before it was taken over by a dark covering of closely packed deciduous trees a hundred yards away.



The meadow rolled away downward on a slight slope.

“Are you two about ready to return to the Asteroid?” he asked, almost absently. For almost a full minute, neither one responded. Mark sighed deeply and looked off into the distance. Joe set his teacup down on its saucer with a faint click and lay back, stretching his long legs out on the sunny grass and folding his hands behind his head. The artificial light came through the branches of the walnut tree under whose canopy they had spread their picnic.

“It’s beautiful out here,” said Mark. “Just beautiful!”

“No place in all the worlds like it,” agreed Joe.

“Think we can be ready to leave by Wednesday?” said Zip.

“Four days from now?” mused Joe. “Sure.”

“That’ll give us two more days in the forest,” contributed Mark.

“That’s what I figure,” said Zip. He drained his teacup, and then lay back for a nap. A light breeze moved the grass at his feet and caused the branches to sway overhead. Their shadows played across Zip’s face. Later he would gather dry wood and the three friends would enjoy a campfire in the evening.

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“*Star Ranger* requesting access to the Asteroid.” Starman Mark Seaton spoke into his navigator’s mike, and then tossed his head to throw his black hair out of his eyes. He hadn’t gotten a haircut since shortly after the *Michael Adams* had brought them back from Europa.

“Proceed with the standard security identification protocol for ultra-high-security area,” said the space traffic controller. Each of the three Starman submitted to the triple identification check required before landing procedures could be initiated. Under the scrutiny of security personnel aboard the Asteroid, Mark presented his facial and cranial characteristics to the scanner, followed by his fingerprints and retinal map. His two companions followed in turn.

“Are you carrying any other passengers?”

“No, sir,” replied Mark.

“Permission to land granted. Once you touch down, please wait for the inspection crew to meet you at your ship. Your spacecraft will be thoroughly inspected by heat detectors to check for stowaways before you will be allowed to debark. Welcome back to the Asteroid, Starmen!”

“This is a valuable piece of property now,” said Mark after he’d signed off. “No unauthorized personnel are going to get close to *this* chunk of space iron!”

“That’s for sure!” said Joe enthusiastically. “This is probably the most guarded piece of rock in the Solar System right now. It’s crawling with soldiers, it’s got two squadrons of star fighters stationed on the surface, it has a few dozen nuclear and conventional warheads, it’s surrounded by patrol craft, it has had advanced radar and gravitational sensors installed to detect the approach of anything the size of a bolt or larger, —”

“Okay, okay, I get the point! I agree with you,” said Mark, laughing.

Joe piloted the *Star Ranger* toward what most people simply called the Asteroid. He had no trouble spotting the numerous ships that hovered around the dark object, guarding it from any unauthorized approach. A few metallic glints on the surface hinted at the presence of even more ships.

The Starmen’s well-known spacecraft made the approach. Far below on Earth, the eastern bulge of Brazil was visible under moderate cloud cover.

Moments later, the brick red spacecraft that had been issued to Starman Zip Foster nearly two years earlier moved in close to the primary port of entry to the Asteroid. Joe set the *Star Ranger* on automatic pilot and let the computer handle the complexities of guiding the Starmen’s ship from the weightlessness of space to the artificial gravity inside the Asteroid. The *Star Ranger* came through the outer opening into the iron-dark throat of the floating base of ancient alien construction. The panels closed cleanly behind them, and moments later the Starmen’s craft touched down lightly on the landing area inside the hollow

asteroid.

“Wow!” exclaimed Mark when all three Starmen had stepped onto the surface of the spaceport hidden inside the asteroid. “Look at what they’ve done in the months we’ve been gone!” A veritable city of spacecraft filled the area in front of the enormous transparent wall that separated the landing area from the inhabited portion of the asteroid. A crew of six people quickly met the three Starmen who were waiting at the base of their ship.

Three of them immediately entered the ship with heat-detectors to check for any stowaways. Once the ship had been declared clean, the Starmen were allowed to seal it and cross the great doors of the airlock into the inhabited portion of the Asteroid.

“Greetings, Starmen,” said a genial man as they passed through the airlock and removed their helmets.

“Hello, Mr. Madera,” said Zip with a big smile. “I was hoping we’d find you here!”

Thick brown hair covered the head of Mr. Jesus Madera-Cruz, chief pioneer for Starlight Enterprise. Brown, guileless eyes looked out from his pleasant features, and strong, even, white teeth showed through his welcoming smile. They all shook hands. Madera led the trio across the quad to the main entryway of the base.

“Mr. Starlight acceded to my wishes and assigned me to this project,” the Mexican explained. “It was very kind of him, since I had several other pressing responsibilities at SE when the Asteroid came into our possession.”

“Richard usually knows where people’s gifts and skills can best be used,” said Zip. “The most important work of all must be taking place on this asteroid.”

“Truly, I think it is,” agreed Madera. “Starlight Enterprise has filled these offices and laboratories with hordes of scientists and engineers who are dedicated to extracting from it every secret it contains! What, may I ask, brings you back here, my friends?”

Zip explained the search for the Benefactors and provided details that the standard news releases had not included in their accounts of the journey to Europa.

“Much of what you say is not unknown to me,” nodded Madera as they passed through the great doors into the wide, four-story hall that formed the entry to the headquarters on the Asteroid. The facility was buzzing with activity. Behind the many archways, laboratories and workstations were filled with people sitting at desks or standing before screens. People were striding along the passageways. They offered greetings to the Starmen but none stopped to chat.

“This is the only place where anyone has seen living Benefactors,” said Mark. “I saw two of them during our captivity. We want to search for a way to enter the inaccessible part of the interior and see if we can locate additional clues as to where they might be found.”

“The best engineers to whom Starlight has access have been trying to do that very thing for almost a year, and have nothing to show for their labors,” Madera warned the Starmen.

“We are aware of that, of course,” said Zip, “but the Benefactors appeared here and helped us when we were escaping from Zimbaro. We’re just hoping they’ll do so again.”

“What makes you think that they—if they are present—will assist you when none of us has seen a trace of them?” prodded Madera. “Mind you, my friends, I am not arguing with you nor—” he paused a moment to search for the right word “—teasing you. I am merely asking.”

“To be honest with you, Mr. Madera,” said Zip, “it is little more than a desperate hope.”

“Perhaps you will be successful where all before you have failed,” said their companion. He showed them where they would be staying, helped them stow their gear, gave them brief instructions on how to find their way around, and then left.

“Nice of them to give us such well-equipped quarters,” observed Joe. “With the size of the staff that must be aboard this vessel, I’m sure living space like this is at a premium.”

The Starmen had been given a large apartment that not only had its own kitchen and washing facilities but also an upstairs research station. This had three computer terminals, one for each of the Starmen, with unrestricted access to all the files and research materials on the Asteroid.

“Well,” said Zip after they had settled in, “let’s get started. We had lunch just before we landed, so we won’t need to fret about a meal for a few hours. Let’s each take one section of the hidden portion of the Asteroid and find out what others have done before us.”

“Aye matey! There’s work to be done and throats to be cut,” said Joe. “No time like the present!” He plopped himself down at one of the consoles. Mark and Zip did the same.

“First thing I’m going to do,” announced Zip, “is find out if anyone has seen the three-moon image anywhere inside the facility.” He sent an electronic query off to the research and records center.

They had been working for less than half an hour when there was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” said Mark. The sound of his boots on the stairs faded as he descended to the lower level.

A moment later he called up the stairwell. “Zip! Joe! Can you come down please?” The two Starmen came down and saw that Mark was talking to a tall and thin elderly man with short iron-gray hair. He was dressed in nondescript clothes over which he wore a white laboratory coat.

“This is Dr. Namon,” explained Mark. “He was in charge of the most recent scan of the interior surface of the asteroid.”

“Yes,” continued the man. “Your query, Starman Foster, about the three-moon image was forwarded to me and I hastened to come in person. It has been seen in only one place. I can take you there.”

“Wonderful!” said Zip. “Thank you, sir! We can leave at

once.”

“You’ll want a camera. It is a beautiful example, in excellent condition.” Zip ran upstairs and picked up a high-resolution camera from the equipment in the lab, then rejoined his companions.

Dr. Namon took them down the hall to the nearest elevator. Once they were inside, he pressed several buttons on the control panel. The car descended for nearly thirty seconds, then slowed, paused, and then moved sideways for a brief time. It paused again and then descended at a slow rate. The door opened and revealed a passage illuminated by only a few widely spaced lights.

“Right this way, Starmen,” said Dr. Namon, stepping out of the elevator and gesturing invitingly with one hand. “It’s at the end of this hallway.” He conducted the three Starmen to the end of the passageway. It terminated in a floor-to-ceiling metal wall with a double door in the middle of it. Spread across the double door was a magnificent color likeness of the three-moon image, larger than any the Starmen had seen before and looking as fresh as the day it was made. It was at least three feet wide.

“Wonderful, Dr. Namon! Thank you!” cried Zip. “Why hasn’t anyone told us of this before?”

“This passage has only recently become accessible, Starman Foster,” said the gray-haired man. “If you had asked only a day or two ago, no one could have shown this to you.”

“It looks so fresh,” said Zip with wonder in his voice. He reached out his hands to touch it. It looked almost three-dimensional, but was actually flat and smooth. He couldn’t take his eyes off of it. Mark and Joe were equally entranced with the design.

“Take a picture, Zip,” urged Joe. Zip raised the camera and snapped the shutter several times. Then he looked through the images he had taken on the camera’s small display screen.

“They all look good,” said Zip. “Do you have any images of your own, Dr. Namon?” There was no answer.

Zip turned his gaze away from his camera and looked up. Dr.

Namon was gone.

Chapter 3: Ahmanya

“WHERE DID HE GO?” asked Zip, somewhat alarmed. Mark ran back along the hallway to the elevator

“The elevator’s still here,” he yelled. He whirled and tugged at the closest door. It was locked. Joe strode to the door nearest the image. It too was locked. Joe and Mark checked all the doors but none opened.

Almost absently Zip turned and tried the double door across which the three-moon image was spread. It didn’t budge.

“Let’s go back,” he said, and walked slowly toward the elevator. “I don’t understand,” he murmured with a preoccupied air.

“How will we get back without Dr. Namon?” asked Joe. “We know how to navigate the inhabited areas of this chunk but not how to get back from here!”

“We were shown the way when we were here before,” said Zip. “Let’s hope that we’ll be shown again.”

As Zip had surmised, once they were inside the elevator, the control panel showed a light on one of the buttons. Zip pressed it. In sequence, four more lit and he pressed them. The portal closed and the elevator moved. After a short series of movements its door opened onto their floor. Zip stepped out and led the way to their apartment. Mark and Joe followed silently; they knew better than to speak to Zip when he was immersed in figuring out a problem.

Once they had shut the door behind them and were back inside their apartment, Zip spoke. “Mark, would you check with central control and ask them to find Dr. Namon for me please?”

“Sure, Zip,” said Mark. He walked over to the communicator while Zip went back upstairs to the research station.

When Mark had finished his call, he and Joe joined Zip upstairs.

“There is no Dr. Namon on staff here, Zip,” said Mark.

“No; I didn’t think there would be,” said Zip without looking up. He was loading the images from the camera onto his computer. “And I’ll bet that no one here has ever seen that image.”

“Uh— that’s right. There was a message waiting for us that no one has ever seen the image anywhere on the Asteroid. It was an answer to the question you sent before Dr. Namon showed up.”

“Mm hmm,” said Zip. He was trembling. Because his hands were not steady, he had to make several attempts to get the program to work correctly. Finally the three-moon image appeared on his computer’s screen. “Not good enough, not big enough,” he muttered. He tapped a few more keys and the image transferred to the room’s largest screen, which was about five feet square and set flat on the wall farthest from the archway that was the entrance to the room.

“You were right, Mark,” said Zip. Then he looked up with a smile of enormous satisfaction on his face. “You were right, Mark! There *are* Benefactors on this asteroid and they *are* going to help us! We’ve just seen one! He brought us to the site of this image! He told me to bring a camera!” Zip turned back to his keyboard. “Now I have to figure out why.” He was already deeply involved in the task. He ran his left hand through his red hair, rubbed both hands down his cheeks, and then brought them over the keyboard. He hesitated a moment, then began to tap.

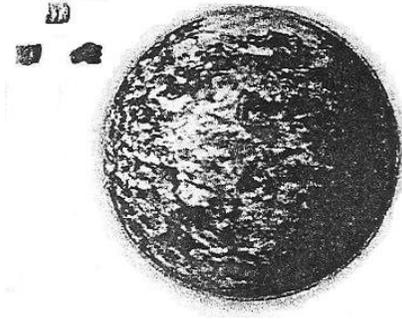
The image on the large screen came into three-dimensional relief.

“Ahmanya,” breathed Zip reverently, recalling the word he had learned from the octopoid dwellers at the bottom of the European ocean. About a fourth of the planet’s surface was hidden under clouds and the right side was dark with shadow, but the visible portions showed evidence of at least a dozen islands and two sizable continents, all surrounded by deep blue seas. There were splotches of bright green, especially in the very center of the image.

“It’s so beautiful,” Zip whispered to himself. The longing he had felt fluttering in his breast when he had first heard the word “Ahmanya” surged over him again with ten-fold power. He was on the verge of a great discovery; he could feel it. Repeatedly he had to stop and try to calm down and ease his trembling.

Mark and Joe watched with rapt attention.

“Magnify that, Zip,” suggested Mark. He pointed to the largest section where there was an intense green color. Zip captured the coordinates and magnified the site. Closer and closer he zoomed in until details were lost in the enlargement. He tried another site—a seashore. Again, the magnification increased to the point where details were lost.



“Ahmanya,” breathed Zip reverently.

At times, Zip simply stopped and gazed at the full spread of the image, entranced by its beauty.

“How like Earth it is,” he whispered once.

“Parts of it—parts of Earth, that is,” said Mark. “New Zealand and the northern parts of Canada.”

“There are mountains here,” said Joe. “See? That’s not cloud cover. Those are snow caps.”

“Hmmm,” agreed Zip. “But what are we supposed to learn from this? I’m going to try to find out what’s under the clouds.”

“If it’s a piece of artwork rather than a true likeness, Zip, you won’t find anything under the clouds,” said Joe.

“I can try to extend seashores, extrapolate plains, and so forth. The clouds are very scattered so there is some land visible beneath them. So tantalizing! In places I’ll just have to guess with the computer’s help, if I have to. We were shown this image for a reason.”

The afternoon crawled into evening. Mark and Joe had wandered down into their living quarters. Zip had kept at the task, easily rendering all visible points of Ahmanya into three dimensions, and then had tried to build a complete image of what the planet might have looked like by plotting likely points one by one. Slowly a three-dimensional map took shape on his screen. Further mountain ranges, plains, valleys, and seas appeared. It was painstaking work, for he had to guess at most of the points. More than two-thirds of them had to be refigured at least once, and many of them up to half a dozen times before they made sense. Even then, Zip wasn’t sure whether he was doing scientific reconstruction or purely imaginative artwork.

After more than four hours of work without rest, he was tired and hungry but kept working. Something pushed him on and he didn’t want to abandon the effort.

Mark walked into the room, keeping quiet. He could see that Zip was fully absorbed in his task, wearing a look that was a blend of inspiration and frustration. After a moment when Zip hadn’t moved at all, Mark asked, “Would you like something to eat, Zip? You’ve been up here all afternoon.”

“No thank you, Mark,” said Zip without looking at his friend. “For some reason I can’t stop. I feel driven, almost called, to keep going.”

“You’re getting consumed by it, Zip. Come on, take a break! You can’t go on forever!”

“I know. I’ll be down before long. But I can’t let it go yet.” Mark went out as quietly as he’d come in.

Zip added a few more points to the map. He hadn’t been sure of them because their location was on the edge of the design and their meaning was doubtful. He set them up and tapped “Enter.” The planet’s image changed slightly.

Suddenly Zip knew what he was looking at. His face drained chalk-white, his eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. The conviction came with immediate visceral certainty, and emotions surged over him with enormous power, almost as if he had been thrown into a huge, violent whirlpool of ice water. He gasped, then jumped up and stepped back, hurling the chair down several feet behind him. His eyes were wide and the hair on the back of his neck stood out stiffly. He began to howl.

“AH NO, NO! Oh no, *NO!*” Tears streamed down his face. “*Oh NO! NO!*” The sounds were torn from him with savage, involuntary passion.

Joe and Mark stampeded up the stairs and ran through the door.

“What is it?” they cried out. They were panicked. “Zip, what’s the matter?”

Joe spoke up. Of the three he was most in control of himself. “Calm down, Zip! What is it?”

Zip waved his hand toward the console where the planet stood out in relief. His hands were shaking badly. He gulped and he couldn’t speak. He was shrieking and hyperventilating. Joe went over to him and put his arm around his shoulder. “Take it easy, Zip. Take it easy. You’ll be okay.” He picked the chair up and eased Zip back into it.

After a couple of minutes, Zip’s cries subsided and he was breathing more normally. “Oh no,” he whispered, the tears still streaming. He put his hands over his face. “I feel sick,” he moaned. He doubled over, clutching his stomach.

“Tell us, Zip,” pleaded Joe quietly but urgently.

Slowly Zip sat up straight and took a couple of deep breaths. “That planet—Ahmanya,” he said, indicating the screen once more. “I know what it is.” The others looked at him expectantly. “It’s Mars,” he wailed. “*IT’S MARS!!*”

Joe looked at him as if he thought that Zip had been working and going without food too long, but he said nothing.

Mark spoke up. “What?” he said in a small, shocked voice like a whisper coming from far away.

“Look at it!” cried Zip. “*Look at it!*” He jabbed his finger at the screen. “Look! See this diamond shape? That’s the Antigones Pons! What other planet has a landform like that? I didn’t put it all together until I saw *that* come up! And look—here’s the Boreosyrtris, just north of where you parachuted onto Mars when the pirates had taken over Eagle City! See? Just below it is Crater 53! Come on! You know these formations as well as I do! This is *Mars!!* Oh, it’s Mars without erosion and deserts. All the features are sharper than what we know! But there’s no doubt—*it’s Mars!*”

“Well...okay, for the sake of discussion, let’s say it’s Mars,” conceded Joe. “What’s the reason for the outburst?”

“Don’t you get it?” said Zip urgently. “*Mars!* A planet with oceans and clouds—it’s blue and green and white, like Earth!”

“That’s why it *can’t* be Mars, Zip. Mars is red.”

“Mars is red *now*—a dry, dusty, howling desert that was completely dead before terraformation! But now I know that it wasn’t always dead.” Zip began to weep quietly. “It was alive and beautiful once, filled with people, the kindest people we’ve ever heard of, the people who saved the Titanians, the people who defended the Solar System from the Xenobots. Something *horrifying, appalling* happened on Mars, something I can’t even imagine but it terrifies me.” He was almost whimpering. “I can never think of Mars as a planet again. It’s a corpse.” He sat hunched over, his head in his hands. No one said anything.

Then Joe said, “Zip, you’re frightening me.”

“Of course I am!” Zip shouted, leaping to his feet and facing his friends. “Don’t you know what this means?” Joe and Mark looked at him blankly. “*It means that there are no Benefactors to be found! They’re gone! Our search has come to the worst possible end!*” Zip was almost hysterical. “*THERE ARE NO BENEFACTORS!* They were all destroyed by the Xenobots when their planet was scourged with fire! Can you *imagine* what the power of the Xenobots must be? On Nyx, we saw nothing, *nothing*, of what they’re capable of! They’ve utterly destroyed an entire planet, not only killing all the people but even leaving no

traces that *anyone* ever *lived* there! And they told us on Nyx that Earth is next!”

Zip attacked the air with both hands in a violent, clutching gesture, then brought his palms to his temples. He sat down wearily. Looking down at the floor, he said despairingly, “The two aliens Mark caught sight of on this asteroid must be the descendants of the few survivors,” he said wearily. “But how many can be left after more than 12,000 years? A few hundred? Maybe even as many as several thousand all hiding inside this asteroid! But the population of the *planet* is gone!” Zip became animated and raised his eyes to his friends’ faces. “Look! The Benefactors may have beaten the Xenobots back but they *lost* the war! No wonder they don’t show themselves! No wonder they’re afraid of the Xenobots! And now the Xenobots are back looking for their ‘ancient enemy’ to wipe out the last of them!”

Mark spoke up gently. “But Zip. It can’t be Mars. This planet has three moons. Mars only has two. You can’t explain that.”

Zip sighed deeply. “I think I can,” he said.

“You can? Where’s the third moon?”

Zip looked at his friends. He paused for effect. “You’re in it,” he said.

~

There was nothing more to say. Mark had helped Zip down the staircase and made some chicken broth. Zip sat on the sofa wrapped in a blanket, astrogazing aimlessly, clutching in both hands the cup Mark had brought him. Steam rose from it fragrantly and warmed his face, but he still felt a chill. Once in a great while, Zip picked up the cup and brought it to his lips automatically and took a sip. On the screen, Joe was probing the depths of the Oort Cloud, but Zip paid no attention. From time to time he put both hands to his face, covered his eyes, and wept. His body shook silently.

“No one is big enough to mourn genocide,” he whispered once. “Can’t be done.” It was the only thing he said after he’d been brought downstairs. Mark and Joe carried him to his bed.

He dropped off into the deep sleep of exhausted sorrow.

~

The following morning, Mark and Joe checked on Zip but didn't wake him. The mood was somber as the two Starmen made breakfast. Conversation was limited to the basic necessities.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

“Have you found the sugar?”

“In that cupboard.”

“Thanks.”

Just as Joe was putting the plates down on the table, Zip stumbled in. He hadn't shaved and he'd only combed his hair with his fingers. He walked over to the refrigerator and opened the door.

“Juice anybody?” he asked.

Minutes later the three of them were seated at the table.

“I'm okay now,” Zip said. “Thanks for your help last night. It was quite a blow.”

His friends brushed off his thanks. Joe buttered a slice of toast and then spread jalapeño jelly over it.

A little small talk got them conversing again almost normally. Then Mark decided to address the subject at hand.

“It was brilliant, Zip,” said Mark with conviction. “Tragic as it is, it's brilliant! You've found the key to understanding the history of our Solar System. The human race can never think of Mars in the same way again! You should be the one to name this moon we're on, Zip.”

Zip was subdued. He looked tired, exhausted. “I'd like to,” he affirmed quietly. “I'd like to be the person who names it. And I already know what I want to call it.”

Mark and Joe waited.

“Thousands of years ago, when human beings first looked up and saw the fourth planet, they called it Mars because it was red.

Mars was the god of war in ancient mythology and its redness reminded them of blood and battle.” He sighed. “I suppose they weren’t so far off, now that we know its history better.

“Then when Asaph Hall discovered the two moons in 1877, he named them after Mars’ attendants in Homer’s *Iliad*: Phobos and Deimos. In Greek, *phobos* means ‘fear’ and *deimos* means ‘terror’.”

Zip was telling them what they already knew, but Mark and Joe waited patiently. It was Zip’s moment. He’d earned it.

“But now that we know that Mars had *three* moons, and now that we know what this people did for the Titanians and how they defended the Solar System against the Xenobots at the cost of their own planet—” he paused to wipe away the tears that had filled his eyes—“this moon will be called *Tharsos*—Greek for ‘courage’.”

Mark and Joe smiled. Joe clapped Zip on the back.

“*Tharsos* it is,” he said.

Now Zip was weeping openly, but underneath, somehow, inexplicably, he felt an unquenchable, celebratory joy.

Chapter 4: The Next Step

MARK STOOD UP and began to clear the table. “No, I’ll get it,” he said when Zip started to gather the dishes together. Before long he’d put away the breakfast things and poured fresh cups of coffee for the three of them.

“Now what?” he asked as he took his seat. “First, we must report this to Richard—right away!”

“Of course,” stated Zip. “Let’s set up a videoconference as soon as we can. Then we’re going to Mars.”

“What do you want to do on Mars?” asked Joe.

Zip pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. “The Benefactors—the Martians—wanted us to discover this much of their history. If there are any left on this asteroid—and I think there must be—they know how to contact us. Whether many or

few, they must be located in the parts of the asteroid we can't reach. Our people have been trying for a year to get into that space and can't even find a door. If there were more the Martians want us to know, they'd have told us. I don't think there's anything more we can learn here. What we did learn is that Ahmánya is Mars. Therefore the Benefactors, the Martians, want us to go to Mars. If I'm wrong, they'll set us straight."

"Sounds logical, Zip," agreed Mark. He was staring into his coffee cup.

"Why don't they just tell us what we want to know?" asked Joe. "Why don't they come out into the open and talk to us?"

"There's a reason for that, Joe," said Zip. "We don't know what it is, but it must be there. I think we just have to follow their lead. We don't have a choice, anyway. Mark, would you set up a high priority, top security connection with Richard, please?"

"Sure, Zip." He pushed away from the table and headed for the research station upstairs.

~

It was more than half an hour later when Mark called down to the other Starmen.

"Richard will be ready in two or three minutes! Come on up!" Zip and Joe leaped up the stairs and assembled around the console where Mark had made the preparations for a secure video conference. As they waited for the connection to come through, three sets of eyes moved to the large display that identified Ahmánya with prewar Mars.

"The image shows a lot of ocean," said Joe. "It must have been quite a task to make the identification, Zip. There's not a lot of land to work with."

"That tells you something of the violence of the devastation, doesn't it?" said Zip. "Most of the oceans must have been boiled away with such vehemence that the water vapor escaped into space rather than fell back down as precipitation. Even though we've released most of the remaining water through terraformation, today's oceans on Mars don't comprise one third

of what we see on that image.”

“The Martians will tell us about it in their own time, I guess,” commented Mark. “At this point, we can only guess—”

The large screen lit up with Richard’s face. He was smiling broadly.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Starmen,” he began. “SE has a major project brewing on Venus and it’s taking a lot of attention. I was down at the spaceport when I got your request for a conference! Sounds urgent!”

“Yes sir,” said Mark. “We have a lot to tell you. Zip should be the one to inform you of his discovery. I purposely left it rather vague—just that we had a vital and urgent matter to share with you.”

“Thanks, Mark,” said Zip. “First, I’ll send you the results of yesterday’s labors.” He sent a copy of the three-moon image that he had enhanced and brought into three dimensions.

“With that in front of you, sir, I’ll tell you what I discovered.” He explained what had happened aboard the asteroid and his work that led to the identification of the Benefactors’ planet. Zip juxtaposed an image of Mars in the 21st century, shown from the same vantage point as that which showed Ahmanya, with the likeness in the three-moon image and showed point after point of correlation. Richard’s expression quickly turned grave, but his attention never wavered and he did not interrupt.

When Zip had finished, Richard pressed his lips together tightly and looked down for a few seconds. Then he looked back directly into the screen.

Obviously profoundly shaken, he said, “This is devastating news. The implications are enormous! You are to be congratulated, David. It’s fine work. I agree completely that you need to go to Mars. The Benefactors are taking the lead on this and we have to follow. Will you be coming back to Amundsen before going out?”

“No sir,” said Zip. “I want to go right away—today is not too soon.”

“I agree,” said Richard soberly, nodding. “What can I do?”

“Contact Oritz Konig and let him know that we’re coming. Now that we know more about Mars’ history, I want to look for what may be signs of the ancient civilization. Konig’s been searching all over Mars for suitable sites for emergency bases for SE and probably has the most up-to-date, detailed maps of the planet. He can help us a lot. But mostly, I want to be available if there are any Martians there who want to contact us.”

“Okay, Zip! You’ve got my approval and support! Go ahead, all of you. And Zip—”

Zip lifted his eyebrows. Richard continued. “Tharsos is a brilliant name. As soon as we can make these events public, that’s what we’ll call the Asteroid. In the meantime, of course, the fewer people who learn what you’ve discovered, the better. We can’t afford to risk having the Xenobots learn that there are some Martian survivors—especially if they are aboard the Asteroid—er, Tharsos.”

“Thank you, sir,” Zip smiled. They signed off.

~

Messages were queuing up on Richard’s communicator, but he ignored them. He sat alone and pensive at the great teak desk in his office, more than a hundred stories above the Moon’s surface. He rested his chin on his left hand and with his right fingers tapped an idle rhythm on the desktop. He was doing some deep thinking.

Tharsos was an amazingly powerful structure. Though the key to its operation had not been located, it was clearly built with the power to blast entire planets into cinders and warp space to achieve the equivalent of speeds many times faster than light. It had traveled far outside the Solar System to who knows where.

The race that built it must have been inconceivably advanced, yet an enemy had come to their home planet and broiled its surface. That enemy was still around and, perhaps, was closing in. The Martians feared that enemy—yet that enemy also feared the Martians. Richard suddenly felt very small, a

representative of an infant race caught between battling giants.

There were obviously Martians still aboard Tharsos, but they were in hiding. To his knowledge, they hadn't interfered with Troy Putnam or Lurton Zimbardo, even when the madman had slung the Asteroid toward Earth in a collision course. Despite Starlight's best efforts to find any sign of their presence aboard the Asteroid, they had remained hidden.

Richard's expression creased with worry. Two more names of callers appeared on his display screen, showing that messages were continuing to stream into his office. Still, he continued to ponder what Starman David Foster had told him.

The Martians aboard Tharsos were frightened, very much so. There was a reason why they were not being forthright about their existence. Was it fear? If so, what they feared was beyond Richard's ability to understand. Was it another reason?

Richard got up out of his chair. Finding the Martians, he decided, was of utmost importance, and it was probably extremely dangerous—more dangerous than the Starmen realized. They were going to Mars now mostly to make themselves visible in the hope that the Martians would contact them and bring them to the next step. But there was just too much that neither the Starmen nor he knew. There were pieces of the puzzle missing, and he wanted to find them.

John Rwakatare could take over the Venus project. He himself was going to follow the Starmen to Mars quietly in his own ship and be ready to help in any way they might need. He wouldn't even consider letting someone else take that responsibility.

Chapter 5: Martian Plums

THE *STAR RANGER* drew near to Mars. The journey from Tharsos had taken over three weeks, since Mars was more than two months from superior opposition to Earth. Communication between the planets was at its most complex stage. Messages could be lost as they were transferred between the communicator

satellites, especially when the messages were routed around the sun. Most of the time communication was successful, but it could still take up to half an hour for a message to travel from one planet to the other.

“There’s a sweeping dust storm in the southern hemisphere,” announced Mark when the *Star Ranger* was still several hours away from touchdown. “It looks like one of the largest in many years.”

Joe and Zip looked at the navigator’s instruments. Mark brought up the magnification of the image and slowly zoomed in on the scene. Mountain peaks showed themselves sharply out of a reddish-brown haze, but most of the rest of the screen showed a blur.

“Well...” said Zip. “Let’s just hope we don’t have to go down south. It looks as if that’s going to be churning for several weeks before it blows out.”

“Compare that with the image of Ahmanya,” said Joe. Mark manipulated the controls and the inhospitable scouring wind was gradually replaced by the view of Ahmanya they had come to know well. “Overlay the features, if you can, Mark,” Joe added.

“Only about 15% of the view overlaps, Joe. We only have the one side of Ahmanya and some of that’s in shadow. Most of what we know as Ahmanya is on the other side of the planet right now.”

“You know,” said Zip. “It’s going to be hard when we land and see our friends. Besides Richard, right now we’re the only ones who know that this planet was once a paradise of water and forest. We’re the only ones who know that we’re landing on a planet that saw wholesale extermination of its people a long time ago. I don’t know whether I can pretend that all is well when our friends greet us.”

“Yeah,” agreed Joe soberly.

“We have done well in the past century or so,” mused Mark. “We human beings, that is. After the Collapse, we rebuilt our modern cities and ventured into worlds undreamed of since the childhood of our race, probed the secrets of the atom and found

unimagined power. But I wonder if people really change, if they really learn their lesson.”

“What’re you talking about, Mark?” asked Joe.

“I’ve seen stately buildings in the northwest, big cities compared to the ranchland of Montana where I was raised, and I was impressed. I’ve been in the floating cities and was awed by the extent of human achievement, especially since the Collapse. Now I’m living a dream that many people had for generations—the ecstasy of traveling through realms of space. I’ve stood on our Solar System’s most distant planet and found it beautiful.

“But look at that planet below us. A whole people died down there in a horrendous conflagration that simply staggers the imagination. Does technology improve people? Could it happen again? Could it happen again on Earth? The great buildings I’ve seen have many blank windows where someone can stand and look out unfeeling on the canyons below, just as, ... just as hostile to life as that sandstorm below. Just in a different way, that’s all—that sand down there will scour your flesh, but sometimes—sometimes even surrounded by the best of technology, there are things that can shred the spirit. Zip—you stayed with the Tunnel People in Eagle City! Even in this frontier settlement there is already an offscouring of humanity!”

Below them, the hundred-mile-an-hour winds of Mars abraded the mostly lifeless expanse of sand and sharp stone that once had known a civilization.

~

The *Star Ranger* made its final approach to Eagle City. To the left of the spacecraft and below its line of descent, Phobos moved past them in its fast orbit, dazzling for a moment like a topaz in the violet-dark sky. Moments later, Joe brought the ship down to a landing so smooth that his partners couldn’t tell for sure they were down until he shut the engines off.

The walls of Eagle Crater, once known simply as Crater 91, rose around them. Two square miles of hard-fused sand made up

the landing area on the east side of the capital city of Mars. Eagle City was home for about 100,000 people, more than a tithe of the entire population of the fourth planet. The streets were laid out in a simple grid pattern. The buildings were mostly constructed of hardened red brick with a fair amount of sandstone and an occasional edifice of hard stone quarried from the substance of the Crater itself.

A transport vehicle was already speeding across the landing area to the *Star Ranger* as the three Starmen set foot on the ground. They had made an effort to look their best. Their uniforms were newly serviced and the bright red almost glowed like fire in the noonday sun.

“Greetings, Starmen!” shouted the driver as he skidded to a stop in front of them. “Sorry,” he added as a small cloud of dust blew their way, stirred up by his sharp braking. “Welcome to Eagle City! Let me take your bags!” He was in his mid-twenties and had unruly hair as red as Zip’s, strikingly set off by his burgundy ground crew uniform.

When he had stashed their gear and seen that they were seated safely, he turned the vehicle in a tight half-circle and sped back toward the terminal. The control tower, rising four stories above the terminal’s center, had a broad view of the field. The workers at the landing site greeted the three Starmen with glad respect as they cruised toward the station. When they arrived, the Starmen stepped out and unloaded their luggage. Zip thanked the driver, who then shot off with a jaunty wave.

~

“We’re doing some research on the ancient Martians,” Zip explained to the commanding officer in the tower. “We were here last November and visited Final Ilien.”

“I remember that visit,” acknowledged the man, a stocky, well fed individual with the insignia of Space Command worn prominently on his shoulders. “Rather brief, wasn’t it?”

“Yes sir. We only had a day or two before our ship picked us

up on the way to Europa. We may want to visit Final Ilien again, but we're interested in any similar sites—old settlements, lost cities, ruins, anything like that—that may be referenced in your files.”

“I can't get you into Final Ilien, I'm sure you know that. It's privately owned—by those Wind People.” He spoke evenly but with just the slightest tone of disapproval in his voice.

“We understand that. We're interested in other sites of a similar nature that may exist. Even legends, miner's tales, stories, if there's not anything concrete...” Zip let his voice trail off.

“I don't deal in legends, Starman,” said the man in a manner that no one could object to. “For that you'll do better on the west side of the city. I understand you've got some friends out that way.” He emphasized the words “west” and “friends” a little too much.

“Yes, we do,” interjected Joe. “They were instrumental in saving Eagle City from the pirates a couple of summers ago. Perhaps you remember the occasion.”

“I don't mean any disrespect, Starman Taylor. Of course I remember, and gratefully, too. We're all grateful here for everything you did for us back then. I wasn't here at the time myself, sorry to say. My assignment here is new—just last fall, to be frank with you. It's for that reason, you see, that I am not familiar with any records of archeological sites on the planet. We've had a lot to do, to get rebuilt after all the damage of that time. More than anything else, my head's been spinning trying to track down the source of flilox. Trade in that scourge has spiked in the last three months. I'm sure you understand that I've been preoccupied.”

~

“I wonder what *that* was all about?” said Joe. “He made us about as welcome as the taxman! Are people's memories that short around here?” The Starmen were cruising in a rented, open-topped vehicle to the west side of town, moving well under the

speed limit of thirty-five miles per hour.

“No accounting for some people, I guess,” said Mark. “He’s new, he needs to show he’s in charge. I suppose having us around too prominently would make it hard for him to show who’s the authority around here—namely, him.”

“The way the ground crew greeted us shows that people haven’t forgotten,” said Zip. “And look at the way these people here are waving.” He raised his hand to acknowledge the smiles and greetings of two or three women on the sidewalk. The redheaded Starman steered around a pile of bricks that extended out into the street a little too far. They passed familiar storefronts, offices, and small parkways. To the right a fountain played in an open courtyard. To the left was a library and city hall. The residential sections spread out on both sides behind the public buildings.

Zip turned right, then left again. “There’s the warehouse where Stavri was captured,” he pointed out. “If anyone knows about any ‘archeological sites on the planet’, he will.”

Banners were stretched across narrow streets, and awnings shaded the outside walkways. Advertisements for theaters, shops, and restaurants as well as various services became more prolific and gaudier as the Starmen continued westward. The benches on the walkways and in the gardens were filled with people more often than not. Elderly people, mostly men, sat idly—some reading, some playing games with each other, some simply looking off into the distance. As the Starmen drove by, occasionally someone stared at them, turning his head to follow their progress until the vehicle moved out of sight.

Zip pulled up to the curb and stopped.

“Why are we stopping here, Zip?” asked Joe. “The *Lizard’s Watering Hole* is still four blocks up, isn’t it?”

“We’ll get to the McTaggarts soon enough,” responded Zip, stepping onto the street. “Let’s get some lunch here. We’ve never been to this establishment before. Let’s find out what people are willing to talk about.”

Directly across the street a restaurant occupied a prominent

position on the corner. *Wind's End* was painted on a shingle. White letters skillfully printed on a dark green background made an attractive sign. Large plate glass windows faced the streets on two sides. The sun, just past noon, slanted down sharply on the west side of the building. Zip opened the door and walked in, with Joe and Mark not far behind.

Several tables surrounded with sturdy chairs were placed on the floor and long tables with benches were arranged at the back. There was also a counter with stools. The place was not quite half full. When the Starmen entered, all the patrons turned and looked at them.

A young woman hurried up to them from behind the counter, wiping her hands on a clean white towel. She was, perhaps, in her early thirties, with long blond hair pulled back and held in place with a ribbon. She was slightly overweight but showed the glow of good health.

"Welcome, Starmen!" she exclaimed, clearly delighted to see them in her establishment and eager to please. "Please, come in! Sit down! What can I get you? The specialty of the house is spiced meat loaf and baked potatoes with cheese. We can serve the meat loaf as spicy as you like—or not, if you like it mild," she added, glancing at their faces and hoping she hadn't come across as too enthusiastic. "And there's a new shipment of fresh oranges just come in."

"That's just what I'll have," boomed Joe. "I'm hungry, and I can smell the meat loaf from here." He stretched out his long legs to one side of the table. Zip and Mark ordered the same thing.

After they had eaten and praised the woman for the delicious meal, she brought them a bowl containing several small fruit the size and color of plums.

"I think you'll find these to your liking, Starmen," she said with a shy smile. "They're on the house. We all remember what you did for us a while back, and we're grateful. Please, sample these fruits."

Mark and Joe had been staring at the bowl as soon as she set it

down. They both sat up straight, glanced at each other, and then Mark reached out a hand carefully and took one of the fruit. He smelled it, then bit into it.

“Is it the same?” asked Joe.

“It is,” said Mark.

“Same as what?” asked Zip.

“We ate these when we stayed with Jogren, Zip,” explained Mark. Zip’s face suddenly flushed. A sudden realization came to him with stunning force.

The young woman looked at them with a puzzled expression on her face. “Is there something wrong?” she asked anxiously.

“Oh no, no, not at all!” Joe hastened. “It’s just that we’ve tasted these before and they were delicious, and we never thought we’d see them again! What are they?”

“They’re just Martian plums,” stammered the woman. “They grow somewhere out northwest, far beyond the Crater. Once in a while one of the prospectors brings me a basketful of them.”

“Which prospector?” asked Zip.

“Why, that one over there—on the bench out in front. He just finished his lunch before you came in. He’s one of my regulars—at least when he’s in the Crater. His name is Charles Stansby.”

“Would you invite him to join us, please? We’d like to thank him for the fruit—and you, too!”

The woman went out and invited the man to come back inside. Still seated on the bench, he turned his head and looked over his left shoulder at the Starmen, then began to talk animatedly with the woman. The Starmen couldn’t hear the conversation, but a moment later the man ambled inside and took the fourth seat at their table.

He looked about sixty but was probably closer to forty. His skin showed signs of chronic dryness and his hands were scarred with numerous small cuts, scrapes, and burns that hadn’t been tended properly. He obviously cut his own hair, which was pure white. Scrapes on his chin showed that he had shaved recently, but wasn’t in the habit of shaving very often.

“Name’s Charles Stansby,” he said by way of introduction.

The Starmen introduced themselves. The woman saw that they were comfortable, then hustled off behind the counter.

“We’d like to thank you for the fruit, Mr. Stansby,” began Mark. The man began to chuckle quietly to himself. “Excuse me,” said Mark. “Did I say something funny?”

“Nobody’s called me ‘Mr. Stansby’ for at least twenty years, young man,” he wheezed. “I’m just ‘Charles’ to most people. And you’re welcome to the fruit. I bring ’em for Gillian. She always takes a fancy to ’em and gives a few to her favorite customers now and then.”

“Where do you find them?” Mark continued.

“Well, now, what are you after ’em for? You bein’ Starmen and all, what could *you* want with ’em?”

“We’ve tasted them before, Charles,” interjected Joe. “In the summer two years ago, Mark here and I and another friend of ours were in the desert northwest of the Crater. We met an odd fellow named Jogren, and he fed us some of these.”

“And why are you looking for ’em again now?”

“Charles,” said Zip. “We’re looking for more than plums. We’d like to find Jogren again and we’re not sure just how to do it. Maybe if we knew where the plums came from we could find him more easily.”

Charles scratched his chin thoughtfully, and then spoke up with a hint of wariness in his voice.

“Well, seein’ as how you’re Starmen an’ all, like I said before, and seein’ as how you’re the ones that overcome the pirates back then, and did us all a big favor with that, that’s for sure—” He paused a moment. “I’ll tell you. It’s pretty easy to get to the place, though it’s not close. Gillian!” he called. “Bring me a piece of paper and somethin’ to write with, won’t you!”

After Gillian brought the materials, Charles set out to explain where he found the plums, and then drew a map.

“Now there’s a number o’ places out there where you can find the fruit growing wild. Short, stubby, purple kinda trees, usually in the shady part of a canyon and in the lee of the wind, you know.” He sketched the features of the terrain as he spoke. He

drew quickly with a practiced hand.

“Now there’s a great section of mud right about here, dried mud, hard almost as stone.”

“The mud caves!” exclaimed Joe.

“Yes, there’re caves in there. And on the far side about five miles or so beyond is a weird patch of lichen that glows something strange when it’s dark.” Charles filled in the features of the map, and then added a line of foothills with narrow canyons and rocky defiles several miles north of the lichen.

“You can’t fly into this area—’least not very far. When you get here,” he drew a light circle, “you’ll have to land and walk the rest of the way. You’ll find the trees bunched up around here.” The point of his pencil tapped on the indicated area.

“Do you know Jogren?” asked Zip.

The prospector’s eyes shuttered and he kept his glance to the map. “Can’t say that I’ve ever met ’im,” he mumbled.

“Mr. Stansby—Charles,” said Zip. “We’d like to go out to the place where you find these plums, and we’d like to find Jogren. Would you go with us and help us find him?”

For a long time the man didn’t respond. Then he said, “With this map here, I don’t think you’ll have any difficulty finding the place where these plums grow. You shouldn’t have any trouble getting there on your own.”

“Charles!” urged Zip. “Won’t you let us hire you as our guide? It’s very important—more than you, or anyone, might guess!”

The white haired man shuffled to his feet. “Thank you for the offer, young man—Starman—but I got to be going. I’m glad you liked the plums.”

Zip stood up and reached out a hand to grip the man’s sleeve. “Charles, please! We need your help badly! We have to find Jogren!” he pleaded. The man looked alarmed and stepped back a little, shaking his arm free. People at other tables looked up curiously.

“Please think about it,” said Zip, more sedately. “Can we find you somewhere so we can talk again?”

“I’ll be in Eagle City for a few days more,” the prospector

muttered. He eased back out the front door and took his seat on the bench. After a few seconds, however, he got up and walked quickly down the sidewalk and out of their sight.

Zip slowly sat down again and their fellow diners returned to their own conversations.

“Why the fervor, Zip?” asked Joe. “Why do we have to find Jogren?”

“Jogren’s who we’re looking for,” Zip stated. “We came to Mars to find people like him.”

Chapter 6: “One Who Enters By the Left Door”

THE TIME WAS PRESSING on toward midnight, but no one seemed to care. In the tortuous tunnels below the *Lizard’s Watering Hole* the Starmen were seated in Stavri Thalassa’s plain but serviceable living quarters. Stavri reached out and took a small handful of nuts from the bowl he had set out more than two hours earlier but that everyone else had ignored for most of that time. With them were Donal and Doris McTaggart, proprietors of the popular *Watering Hole*.

These three friends had been among the people mostly responsible for the overthrow of the pirates’ attempted takeover of Mars nearly two summers earlier. The Starmen had trusted these outcasts of Eagle City’s population with their lives, and now had trusted them with the full scope of their current search. Zip, who at first had felt the need to keep the facts from everyone, had decided to share the story with their closest friends on Mars under the solemn promise of confidentiality.

“Gives me mind more ’n a few twists, I tell ye,” said Donal, shaking his head for about the tenth time since Zip had finished the tale. “I think that there’re people livin’ on this planet who belong to the ancient race and us never knowin’. I can’t rightly fathom it!”

“We can’t be sure,” clarified Mark. “We won’t be sure until we find Jogren again, but it makes all the sense in the world!”

“Well, we’ve told you the story and answered all your questions,” said Zip. “Now is there someone who can guide us to where he might be found? Charles apparently can’t. At least he won’t admit to much of anything.”

“Charles is a guid man,” contributed Doris. “He’s just not comfortable bein’ a subject of anyone’s attention. I doot he’s regrettin’ that he’s told you what he knows, but he’s not likely to be guidin’ you around in th’ outlands. It’d draw too much scrutiny his way, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what you mean,” said Zip. “What is there to be afraid of?”

“There’s nothing, now, you can rightly put a finger on,” said Donal. He leaned forward a little and pursed his lips. “Things’re back to normal, you might say, after we cleaned out th’ city o’ the accursed pirates. But there’s a kind o’ undercurrent. The past year or so we’ve had a noticeable lot o’ new clientele in the *Watering Hole*,” he nodded his head upward, “and there’s just a feelin’, you know, like they don’t really want t’ know the local business an’ gossip an’ such, like they’re too *busy* about some business. And they’re not talkin’ about it, whatever it may be. Now that’s nae like the kind o’ customers we’re used to, and Doris ’n me, we’ve been here a lang time and we know.”

Doris continued. “We’ve gotten people from all over Mars, even frae the farthest outposts, and just aboot all they want t’ do is *talk*—even if they’re shy or the quiet-type. Take Charles, now—he’s a loner like most o’ them, but he knows that people have t’ connect up with people *sometime* or other, don’t you know. He talks when he wants, and he knows how t’ choose his friends. But some o’ these others,” she grimaced and clucked her tongue. “They close up tight.”

“What they’re trying to say, Starmen,” explained Stavri, “is that that kind of behavior makes the regulars nervous—like there’s some sort of secret in their own hometown that strangers know but they themselves are not privy to. And the new officials—take that Space Command gasbag you were describing a while back, fer one—some of ’em seem to be more interested

in ‘opportunities’ than in doin’ their job. Not all of them, by any means, don’t get me wrong!”

“But surely *someone* will be willing to help us find Jogren!” erupted Joe. “Everything you’re saying is just rumor and gossip and bad feeling. There’s nothing *factual* I’ve heard yet!”

“Ach, nae doot we can find someone fer ye,” said Donal. “But you haven’t given us much to gae on, either! I have heerd that that adventurin’ fellow ye were gaein’ about wi’ afore is back in town. Maybe he could be persuaded to taek ye back oot again.”

“What!” cried Mark. “You mean Steve Cliff?”

“Aye, the same. Some o’ oor patrons this evenin’ said they’d seen ’im about the spaceport this very afternoon but he didn’t come t’ see us tonight. Nae doot we’ll see him tomorrow.”

“Well, it would be great to see him again,” said Joe, “but I’m not so sure he’d be much better off than we are in trying to find Jogren. We sure didn’t ever expect to be going back out that way and when we first saw the place it was in a whirling snowstorm. The next day, Jogren took the lead and it was miles before there were any kind of landmarks. I’m sure we could find the general area without much difficulty, but even if we did it could still take weeks, even months, before we found him in all that wasteland of canyons and ridges.”

“We still have to trust the ancient Martians to find *us*, if they want to,” stated Zip. “Tomorrow let’s take the *Star Ranger* and cruise the general area. We’ll take photographs, a few measurements with other instruments, and try to make an educated guess about where Jogren must be. Then we’ll go out there, with or without a guide.”

~

An overweight, balding man of clear Chinese ancestry looked away from the nervous face on his personalized, encrypted communicator, leaned back in his plush chair, and then looked out the floor-to-ceiling window that filled the east side of

his den. “One can never rest,” he said to no one in particular. “Just when you think things are running smoothly, someone has to come in and cause a problem.” He sighed and shook his head with an air of annoyance. He returned his attention to his caller.

“You will enter the Starman’s ship secretly and destroy their information files. When they return to their ship and discover the damage, you will send them an ultimatum that they are to leave Mars immediately—let me make that very clear: they are to take off *IMMEDIATELY!* You will see that all three of them receive the ultimatum simultaneously *after* they learn that their ship has been violated but in all events *before* they enter it. You will station a sharpshooter on the rim of the spaceport hangar used for long-term repairs and maintenance, farthest from the busiest part of the field. If the Starmen do not follow the ultimatum, the sharpshooter will kill them. You will follow my directions at once. Either way, by nightfall today the Starmen will no longer be a concern of ours.”

The man signed off. His voice was even and polite, but carried an unnerving edge that showed that nobody had disobeyed him for a long, long time.

Although he was in his mid-fifties, the man carried his age well, as had nearly all of his ancestors. He was proud of his heritage and had traced his genealogy back more than 700 years into the feudal age in China. He found it deeply gratifying that his ancestry connected him with the line of the Emperor himself, though the man’s line of descent was traced through a younger sister who had never sat on the throne.

His given name was Ban Zou Men. Literally translated, it meant “one who enters by the left door”. Over his years on Mars he had quietly amassed a large cabal of corrupt officials and thugs who had Anglicized his name to “the Banjoman”.

~

Joe was livid. His face was flushed dark red and he was shouting at a frightened ioneer. “Where were you when it

happened? How could this possibly have gone on?"

Zip was silent but white with anger. Mark's nostrils were opening and closing with the intensity of his ire, and his hands were rolled into fists.

The Starmen had returned to the spaceport that evening, and learned that during the afternoon the *Star Ranger* had been broken into and its computers that contained their log and secure research information had been demolished in a fury of systematic, well-aimed blows. Technicians had been at work for more than two hours removing the irreparable equipment. Pieces of the hammered panels and consoles were set out on the landing area in the shadow of the ship.

Suddenly, before the ioneer could make any response, all three compads carried by the Starmen alerted them to an urgent incoming message.

"What's this?" fired Zip with fierce impatience. "All of us at the same time?" They opened their compads. A written message began to scroll across the screen: **YOU WON'T FIND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR IN THE MARTIAN OUTBACK. LEAVE MARS IMMEDIATELY. DO NOT RETURN TO EAGLE CITY. LEAVE NOW. WE CAN DAMAGE MORE THAN YOUR EQUIPMENT. EASILY.**

"Who thinks he can threaten us?" Joe boomed. His anger had become explosive. Mark, still furious, had become wary.

Zip pushed the button that traced incoming calls. His screen read **◆ □ □ ◆ ✕ ⚬**. "Encrypted and untraceable, of course!" He shut his compad down, placed it into its compartment on his left sleeve, and lifted his chin. With the characteristic measured determination that made him a leader, he stated, "Well, we're not leaving Mars. I don't know what enemy we've made, but this threat convinces me that we're on the right track!"

More than two hundred yards away, a man dressed in black was lying on top of an unfrequented spaceport hangar amid a jumble of conduits, exhaust pipes, and access hatchways. The orange-haloed sun had just dropped below the highest edge of the west crater wall and pencil-thin shadows stretched across the landing area. The man's suit merged perfectly with the deepening

gloom of evening, making him all but invisible to the eye.

The man had a small receiver in his ear that was attached to a listening device, and he was looking through binoculars. After he heard Zip's defiant words he quietly picked up the powerful laser rifle that was arranged next to him. The man assured himself that the rifle was set to maximum power and directed it over the top of the low barrier that ringed the roof. He crawled a little forward, made himself comfortable, and peered through the scope.

The Starman leader's head and upper torso appeared in the rifle's viewport. The redhead was facing obliquely away from the sharpshooter, addressing Mark and Joe. The man carefully aimed so that his shot would send a powerful spear of light through Zip's neck. He would then quickly dispatch the other two Starmen. There was no shelter nearby where they could find cover. He estimated that he could shoot all three of them in less than two seconds.

When the sniper was about to pull the trigger, a dark figure stepped silently out of the shadows and rapidly reached a hand toward the unsuspecting prone rifleman. He pressed his thumb into the hollow behind the man's right ear and wrapped his fingers loosely around his throat. Then with enormous force he brought the man's chin upward to full extension, lifted him up, and threw him back against the wall that enclosed the top of a stairwell. The gunman slipped down, unconscious. Wordlessly and efficiently, the dark figure retrieved the rifle from the place where it had clattered aside, gathered the binoculars and listening equipment, and put all the gear into the sniper's own storage bags. He slung the bags over his shoulder, then grasped the unconscious man and quietly dragged him into the warren of rooftop fixtures.

~

"Why didn't you call us as soon as you discovered the damage?" Zip finally spoke through compressed lips. The frightened pioneer gratefully turned his attention from Joe to Zip.

“No one knew where to find you, sir,” he stammered.

“I gave our call number to the Commander as soon as we arrived,” Zip snapped.

“I’m sorry, sir, but he told us he didn’t know how you could be contacted. He said you were keeping your whereabouts to yourself, sir.”

“What about Joe’s question: how could this happen? Where were you all when someone entered our ship?” All three Starmen felt an outrageous sense of personal violation. The ship was like their home, and their private belongings were aboard. In bright daylight in a supposedly secure area, the record of their correspondence with their family and friends, the integral files of their work, and the primary copies of their records of Ahmanya had been plundered and destroyed.

“I can’t explain it, sir. Our security equipment shows no sign of unauthorized entry at any gate or onto the field at any time. The patrol saw nothing out of the ordinary, and their written records and security tapes bear that out. It wasn’t until the late afternoon that someone saw that the airlock door had been dented. She tried the door, found it open, went inside, and discovered the damage, sir. We began to repair it immediately.”

“Did no one take any record of what it looked like before your technicians destroyed any evidence?” pressed Mark.

“No sir. We knew you were in a hurry and wanted to get the repairs done as quickly as we could and we didn’t think of it. We expect to have your ship back in working order by tomorrow morning, sir. We’ve called in a special crew to work through the night.”

“Joe,” said Zip. “You take charge of the repairs. See that they’re being done correctly. Mark, let’s go talk to the Commander.”

~

“I’m telling you, no one called me, Starman!” asserted the Commander heatedly. He was sitting at his desk in his office on the top level of the tower. Two determined Starmen stood before

him. “You can check the records for yourself! Check the records, I insist!” He pushed over a sheaf of papers that had been printed moments earlier.

“I will,” said Zip evenly. He skimmed the logbook and saw no report of anything out of the ordinary.

“You see?” said the Commander, a little smugly. “I don’t understand what you’re accusing me of. The repairs will be effected by tomorrow morning—at no charge to you, of course. I’m very sorry for the inconvenience, I’m sure, but we’ll make good on the damage.”

“Obviously, Commander, an invader breached your security and entered our ship and damaged it. Surely someone on the ground crew would have informed you as soon as it was discovered. I want to talk to the person who first noticed the broken door on our ship, the one who made the call.”

“I’m telling you that no one made any call! But I received a report just moments after you arrived, and the person you want to talk to is Fay Shideler. She reported for duty at noon. I’ll call for her.” The Commander placed a call for Fay Shideler to come to the tower office.

After a long wait with no answer, the Commander repeated the call. “I’m sorry, sir,” came the response, “but Shideler has gone home sick.”

“I want her address, Commander,” demanded Zip. His gray eyes looked out evenly from under his red brows. Daunted, the Commander shuffled some papers on his desk, muttering, “I don’t know why you can’t just accept our apology and wait for our crew to repair your ship.” Neither Starman answered. The Commander provided the address and communicator number that they had demanded. The Starmen left his office with only a curt word of thanks.

Back on the landing area, Joe was just descending the ladder of the *Star Ranger* when his partners returned. A few members of the ground crew were visible a long way off, their burgundy-colored uniforms striking in the late afternoon light. The lanky Starman stepped onto the ground, rubbed his hands on his pants,

turned, and ran a hand through his hair.

“Well, it doesn’t look too hard to fix,” he said. “Mostly just replacing the hardware, and there are two guys up there doing that. Our files are gone, but we’ve got the working copies with us on our compads and we can have the major files sent to us from Starlight.”

Zip took out his compad and called the number the Commander had provided for Fay Shideler. There was no answer.

“Mark and I’ll go call on this person, Joe. You stay here and make sure the *Star Ranger* is not left unguarded.”

“Sure, Zip.”

~

Almost two hours later Zip and Mark returned. They were fuming.

“Landlady said that Fay took off just before nightfall. Apparently the ‘sickness’ was a story she gave to the crew here when she wanted a few hours off somewhere. No one knows where she went—just somewhere outside the crater in her personal craft. No one’s answering her communicator.”

Joe snorted. “They sure don’t run this place the way they used to. If you ask me, this ‘new Commander’ isn’t going to last long. Eagle City is too important to put up with this kind of slipshod management.”

“How’re the repairs coming?” asked Mark.

“Okay. We ran into a little problem. The trivardian simulator is cracked. I didn’t notice it before and they don’t have one in stock here. If you can believe it, they say that their computer system is broken down and they can’t check the inventory in the warehouses! I’ve had to send someone into town on foot to survey as many as five warehouses!”

Mark scowled. “Computer system broken down? Whoever heard of a computer system breaking down? Sounds to me like we’re getting the runaround!”

“That was my reaction too, but believe me, they can’t do

enough for us here! Five people volunteered to go after the part, and I've been plied with sandwiches and coffee since you guys left."

When the errand runner hadn't returned after an hour, Joe asked someone in the landing field office to contact him. He answered immediately.

"Sorry, sir," said a young voice. He sounded harried. "I've been to three warehouses and no one has any of 'em. There're still two more supply warehouses in the city to check. It's taking me a little longer than you might think since it's past dinnertime, but I'll be back as soon as I can."

Joe signed off, but now he was showing signs of irritation and doubt. "It's an unusual part, that's for sure, but not so much that we shouldn't be able to find one. Not every spacecraft needs to know how to configure space and position for close distances, but we can't be without it, especially if we need some precise measurements for what we've got planned out in the field tomorrow."

"He checked the Space Command warehouse, of course?" asked Mark.

"Went there first, naturally."

"They don't have one?" The black-haired Starman was incredulous.

"He found a box of them but it was empty."

Another hour passed before the errand runner returned. He was a boy in his young teens. "Starman Taylor!" he shouted even before he brought his vehicle to a stop. "There aren't any trivardian simulators in Eagle City! *Nobody* has one! But I ordered one from New Emmaus and another from Westcott, just to make sure we get at least one! They're both sending one out immediately. They should arrive just before dawn! I hope that was right, sir!"

The Starmen were too stunned to speak for a moment, but then Zip came to himself and said, "Sure, sure, thanks, that was right." The boy smiled and ran off to get the discharge from his shift. He had stayed overtime to search for the trivardian

simulator and was eager to get home.

“Well, it’s nearly 10:00 p.m.,” said Mark after a long pause. “You’ve had sandwiches, Joe, but Zip and I haven’t eaten dinner. I’m sure you can take in another meal, so I’ll stay here while you two get something and bring it back.”

“I’d rather stay,” said Joe. “There’s a new crew due on before too long and I want to be here for them. You know what I like.”

Zip and Mark began to walk back out to the City.

Chapter 7: Search for an Airship

THE NEXT DAY’S MORNING SUN glowed like bronze over the east rim of the crater. The Starmen had spent a guarded night aboard their dark red spacecraft. No one had contacted them in any way. Zip peered out of the porthole in the crew’s quarters and saw a burgundy-uniformed worker moving slowly across the landing area, casting a long shadow as he strode toward his destination.

Zip rubbed his left thumb back and forth across the top of his fist. Staring out with tense preoccupation, he lifted his coffee cup to his lips.

“I’ve been up since about five,” said Mark behind him. “I checked the engines, fueling system, and all the rest of the propulsion system. There’s no sign of damage and we appear to be ready to lift off as soon as Joe agrees that the computers are properly attuned to the ship.”

“We still need the trivardian simulator,” said Zip without turning his head away from the porthole.

“That was supposed to be here by dawn.”

“Dawn was almost an hour ago. I’m going to call in as soon as I finish this coffee.”

“I already called.” Joe’s voice came from the master control cabinet a flight above the crew quarters. “They said both sources came through and the parts were left for us at the tower.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Mark. “I’ll go get one and we can be

on our way in an hour.”

“Just call them up and have them deliver it,” said Zip. “I’m tired of running around on errands.”

Mark left the crew quarters but returned a moment later. “They said that they’d delivered it to the warehouse at Space Command. We can call for it there.”

Zip tightened his lips and snorted. “What would they do that for? They know we need it and we need it now! If they could deliver it to the warehouse they could have delivered it directly to us!”

“Probably the Commander’s little way of showing us who’s in charge. I’ll go get it. I don’t mind. I called the warehouse and confirmed that the part’s there, waiting for us.”

Zip grimaced, shook his head, and told Mark to go on.

~

Fifteen minutes later Mark called Zip on his compad.

“Zip! Great news! I ran into Steve Cliff here at the warehouse! He’s idle for a few days and would like to go with us to find Jogren again. He says he knows that area of the outback very well!”

“I sure do, son!” Steve’s familiar voice came over Mark’s compad. “I’ve been tryin’ to get some parts for my own ship for a coupla days here, but I gotta wait fer a coupla days more, so I may as well go get into trouble with you lads again!”

“That’s terrific, Steve!” exclaimed Zip. “Nobody in Eagle City seems to be interested in being our guide on a simple trip to the outback! It’ll be good to see you again! Can you come back with Mark?”

“Sure can, Zip! These lizards at Space Command just told me I have to wait at least three more days to get my parts so I’m just sitting around fuming.”

“Mark, did you get the simulator?”

“Success at last, Zip! It’s in my hand now. We’ll see you shortly.”

Zip signed off. “Well, now, Joe, it looks as if things are finally looking up!”

Joe was smiling hugely. “Steve Cliff! If he’s aboard the *Star Ranger*, we’ll be in for some fun—that is, if our engines are able to handle the load of having his bulk aboard!”

~

Mark brought the trivardian simulator and Joe had it installed in a few minutes. The *Star Ranger* was ready to lift off. The three Starmen and Steve were planning their course.

The four men were peering into a navigational table, which was about three feet square. Its glass screen could display any topographical map to which the crew had access. At the moment, ten thousand square miles of the terrain northwest of Eagle Crater were showing. Steve’s ample stomach was pressed right against the frame of the table and his stubby fingers were making circles over a rugged spot.

“Right about there, I’m sure, is where we were when we met Jogren. It’s honeycombed with caves and we’d never find his place from a shuttlecraft. What we really need is a dirigible.”

“A dirigible?” cried Joe. “We don’t have a dirigible! What’s wrong with a shuttlecraft?”

“The place is convoluted with tunnels, deep wind caves, grottos, fissures, and the like. Your shuttlecraft’s hoverjets would use up all its fuel before you covered a tenth o’ what’s out there. There are motorized dirigibles specially designed for the Martian atmosphere. You can move very slowly at low altitudes and your instruments can scour the terrain as thoroughly as you want—just so you remain high enough to be outta the major strength of the winds! I’ve been out that way several times; take my word for it—we need a dirigible.”

“Since when have you been out in these badlands, Steve?” asked Joe. “You didn’t mention that when we were lost out there two summers ago.”

“I get around, Joe. Recently I’ve been doing some

exploration in the badlands of Mars—a number of different places. Southern hemisphere, too. Naturally I started out where we'd had our *Sonntagnachmittagsspaziergang* back in '51. Got to know the place tolerably well. I wasn't looking for Jorgen, though, and I never ran across him again."

"What are you looking for in the badlands?" asked Zip.

"Well, this 'n' that, you know. Artifacts of one kind and another. I was working for a client, if you must know, and I can't broach his confidence. He pays well, though. I got caught in a dust storm last week and got just too many particles in my lubrication system. Ripped up all my filters, so I limped back in here to get replacements. That's what I'm waiting for right now."

"Is that how you injured your eyes?" persisted Zip. Steve's eyes were a little bloodshot and watery, and he blinked frequently.

"Naw! I had my suit on, o' course, but I think I got a little overworked and fell prey to some virus or something. I feel like I haffta sleep a lot and my eyes itch something fierce. But I'll be fine takin' you boys on a jaunt! A lot better'n stickin' around this population center 'n' waitin' for my package to arrive! Pfft! This place is sure fallin' apart since the new administration took over!" He rubbed his eyes, then pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed them again.

"Now about this dirigible you need. I've got a friend. Well, to be honest, we were friends a long time ago, but he'd probably rather not remember that. See, he's become very big on Mars and people like me embarrass him now. He's a prominent businessman. Name's Andrew Forge. He's a multibillionaire and carries a lot of influence. I don't run in his circles any more and don't really want to, and I daresay he'd say the same about me. But I'm sure he's got a dirigible or two of the size we need, and if I talk to him right he'd probably let us borrow one—as a kindness, see."

"Where is he?" asked Zip. "We need a place near where we're going."

"Well," Steve looked apologetic, "he's not near the badlands.

He likes to live and work quietly. He does a lot of good work for the citizens of Mars, but he prefers to be outside the limelight. He started out in Eagle City 'bout twenty-five years ago, but he checked out o' there not long after he made his first coupla million solars. He lives in a beautiful, quiet little town south of the Crater."

"South of here? That's even farther from where we're going. Can't we get a dirigible closer than that? I've seen a little town called Brandow on the maps—it's the closest settlement to where we want to go. Wouldn't someone there have a dirigible we could rent?"

"You don't wanta go there!" Steve said decidedly. "Sure, a lot of the miners and settlers have 'em, and maybe there's one or two even in Brandow, but theirs will only carry one or two people, and they're a bit leery o' lendin' 'em out anyway. They use 'em a lot, o' course, and most o' them folks are a bit standoffish when it comes to dealin' with officialdom like you Starmen—no offense, I'm just tellin' you how they think out there."

"We're not officialdom, Steve," protested Zip. "We're Starmen, working for Starlight Enterprise. And on this assignment, we're working on our own!"

"What is it that you boys are after this time, anyway? I don't believe you ever said," asked Steve.

"We can't say just yet, Steve," stepped in Zip before the other Starmen could answer. "Even though we're functioning independently, we are acting with Richard Starlight's support and under his advice."

"Hmph," grunted Steve with a nod. "Makes no difference to me."

"Now here's where Brandow's located," said Zip, hunched over the map and pointing. "It's northwest of here. It's a mining town of fewer than a thousand people. It's up here, right where the foothills spill out into a smooth plain, about 100 miles away from where we want to go—no more than that!"

"Looks great! Could be just the place we want," said Joe.

“Let’s go on up there and see if we can find a dirigible,” said Zip.

Steve leaned back. He blinked his eyes and ran his handkerchief over his face again. “I think I’ll take a nap while you boys get us to Brandow—if you don’t mind.”

Brandow was a small town that was subject to frequent gale-intensity dust storms. Most of the town was buried underground, but there were several dozen brick buildings of one or two stories in height. A few rock-paved streets in bad repair connected them. To the immediate west a wide river flowed lazily from north to south and made a loop that touched the edge of town.

An abandoned iron foundry hugged the eastern shore of the waterway. It was almost a hundred years old. Most of the original iron for the construction of the town had been forged at that site, but the foundry had not been used for at least forty years.

Several large domes near the buildings showed where most of the settlement was located. Each dome was covered with a film of brown dust. To north, east, and south as far as the eye could see a drab desert rolled away into the haze. To the west, russet wind-scoured foothills tumbled down from rocky escarpments and faded out into the sand not far from the town. There were marks in the sand that showed where wheeled vehicles had left the streets and gone out to some of the mining leads.

The *Star Ranger* was anchored to a large concrete slab adjacent to one of the domes. The Starman and Steve clambered down out of the ship, crossed the sandy wasteland that separated the landing pad from the access dome, and came through the airlock into the receiving area. The place was well kept but sparsely furnished. The fixtures were old and dented, but serviceable.

“We don’t get many visitors out this way, Starman.” The controller who had permitted them to land was addressing Zip. The man’s head was shaped like a bullet, and was crowned with blond hair that needed to be washed. His hands were greasy.

“Just a couple a week in the busy season.” He smiled to show that he had made a joke.

Zip returned a friendly smile. “We’re looking for a large dirigible,” he said. “We’re going into the badlands for a few days and need one that’ll carry the four of us and some equipment.”

The man lifted his eyebrows and pursed his lips in surprise.

“Well, this must be our busy season for sure, then, Starman,” he began apologetically. “We had a party just this morning show up and take a dirigible. They were back on foot ’n about an hour, saying they’d had a smashup. Nobody hurt, but they left me the directions to the wreck and took the other dirigible. I’m afraid I don’t have anything for you, and no idea when we will.”

The Starmen looked stunned and unbelieving. “You don’t have a dirigible for us?” stammered Joe.

The man turned his attention to the lanky Starman. “No sir, I’m sorry. I’ll be glad to call the hangar over to Relcon, if you like. They’re the closest settlement to here and they’ve got three.”

“How far are they from here?”

“’Bout four hundred miles due north and a bit east.”

“Four hundred?” spat out Zip. “That’ll put us more than 500 miles from our goal!”

“I hope you boys aren’t in a hurry,” said Steve. “Go ahead ’n’ call,” he said to the man.

~

“I can’t believe it,” said the man, shaking his head with frustration and amazement. “Relcon had three o’ the big dirigibles, but early this morning their hangar caught fire and they were all burned right down to the framework. Some kind of oxygen fire, they said.”

Joe spun on his heel and pounded his fist into the air. “What is this?” he yelled. “Looks to me like somebody doesn’t want us to get out to the badlands!”

“Where else can we find a dirigible?” asked Zip grimly.

“Well, there aren’t that many to begin with, sir,” answered the blond man, “and the closest after Relcon must be more ’n a thousand miles from here, out eastward. I’m afraid you won’t find any of the airships closer than that.”

The Starmen took leave of the man and sought counsel with Steve. They were sitting in the lounge on the side of the hangar.

“Now what?” asked Joe with ill-concealed irritation.

For a moment no one said anything, then Steve spoke up, smiling and blinking with a hint of embarrassment. “Well, there’s still my friend. I’m sure he’ll have what we need.”

“Shall we send him word?” asked Zip resignedly.

Steve shook his head decisively. “It’s better if we just go. If we send word, I think he’d find a reason not to see me but if I just show up—and with three Starmen—that’ll whet his curiosity. He’s more likely to see us that way.”

“Let’s go,” said Zip.

~

Mr. Andrew Forge’s several billion solars in assets made him the major businessman on Mars, though he hadn’t lived in Eagle City for more than two decades. As soon as he had amassed sufficient capital, he had moved out into Seven Leaves, a placid town of about two thousand inhabitants located in a shallow valley several hundred miles south of Eagle City. His business ventures had continued to prosper, though they continued, for the most part, on their own momentum. Managers simply kept the various projects moving, and Mr. Forge was, to all appearances, retired.

He enjoyed being the town’s “famous citizen”. On the eastern edge of the city limits he had built a mansion out of quarried stone and paneled it with scarce, nearly priceless wood. Many citizens of Seven Leaves, especially the young people, found welcome employment on his staff of chefs, landscapers, gardeners, mechanics, housekeepers, maintenance personnel, and managers.

Most important was his well-trained security staff, none of

whom had come from Seven Leaves. They were far better equipped than any citizen of Seven Leaves could have imagined. Most of the people of the small, peaceful hamlet would have been acutely alarmed had they known of the potent weaponry concealed in the impressively beautiful mansion on the east side of town. They would have been terrified had they known that more than half of the security staff were sleepless androids.

The *Star Ranger* touched down at the Seven Leaves spaceport, and Steve and the three Starmen descended. Space suits were not needed, for Mr. Forge had provided inconspicuous apparatus at various places throughout the valley by which the atmosphere was maintained and the weather was kept temperate.

The town was almost painfully beautiful, with a large reservoir a mile or so away from which the town received its water. Irrigation made colorful gardens possible as well as many acres of green lawns. The warm springtime weather was reminiscent of New England on Earth. Many dozens of trees were in blossom throughout the community. A slight breeze cooled the air. The buildings were constructed of red brick, and had roofs made of tiles of several warm earth tones.

The town had been laid out with careful attention to the flow of land and water, so that gardens and paths followed patterns pleasing to the eye, and houses appeared to have been placed almost at random. The town center, with shops and common buildings, was geometrically satisfying. The visitors experienced a feeling of peace growing over them as soon as their feet touched the landing area.

“Doesn’t look like the kind of place where you’d want to shout,” observed Joe.

The four men strolled up to the tiny terminal building. A slender old man, well into his seventies, sat at the desk inside. His hair was completely white and carefully combed. His skin was tan and supple, and his teeth looked perfectly straight.

“Good afternoon,” he beamed as soon as they entered the door. “Welcome to Seven Leaves.”

“Thank you,” said Zip. “We’re here to visit Mr. Forge.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No,” said Steve, taking over the conversation. “I’m an old friend of his, just dropping by. I was in the area and wanted to introduce my friends here, the Starmen. They’re the ones who foiled the pirates a coupla summers back. Saved a lotta Mr. Forge’s investments and I thought he’d like to express his thanks personally.”

“I see, sir. And if you’ll forgive me for asking, who may I tell him is calling for him?”

“Oh sorry,” erupted Steve, punctuating his apology with a bellow of embarrassment and a look of chagrin. “I’m Steve, Steve Cliff. I’ve known Andy since he opened up his first shop in Eagle City.”

If the greeter was unused to visitors referring to Mr. Forge as “Andy”, he managed to conceal it. He turned to his communicator and announced that a Mr. Steve Cliff and three Starmen had dropped by to see Mr. Forge.

“Well, Mr. Cliff,” he said a moment later, “it seems that Mr. Forge is in and will be glad to see you. I must say that I am somewhat surprised.”

“I don’t blame you! I’m sure I’m not the kinda guy who frequents the palace out there.” This time the greeter was unable to conceal a slight wince.

“Please proceed on through the town. Mr. Forge lives in the mansion on the east side.”

“Yeah, thanks! I been here before, though it’s been a few years.”

The Starmen added their thanks, and the four of them passed through the terminal and into the heart of Seven Leaves. A number of people watched them stroll through the town and greeted them with a wave or a friendly word. A walk of only a few minutes brought them to the main gates of the Forge estate.

Chapter 8: The Search Turns Violent

“RICHARD, WITHOUT A DOUBT the Starmen are walking into something way over their heads!” Oritz Konig’s anxious voice rang through the pilot’s compartment of the *Lux Mundi*, Richard Starlight’s personal spacecraft. The head of Starlight Enterprise had been in contact with SE’s chief of security regularly during his journey from the Moon. Konig had been working at Starlight’s Mars Base for over a year and a half, redesigning the organization and establishing a network of outlying bases throughout the planet.

Richard had made his approach to Mars Base on a polar trajectory; through his windshield he could see the northern polar ice cap. Glaciers spun out from it like narrow blades on a pinwheel. More than a century of terraformation had drastically reduced the size of the snow cover, and in places brown mountain peaks that had not been exposed to the atmosphere for eons were emerging. More than a dozen glistening rivers flowed southward from the broad white snowfield.

“I suspected as much, Oritz,” said Richard. “That’s why I am coming to Mars personally. There is more at stake than they know, and probably we ourselves only have an inkling of the strength of our opposition. I’ll be landing in a few minutes. Track me as I come in.”

“I’ve already got you, Richard,” said Konig. “I’ll be waiting for you when you land.”

In moments the lustrous gold spacecraft soared into the airspace over Mars Base. Its flecked, metallic surface sparkled in the sunlight so that it almost looked like a flare spun from the surface of the sun. Starlight Enterprise’s main base of operations was situated less than a hundred miles from the nearest edge of the ice cap. Sheathed in glass, the buildings looked as if they were made of white fire.

From the *Lux Mundi* Richard could descry the hangar, the sprawling laboratory and research buildings, and the manufacturing centers. The landing area extended for two square

miles to one side of the plant. Men, robots, and machines were in motion everywhere he looked. Skillfully he brought his ship down in the place of honor that had been set aside for it.

Richard alighted from the ship and greeted Oritz Konig. The two men shook hands. Their smiles showed the deep affection and mutual respect that they shared. Assistants took charge of Richard's luggage and conveyed it to his private apartment in the topmost level of the central building.

"Welcome to the Base, Richard! It is good to see you again!" Konig was not overweight but appeared to be of almost massive size. The two men chatted amiably as they walked into the headquarters of Mars Base. Once they were enclosed in Oritz's spacious office, they sat down in a corner where there were a few chairs, elegant but not ostentatious. A pitcher of ice water and a few glasses were set out on a metal table. The men began to talk more seriously.

"I was able to keep track of the Starmen without difficulty," began Konig. "On the surface there was nothing out of the ordinary, but from their first night there was a feeling of—well, imbalance, disharmony." The large man grimaced and laced his fingers together. He did not like to talk in an imprecise manner.

"There were too many things wrong," Konig continued. He explained to Richard everything that had happened to the Starmen—the vandalism on their ship, the difficulty in getting the trivardian simulator, the confusion with the reporting process to the tower commander. He'd have been greatly alarmed had he known of the attempted assassination of the Starmen.

"Our own surveillance didn't take note of anyone entering the *Star Ranger*, Richard." Konig's voice was grim. "I've reviewed all of our procedures—thoroughly, Richard, thoroughly! There was no evidence of entry, and no breach of security. I'm stumped." Konig sat back in his chair with an expression that might have verged on challenge but was really just confidence that he was convinced of the accuracy of what he had just said.

Richard tented his fingers and rested his chin on his joined

thumbs. After a moment's thought, he shook his head.

"Well, keep track of them, Oritz. I'm going to my apartment. I've got a few ideas and I need to do some research."

~

Four guards manned the gates of the Forge estate. Two were standing with apparent idleness close to the gate itself, and two were in a small building set back about ten yards from the entrance.

A beautifully kept lawn stretched for several acres between the main gates and the first outbuildings of the estate. Old oak and walnut trees grew in sufficient number to give the impression of a mature orchard, but not in such profusion as to obscure the view when they were in leaf. In early spring the trees bore an abundance of small, bright green leaves.

As soon as the guards recognized Steve Cliff, they opened the gates wide.

"Hi, Steve," said one. "Mr. Forge is expecting you. He'll be glad to see you. Welcome to Seven Leaves, Starmen!"

"This place is beautiful," said Mark as they left the gates behind them. "It's amazing! It's a wonder that Seven Leaves isn't inundated with people wanting to live here!"

"I'm surprised that I've never heard of this town," said Zip. As they made their way down the walk, he noticed with a shock that there were two more guards, one each posted in an eyrie that had been designed to blend into the trees. Unobtrusively he scanned the area to both right and left and noticed that there were similar eyries concealed among the trees, about a hundred yards apart.

"Steve, why are there so many guards here? The town seems peaceful enough. What does Mr. Forge do?"

"He's basically retired, Zip, my boy. Andy's dedicated his life to philanthropy these days—quiet philanthropy. He wants to put his money t' good use. There are plenty o' people who resent his wealth and his influence. Rich people have a lotta enemies,

I'm sure you know. There's a lotta crackpots around. It bothers him that after all he's done for folks, there should be some who don't like him. He's really a very shy person. You'll like him!"

The Starmen and Steve passed along the walkway through an expanse of colorful flowerbeds. Gardeners were at work lightly trimming the spring growth and aerating the soil. Most took a moment to lift a hand in a friendly wave toward the visitors.

The great house loomed up in front of them, presenting a pleasing façade of dressed stone with dark wood trim. The third, topmost story showed a line of dormer windows in a sloped, tiled roof. Several narrow chimneys relieved the lines of the crown of the structure.

The foursome came to a massive double front door made of dark wood with stained glass windows inset into the panels. Steve ignored the doorbell and rapped lightly on the door. A woman opened it almost instantly. She was a matronly and businesslike individual wearing a floor-length green plaid dress. She smiled broadly and invited them inside.

"Welcome, Steve! Welcome, Starmen! Welcome to Forge Manor! I am Mrs. Dathan, Mr. Forge's secretary. Mr. Forge was so pleased to hear from you, Steve! He's eager to see you again. It's been a long time since you visited us. Come right this way!"

The woman turned and led them through a lavishly appointed entrance hall to the foot of a wide staircase. The interior of the manor house was lined in dark, highly polished wood of exceeding scarcity. A dining room opened off one side of the entry and a parlor on another. In front of them the hall continued toward the back of the mansion with other doors on either side.

The staircase was thickly covered with a pale, silvery green carpet. It wound upward in a gradual curve so that the Starmen were facing back toward the front of the house when they came to the first landing. Straight ahead of them was a huge, magnificent stained-glass window, depicting a breathtaking view of the Yangtze River cutting through the Three Gorges in early evening. The sky was a rich deep blue set with silver stars and a

crescent moon. It was a scene from China's past glory, since the Three Gorges had been lost forever after an enormous dam was completed in 2006 and flooded the valley in which they were located.

Mrs. Dathan turned to the right and led the Starmen and Steve across a foyer furnished with comfortable chairs and a long table, and whose walls were lined with books. She passed through a partially open door without knocking, then turned and invited the four men to enter.

Inside was a large sitting room. A desk appointed with two brass lamps was positioned against the far wall. A large videoscreen was built into a bookshelf behind the desk. Windows filled the west and north sides of the room, set with diamond-shaped leaded glass panels. Late afternoon sunlight poured into the room.

There were two long sofas in the room facing each other. Two wing chairs were set between them at one end, with their backs to the descending sun. In the center of the arrangement was a long, low table decorated with intricately shaped glass artifacts.

As the Starmen entered the room, Zip noticed that there were three Chinese characters on the door. He had little time to scrutinize them before Mrs. Dathan was introducing him to the man in the room.

“Mr. Forge, here are Mr. Cliff and the three Starmen you were expecting.” She got no farther before Mr. Forge set aside the book he was reading, stood up, and greeted them. He was a middle-aged, somewhat overweight Chinese man. Zip was surprised. He had not expected a Chinese man to have a name like “Forge”.

“I am so happy to welcome you to my home,” he said. He extended his hands and shook each Starman's hand in turn in a warm, double grip. He bowed slightly as he shook their hands. His smile was warm and set the visitors at ease immediately.

“Please sit down, sit down, anywhere. Mrs. Dathan, would

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you please bring us some tea?"

"Of course, Mr. Forge. The cook is already preparing something. I'll have it brought up at once."

"Thank you." He turned his attention to his visitors again. "I was profoundly gratified when Steve called me earlier today to say that you were coming to visit me. I have few callers and I always enjoy it when Steve comes to see me. He's quite—different—from my usual visitors. And to have the three of you come with him," Mr. Forge smiled and exhibited his pleasure, "was more than I could have hoped for. I owe so much to you three—to all *four* of you, really—for your heroic actions of two summers ago when you saved Mars from the tyranny of those pirates!"

Zip spoke for the first time. "Thank you, Mr. Forge, for saying so. It is an honor to meet you, sir. I am embarrassed to admit that I hadn't known of you and your work before now. Steve has told us something of your life and work on Mars, and I'm surprised that I was not aware of it."

Mr. Forge laughed. "Don't be embarrassed, Mr. Foster. I have chosen deliberate obscurity almost to the point of anonymity. I like it better that way. I am a private person, though I do like to get involved in things—wherever I can help. That's my way. When Steve called, he told me that there may be something I can do for you now, but we can get to that a little later. Please tell me about yourselves—your families, your interests, your adventures as Starmen! I must admit I don't get out too often, mostly by my own choice, but I do love hearing about others' escapades."

Steve had a wide smile on his face, sat back comfortably in one of the wing chairs, stretched his legs out to full extension and clasped his hands over his paunch.

"You go ahead, boys. Mr. Forge knows all about me. I'll just wait for the tea."

As if on cue, at that moment three servants wheeled in a teacart laden with freshly-baked cookies and cakes, delicate pastries, exotic cheeses and crackers, an assortment of fruit preserves, and hot biscuits straight from the oven. A samovar

was in place on the top of the cart, with five delicate teacups surrounding it. The servants efficiently distributed linen napkins, plates, and silverware. In less than two minutes they had finished preparing the tea and left the room.

For the next forty-five minutes the Starman talked in turn about their lives and interests. Mr. Forge listened intently, asking a discreet question now and then.

When the tea things had been cleared away, Mr. Forge moved on to the next topic.

“Now, my friends, my new friends, how can I help you? Steve says that you need something.”

“Yes sir,” said Mark. “We need a dirigible.”

Mr. Forge’s eyebrows shot up. “A dirigible?”

Without saying anything about the true nature of the work, Zip explained what they needed and related the problems they’d had in finding a suitable airship.

“My my,” Mr. Forge sympathized, “you *have* had a run of bad luck. Not good, not good at all. Let’s see what I can do for you. Please come with me and I’ll check our inventory. I’m afraid that my managers run most of my affairs now and I do not have my facts at my fingertips.” As he spoke, he moved to his desk and eased into the swivel chair. He rolled toward the large computer screen and activated it. The Starmen and Steve stood behind him.

“Hmmm, hmmm,” muttered their host to himself as he brought up a number of files.

“Dear me, dear me, this is most distressing,” he said quietly. His forehead furrowed. “I am so embarrassed, my friends. It looks as if I don’t have a dirigible like the one you need—at least, not readily at hand. There are over a dozen large ones under my control, but, as you can see, they are all located far from here at present.” He moved away from the screen and gestured with his hand so that Zip could approach the terminal. Zip could see that all the large dirigibles were in use far from Seven Leaves.

“Ah well,” mused Zip, trying not to sound too disappointed. “There’s nothing for us then, I guess, but to have one built by the

engineers at Starlight Enterprise. Mars Base will be able to make one, I suppose, and they can equip it with the machines we'll need—the infrared and sonar and x-ray probes. We'll need all that to help us search underground.

“Thank you, Mr. Forge, just the same. It was a great pleasure meeting you.”

“Yes, indeed, sir,” added Joe and Mark. They all shook hands.

“We'd better be getting on to Mars Base,” said Zip. “They're not expecting us, and I'd like to get there before the evening's completely gone.”

The four of them made their farewells. Mr. Forge was profuse in his apologies to the point that the Starmen became almost uncomfortable. Finally they were allowed to leave the room. Mrs. Dathan met them coming down the stairs and showed them out of the front door.

The instant the front door closed behind them, Mr. Forge hurried to his den in the back parts of the manor. He opened his communicator and made contact with the spaceport on the other side of the town.

“Don't let the Starmen leave! Keep the Starmen away from their ship! *Make sure they don't leave!*”

~

Ten minutes later the Starmen and Steve returned to the terminal at the small spaceport. As they passed through, a man about thirty years old stepped from behind the desk and stopped them. He was a brawny individual well over six feet tall, with a chiseled face, light brown hair, and brown eyes. He filled his uniform almost to the bursting point.

“I'm very sorry, Starmen, but your ship was showing signs of a serious radiation leak. We've quarantined it until our ioneers can track it down and repair it. You'll have to stay in Seven Leaves for a few days.”

“What!” Mark exploded. “There couldn't possibly be a radiation leak on that ship! I checked it completely myself, and

thoroughly, just last night!”

The man raised his hand as if to push Mark away. “Then you missed something. I’m not going to risk my men because your ship is leaking deadly radiation. We’ll take care of it and we’ll let you know when it’s ready.”

Mark stepped forward aggressively, his face purple with anger. Before he could say or do anything more, Zip spoke up.

“I want a report of what you’ve found and what you’re doing about it. We’ll be outside.”

The man shifted his eyes from Mark to Zip, pressed his lips together like an affront and gave a quick nod. He turned back to Mark and glared for a moment before turning insolently back to the counter. His manner showed that he had dismissed the four of them. Joe and Mark followed Zip back out the front door and around to the side of the terminal building where there were a few benches set out on a pavement. Yellow and orange flowers grew in beds nearby and a large tree spread its branches over them, green with new leaves. Steve tagged along behind them and they all sat down on the benches.

“Zip!” burst out Mark. “What are you doing? There’s nothing wrong with the *Star Ranger* and you know it!”

“Why don’t we call Mr. Forge and have him tell this guy to buzz off?” said Joe, seething almost as much as Mark.

Zip leaned in and invited the others to do the same.

“Something’s going on,” he said in a low voice. “There’s a pattern here. We’ve all seen it and we don’t like it, but something’s going on. Ever since we landed on Mars, we’ve run into ‘bad luck’. I don’t think it’s bad luck. We’ve got an enemy somewhere.”

“Hey,” said Mark quietly. “Look at that!” He indicated with a nod of his head. The others turned and saw a tall figure standing on the dark side of the tree, almost blended into the bole. He was covered head to foot in a long cloak the color of the shadow. He clearly didn’t want to be seen, but he was looking intently at the Starmen. When he saw that they had noticed him, he beckoned to them.

“I’ll go,” said Zip.

“Doesn’t sound like a good idea to me, Zip,” said Steve. “That guy looks real suspicious to me.”

“I’ll take Mark with me. You and Joe stay here.” Before Steve could say another word, Zip and Mark walked over to the figure. As soon as they got close, before they could say anything, the cloaked man began whispering to them urgently.

“You’ve walked into the center of trouble. There is no radiation leak in your ship. You are in danger here. Powerful men want to kill you. The radiation leak is a ruse to delay you while men come to capture you. If there were a real radiation leak, a siren would be sounding and the landing field would be evacuated. Instead, armed men are surrounding your ship. The man in the terminal is not the one you met when you arrived. You must leave now. Every second you delay will make your escape harder. Run! Now! —or the entire town and soon the entire planet will be against you! It may even be too late for that! Run! You will also find help when you need it!”

Zip raised a hand, “But...”

“Now!” repeated the figure. He turned and stepped away from the tree and into a thicket behind it.

Zip turned to Mark. “He’s right. I’ve felt it all along. Time to think later. Let’s make a break for it.”

Mark smiled and his eyes sparkled. “Now you’re talking! It’s about time we acted!”

The two of them strode back quickly to where Joe and Steve were sitting. Steve looked very uncomfortable and Joe looked a bit awkward. Zip quickly reported to them what had happened.

Steve erupted. “No, Zip! You don’t know who that guy was! What do you mean, ‘make a break for it’? Does Mr. Forge’s hospitality mean nothing to you? These are his men! They’re just trying to protect you!”

Zip looked confused. “Well, maybe you’re right, Steve,” he conceded. “A lot of funny things have been going on lately. Let’s at least see if we can verify the story of the leak.”

He walked back into the terminal office and asked what

news there was on the radiation leak. The burly guard looked somewhat relieved that the leader of the Starmen was cooperating. "It'll take about two days, I think," he said. "But don't worry. We're keeping the ship safe." Zip looked casually through the large window and saw that half a dozen armed guards surrounded the *Star Ranger*. A hundred yards farther away another ship was preparing to launch.

"So I see," said Zip. "Thanks. Guess we'll go back into town and find some place to stay. I'll check back in the morning." He strolled back to the sitting area where the others were waiting.

"He's right. The man by the tree. There's no leak. The ship's being guarded but there's no sign of any ioneeers working on it, and there are other ships acting normally well within any danger area if there were any radiation. And the guards are not wearing any protective gear. We're getting out of here now!"

Steve leaned back, showing extreme discomfort. "Steve?" asked Zip, turning to him.

"I'm with you," he said after the slightest hesitation. He began to rub his eyes.

The edge of the landing area was a few yards away, on the other side of a slatted fence. Through gaps in the fence they could see a few storage bins arranged in a line, and an electric ground vehicle, usually called an EGV, but more commonly known as a "popper".

"There's a popper. We're going that way," said Zip. The four of them moved slowly toward the fence, looking carefully to see whether they were being observed. When they got to the fence, Joe waited a moment, and then said, "Stand back! I'm coming for you and I won't be hiding!" He leaped over the fence, ran to the EGV, jumped in and started it. At full reverse speed, he backed into and through the fence. The others piled in. He put the popper into forward and sped across the landing area toward the *Star Ranger*.

Three guards ran out of the terminal shouting.

"Get 'em, Mark and Steve!" shouted Zip as he pulled his pistol out. Mark already had his pistol out and fired a burst of

shots in the guards' direction. The ground steamed up in front of them. They skidded to a stop with looks of alarm on their faces, unable to believe what they were seeing. They whirled and ran back toward the terminal. Mark turned his pistol onto high power and fired a burst of energy toward the building. The beam superheated a small section of a plate glass window, and stress caused by sudden thermal expansion shattered the window into a million fragments. The guards dropped flat and covered their heads. Mark shot again and created a hole in the wall.

"That," he said with satisfaction, "ought to have put out their communication system, if I remembered correctly where it was located in there! Not that it matters much now!"

Meanwhile, Joe was racing the popper toward the *Star Ranger*. Zip was firing burst after burst from his pistol toward the guards, hoping to make them scatter. These men, however, were armed. They shouted and dispersed, but then began to shoot back. One shot pierced the front of the popper. A fierce red aura coruscated up and quickly dissipated in an orange glow. Joe wavered for a moment, trying to regain control of the vehicle. The battery and engine were in the back of the popper, so Joe pressed the accelerator home and they sped forward, undeterred by the strike.

As the popper came close to the ship, the guards ran, knowing that they had no cover. Joe brought the vehicle to a stop and the four of them took cover behind it. As the guards fled, several of them turned and shot from time to time, but Mark and Joe fired laser beams among the guards with pinpoint accuracy, piercing equipment bags and communicators. With that, all the guards turned headlong and ran, not looking back.

"Come on!" shouted Zip. He unlocked and opened the hatch to the *Star Ranger* and they all scrambled aboard.

Chapter 9: A Walking Horror

JOE LEAPED INTO THE PILOT'S CHAIR, took a rapid glance around to make sure that the others had secured themselves into their seats, yelled "Hang on! Here we go!" and slammed the emergency start procedure into action. The *Star Ranger* blew off the ground at near-maximum survival speed and in seconds was a barely visible dot in the sky over the equatorial desert of Mars. Once the ship was at high altitude, normal procedures took over, the G-forces diminished, and the Starmen heaved sighs of relief.

"Mars Base, Zip?" asked Joe.

"Right," answered the redheaded Starman. "I won't really be comfortable until we're there." A feeling of discomfort still nagged at him.

"What was going on back there?" asked Joe as he set the coordinates for the capital city of Mars.

"I haven't had time yet to take it all in," answered Zip. "The man by the tree must have been one of our 'allies'." Zip was still being careful not to say too much in front of Steve. "I don't know how he knew where we were and that we were in danger. I don't know why anyone would want to detain us in Seven Leaves, but it's pretty clear that we've got some potent enemies with a lot of resources and a long reach—that's if we can take our recent run of 'bad luck' as having been deliberately set up."

"If it was set up," contributed Mark, "then their first goal must have been to delay us. The wrecking of the *Ranger* was done to delay us. When we couldn't find a trivardian simulator or a dirigible, that delayed us. And now someone tried to delay us in Seven Leaves. But the man by the tree wasn't talking about delays—he told us that our lives are in danger!"

Just then a radio alert came through the system. Mark turned to address it.

"*Star Ranger*," he answered. "Go ahead." After a few seconds his eyes got big, then narrowed. He put the message on the shipwide mode. A stern voice sounded throughout the cabin.

"—spond immediately! This is Captain Frederick Jones of

the Seven Leaves Police Force! You are under arrest and ordered to return to Seven Leaves at once! Acknowledge!” Mark turned to Zip.

“We’re going to Mars Base,” announced Zip with determination. His lips tightened. “Full speed, Joe!”

“Yes sir!” Joe acknowledged. He moved the acceleration lever forward and the indicator showed that the *Star Ranger* was surging ahead.

“Slow this ship down and go back to Seven Leaves!” The harsh, booming voice did not come through the speakers. It was Steve Cliff!

The Starmen turned toward their companion with looks of complete incredulity across their faces. Steve was standing at the back of the cabin too far away for any of them to reach him easily. He had a laser pistol in his hand. The look on his face showed that he was deadly serious. For a few seconds no one said anything. The Starmen simply gaped, unable to believe what they were seeing.

“Steve!” Mark said at last, lifting both hands in a gesture of appeal. “What are you doing? How could you pull a pistol on us? I...” Mark turned helplessly to Zip and Joe. He was at a loss for words.

“Turn the ship around! Now!” screamed Steve. His body was taut with tension.

The voice of Captain Jones shouted through the radio. “This is your last chance! Return to Seven Leaves immediately or be shot down!”

Zip turned slowly to Joe and said, “Do what they say, Joe. Take us out of here.”

Joe circled back to the control panel, sniffed, and shook his head a few times. Then he eased the acceleration lever back. The *Star Ranger’s* speed began to diminish.

“Turning now,” said Joe with a tone of frustration and resignation in his voice. He gripped the controls and rolled it gently to the left. The Starmen’s spacecraft began to roll out of its course.

All at once, Joe whipped the controls to the right and slammed the accelerator forward. Mark, seated at the navigator's post, rolled with the sudden change in course. Zip, standing in the middle of the cabin, flew toward the left wall. He lifted his right leg and caught himself as the wall, for a moment, became the floor.

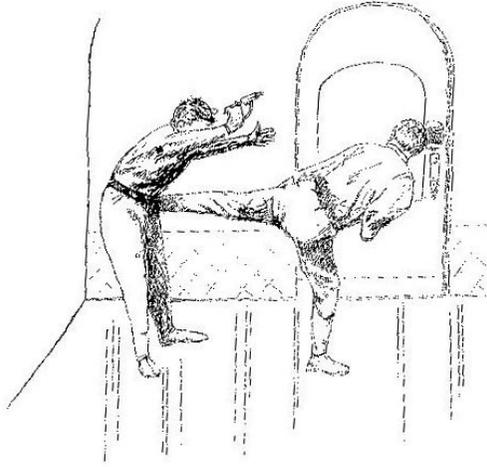
Steve crashed into the left wall, and then bounced off it in a desperate dance, trying to keep on his feet. Both arms swung in wide circles as he fought to maintain his balance. Joe straightened the *Star Ranger* out again, and Zip suddenly released a furious, piercing yell and charged full speed at Steve from eight feet away. He was certain that Steve knew that if the laser discharged inside the *Star Ranger's* cabin, it could pierce a wall and depressurize the ship. Whatever was wrong with Steve, he hoped that he wasn't trigger-happy.

As he leaped for Steve, Zip planted his right foot down and rapidly spun counterclockwise on the ball of his foot, looked over his left shoulder, transferred the momentum from his whirling body into his left leg and shot it back in a powerful kick aimed at Steve's midsection. The acceleration in the *Star Ranger* added to the power of the kick and it connected with a satisfying "chunk" sound, like a fastball slamming into a catcher's mitt.

Steve expelled a sudden, thunderous groan and flew backward against the rear bulkhead, but he didn't lose his grip on the pistol. Dazed, he tried to recapture control of his whirling arms and aim the pistol at Zip's chest. Zip, still moving after the back kick, planted his left foot on the deck and swung his right foot in a high crescent between him and the man with the gun. The edge of his foot caught Steve's right wrist and knocked his arm aside. Even at that, Steve held onto the pistol.

Mark leaped into the fray, rolling head over heels to avoid becoming a target for the wavering pistol. As he rolled he pulled to his left and swung his right leg in a fast circle parallel to the deck and struck hard behind Steve's right ankle. Steve's feet shot out from under him and his heavy bulk crashed solidly to the deck. He hit hard, but showed no signs of weakness. As Mark

continued his attack and lunged forward, Steve swung his right hand in a fast, desperate arc and caught the Starman a ringing blow on the left side of his head. While Mark was stunned and off balance, Steve struck him a second time.



Zip aimed a powerful kick at Steve's midsection.

Zip dropped down and delivered a hard punch to the left side of Steve's jaw and saw his left eye jerk aside and sink for a split second into his head, then return to place.

"Mark!" screamed Zip. "He's an android! He's an android! It's not Steve at all! It's—" Zip's shock had disrupted his attack, allowing the false Steve to grip his throat with his left hand. His thumb pressed cruelly into Zip's windpipe. In a flash, Zip recalled what he knew about androids. They did not have superhuman strength but could not tire. They had a powerful self-preservation program. Causing an android to pass as a human being was one of the most horrific crimes imaginable. Even as he felt the android's hand trying to crush his throat, Zip was recoiling with horror at what he was fighting. His gorge

began to rise, and then an immense anger flushed through him at the violation of nature that was writhing under his knee.

Zip pressed his left knee into the android's chest, then bent and twisted the arm so that he could release its grip. In the meantime, Mark had lifted his left arm to block the android's blows. With both hands he twisted the android's right arm and pressed on the back of its hand. Its fingers flew open and the pistol dropped. With a roar, Mark gripped the android's head with both hands, lifted it up, and then slammed it down vehemently on the deck. The light in the android's eyes went dark, the mouth went slack, and the limbs relaxed and lay still.

Zip stumbled over to the sink and clutched its sides, panting. A clammy sweat covered his brow. Mark stood behind him and placed his arm on Zip's shoulder. Mark was trembling.

"You two okay?" yelled Joe from the front of the cabin.

"Yeah, we're okay," said Mark. "Just need a moment to recover."

"Good work! What about the police cruiser?"

"Head right for Mars Base, Joe—top speed!" ordered Zip. "Things are desperate now! Get ahold of Konig or whoever you can raise up there and tell 'em we're coming in as soon as we can and might need help!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

"How long do these things stay out?" asked Mark.

"I don't know," said Zip. "You slammed its head pretty hard on the deck and may have broken it, but to be sure we'd better restrain it while we still can. There are some cloth binding strips in that cabinet, to tie down loose items during flight. Get a couple of strips and we'll tie this device up."

Mark opened the cabinet and pulled out two rolls of binding strips and handed one to Zip. They knelt down on either side of the android.

"I'll roll it toward you, then I'll tie its arms behind it," said Mark. Zip nodded.

As they bent over, the android suddenly returned to awareness. The light in the eyes came on and its arms flailed out

in both directions, striking both Starmen in the face. Zip and Mark flew backwards. There was a look of insanity on its face.

With a yell, the android leaped to its feet, grabbed a parachute, charged into the airlock while frantically trying to strap the 'chute on, and hammered the "open" knob. The outer door wouldn't open with the inner door still ajar, so as Zip and Mark came groggily to their knees and began to stand up, the android looked over its shoulder with a wild-eyed countenance, jerked the inner door closed and hammered the "open" knob again.

The *Star Ranger* was moving at high velocity. When the outer door of the airlock opened, the android was sucked out so speedily that it seemed as if it had simply disappeared. Zip and Mark both cried out in shock. First they saw a large man-shape in the opening, and next they saw a rectangle of sky.

Behind them the man-shape whipped and tumbled in the sudden drag of air. Shoes, shreds of cloth, straps all flew off. With frenzied desperation, the android's hands clutched at the straps of the parachute, the skin of its face rippling in an involuntary snarl as the air dragged at it. With one hand it gripped a strap of the parachute bag and with the other it found and pulled the ripcord.

The enormous canopy deployed in the whipping wind and instantly ripped into shreds. The man-shape held onto the empty pack, spinning and tumbling all the way to the ground. It struck the planet with tremendous force and burst into thousands of component parts.

"The police craft has just fired on us!" shouted Joe. "One, two, three missiles! I can't believe it! What's going on?!"

Zip and Mark ran to the front of the cabin and assumed their places, Mark at the navigator's station and Zip in the co-pilot's seat.

"Mark, identify the projectiles!" ordered Zip. Mark's fingers flew over his keyboard.

"Three X12 attack missiles, Zip," said Mark grimly.

Zip's blood ran cold. *This is crazy*, he thought. *This is Mars!*

You can't do things like this on Mars. You can't just simply start firing missiles at ships in the sky!

"Push it up higher, Joe! They're faster than we are but they're still way back there and it'll take them a long time to catch up. They're fast, but those things run out of fuel in ten minutes! We've got a good start and we can probably outrun them!"

"Yes," said Mark, "but they make up for a small fuel supply with a large package of explosives! If they hit us, this entire ship will become dust!"

"More good news!" announced Joe. "There's a squadron of six fighter jets coming toward us from Eagle City! No announcement! They're coming in firing! They'll be on us in less than a minute!"

~

Two thousand miles away, Oritz Konig's voice suddenly burst through the communicator in Richard Starlight's office. "Richard! Come quickly! Someone's trying to shoot the Starmen out of the sky!" Richard jumped out of his chair, knocking it onto the floor, and ran. In less than a minute, he was in Konig's office. A crowd of tense workers stood behind Konig. They made room for Richard.

On a large screen, Konig had a radar display showing. Konig pointed out the Starmen's spaceship, and Richard's eyes got large when he saw the three cruise missiles behind them and the fighter jets that were approaching from the front. "Those are X12 missiles," Konig explained, "—enough firepower to down a spaceship twice the size of the *Star Ranger!*"

Richard looked at the radar display with fury. "What's going on here? What kind of idiot are we dealing with? Firing at Starmen in broad daylight! Have they gone mad?" Richard clenched his fists, and then unclenched them.

He became energized. "Get someone to trace those missiles and find out where they came from! Also, call Eagle City and get them to launch their police fleet at once to protect the Starmen!"

If the Starmen can get away from those missiles, we'll have a force there to protect them! If the Starmen can't get away," Richard gritted his teeth, "then the police fleet will pound the living daylight out of the ships out there!"

Konig looked pale. "Richard—that squadron out there *is* Eagle City's police fleet."

~

Joe was at the helm of the *Star Ranger*, desperately engaging in evasive maneuvers, trying to avoid being hit by the laser cannons from the ships in front of them. Most of the shots missed, but the Starmen were still sustaining a few hits from the fleet ahead, and the missiles were closing in from behind.

Joe abruptly abandoned the evasive maneuvers, turned his ship to head directly toward the incoming fleet, and rammed the *Star Ranger* into overdrive. The Starmen's spacecraft flew toward their attackers and was soon among them—and then past them. The three X12s in fervent pursuit suddenly had seven targets to choose from and locked onto the three that were nearest.

As the missiles began chasing their new targets, the ships from Eagle City broke formation and scattered. The Starmen's spacecraft shot on northward. Eagle Crater was ahead, but the Starmen would not be landing there. In moments, the *Star Ranger* was screaming over the northern wastelands of Mars with Eagle City far behind.

Chapter 10: Four Intense Conversations

"DID ANY OF US mention the ancient Martians, or even the Benefactors, in the android's hearing?" asked Zip. "Think hard! Someone's after us and I'll bet an asteroid made of gold that that monstrosity was reporting everything we said to whomever sent it to us!"

Mark and Joe thought for a moment. "I don't think we did,

Zip,” said Joe with a shake of his head. “Remember, he asked us what we were after when we first met up with him—‘it’, I should say. And we didn’t tell him—it—anything. We said we couldn’t yet.”

“Mmm hmmm,” Zip nodded.

Mark screwed his face up, then said, “But we may have said something unguarded when we were discussing the meeting by the tree. That was a pretty intense encounter.”

“I’m sure I only mentioned our ‘allies’,” said Zip. “I remember being definite about what I reported.”

“I can’t remember anything else we said,” said Mark, thrusting his hands out in frustration.

“Could it have planted any listening devices aboard the *Star Ranger*?” asked Joe.

“Let’s check and be sure,” said Zip. Joe kept to the pilot’s seat while Zip and Mark made a thorough search. They found no evidence of a spy device of any kind.

As they took their places again, Zip said, “I always felt a little uncomfortable with ‘Steve’, but I just chalked it up to feeling a bit outside your circle. You two spent several weeks with him and I only knew him for a few days.”

“An android!” snorted Joe. “Who would do such a thing? And where’s the real Steve Cliff? No one could have made so convincing an imitation without the real Steve to draw from!”

“Remember we heard from Donal that Steve had been spotted in Eagle City? Donal was bothered that Steve didn’t show up at the *Watering Hole*. That’s when he must have been captured. Somebody did the brain scan and prepared the android. That kind of job can be done overnight and that’s just about how long they had to do it, too!”

“It makes me sick to think of it!” said Mark. “It was all I could do to grab its head and slam it down so hard on the deck. It felt like a man! As it was, I think I must have broken it. When its circuits kicked in again, all it had left was an exaggerated self-preservation mode. It couldn’t have survived a leap from the ship at the speed we were going.”

“Well, let’s hope not,” said Zip. “We’ve been taught—we, the human race—for over a century that designing an android to pass as a human being is such an atrocity that I never imagined that anyone would actually do it!”

“There are still people who remember the worst years of the Collapse—they’ve got to be a little over a hundred years old by now,” observed Joe. “But surely no one alive now can remember when Reuben Ridger led the stateside nuclear terrorists of the 2040s and used androids to bring nuclear devices into what were thought to be the most secure places of all!”

“History is easy to forget if you want to, Joe,” commented Mark. “Remember what Richard told us when we first met him, when he drove us in the moonbus to prepare us for our assignment here on Mars?”

“Hmmm, yes—people who ignore the lessons of history are likely to repeat the worst parts of it—something like that.”

“An android couldn’t pass for a human being for very long,” commented Zip. “It was always the eyes that gave them away. Other differences could be attributed to tiredness, illness, or some idiosyncrasy, but the eyes—they’re the windows of the soul and no machine could ever pretend to have a soul for long.”

“‘Steve’ was always rubbing his eyes, remember?” commented Mark. “Whenever we got near, it always rubbed its eyes. It even told us right off that it was ‘sick’ or ‘tired’ or something—I don’t remember exactly what it said, but it was already heading us off from suspecting it.”

“I wonder where the real Steve is now,” mused Joe soberly. “I don’t think it looks very good for him. We don’t even know who our enemy is. We don’t even know where to begin to look for Steve—if he’s still alive.”

~

Edmund Warner, the mayor of Eagle City, was coming to the end of a long, tense day in his office not far from the city square. There was no sign yet of any letup in the action. On the wall of

his luxurious office, a large screen display showed three ships in the police fleet trying to outrun cruise missiles. As he watched, the remaining three police craft attempted to shoot down the flying weapons that were threatening their comrades without becoming targets themselves. After many attempts and near misses, they succeeded. The *Star Ranger* had been out of local radar range for some time.

After the last cruise missile had been destroyed, the mayor barked orders into his desktop communicator. “I want you to put every available man out there!” Edmund screamed. “Every available ship! I don’t care what it takes! You’ve got to bring the *Star Ranger* down! You can’t let them get away! If they leave the planet they’ll slip through our fingers and we’ll never find them again! Find them! Key in to the planetwide radar network and send up three squadrons after them!”

The mayor’s office had been turned into a command center for an urgent manhunt. Edmund Warner was doing his best to look competent, powerful, and effective. A small group of local reporters had been invited to witness the breaking news and a camera was broadcasting the scene live across the Solar System.

As soon as the mayor turned away from his communicator, one of the reporters asked, “Are you sure about this, Edmund? It doesn’t seem possible, not possible at all!”

“Of course I’m sure, Dana! I wouldn’t be going to all this trouble if I weren’t convinced that the Starmen were guilty! Earlier today, I’m telling you, they walked right in to the home of Mr. Andrew Forge and after an argument of some kind, they shot him dead! There’s a witness—his long-time secretary, Mrs. Dathan. Half the town saw them sprint back to their ship from Forge Manor. An attempt was made to arrest them at the spaceport—gently and respectfully, too, I might add! —and they burst through the cordon set protectively around their ship and took off in direct disobedience to an order that they remain in Seven Leaves for questioning! They were pursued by a police craft and ordered to return to Seven Leaves—an order they ignored completely!

“When I got the word from the police in Seven Leaves, I responded immediately and ordered six of our best ships up to intercept the Starmen! You yourselves just saw what happened then! They arranged a deadly attack on our own police force!”

“It appeared that they were merely escaping from cruise missiles shot at them from behind!”

“Exactly! Avoiding arrest and saving their own skins by putting our innocent men in sudden peril of their lives! I tell you, these Starmen have been just too independent for too long! They think they can go just anywhere and do just about anything they want without regard to due authority, and I for one have had enough of their disrespect for the people of Eagle City!”

“Edmund, please!” persisted the reporter. “These are the Starmen who repulsed the pirates two years ago and saved the people of Eagle City from a virtual occupied state! I still remember that, even if you don’t!”

“Well, now, my memory’s not that short,” conceded the mayor, “and I’m as grateful as the rest of you for that good work. But that was two years ago when they were all new graduates. They’ve become big shots since that time and it’s obviously turned their heads. Shooting one of our chief citizens in cold blood!”

“How do we know for sure? How do we know that Mr. Forge is even dead?”

“There’s a witness! I told you. Moreover, the entire crime was captured on Mr. Forge’s security video system!”

“Where is the videofile now?”

“In the hands of the Seven Leaves police force. When the alarm was first sent out, they sent me an encrypted version, and I saw it personally! When they’re ready to release it, you’ll be able to see it for yourselves. Hard to believe, I grant you, but look at the reputation these Starmen have around here!”

“Pretty good, if you ask me!” insisted Dana.

“Think about it, Dana!” spat the mayor. “You’re a reporter! Check the facts! Where do these Starmen spend their time when they’re in Eagle City? Not with us, not with the authorities in

Eagle City, not by a long shot!” The mayor tapped his desk with his right forefinger. “They always go to the west end of town and spend their time among the criminal element! They don’t have any accountability! They spend a lot of the taxpayers’ money on their ‘adventures’ and no one hears any real report of what they’ve done or achieved for the public interest!” He punctuated his comments with a fierce nod, and leaned over his desk a little farther.

“When they arrived in Eagle City this time, they were in trouble within twenty-four hours! They treated Commander Gibson of Space Command with contemptuous disrespect! Threatened him in his office, they did! Space Command! —the very people who *really* saved Mars two summers ago! Without them all the Starmen would have done is stir up the pirates and aggravate them against the populace!”

The mayor leaned back and sighed. “I’m just glad that Space Command showed up when it did, that summer.”

“Mr. Mayor,” began Dana. Warner leaned forward again.

“Look, I’m sorry, Dana and the rest of you. Sorry I got so intense, but this matter has pretty well thrown me and I can’t ignore it for too long. I’ve got to get back to work and coordinate the planetwide manhunt for these three murderers. If you’ll excuse me for now, I’ll call a press conference a little later tonight and bring you up to date.” He nodded to his two security officers, who then escorted the reporters out of the office.

As soon as the door closed, Edmund entered a private number into his communicator—a number he kept only in his memory. The ensuing conversation was doubly encrypted.

“Mr. Forge, when are you going to get me that videofile?” he asked a trifle impatiently once the connection was made. “I’ve got a bunch of reporters hounding me, and they want something solid! I’m sure you heard what I just said to them—the whole Solar System must have seen the exchange a few moments ago. I think I handled it quite well! Words alone, though, aren’t going to convince very many people for very long, if at all. I can’t put them off forever, and I’m going to be in big trouble if you can’t

get the videofile to me.” Edmund listened to the reply, then broke the connection and stared at the radar screen, grumbling and muttering to himself.

~

Aboard the *Star Ranger*, the radar started making noise again. Mark looked at it and his heart sank. He had forgotten that a satellite-based planetwide radar network had been established after the pirates had been captured, and that the police could track all ships that flew anywhere in the Martian sky. Three fleets of police ships were closing in on the Starmen rapidly from different directions.

“Closest intercept in about fourteen minutes, Zip,” he announced.

~

Along with all the personnel of Mars Base, Richard Starlight had viewed the exchange that had transpired in the office of Eagle City Mayor Edmund Warner. His response had moved beyond amazement into rage, then to cold determination that brooked no interference. He ordered a direct and immediate connection with the mayor’s office.

“Mr. Mayor?” said the mayor’s secretary. “Mr. Richard Starlight is on the line for you. He insists on speaking with you personally.”

Edmund’s demeanor changed. He suddenly wondered whether he might be getting into something over his head. He felt his throat constrict.

“Thank you,” he said tensely. He felt irritated that he couldn’t control the nervousness in his voice. “Would you please bring me some water?” He opened communication as soon as his secretary left the room.

“Mayor Warner here,” he said. The well-known face of Richard Starlight stared at him for a few seconds before Richard began to speak. The mayor shifted his eyes away momentarily from Richard’s stolid gaze.

“Mr. Warner,” began Richard. “I’m sure you realize how stupid you appeared on the news a few moments ago.”

“Mr. Starlight—,” began the mayor.

“Mr. Warner,” continued Richard. “You know very well that the Starmen did not murder anyone. Anyone whose brain has half the capacity of a Martian gopher’s knows that you’re not telling the truth. Now let me warn you, very clearly, while you listen very carefully. If you have set the police on the trail of the *Star Ranger*, and if any harm comes to the Starmen—or to anyone else, for that matter—it is *you* who will be responsible. It is *you* who will be guilty of murder.” Richard spoke slowly and clearly, but the force of his personality came almost palpably through the communicator. Edmund Warner could feel a rapid panic rise up inside of him. He tried to appear calm and confident.

“You don’t know what I know, Richard Starlight! I’ve seen the videofile myself! I saw them shoot Mr. Forge! And I will see to it that these criminals are stopped, now! They—”

Richard’s eyes blazed. “Shut your mouth, Warner!” he sizzled. “Don’t even—”

Edmund Warner’s hand shot out and terminated the communication, even before he thought about what he was doing. As soon as the screen went dark, he stood up then sat down again in a fluster. His hands were trembling. His heart was racing.

His secretary entered the room. “Mr. Warner, here’s your water! My, you don’t look very well! Can I get you something besides water? Terrible situation, this, isn’t it, sir?”

~

Richard realized as soon as Warner terminated the communication that something was seriously wrong. If he himself didn’t take some action immediately his three Starmen could very likely be shot down.

As quickly as he could he brought up to his computer screen

the secure files for the planetwide radar network. Starlight Enterprise had designed and installed the system shortly after the pirates had been captured. Since Starlight Enterprise had built it, Starlight Enterprise could shut it down. Under any other circumstances he wouldn't dream of doing so without consulting Space Command. For now, though, he had to give the Starmen a chance to elude their pursuers. If he could shut down the radar network, the *Star Ranger* might find a refuge where it couldn't be traced.

Richard typed in a few commands and then attempted to enter the highly secure, most sensitive area of the radar network control base. When he had completed the preparations, he said, "Richard Starlight. Enter." Bold red capital letters came up instantly: **ACCESS DENIED TO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL.**

Richard's face drained. He suddenly realized that the entire charade had been planned in great detail ahead of time. Someone had taken over the satellite network and SE now had no control over it. He looked over to the tracking screen and saw the police craft drawing ever closer to the Starmen.

~

It was night. The gentle, pleasant, comforting sounds of a sprinkler came through the window. The gardens were being watered. Andrew Forge, also known to a few people as "the Banjoman", was in the basement of Forge Manor in encrypted communication with Peter Bellar. Bellar was in charge of the Banjoman's refuge in a secret and secure base about 700 miles away. The base was an old public storage facility that Forge had purchased three or four years earlier. He had renovated and expanded it, with most of its new features concealed underground. It had become his watchful eye on the lichen field.

"Incidents occurred today," Forge began, "that could have threatened our operation. We have mobilized a lot of force against the Starmen. By tomorrow morning, everyone on the

planet will be scandalized at their behavior. Mr. Warner made a good beginning at turning the populace against them.”

Bellar said, “The news report was intense and appeared convincing.”

“The android was not able to discover their reason for coming to Mars,” continued Forge, “or who it was they spoke to at the spaceport here, but that is of little consequence now. The radar network can track them wherever they go, and at the moment eighteen ships are on their trail. They will be destroyed momentarily and there will be plenty of evidence that the Starmen are guilty of murder and that, when their ship was destroyed, the police were acting in defense of their lives.

“The assassin I ordered to eliminate them last night didn’t fulfill his charge and has apparently fled. That leaves us no choice. Had the Starmen pursued their plan to investigate the area where we harvest the fillox, we would have lost everything—certainly our control of Mars and probably even our freedom. We’ve got the entire population of prospectors and adventurers afraid to go near the lichen fields; they’re even afraid to talk about it. We can’t have the Starmen going there now and drawing the attention of the entire planet to the site of our operation.”

“The crew worked very fast in heading them off when they decided to come to Brandow,” said Bellar. “It was touch and go, but the Starmen left without any suspicions about what we’re doing there. The android gave them immediate notice that the Starmen were on their way.”

“I’d have been content if we could have left it there, but they left us no choice,” said Forge. “We tried to discourage them. We tried to delay them. We tried to deter them. They just would not be turned aside. Now they must be eliminated. We tried to do so quietly first, and now they have forced us to do so publicly. So we’ll do it in a way that discredits them, discredits Starlight Enterprise, and discredits Richard Starlight personally. I hate, I just hate to do these things in the public eye, but now that it has become necessary, we can and will do so. I really don’t think,

under the circumstances, that that will be too difficult to manage. All the power is on our side—almost all of it, that is. Starlight doesn't even know who or where we are.”

Chapter 11: Into the Desert

RICHARD STARLIGHT realized that, since he couldn't shut down the radar network, he had another option. Since Starlight Enterprise had placed the satellites of the planetwide radar network into interlocking orbits, his system showed where each one was located. If he couldn't shut down the network, with his own satellites he could destroy a portion of it over a large enough area to allow the Starmen to escape detection.

Quickly but systematically he located and entered the secure files that monitored the array of Starlight Enterprise's weapons satellites, each of which bore several high-powered laser cannons. Resolutely, he locked the high weapons-grade lasers onto the radar satellites over half of the northern hemisphere and fired. In seconds, a large swatch of the radar network went dark and Richard's radar map on the wall of his office vanished.

Now the *Star Ranger* was invisible to its pursuers. Richard grasped his communicator and sent out an urgent but non-focused radio message to the Starmen. The population of Mars for two thousand miles in every direction would be able to hear him, but he disregarded the implications of that fact. He sent the message as a high priority communication and began to speak.

“Richard Starlight at Mars Base calling the *Star Ranger*. The planetwide radar network has been disabled. Find a place of concealment. Do not respond to this message. Attend to the Starlight frequency for further information.”

Richard leaned back in his chair with grim satisfaction. The head of Starlight Enterprise knew there would be repercussions for this act, but he was confident that he could handle whatever was to come.

His next task was to learn the identity of his enemies.

~

Mark stiffened when the message from Richard came through the communicator on the *Star Ranger*.

“Zip! Joe!” he cried. “Richard’s here on Mars! He’s at Mars Base! He’s disabled the radar network! He’s ordered us to hide somewhere and monitor the Starlight frequency!”

“Take us down, Joe!” ordered Zip. The Starmen saw a chance for deliverance from pursuit when, seconds before, they could see no hope of escape.

Joe didn’t need the order. Already he was dropping the *Star Ranger* down as close as he could to the surface of the planet and turning northwest, away from the bearing to Mars Base and in the heading farthest from the ships that were converging on the Starmen’s last known position. The eighteen ships in pursuit were not in visual range yet. It was only a matter of a few minutes before each of those ships would be able to scan the area with onboard radar. Before that happened, the Starmen had to be out of range.

Directly below the *Star Ranger* was an expanse of inhospitable, rocky terrain littered with large boulders for a hundred miles or more in every direction. Tensely, Joe brought the ship down so that it skimmed closely above the sands. At a speed of over 500 miles per hour, Joe piloted the brick red ship along the contours of the rolling desert toward the closest outcropping of hills, ridges, and freestanding boulders. In less than ten minutes, the hills came into sight.

Joe piloted the Starmen’s ship along the deepest canyon he could find. He kicked in the hover jets on the bottom of the *Star Ranger* and dropped his speed to under a hundred miles an hour. As the valley began to meander, Joe diminished his speed even more. After a while, the valley traversed a wide, gently sloping pass. A scrub forest grew in the lower parts of the valley, with banks of snow in the hollows. The terrain was apparently completely uninhabited.

The red ship cruised on, staying close to the ground. The

pilot weaved his way among the turning ridges and convolutions of the land. After more than an hour of snaking through the arroyos, the *Star Ranger* emerged from the foothills on the west side. The Starmen were now more than two hundred miles from the location where the police ships had expected to find them.

“They can still find us,” observed Zip. “A systematic search following a grid pattern will find us even if they don’t have individual radars—which they do.”

“Look,” said Joe. “A double crater lake.” He pointed forward. Directly ahead was a pair of overlapping meteor craters filled with dark water, almost hidden among labyrinthine canyons at the foot of a rising, mountainous land. Pines and firs grew thickly on the slopes above the impact site. One crater was roughly the shape of a lemon, and the other was round and about three times the size of the other. A small channel linked them. Several massive boulders had tumbled from the upper slopes into the larger of the lakes. On the horizon the sun was setting through clouds of dust stirred by wind. Impossibly long shadows lay across a distant plain.

A small river flowed from the double lake and turned and twisted lazily across the sands. In the light of the sun the river and the surface of the lake glowed like hot copper.

“I see what you’re thinking, Joe! Good idea!” said Zip. “Go ahead.”

Joe brought the *Star Ranger* to a hover over the larger of the two craters, and then slowly lowered the ship into the water. The water was an opaque brown color, dense with organic material held in suspension. The Starmen did not have to lower their ship more than a few feet before they were surrounded by liquid gloom. By the time the *Star Ranger* reached bottom, the darkness was impenetrable. Joe cut the engines of the ship. A thick silence fell.

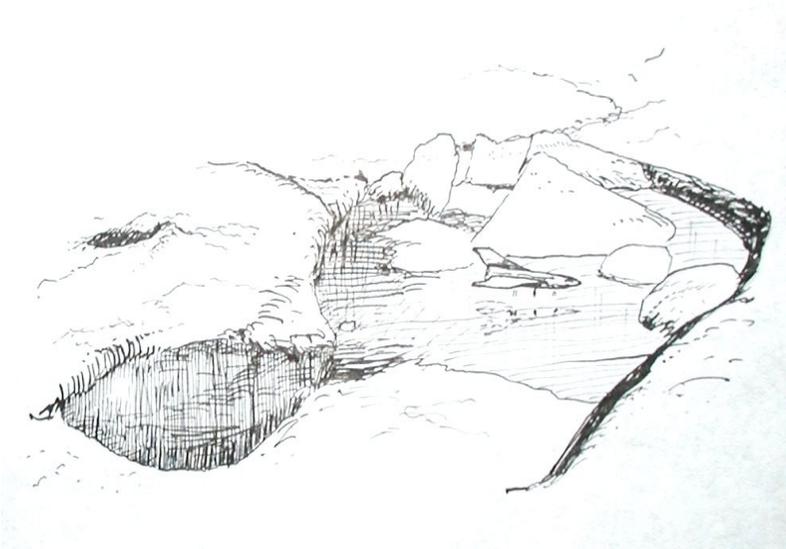
“We’re either well-hidden or a sitting duck,” said Joe.

“This sitting duck has plenty of sting, if it comes to that,” said Zip. “Mark, let’s hear what the news is saying. Enough’s happened to us today that it’s probably a matter of public

concern.”

Mark turned the communicator, set it to the Mars public news station, and piped the sound into the *Star Ranger's* cabin. They didn't have to wait long to hear the information they sought.

“The hunt for the Starmen's ship, the *Star Ranger*,” began the commentator, “has not yet found any traces of the fugitives, although police indicate that they are close on their trail and expect a break in the chase before long. No charges have yet been filed against Richard Starlight, who openly admitted that he destroyed forty-two satellites in the planetwide radar network to aid the renegade Starmen in their flight from justice. The unannounced presence of the head of Starlight Enterprise at that company's base not far from the northern polar ice cap has not been explained.



Joe brought the Star Ranger to a hover over the larger of the two craters.

“More to the point, the sharp break between Starlight Enterprise and Space Command has taken everyone by surprise. Until today the two organizations have worked with complete mutual trust and noted effectiveness. Mr. Starlight has not explained why he launched an attack against the satellites without even contacting Space Command. Starlight Enterprise did design, build, and install the radar network, but there is no question that the network belongs to Space Command.

“The citizens of Seven Leaves, a small town near the equator, are still reeling in shock over the blatant, broad-daylight murder this morning of its leading citizen, Mr. Andrew Forge, by the three Starmen and their companion, an adventurer known as Steve Cliff. Mr. Forge was brutally shot down in his home by Starman Joe Taylor, aided and abetted by his partners, Starman Zip Foster and Starman Mark Seaton.”

The three Starmen froze at these words. A perceptible chill ran through each of them. The newscaster continued.

“Mr. Forge was best known to the citizens of Mars as its wealthiest citizen who was living in obscure retirement. Today, after his death, Mr. Forge’s chief of staff revealed that he was also Mars’ greatest benefactor and philanthropist. He founded or supported numerous charities and foundations for the benefit of the people of the planet, while preferring to remain anonymous.

“Footage from a security camera in Forge Manor, now in the hands of the Seven Leaves police force, shows the Starmen entering Mr. Forge’s office. A conversation took place that began amicably enough, but the Starmen quickly became argumentative. The footage shows the aged Mr. Forge becoming alarmed and then fearful at the aggressive manner with which the three young men confronted him. At one point, Starman Taylor reached both hands in a threatening gesture toward Mr. Forge, who shrank back with a look of fear.

“Mr. Forge then struggled to reach a communicator on his desk, presumably to summon help. At that point Starman Taylor drew his pistol and shot Mr. Forge without warning. The philanthropist died instantly.

“The Starmen immediately ran from the room. Mr. Forge’s personal secretary and a long-time trusted employee, Mrs. Susan Dathan, told local police that she heard the altercation. Although always hesitant to break in on her employer’s business meetings, she reported that the vehemence of the argument had caused her to decide to interrupt when the door of Mr. Forge’s office was flung open and the three Starmen and Mr. Cliff charged past her without a word. She said that they seemed ‘angry’ and showed no sign of confusion, remorse, or regret. At that point she sounded an alarm.

“Numerous citizens of Seven Leaves related how the four men ran through the town toward the spaceport, where they resisted officials’ several requests to remain for questioning. Though the authorities had cordoned off their ship, the Starmen broke through a barrier by force, commandeered their ship at gunpoint while firing deadly shots into the spaceport terminal, and launched. Pursued by a police cruiser from Seven Leaves, they ignored commands to return for questioning and endangered the lives of Eagle City police officers who were called in to the chase. Last seen the Starmen were speeding recklessly in the direction of Mars Base.

“The police cruisers of four local towns were scrambled to arrest the Starmen and were hot on the pursuit, ironically being guided by the planetwide radar network which the Starmen’s own employer had designed and installed a few months after the assault on Mars by pirates two years ago. As the police were closing in on the *Star Ranger*, Richard Starlight destroyed the radar network and allowed the Starmen to escape. Mr. Starlight vigorously defends the Starmen’s innocence and has expressed outrage at the attack on his men by the police. He insists that the Starmen have been framed.

“Citizens of Mars will remember that it was a year ago February that the once-prestigious Starlight Enterprise suffered public humiliation when its ship, the *Starventure*, failed while en route to the planet Nyx, nearly killing everyone aboard ship. Public trust in Starlight Enterprise was seriously damaged at that

time. Today's debacle assures that rebuilding trust in this erstwhile exemplary company may be an impossibility.

"Mayor Edmund Warner of Eagle City will now provide a report on the current efforts to locate and apprehend the Starmen."

The voice of Mayor Warner came over the radio. "The authorities are fully aware of the significance of the solemn events of this tragic day. Never before in Starlight Academy's more than fifty-year history has any Starman committed any crime. Now it is my sad duty to charge three young men, formerly heroes on Mars, with the murder of one of Mars' leading citizens and the reckless endangerment of our police as they fled the scene of the crime. A planetwide manhunt is now being organized.

"I must add that I am amazed at the behavior of the respected Richard Starlight, who as yet has provided no satisfactory explanation for his unprecedented attack on the radar network, not only allowing the Starmen to escape detection but opening Mars to possible attack by outside forces.

"Repair of the radar system will take several days, during which time radar surveillance of the entire planet will be weakened. It is only because of Richard's excellent reputation that no charges have yet been filed against him. Neither he nor the population of Mars, however, should assume that the authorities plan to take no action at all."

There was no further news. Zip reached over and turned the radio off.

"This is serious, very serious," he said. His brow was furrowed with anxiety.

"I can't believe this is happening!" said Joe. "I can't believe that the people of Mars would believe that lie! Who's behind it?"

"Andrew Forge, obviously," said Zip. "But why?"

"This is a new kind of enemy," said Mark soberly. "This is an entirely different kind of battle. We're new to this and we're outclassed."

"We've got the support of the people—we must have!" said

Joe. “An entire population can’t throw us off just like that, not after what we did less than two years ago!”

“Can’t it?” mused Zip. “I wonder.”

~

On the Moon, Allen Foster had watched the newscast in his private office. “Thank you, Richard,” he whispered. “Who can be behind this lie? Why is this happening?” His face was drawn with worry that reached to the core of his heart. He hoped that his wife Elizabeth hadn’t heard the news, but he knew that it wouldn’t be long before she learned the atrocious accusation leveled against their son and his friends.

“I’ll call Rock,” he said, referring to John Rwakatare, who was in charge of Starlight Enterprise in Richard’s absence. Allen reached for his communicator.

~

A quiet alarm buzzed in the crew quarters of the *Star Ranger*.

“I didn’t sleep at all,” announced Joe.

“Yes you did,” said Mark, “because your snoring kept me up.”

“Let’s get moving,” said Zip, sitting up and stretching. He walked over to the sink and splashed some water in his face, then dried himself with a small towel. As he replaced the towel on its rack he saw that the clock showed **12:01 a.m.** The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted to them from the pot they had set up in the cabin the evening before.

“Would you take the helm, Zip? I’m just too tired,” asked Joe.

“Sure,” said the redheaded Starman. He turned on the shipboard detection system and scanned the area in the proximity of the double crater.

“It’s blowing and raining pretty hard up above,” said Zip,

“but there’s no sign of a ship nearby. Ready?”

“Aye aye,” said Joe. He blinked back his tiredness.

“Ready,” said Mark.

Zip powered up the *Star Ranger* and lifted it slowly from the murky bottom of the crater. It broke the surface and emerged into a cold, slashing rain. The sky was utterly dark.

“35° outside,” said Mark. “Almost as cold as you can get without snowing. Let’s hope that the weather will work in our favor.”

Joe poured large mugs of steaming, aromatic coffee for each of them. He opened a packet of cheese and large, nutritious crackers and made them available to the others.

“Anything from Starlight?” asked Zip. Mark set the communicator to the private SE frequency, but there were no messages queued up for them. Suddenly they all felt very alone.

“News?” asked Joe. Mark checked the public news station, but it only offered the music that was standard in the dark hours of the night.

Zip carefully lifted the hulk of the spacecraft up over the top ridge of the double crater. Black rain whipped across the window. Zip activated the automatic pilot. On the control deck immediately in front of him the shape of the land appeared.

“We’ll head to the desert where you met Jogren,” he said. “Someone wants very badly to keep us from there, so that’s where we’ll go. Not too close, though—just close enough to reconnoiter. We’ll stop and find a place to conceal the ship. And then wait for word from Richard.”

For the next four hours Zip piloted the *Star Ranger* on a southwestern course through the darkest hours of the morning. They flew in the teeth of the wind. The rain did not let up, but seemed to be covering the entire world. At times it froze into hail and drummed brutally across the window, then turned back into howling, driving rain.

At length, behind them the eastern horizon began to show the least sign of paleness. Just before sunrise, Zip crossed the northern edge of the tumbled wastelands across which his

partners had trekked with Steve Cliff two summers earlier. Through the heavy darkness light began to show on the land. The power of the rain diminished and the raging drops became a gentle shower, and then ceased altogether.

Zip became conscious suddenly of space and void. It looked as if he had come to the end of the world. He brought the *Star Ranger* to a stop and allowed it to hover. A monstrous canyon opened up ahead of the Starmen, its farthest side lost in the shadows of predawn. With a sweeping glance Zip took in the staggering sight of a gigantic cliff dropping down abruptly just ahead of them, its ruddy slopes dotted with cedars and stone joints that led down into clefts filled with gray smoke. Far below was a ragged red world of rock, bare and shining wetly in the aftermath of the rain. Spires and domes and crags, clear and strange in the morning light, uplifted from the bottom of the canyon with beauty that seemed more fable than fact.

The vastness and grandeur caused Zip to draw in a sharp breath. Mark and Joe moved up to gaze from the forward window. Looking back toward the sun, the Starmen saw the edge of a dazzling disk of light lift over the distant horizon and radiate brilliant illumination that flowed through layers of saffron mist. Dawnlight touched the topmost parts of the canyon, and the opposite side showed the first trace of gold.

“There’s a large overhang on the opposite side of the canyon,” pointed out Zip, “and it looks as though there’s a cave there, too. That might be just about ideal for our purposes.” He eased the *Star Ranger* forward over the edge of the canyon. The rock walls dropped below them in majestic splendor. Zip followed the profile of the cliff down, keeping close to the enormous rocks that shaped the sides of the chasm. At the bottom he crossed and then ascended past the spectacular rises on the far side.

He lifted up through a shadow-hung gap in the escarpments and found the space he had discerned before. A large hollow, carved over eons out of the soft stone by the powerful winds of Mars, made a concave shelter under the outcropping. He eased

the *Star Ranger* onto the ledge, and slowly and carefully brought it as far into concealment as he could. With scarcely a trace of motion, he rested the ship onto its landing gear and shut down the power.

“I’m hungry,” announced Joe. “I’ll make breakfast. I doubt there’s a finer place on the planet for a meal.” He set coffee to perking, then gathered up a couple of frying pans and checked the larder for eggs, potatoes, and bacon.

While Joe was preparing breakfast, Zip set the table. Mark secured his helmet and stepped out of the airlock onto the ledge. A stand of hardy fir trees grew on one side. Far off to the east, a vivid rainbow glowed through the mist in a dazzling arc.

A short distance to the southwest, a spherical mobile sensor not quite an inch in diameter sent an encrypted message to its home base. It was one of a dozen sentinels in constant motion around a well-hidden citadel owned by Mr. Andrew Forge. The sensor had noted the arrival of the *Star Ranger* and its place of concealment. The Banjoman’s search for the three Starmen was over.

Chapter 12: Identifying the Darkness

THE SUN ROSE and began to dissipate the mists left over from the rain. The leaden clouds had thinned out into wisps of pale pink, strung across the sky like the tendrils of a vine covering a bower. After Joe had finished cooking their breakfast, he called Mark back inside. The big Starman reluctantly turned from the empyreal opulence and reentered the *Star Ranger*.

Joe put what he had prepared into serving dishes. The aroma of fresh bacon and eggs made their mouths water. They sat down and tucked into the food. Joe forked his eggs and speared the chunks of potato with vehemence.

“Somebody please tell me what is going on!” he demanded, talking around a large mouthful of breakfast. “How can anyone accuse *me* of shooting down a harmless man in his own home!

How can anyone accuse me of shooting anyone anywhere at all!”

“It’s more than that, Joe,” said Zip. “We’re all implicated, we’re all accused! Even Richard is being put up for disgrace!”

“Thank heavens that Richard thought to blast the planetwide radar system!” contributed Mark. “He took a risk for us! It sure is great to work for such a man!”

“Somebody’s out to discredit—maybe even destroy—us and Richard!” said Zip. “That’s a tall order, but so far they’re winning!”

“You said last night it was Andrew Forge,” prompted Joe.

“Who else?” said Zip. “He’s got the resources, the influence, he’s the supposed murder victim. Either somebody really murdered him and is pinning the blame on us, or it’s Forge himself. It’s got to be Forge. The android brought us directly to him! The news report said that the secretary—Mrs. Dathan—claimed to have heard the shooting. We know she’s lying, so Forge himself has to be setting up the whole charade. What we don’t know is why!”

Mark looked thoughtful. “Don’t forget that the mayor has to be in on it, not to mention that bumbling commander at Eagle City Spaceport. He’s the one who sent the trivardian simulator to the Space Command warehouse instead of directly to us. That’s where I ran into ‘Steve’—obviously now a set-up.”

“What’s the reason?” asked Zip. “What have we done? Whom are we threatening? Surely this can’t have anything to do with our search for the Benefactors, the ancient Martians! The Xenobots can’t be behind this!”

“The first sign of trouble came from Charles Stansby, the miner from the outback,” said Mark. “He was unwilling, even frightened, to guide us to the area where the Martian plums came from. Donal told us that there’d been strangers in his establishment, making the regulars uncomfortable and frightening them. Things began to happen then to keep us from going to that part of the planet.”

Zip’s face changed, showing that something was becoming clear to him. “When did it turn from simple delaying tactics to

trying to destroy us? It was when we left Forge's place. I said then that if we couldn't find a dirigible anywhere on Mars we'd get SE to make one for us. No matter what, we weren't going to be stopped from getting where we wanted to go. I said that to Andrew Forge himself."

"You also added," punctuated Mark, "that you were going to equip that dirigible with instruments that could make a careful search of the area—even below ground!"

"There's something there that Forge doesn't want us to find," nodded Zip. "And he's willing to create this huge uproar to keep us from getting there. Outfitting an android to imitate a real person could be done overnight, but it's not easy to do. And arranging this manhunt means taking a big risk. The more people involved, the easier it is to slip up—and he's trying to get the whole planet to swallow this lie!"

"Even the public news station is taking his side," snorted Joe. He had stopped eating and his breakfast was getting cold. "Sounds to me like a *lot* of people are part of the pack of lies! No matter how rich he is, how could he succeed at that so quickly? He's got to have a lot of existing support!"

Zip's eyes suddenly lit up. "Troy Putnam!" he gasped. The other Starmen looked at him expectantly. "Don't you see? It's Troy Putnam that is the cause of all this!"

"But—" Mark hesitated. "Putnam is thoroughly mentally disabled, Zip. His mind is gone. How could he be the mastermind of this?"

Zip shook his head. "No, no, no. Look. How was Troy Putnam able to take over Mars? He took a few years and placed a bunch of insiders into strategic positions. He infiltrated the top ranks of Mars with traitors. When we resisted the pirates and arrested Troy and his men, there must have been some traitors left in place! Space Command couldn't have found them all. Some of the people who were in charge when Troy came in must be in place today."

Zip continued. "That must be why Forge has such influence. Forge doesn't have control over the people who have been there

a long time, but the newer personnel that belonged to Troy could be easily used; not all of them were identified two summers ago. When we escaped from Seven Leaves, Forge must have contacted the mayor of Eagle City and told him to shoot us down, so the mayor launched *selected* members of the police force after us. Probably a lot of the *real* police are honest, as well as the general population of Mars—but the stooges chasing us were probably personally loyal to Forge!”

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Back at Mars Base, Richard Starlight and Oritz Konig were meeting for breakfast. Neither had slept well. The meal had been served them in Richard’s private apartment. The dishes had just been cleared away.

The two men were sitting in a bay window that had a northern exposure. A pot of coffee had been left on a small table. Konig stirred a little sugar into the dark liquid, placed the spoon down carefully, leaned back, and brought the cup to his lips with both hands. He stared silently through the large windows at the glaring red-orange sand and rock of the landscape outside.

At this latitude, very little could grow. There was no settlement on Mars closer to the north pole. Though Mars Base was a well-designed and fully equipped facility, it had an atmosphere of being an outpost. There were no towns, settlements, or even squatters’ claims within two hundred miles. A gusty breeze, laden with red dust, blew across the desolation outside.

“Of course the Starmen aren’t guilty,” Richard was saying. “The media’s story is as phony as a three-solar bill. Even assuming that the Starmen *were* murderous criminals bent on assassinating this well-respected billionaire, they could hardly just stroll into his office, shoot him, and then waltz out and take off. The whole scenario is preposterous, ludicrous! You can bet that a flea couldn’t even get into that office—or out of it—without an entire army knowing. The accusation coming out of

Forge's office is a flat lie!"

Konig looked concerned. "Assuredly—but why? Why the sudden attack on the Starmen in the daytime skies of Mars? Why the sudden media assault on them and us? It's got to be Andrew Forge behind it, of course."

"It's the only practical explanation. Unless, that is, you would like to assume that Andrew Forge was suddenly kidnapped under the nose of his private army, and that the brilliant kidnapper who pulled that feat off suddenly lost his mind and decided to frame the three most famous and upright Starmen of all time to throw the police off his trail. No ordinary criminal would try to frame a Starman; it's a wasted effort. There must be some other reason. Forge must have something important to gain by dropping out of sight permanently and framing the Starmen for his murder."

Inwardly Richard wondered if there were some connection between Forge and the search for the ancient Martians. He wished there were some way he could hazard a secure communication with the Starmen, but he couldn't risk making direct contact with them. Under the circumstances, he hadn't had time yet to enlighten Konig of the results of the Starmen's investigation of the asteroid.

Konig shared a thought. "The Starmen must have stumbled onto something, something that bothered or threatened Forge, and Forge didn't want that 'something' to become known. He decided to frame them and take the opportunity to vanish. Forge, then, must have something he badly wants to hide. But what?"

Richard shook his head. "That's what I want you to find out, and quickly. Whatever it is, the threat of exposure must be serious enough to have caused Forge to lose his head; he pulled a thoughtless stunt that has the potential to blow his cover permanently. The only reason it is working so far is because Mars hasn't changed much since Troy Putnam tried to take over. Forge's got enough personnel in the right places on his side to put the lie out in public and try to make it sound convincing."

"I'll get right on it, Richard, but—" Konig looked puzzled.

“Mars hasn’t changed? What do you mean?”

Richard had come to the same conclusion about Troy Putnam’s latent traitors as the Starmen had, and explained his reasoning to Oritz. “But now,” he concluded, “apparently they are working for Forge. Forge may even have been the local driver for corruption on Mars, since Putnam had his base in the Asteroid Belt.

“Unless we can move quickly and convincingly, I fear that Forge will use the corrupt personnel in the justice system, police force, and news network to continue this assault on the Starmen and us, and seriously harm Starlight Enterprise and all Starmen in the process. There is more at stake here than meets the eye.”

Konig felt his spirits sink within him. “It’s a big job, Richard. You’ve read my reports on the work I’ve done since you transferred me here. A three-month job has turned into a posting that’s already lasted almost two years. Now, with this, there’s no end in sight. The Starmen have been instrumental in saving Mars twice now. How many more times must it be done? I’ve been in security for more than ten years, Richard, and I’ve seen a lot of criminal activity. This set-up exceeds anything I’ve ever suspected or heard of. What kind of man can do this?”

Richard sighed. “Andrew Forge, if he is guilty, is a very gifted man, but at the heart probably not out of the ordinary. He’s like most people, the people who just commit their crimes on a smaller level. How many people will lie to save themselves trouble or make themselves look better than they are? How many will steal a few solars here or there if they know they can get away with it? How many are capable of betraying somebody under pressure? Putnam, Zimbardo, and now Forge are simply examples of men who took these common vices to an extreme. A person who lies a little in the beginning and succeeds can grow bolder and go onto other lies. This isn’t new; the potential is found in everyone. Some people who are more intelligent or have more resources than most can take the vices farther than others and descend deeper into darkness.

“What is unusual are people like the Starmen: people who

will not lie no matter what the cost, who won't steal, who are loyal and respectful to the end, willing to take risks with little reward, who will pursue a dream doggedly to bring it to reality. People like this aren't ordinary at all—they stand out. These are the people who understand my father's vision.”

Richard smiled. “Two summers ago, Oritz, when the trouble started on Mars, I took two of these Starmen on a short drive on the lunar landscape. Zip was here on Mars, in Eagle City. Mark and Joe accompanied me. At the time they were newly graduated from the Academy and hadn't had any assignments yet. I remember telling them about the meaning of my father's name, how he'd taken a new name to signify light in the great darkness of the Collapse, as stars are points of light in the darkness of space. I told them that no matter how overwhelming the darkness might appear, they were still charged to be people characterized by light, the inspiring light of beauty and adventure, which the darkness cannot overcome. I reminded them that this was why they had been selected as Starmen—they were the ambassadors of Starlight Enterprise to the universe, the best that we and human civilization had to offer. When they committed themselves to our vision, they became people called and chosen to be as different from ordinary people as light is from darkness.

“I believe passionately in my father's vision. The reason Mars was ever in danger was because its leaders—or enough of them, at least—were people walking in darkness, caring for no one but themselves. Neither the Starmen nor we are going to be able to do much to change that; none of us can do that alone—only the uncreated Light can do that. Mars' fortunes will wax and wane and wax again, but no place in civilization will ever be completely safe until the last darkness is overcome. Until then, we battle on, resisting the darkness wherever we can.”

Chapter 13: In the Morning Light

A SOFT BELL rang in the crew's cabin of the *Star Ranger*.

"A message from Richard!" shouted Joe. He pressed a button on the nearby communicator and piped the message into the galley.

"Greeting, Starmen." The voice of Richard Starlight was confident and encouraging. "Police ships from Eagle City and several surrounding settlements are following a grid search pattern whose center is the position from which you disappeared yesterday evening. They have orders to arrest you and bring you in to Eagle City to face trial. Further, they have orders to shoot you down at the slightest provocation. I am convinced that this second order is a ploy to ensure your murder without witnesses by certain members of the police. Remain in hiding and take precautions. At 11:00 a.m. this morning, tune in to the Starlight network. Peace be with you."

"Ha!" exclaimed Joe and clapped his hands together. "Something's happening!"

"That's over three hours away," said Zip. "Let's check the ship over while we've got some time. It took several hits yesterday."

The Starmen were not in a position to set up a gantry to give their beloved ship a thorough examination, so Zip and Joe would have to make a visual assessment with ladders. Mark took his seat and checked first through all the electronic systems, and then made a thorough manual check of the engines.

The previous evening the Starmen had ascertained that the inhabitable portion of the ship was airtight, but there was evidence that there were leaks in the bulkheads and the framework. Zip and Joe secured their helmets and went back outside. Each carried a lightweight, collapsible ladder. Zip took the port side and Joe the starboard side of the ship. Beginning with the nose, they tested the hull of the ship and took note of the gashes, holes, burn marks, and stressed seams. Pinprick leaks sealed themselves automatically, but the larger damage had to be

repaired by hand.

After the two Starmen had finished their examination, they traded sides and checked each other's work. When their results agreed, they set about to mend the destruction the ship had sustained in the attack the previous evening.

Zip had a disquieting feeling that whatever Richard had planned, the madness would not be resisted easily. With a grid search pattern going on, he knew that it was only a matter of time—maybe even a few hours—before the *Star Ranger* was found and blasted to atoms. Even in the pristine beauty of this uninhabited canyon, there could be no permanent escape.

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Seven spacecraft from Mars Base soared slowly and prominently through the airspace over Eagle Crater. Six flew in a line across, each ship a brilliantly reflective burgundy color. Leading them was the *Lux Mundi*, Richard Starlight's personal spacecraft. In the midmorning sunlight its flecked gold exterior flamed like the heart of the sun as the ships circled the city. The seven ships flew in tight formation as if linked together by invisible bonds.

In the streets below, people stopped what they were doing and looked up at the ships. Others came out of their houses or places of business. When the streets were well filled, a loudspeaker from one of the ships announced, "At 11:00 a.m., Richard Starlight of Starlight Enterprise will personally address the people of Eagle City in the courtyard of the Starlight Building. All citizens of Eagle City are invited to come and meet Richard Starlight and hear his response to the false accusations against Starman David Foster, Starman Joseph Taylor, and Starman Mark Seaton. Mayor Edmund Warner and his council members are especially invited to be present."

After the announcement had been made three times, the seven ships landed at the spaceport. Richard, Oritz Konig, and several other officials from Mars Base strode across the landing

area and through the gates of the spaceport into the city square. Each was formally dressed and all looked impressive.

Many people from the outlying areas of the city began to swell toward the center of the capital. The streets became crowded and vehicular traffic was stopped. Police officers poured from the headquarters adjacent to the spaceport, under hasty orders to effect crowd control. Other officers began to come in from outlying stations, but were hampered in their movements by the crowds. They made progress only slowly.

As Richard moved through the crowd with his party, many cries went up.

“We’re with you, Richard!”

“We don’t believe a word of it!”

“Make ’em tell the truth, Richard!”

There were other voices as well.

“You’re getting yours now, big man!” But these cries were quickly silenced, shouted down by others. Richard waved as he walked across the city square, shook hands with many people, and made eye contact with as many people as he could.

Before long the Starlight party reached the terminus of Pallas Avenue, where it emptied into the city square. Starlight Building, the headquarters of SE in Eagle City, was located three blocks along the avenue and covered an entire city square. The headquarters building was three stories tall but had two basement floors below street level.

A courtyard of a little more than two acres lay to one side. A high brick fence surrounded it, but three rolling gateways had been drawn open to grant access to the general populace. Starlight employees guided visitors into place on a first-come, first-served basis. A podium had been set up with a massive screen behind it.

Richard and his party came through the gates and ascended to the podium. The citizens were invited to make themselves comfortable on the lawn. Small shade trees, fountains, and a number of benches were situated on the lawn in a pleasing design. A few microphones had been hastily set up throughout

the acreage and two television cameras were placed in prominent positions. Attending one of them was Dana Gresham, the news reporter who had questioned Mayor Warner the previous evening.

In all, twenty-two people took their places on the podium. Desmond Ubuntu, the manager of Starlight Eagle City, approached the stand, welcomed the people who had come to the meeting, and asked them to make themselves at home. His image showed on the screen behind the podium. The television cameras were covering all the action.

“On behalf of Richard Starlight, Starlight Enterprise, and Starlight Academy, we welcome you. Mr. Starlight will address you in a few moments and will give ample opportunity for you to ask questions. Mayor Edmund Warner and the members of the city council have been invited to join us. We will give them time to arrive before we begin.”

At that precise moment, the mayor came through the gate, followed by five other persons. He was clearly angry, uncomfortable, and defensive. He stumped up to the dais and spoke curtly to the first person he saw, apparently demanding to know where he was to sit. That individual pointed to a line of seven chairs that had been set to one side. A microphone stand had been set up at that end of the dais. Ignoring Richard and everyone else, Warner stomped across the dais and sat down, followed by the five others. One chair was left vacant.

As soon as the members of the city council had sat down, Richard approached his microphone.

“People of Eagle City,” he began, “my name is Richard Starlight.” A round of applause and cheers resounded throughout the courtyard. Richard allowed plenty of time for the acclamation to be expressed fully.

“Thank you for coming to this gathering with such short notice. In a moment, I will give Mayor Warner a chance to respond to my remarks. For now, I wish to state emphatically and personally that the charges he has leveled against the Starmen are utterly without foundation—in short, they are lies!”

Edmund Warner flushed bright red and bared an expression of unmitigated hatred toward Richard. It was clear that it was all he could do to keep under control. The five council members with him looked pitifully uncomfortable.

“The mayor,” said Richard, “has publicly accused the Starmen of murder and has ordered their ship to be shot down by Eagle City police cruisers. This—” here Richard turned to the mayor, “is a travesty of justice! How you can call it *justice*, Mr. Warner, to shoot down the Starmen without a trial? How can you call it *justice* to hunt the Starmen with cruise missiles and conduct a planetwide manhunt on the flimsiest of evidence?”

Richard’s voice rose with passion. “The Starmen would never have walked into Mr. Forge’s office and shot him, knowing that they were on foot and had passed a dozen or more armed guards as they entered his home! The reputation of the Starmen on Mars and throughout the Solar System makes this accusation absolutely untenable! You’ve spoken of evidence, yet you haven’t produced it! You have controlled the news media in a pitiable attempt to wrest public opinion away from the regard in which these heroes are held! And this assembly alone shows that you have failed!”

The crowd erupted into cheers. At this point, the mayor could no longer contain himself. He leaped up, bypassed the microphone set up on his side of the dais, and confronted Richard directly. His voice rang through the courtyard even before the cheers died down. His enraged features showed close up on the screen behind the speakers.

“Their reputation does not matter in the slightest, Mr. Starlight! What matters is the seriousness of the accusation! These ‘Starmen’ are accused of a very serious crime, and when they were confronted with it they fled from the law. That kind of behavior is evidence of their complete disregard of due process and their guilt!”

Richard held his ground and faced the mayor directly, eye to eye. “On the contrary! That can just as well be the behavior of the innocent when wrongly accused and suddenly attacked! Of

course they fled! Your forces started firing lasers at them without warning and riddled their ship with holes! If they hadn't fled they would now be part of the Martian desert!"

"We *had* to start shooting at them!" Another councilman had taken the microphone near his seat. "These are Starmen! If we hadn't shown that we meant business our forces would have been shot out of the sky! Anyone who would walk into a man's home and shoot him for no clear reason is a ruthless criminal who ought to be treated roughly!"

"Absolutely!" the other council members echoed.

"You've got it absolutely right," another said.

The mayor looked at Richard harshly. "These are *your* Starmen! Of course you're going to defend them! You, mister, have no credibility at all! Your firm was the one that nearly destroyed the entire expedition to Nyx a few months back, right after you had told the Solar System how safe your new radiation shield was! You don't care at all about real justice or real peace. You've manipulated the people of Eagle City with this mock hearing, but that can't change the facts! We will find these Starmen of yours and bring them in. At the slightest indication of resistance, they will be shot down! I will not risk the safety of my officers or the future safety of Mars!"

Richard was secretly pleased. The public exchange was going precisely as he wanted. He spoke evenly.

"Mr. Mayor, if it weren't for these three Starmen which you despise so much, Mars and all its people would still be held hostage by Troy Putnam, and both Earth and Mars would have been ravaged in a fierce war between Putnam and Space Command. These Starmen have risked their lives *twice* to save this world from evil men and have succeeded! They will do so again!"

Richard continued, hammering his point home. "You've shown no evidence of caring about justice at all. You have declared the Starmen to be guilty without a trial or presenting any evidence. Anyone can make up forged video evidence! I could just as easily 'prove' that the Starmen shot *you* yesterday

evening. You and your council have the dubious distinction of becoming the first people to accuse a Starman of a crime, and you will go down in history for it.”

Chapter 14: The Mayor’s Desperation

IT ONLY TOOK A FEW SECONDS for Mayor Edmund Warner to realize that Richard was right. Edmund had fallen under the power of Andrew Forge years earlier when there was almost no one to oppose him or even suspect him. Even when the pirates had landed on Mars and been repulsed, no one traced any criminal action to the reclusive billionaire. Edmund had pinned all his hopes for power, wealth, and a notable career on Andrew Forge, and now he was going to lose it all.

No matter how thoroughly Forge had inculcated his influence into Martian culture and how invincible he had appeared, Edmund Warner recognized that even the “untouchable” Banjoman was not all-powerful. He hadn’t anticipated the presence of Richard Starlight when he started the falsehoods rolling. Richard could use the media to better effect than Forge—in fact, Forge’s deliberate ploy of keeping out of the limelight and running his nefarious activities through others was now a distinct disadvantage. Forge was on the defensive and he, Edmund Warner, was the public fall guy.

A second realization hit the mayor broadside. Andrew Forge was dead! —at least as far as the public was concerned. He had taken his “invisibility” to its logical extreme. The real Forge could simply disappear and leave Edmund and his other public faces to suffer the consequences.

The mayor licked his lips, and then leaped back at Richard in a furious bluster.

“You can’t manipulate me, Richard Starlight!” he retorted. “You arranged this show to influence people’s opinions and you’ve got the resources to put on this charade, but you’re not the mayor of Eagle City! You don’t have the police at your

command or the authority to enforce law and order on Mars! I do, and I am determined to bring peace to this planet, and see that the fugitives are brought to justice! Your money and your name and even this crowd you've bought can't stop me!"

A loud rumble from the crowd stopped Warner's diatribe. He realized he'd made a mistake; he'd gone too far. He'd intended to look staunch and dedicated by standing up to the world-renowned Richard Starlight, but instead he'd insulted the assembly. He took a quick sidelong glance at the crowd and then turned to face Richard again. He licked his lips.

The President of Starlight Enterprise had neither moved nor changed his expression. The mayor appeared to be at a loss for words. After allowing him to fumble uncomfortably for a brief span, Richard stepped in.

"Is there anything else you'd like to say, Mr. Mayor? You see Dana Gresham at one of the cameras, making sure that there is an impartial record of this event. No doubt he will find this meeting to be newsworthy for the public. The other camera belongs to Starlight Enterprise. If you like, I will have a video-record of our exchange sent to your office."

The mayor flushed beet red and for a moment looked almost as if he were going to strike Richard. He stepped back and cocked his right hand into a fist. Then abruptly he whirled and made a beeline for the steps that led down from the dais.

Taken by surprise, the other five members of the city council leaped up and followed after him. They hadn't caught up to him by the time Mayor Warner had reached the gateway that led back out to Pallas Avenue.

~

Once he reached his office, Edmund Warner ordered his secretary to keep everyone away from him. He was trembling, thoughts raced uncontrollably through his mind, he felt an uncomfortable pressure in his chest.

He grabbed the communicator and made contact with the officer in charge of the search grid. He assured himself that the

communication was encrypted, and then spoke.

“Faster!” he shouted into the microphone. “Search faster, cover more ground! I want results by this evening!”

“But sir,” responded the officer, “if we speed up the search to cover more ground we’ll miss a lot of details! Some of this terrain is rough—there are dozens of places to hide! Even a large ship can escape detection if we’re not thorough!”

“I don’t care!” The mayor’s voice was almost a shriek. “Find those Starmen! Get more ships to cover the territory! Use the Grayson radiation detectors! Scour the ground!”

“Grayson detectors, sir? You know that the Graysons can cause genetic damage to any living thing they irradiate! There are people in this territory, Mr. Mayor, people who live here!”

“I don’t think you understand me yet, officer!” said the mayor evenly, with a tone that cut like a razor. “Finding the Starmen is your top priority, do you hear me? Find the Starmen, whatever it takes! I want results by this evening!” He cut off the connection.

Without a pause he made a connection with the editor of one of the two local news outlets.

“I’m sure you’ve heard all about the farce Starlight put together this morning,” he began. “I want a story out right away that discredits the entire episode. Make Richard look bad!”

“Mr. Mayor—” began the editor.

“Uh, uh, uh,” Warner cut the sentence off. “Just counteract what Richard did! We can use the media to our advantage, too! I’m not asking you to lie—just make sure that people know that I’m just doing my job no matter how unpopular that may be, and that I won’t tolerate any interference from anyone, not even Richard Starlight!”

“Yes, sir.”

The mayor was just on the point of contacting his legal office to see if there were any way he could take action against Richard for unlawful assembly, inciting a riot, or some other offense, when he heard shouts outside his office. The noise began low but quickly escalated. He suddenly had a sense of

foreboding.

Someone tried the door to his office. He glanced at the security camera and blanched. There was a small crowd of people bunched up at the door.

“Warner, open up!” boomed a stentorian voice. “Open up now!” An impressive-looking man struck the door with a demanding series of knocks. He had a full head of blond hair and broad shoulders.

With a sense of desperation, Edmund reached for the emergency button on his communicator. At that instant, the door burst open. At the head of a determined group, the blond man in a gray suit strode across the room. With surprisingly quick reflexes he grabbed the mayor’s wrist before he could reach the button.

“Don’t try to call for help, Warner,” he hissed. Flashing brown eyes stared directly into the mayor’s. “You’re not in any danger here—not any physical danger that is, though there are a few of us who wouldn’t hesitate to throw you out your window!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Warner, I couldn’t stop them!” The mayor’s secretary stood at the back of the crowd, wringing his hands and wearing a look of alarm. “Shall I call the police, sir?”

“N—no, thank you, Bob,” said the mayor, trying to appear calm. A man at the back of the crowd slowly but firmly closed the door, shutting the secretary out.

“At last you did something smart, Warner,” said the man in the gray suit. About a dozen people pressed close to the mayor’s desk, their expressions severe and determined.

“Say what you’ve got to say and then get out!” said the mayor. “I can still call the police and have you arrested!”

“No doubt you can, Warner, but you won’t. What I’ve got to say won’t take long, but you’d better listen closely.

“I am R. Mark Johnson, owner of Johnson Construction and Exploration Company. My partners and I have taken it upon ourselves to speak for the people of Eagle City. We are disgusted at the cavalier way you have treated the people of this city! You are a corrupt excuse for a mayor! The way you’ve treated the

Starmen and the barefaced lies you've told since yesterday convinced us that you're no longer fit to serve as mayor—if indeed you ever were!”

“If you don't like the way I run the city, Johnson, you can write a letter to the editor! I'm a law-abiding citizen and I am sworn to uphold the law—you can't just barge in here and make your demands!”

“Hah!” barked Mark Johnson. The people with him smiled and exchanged glances with one another.

The mayor looked puzzled. “What's so amusing?” No one answered.

Warner faced Johnson and leaned in toward him. He lifted his right hand and pointed a finger at the man's chest. He looked at the man with an angry light in his eye. “You listen to me, Mr. Johnson! *I* am the law here, and I am going to see that those Starmen pay for what they did to one of our finest citizens! You are totally powerless to stop me! I have all the cards in my hand and you have nothing but a small pack of thugs whose odious presence in my office I am tolerating for the moment!”

Mark Johnson turned his head and gave a nod to one of the others. “Open the window, Randy,” he said.

The man named Randy went over to the window and opened it. Immediately the room was filled with the murmur of other protestors, gathered outside. A large number of people had moved from the yard at the Starlight Building to the city hall and were waiting outside.

Edmund wanted to look out the window and see just how many there were, but he didn't want to give the others the satisfaction of seeing that they had affected him.

“So?” he said.

“There are more than 400 people out there, Warner. Others are joining them. They are waiting to hear what we have to report after our visit with you. You and your cronies might think you run things, Warner, but you've forgotten that there are an awful lot of people in this city, even in the government, who don't agree with you. There are policemen and soldiers who

were here before you came a few years back; they've had enough of you and your ilk, and they support us to the hilt."

The mayor said nothing.

"Let me do you a favor, Warner." Mark Johnson's deep voice continued without wavering. "You don't know how close you are to outright civil disobedience in this city and across the planet. We have already filed a citizens' appeal to Earth and you are under investigation. I'm sure you'll get the official communiqué before the end of the day. You call off the manhunt for the Starmen—immediately, while we are here in your office to hear you do it. If you don't, the populace is prepared to call for an immediate plebiscite. You'll be ejected from office, charged with a number of serious crimes, and taken into custody." Mark Johnson kept his eyes fixed on Warner's eyes and didn't waver.

"Now, let's see if you can make another good decision, Mr. Mayor." Johnson handed him the communicator.

Mayor Warner sat down slowly and looked at the communicator in his hand as if he didn't know where it had come from. For a split second he felt like jumping up and hurling it at Mark Johnson with his full strength. Instead he opened a channel with the official in charge of the grid search.

"This is Mayor Warner," he said, "Disregard my previous order. Call off the search. Bring the ships in."

"Have you found the Starmen?" asked the official.

"Just call off the search and come home," repeated the mayor. He put the communicator down.

"Good, Mr. Mayor," said Mark Johnson. "We'll leave you now. Remember that you'll be under scrutiny from now on. If you just do your job, no one'll bother you while we wait for the commission from Earth to arrive. Thank you for your time." The visitors left the mayor's office.

Chapter 15: Silver Spiders

IT WAS APPROACHING NOON. The Starmen were finishing lunch, and their conversation was punctuated with buoyant exclamations.

“Did you see that mayor rear back, ready to punch Richard?” asked Joe for the third time. “*Man*, I wish he’d tried it! Right on the news, too!” Joe was having a hard time eating because his smile was so wide. He extracted a leaf from his artichoke and dipped it into his bowl of mayonnaise. Then he swung the leaf around in a vigorous arc as he exclaimed, “Swing it, Edmund, mayor-boy! Show us all what you’re made of! Go ahead! Hit the famous Richard Starlight on live television!” Joe popped the artichoke leaf into his mouth, scraped off the edible portion, and put the remainder on the pile of other discards.

Mark dipped a wheat cracker into the bowl of caviar and took a bite.

“Richard handled it beautifully!” he agreed.

“Let’s not forget that we’re still fugitives,” reminded Zip. “We’ll have to keep the Starlight frequency tuned in to get any updates from Richard.” He reached for a second artichoke. “Joe, I never know what kind of strange edibles you’re going to bring aboard, but this time I like it.”

When the lunch dishes were cleared, Mark asked how the repairs were coming.

“We’re about finished,” said Zip. “We patched a few small leaks, but the high acceleration and sudden changes in direction strained some of the framework. The metal was groaning a bit when I was flying it last night.”

“Nothing to worry about in the immediate future,” said Mark. “The ship was well made, but I’d feel more comfortable if we could get it to a hangar somewhere and give it a thorough going-over.”

“Definitely,” agreed Joe. “Our patches are makeshift anyway. They’ll last for some time, but right now the *Star Ranger* could fit right in with a fleet of asteroid miners’ Rube

Goldberg conveyances.”

“How are your compad fuel cells?” asked Zip.

“I recharged mine before we left Amundsen City, so it’s still fresh,” reported Mark. “It’ll last until early next year.”

“Mine too,” said Joe.

Zip nodded with satisfaction. “Okay, good. Mark, suppose you and I take a look around. We came to Mars to look for evidence of the Benefactors and I don’t see why we can’t get back on track. We’re looking for Jogren, and we’re in the area that someone’s tried hard to keep us out of. No one knows we’re here and we have to stay hidden until we hear from Richard again, but I’m curious to see what’s out there.”

“Shall we take a shuttlecraft?” asked Mark.

Zip shook his head. “Too risky. Let’s wait until we get the ‘all clear’, and then we’ll explore to our heart’s content. We’ll walk, and we’ll communicate with an infrared beam.”

“Infrared?” asked Joe. “That’s only got, at best, a range of about five hundred yards!”

“Right, but it’s hardest to detect. Just to make it even more secure, we’ll use the Rapid Random Frequency Change System. We can use the computer to enhance the signal and, if we get to the point where we can’t communicate—well, I’d rather do that than risk capture.”

“Okay, Zip.”

“Joe, would you please stay here, guard the ship, and monitor the Starlight frequency for news? Tomorrow Mark can stay and you and I will go out, and on Thursday, I’ll remain—assuming we still need to be here.”

“Sounds good, Zip,” agreed the others.

“Well then, let’s get our NPACs and go outside,” said Zip.

~

Zip and Mark secured their helmets, checked the life-support systems on their suits, and exited the airlock into the Martian midday. They hefted laser rifles and packed binoculars; Zip had a

compact tent packaged at his side, and Mark packed a case of measuring and sampling instruments.

The ledge where Zip had landed the *Star Ranger* was less than a hundred feet below the top of the ridge. They skirted the overhang and, although the incline was steep, it didn't take them long to scramble their way to the surface, using their hands to grasp at protruding stones and pull themselves up.

"Can you hear us, Joe?" asked Mark, once he and Zip were standing on level ground.

"Coming through okay," answered the gangly Starman, "but the signal's already a little weak. If you walk any distance, I'll probably lose contact. Shall I put the aerial up, Zip?"

"Yes. We won't be going far and this place is so desolate I doubt there's much risk. We need to be in constant communication with each other as long as we can."

"Aye aye, Zip," answered Joe. A tiny hatch slid aside on the top surface of the Starmen's spacecraft, and a small, transparent balloon began to rise. It quickly inflated to its full size of six inches in diameter and wafted upward in a slight breeze, trailing a spiderweb thin wire.

Zip and Mark surveyed the land in front of them. A plateau of rough rock, fairly level, extended southwestward. There were a few jagged cuts that dropped down into shadow, but overall the terrain was a featureless expanse of hard, brown, rock-strewn earth.

"No place to hide up here," observed Mark. "I don't want to be in the open too long."

"No," assented Zip. "Let's go off due south. It looks as though the other side of this plateau comes closest there."

"I can hear you fine," said Joe. "I'm kicking in the frequency changer now, and the computer enhancement, too."

"Very good, Joe," assented Zip.

Zip and Mark made their way across the upper plain in a direct line. Through the outside microphones on their suits, the two Starmen could hear the easterly breeze blustering across the path. It would have stirred up dust, but the ground was moist

from the previous night's storm. Now, though, the dark blue sky was cloudless.

"I'm losing your signal, men." Joe's voice came weakly through the communicators.

"Okay, Joe," said Zip. "We've still got some distance to go, so we'll be out of touch for a while. Expect us back in less than an hour."

After about a mile, they came across the beginning of a gorge cut into the flatness of the tableland. A barely discernible fold deepened sharply into a descent that widened as it plunged southward. Fierce rains had eroded a jagged canyon that ran for about half a mile, and then came to a sudden termination.

"Down here," said Zip. Mark nodded and led the way into the depression. Leafy vegetation grew in profusion in the shelter of the canyon. Tall trees covered both sides of the cutting and thick, bright green grass and broad-leafed shrubbery covered the ground. The plants were wet and dripping from the rain the night before. Where the sides of the canyon were visible through the verdant growth, they were scored with deep cuts, some of them hidden in dark shadows.

"Look at this," said Mark. "Do these trees remind you of anything, Zip?"

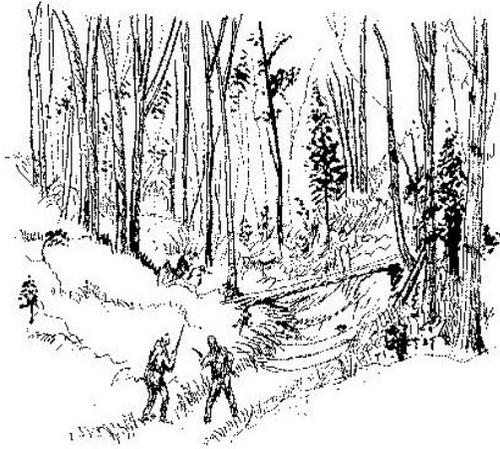
"The trees in the holograms on Nyx, without a doubt."

"Yes, indeed. I think they might be the trees whose designs we saw on the ships in Tharsos, too."

"Imagine what this planet must have been like when there were vast forests of these trees!"

Creepers and full-leafed vines twisted up profusely from the lush soil and wrapped around many of the trees. In places, large boles had fallen and formed bridges across the bottom of the canyon.

"There's a riverbed down here," observed Mark, who was in the lead. "Must be a torrent when it rains! Right now it's a pleasant trickle."



Leafy vegetation grew in profusion in the shelter of the canyon.

At the bottom of the canyon there was a thick deposit of rocks, brought down from the slopes on both sides by the waters that had cut the channel. The Starmen clambered down with the spreading branches of the trees protecting them from any casual, unwanted observation from above. Toward the bottom of the canyon through the interlocking branches there was a nimbus of golden light in the fine mist that hung in the air.

Before long, Mark had pressed through the last restraining shrubbery to the end of the canyon. Two large boulders jutted from the sides and numerous other stones backed up in front of them where they had rolled down the riverbed. A pool of placid water lay at the bottom of the cutting. Between the boulders water flowed out delicately and drained in a long waterfall. In a heavy rain the water would surge over the precipice in a fearful torrent.

“Not a place to be caught in a flash flood,” observed Mark.

He and Zip crawled to the top of the great boulders, one on either side of the opening between them, and surveyed the land beyond. The wall through which they were looking dropped

sheer to the floor of the valley a long drop below them. Their vantage point afforded them an unbroken view for many miles to the south. Directly beneath there was a number of bewildering passages among sharp ridges, cut by rain. Southward the ridges gradually smoothed out until they disappeared on the plain.

“What was that old man’s name?” asked Mark. “The prospector we met the day we landed?”

“Stansby,” said Zip. “Charles Stansby.”

“Does that convoluted terrain below resemble what he was describing?”

“Could be, but so might a hundred other places in this land of convolutions.”

“Do you see anything growing down there, anything that might be the trees where the Martian plums come from?”

Zip crawled a little closer to the edge and peered down. “There’s a lot of trees and other growth down there—brush and probably some ferns.”

“What’s that out there?”

“Where?”

“Far out, ten miles, maybe more. The color of the land changes. See, there’s a sudden change of hue from the reddish brown to gray or maybe dull green.”

“Hmm,” agreed Zip. He pulled his binoculars to the front of his helmet and affixed them in front of his eyes. A digital image was transferred from the binoculars to a screen that appeared on the glass front of his helmet. Mark followed suit.

“Some kind of low plant growth,” said Zip. “It’s very close to the surface.”

“Lichen,” said Mark confidently.

“How can you tell from here?” asked Zip.

“Because I’ve been there. I know where we are now. That’s the lichen field we walked through with Jogren two summers ago. Very plain during the day, but bioluminescent when it’s dark. Eerie but tantalizingly beautiful.”

“What’s that thing in the middle of the field?”

Mark increased the magnification.

“A machine of some kind,” he said. “What’s it doing? Are they harvesting that stuff?”

“Are you sure that’s the same lichen field you crossed with Steve and Jогren?”

“Well, I can’t be sure, of course, without actually getting down there, but if it is the same place, then the mud palisade would be out there a few miles off to the left from where we are,” answered Mark. “If the manhunt is called off, we can fly over there and scrutinize the place.”

“We’d better start on our way back, now, Mark,” said Zip. “The climb back up through this canyon will take us a little time, though—it’ll be harder getting out than it was getting in here. It’s pretty steep. We’ll be breathing hard when we get up.”

~

Back at the *Star Ranger*, Joe was becoming curious. He noticed that the radar screen was waving as if the system were detecting something, but there was no reading.

“Hmm,” said Joe to himself. “No blip on the screen, but there’s a ‘roll’ or ‘warp’ that comes on for a second and then disappears.” When he checked for details—size, mass, distance, and so forth—nothing came up.

“Maybe the system was damaged in the pursuit,” he mused, “But I’m sure Mark went over it thoroughly yesterday. I’ve never heard of anything like this, but maybe a microline in one of the circuit boards is partially detaching. Mark’ll have to check it again when they get back. He’ll know better than I do.”

About ten minutes later, a movement outside the ship caught Joe’s attention. He was monitoring the Starlight frequency for news, watching the radar, and watching the infrared communicator as his colleagues ascended the narrow canyon back up to the tableland. The sudden motion caught him completely off guard. He narrowed his eyes and gave his full attention to what he could see through the window.

Two shiny metallic robots were lumbering across the ledge

toward the *Star Ranger*. They were about three feet long and shaped like scarabs, but had eight long, doubly jointed arms. Two were in front, four in the middle, and two in the back. The robots looked alarmingly like silver spiders. They had been obviously designed for traversing the rough Martian terrain. One had a cylinder strapped to its back, and the other was equipped with a set of lenses that looked repulsively like bulbous insect eyes.

Joe turned his head quickly and glanced at the radar screen. The robots did not appear! Before he could cry out, he was hailed over the ship's normal communications system.

"Hello there, Joseph! Some of my acquaintances call me the Banjoman. Do you see those two robots? One of them is carrying an atomic bomb." Joe immediately remembered that an atomic device based on an isotope of mercury could fit into a tube less than a foot long. He felt his skin crawl.

"That's right, Joe—an atomic bomb. See that thermos bottle on the back of the first robot? It's a small nuclear device, but still powerful enough to vaporize you and your ship, and blow out a considerable portion of the wall of the canyon.

"I can detonate it, Joe, if you like. I can do it in seconds—there's not nearly enough time for you to escape. I'll give you a choice: you can either leave your ship with your hands raised, or I will blow you to atoms. Be assured, Joe, that I can see what you're doing. The other robot is equipped with infrared scanners that can see right through your ship and watch your every move. Right now you're sitting in the navigator's seat with both hands on the console. Don't make any fast moves, Joe, or I'll make sure that you and your wonderful ship are atomic dust long before the pieces of the ledge you're on come to rest on the bottom of this exquisite gorge. I beg you—please don't make me do it! I do so love the beauties of nature and hate to see them destroyed."

Joe felt a hideous sense of frustration. There he sat with Starlight Enterprise's best equipment at hand for both offense and defense and he was powerless to use any of it.

“Go ahead, Joe,” said the Banjoman, “scan it. See if I’m telling the truth or not. I’ll wait. I want you to know that I am a trustworthy man. You can depend entirely on what I say.”

Joe nervously scanned the robots, looking for telltale radioactive material, and found the man was telling the truth: one robot really *was* holding a nuclear device. His hands grew clammy and his heart speeded up.

“Okay, I believe you,” said Joe, the first words he’d uttered since the robots had appeared.

“I’m sorry I missed your friends, Joe. I’d like to invite them to come along with you. Well, no matter. I’ll send someone out after them right away. They can’t be far, and they won’t have their ship. And don’t try to contact Richard Starlight or anyone else—you’ll find that your communicators won’t go more than a few miles. I’ve jammed the airwaves.”

Joe wondered what he meant by saying “they won’t have their ship.” What he said was, “I’m putting on my helmet and coming out now with my hands raised.” He just hoped that the man who now had him under his control did not know where Zip and Mark were.

Zip and Mark, more than halfway back up the ravine, had overheard the entire conversation. As Joe secured his helmet, the communication between them was cut off.

Chapter 16: Zip Takes Control

JOE SEALED THE AIRLOCK behind him, descended the ladder to the ledge, and turned to face the robots. He raised his arms. The robot with the bulbous eyes followed every move he made. Joe knew that he was being scanned with detailed intensity. He felt hideously violated.

An electronic voice sounded in his helmet. “Follow this unit.” The robot with the cylinder turned on its eight legs and began to walk toward the canyon wall. The other robot walked toward the *Star Ranger*.

“Where is that robot going?” asked Joe.

“Not your concern,” said the metallic voice. “Follow this unit.” Joe continued walking with his arms up. He and the other robot passed each other. Joe stared at it, and as it approached the base of the ladder he stopped and turned to watch it. Highly alarmed, he stopped and turned as if to go back to the ship. An unexpected agony drilled him on the lower left side his back, as if he’d been stuck with a hot needle.

“Aangh!” he cried and fell to his knees, reaching back with his left hand to grasp the wound.

“Follow this unit,” said the dispassionate electronic voice. Joe knew he’d been shot with a powerful needle-laser. His suit had instantly sealed the breach, but the wound remained. He struggled to his feet and turned back toward the first robot. When it saw that Joe was following, it continued to move toward the side of the canyon. Joe made certain that he did not drop too far behind.

“How did you know where I was?” asked Joe, gritting his teeth with pain.

“Not your concern,” said the unit.

If it’s not my concern, whose is it? thought Joe angrily. He highly resented his powerlessness. He wished he could topple the machine into the canyon and watch it bounce off the sides until it crashed onto the floor below, but he didn’t dare. He knew he would have to go wherever it was taking him.

The robot’s two forward hands reached out and clutched an outcropping at the bottom of the slope. It began to climb upward.

“Follow this unit,” the artificial voice repeated.

Joe stepped up onto a toehold and reached up with both hands to grasp a rock protruding from the side of the incline. He followed the unit.

~

A little over a mile away, Zip and Mark huddled in the bushes under a huge, dead tree trunk that had fallen across the ravine. They were afraid even to talk to one another for fear that

their enemy would locate them. As soon as they knew that the *Star Ranger* was under attack, they turned off the transmitting component of their communicators. They could still hear what might take place inside the cabin of their ship.

Mark turned toward Zip and made a sign that Zip understood meant “balloon”. When Zip nodded, Mark gripped his laser rifle and lifted his eyebrows. Zip tightened his lips and nodded again. It was risky to use any electronic equipment that could be traced, but the aerial was directionally set to follow them anywhere they went as long as they were within its range. Any invader to their ship would have no difficulty finding them as long as the balloon was in the air.

Mark crept up the side of the canyon to where the trunk had fallen. He wormed his way among dried roots and crawled out onto the tree. Carefully he lifted his rifle and set its sights on high magnification. It took him nearly a minute to locate the balloon that carried their aerial into the air above the *Star Ranger*.

Just as Mark was about to fire, a message came into the Starmen’s ship on the Starlight frequency. Both Starmen heard it. “Greetings, Starmen! This is Richard Starlight. Good news! Mayor Edmund Warner has called off the manhunt! Please respond to this message, and I will provide a squadron of SE ships to ensure that you arrive safely to Mars Base!”

Mark fired a low-energy burst of laser power that turned the balloon into ribbons. Along with the aerial wire, the pieces of balloon drifted downward, wafting to the east in the breeze. Richard Starlight’s voice was cut off.

A moment later, the *Star Ranger* lifted into view over the Starmen’s heads. Mark could see Zip start, leap to his feet, and shout a silent “hey!” in his helmet. Their ship moved into the southwest, staying close to the surface of the planet. In seconds it was out of visual sight.

Throwing caution aside, Zip turned his communicator back on. “Come on!” he shouted. Already he was scrambling back up the leaf-shrouded ravine. Mark turned his communicator back on

and followed Zip. He rounded a corner and almost tripped over his partner, sitting down in the middle of the path.

“I can control the ship from here!” said Zip. He was busy setting up a program on his compad. “No one’s going to commandeer my ship!”

“Where’s Joe?” exclaimed Mark.

“He must have been forced to go with one of the robots!” said Zip. “The other robot took over our ship and is flying it somewhere!”

“How did this ‘Banjoman’ even know where we were? How did the robots approach the ship without showing up on the radar? Why didn’t they capture us too? The Banjoman must have known Joe was alone!”

“Keep an eye out, Mark!” ordered Zip. “I suspect he knew that you and I were out here and he intended to maroon us—that would kill us as effectively as a bomb. But maybe they know where we are and they’re just waiting for us to come out of the ravine! Ah! I’m ready now! I’m going into remote control of the ship, Mark—keep watch! I won’t let ’em go far! They’ve got all our food, supplies, records, everything! They’ve got the information about Ahmanya!”

Zip pressed a button and the inside of his helmet suddenly showed the interior of the *Star Ranger’s* cabin. He could see where the ship was flying almost as if he were in the pilot’s seat himself. By manipulating a few controls on his compad he could fly the ship reasonably well. As soon as he entered a certain code, he could take control away from the master system. Whoever was flying the ship would be powerless.

I’ll wait, thought Zip. Let’s just see where they’re taking our ship. As soon as I know, I’m taking my ship back!

~

The *Star Ranger* flew into the southwest at high speed. Through his compad, Zip vicariously watched the land drop below the ship as it flew away from the tableland toward the

desert plain below. A scroll of figures in the lower right of his helmet screen provided the craft's heading and distance.

In very little time, the arachnoid began to prepare the *Star Ranger* for landing. Keying in to the ship's own scanning system, Zip noted that there was a compact airfield below. The Starman smiled with grim satisfaction.

The Banjoman just made a mistake, he thought. Zip made a quick scan and realized that the ship's automatic locator had been disabled, but the Banjoman must not have considered the possibility that the seized ship could still be traced.

Zip ascertained that his compad had recorded the information he had gleaned, and then entered the code that allowed him to take control of the pirated ship. The instant control was his, he put the ship into full thrust normally reserved for interplanetary travel and turned the *Star Ranger* so that it pointed almost straight up. Quickly he tapped into the video feed in the pilot's compartment and saw that the abrupt change in direction and speed had flung the arachnoid across the cabin, where it had slammed into the back wall of the cockpit and fallen to pieces. The wall had an enormous dent in it.

Zip then began flying his ship back toward the plateau, where he hoped that there would be time for him and Mark to board it and flee from the Banjoman. He fully expected that the Banjoman would launch a number of ships to pursue him, but Zip had the advantage of being able to accelerate the *Star Ranger* at a rate that would have been impossible if the ship had contained any human passengers.

In moments, Zip saw that three ships had taken off from the Banjoman's hidden landing facility. In close formation, the three ships came after the *Star Ranger* at an amazing speed. With mild anxiety, Zip caused his ship to descend so that it was barely skimming the sand in the plain. For a second he checked the rear view and saw that the three ships had followed suit, coming after him in a line almost wingtip to wingtip.

Instantly Zip turned the *Star Ranger* skyward, changing course so rapidly that no human could have survived the abrupt

turn. The Starman leader gasped when the three ships following him made the same maneuver!

“What is it, Zip?” Mark interjected. The big Starman hesitated to interrupt Zip when he was so engrossed in his task, but he was anxious for Joe and the *Star Ranger*.

“The ships after me are robotic, Mark! They can match my moves! I’ll have to outthink them rather than just outfly them now!” Zip whirled the *Star Ranger* again and drove it straight into the ground, pulling out of the dive with seconds to spare. His three pursuers did the same, and kept on his tail.

Without even taking time to think, Zip dropped the *Star Ranger* to half speed and caused it to descend slightly. The three ships shot overhead. Zip fired a laser cannon, but the beam lanced harmlessly through the formation. He didn’t have time to aim properly. The three ships were already turning in a loop to get behind him again.

Zip instantly spun the *Star Ranger* to port, lowered the ship slightly, and then raised it up again. Having to make a sudden change in speed and direction, two of the three ships collided. Zip checked the rear video feed once again and exulted when he saw a huge fireball behind his ship.

Now there was only one fighter in pursuit. Not hampered by any constraints, the pursuer kept tightly on the tail of the *Star Ranger*. Zip expected that the enemy ship was firing lasers at the Starmen’s spacecraft and knew that he must take decisive action fast or soon he would have no ship at all. In desperation, he decided to follow a plan of defense that put the *Star Ranger* under enormous risk, but if successful would cripple the pursuing craft and perhaps even allow the Starmen to scour it for information.

Initiating his plan, Zip directed the *Star Ranger* straight up, and then looped downward in a screaming arc. The desert floor loomed closer and closer. Anxiously Zip kept a watch on the altimeter, knowing that with only vicarious control of the ship he could be significantly off his ability to fine-tune the maneuver he had planned.

Giving himself a reasonable margin for error, he leveled the *Star Ranger* in a reckless hooking motion. At three times the speed of sound, the brick red ship zoomed over the rough desert floor. Zip caused his craft to skim closer and closer to the ground until it was only a few feet above the sand. The robotic plane kept in close pursuit, screaming after the *Star Ranger* several hundred yards behind.

Zip immediately cut all propulsive power on his spacecraft, then fired two systems of small maneuvering jets. One was on the top of the tail, the other beneath the nose. The *Star Ranger* rotated nose over tail so that it was facing in the opposite direction, upside down. Then Zip ignited the emergency launch procedure.

Receiving a sudden influx of propulsive energy in a direction completely opposite to that it had been following, the *Star Ranger* experienced a stupendous amount of structural stress. As it sought to respond to the tension on its frame and internal configuration, the pursuing ship shot beneath the Starmen's craft. The pursuer's tail was sheered off by the *Star Ranger's* starboard wing.

The result was immediate. The enemy craft began to wobble, then at high speed collided with the ground a few feet below it. It skidded wildly and then slid over the desert floor for well over a mile, gradually slowing until it rammed into a sand dune at almost a hundred miles per hour. An immense blowout of sand flew up at the end of a long scar in the desert floor. The Martian winds were still carrying the dust off eastwards when the engines of the enemy craft finally whined down to a stop.

Chapter 17: What the Wreck Revealed

“YOU INCOMPETENT FOOLS!” cried the Banjoman. “You sent three advanced fighters after one empty spacecraft and you lost them all!”

The furious Andrew Forge ranted in the control room of a

small base nestled in the enclosing foothills not far from the unpretentious launching pad Zip had seen through the *Star Ranger's* window. About half a dozen people sat before control terminals as if spellbound, wearing looks of amazement on their faces.

"How could he do that?" marveled one of the technicians. "I was right on his tail! He *couldn't* get away! I'd programmed the fighter to follow his every move!"

"Don't just sit there and stare with your mouths open!" shouted the Banjoman. "We have to exterminate the Starmen immediately! Now we can't just leave them to starve in the wilderness! Edmund's called the manhunt off! If they get into contact with Starlight or anybody else, there'll be a manhunt after *us* by nightfall! Where did the Starmen's ship go?"

"Back to the top of the ridge, Mr. Forge," answered one of the technicians. "I don't know how they did it, or even how their ship survived the collision, but it's gone."

Fury blazed from the man's eyes and his mouth spluttered, "Where's Zootz?"

"Lloyd's in the corridor, sir," answered Peter Bellar, the Banjoman's second-in-command, "waiting for orders."

"Get him in here!"

Bellar hastened to the door, opened it, and beckoned to an individual seated just outside. A sallow man in his mid-thirties jumped up and entered the room.

"Here, sir," he said with a tone of eager deference.

The Banjoman glared at him. "Take a crew of six and get out there and find the other two Starmen! If they get away, don't bother to come back!"

~

After the *Star Ranger* had sheered off the tail of the last pursuing craft, Zip flew it back toward the ravine where he and Mark had taken refuge. Through his compad, the gargantuan south-facing cliff wall loomed up. It was a resolute front of hard stone, broken in places with cracks and gloomy openings. The

sun, in mid-afternoon, penetrated only a short way into the breaks in the façade, leaving the deeper parts in cool purple shade.

Zip kept an eye on the headings that scrolled across the screen inside his helmet and guided the *Star Ranger* until he found the opening to the ravine he and Mark had explored. He eased the craft carefully into the gorge, over the pool of water at its lowest end, and under a tunneled canopy of leaves. After he'd pressed it under cover as far as he could manage with the compad, he extended the landing gear designed for uneven surfaces and gently lowered the ship to the ground. Then he cut the power and disengaged the compad's vicarious control.

"Whew!" he breathed with relief. He looked around for a moment and then spotted Mark about fifty yards up the ravine. His friend's red Starman uniform was hard to see, since the big man had taken advantage of the shade in the canyon and lain down in deep shadows between two fallen logs. He was facing up the canyon with his laser rifle ready for action. Zip reset his compad for tight-beam communication.

"It's over for the moment, Mark," said Zip, standing up and stretching. "We've got our ship back."

Mark looked over his shoulder.

"Tell me what happened."

"While we walk back down this ravine. That's where the ship is—let's get to it as fast as we can and reconnoiter. The *Star Ranger* should be well hidden and there are dozens of ravines, caves, and canyons in this terrain. I don't think the enemy'll find us easily and I want to examine the wreck of the last fighter if it's possible. Those ships that were chasing me looked disturbingly familiar. Then we'll see if we can fly out of here."

"What about Joe?"

"If we try to contact him, the enemy will learn where we are and we'll all be captured. Examining the wreck shouldn't take too long, then we'll see if we can locate him. But I think it'll be at least as hard for us to find Joe as it will be for the enemy to find us. We'll rescue him from the arachnoid if we can, but I

think we're going to need help."

As the two Starmen hiked down the ravine, Zip gave Mark the account of his rescue of the *Star Ranger*.

"Miraculous flying, Zip! I know the framework of the ship is a titanium alloy and would probably have survived all but a broadside collision, but to pull off a sudden reverse flight pattern like that, well, my hat's off to you!"

"Keep your hat on until we see what the ship looks like, Mark."

The year was in its greening time, and the trees were a study in mystic, dusky emerald. The moisture from the morning had dried up in the midday sun and the leaves rustled in the constant Martian wind. Though the ravine was protected from the strongest side of the afternoon gale, a breeze kept the branches in restless motion.

"There it is," said Mark, pointing. The dark red of the ship appeared far down, among the swaying boughs and dancing leaves. In moments the Starmen had reached the *Star Ranger*.

There was hardly an unscathed portion anywhere on its surface. It was marred with dents large and small, some panels were missing altogether, numerous punctures showed where a medium-weight laser had left its mark, and on the front of the right wing there was a significant breach in the superstructure itself. The ship was one step above a ruin.

"Looks great!" said Mark, "—all things considered, that is."

"No time to waste admiring it," said Zip. "No doubt somebody's looking for us right now, and we've got to investigate that fighter."

The Starman leader entered the airlock and came out with a coil of rope and a bag containing climbing equipment. He and Mark proceeded to the very end of the ravine. Behind them the *Star Ranger* was covered over with a thick umbrella of branches laden with large green leaves.

For the second time that day, the two Starmen crawled to the far edge of the boulders that closed off the ravine and peered out into the plain beyond.

“There,” they both said at the same time. The wind had already obliterated much of the scar that the careering craft had made in the desert in its long dash to oblivion, but the wreckage was exposed and easily visible about a mile to the southwest of the Starmen.

“We’re lucky,” said Zip as he uncoiled the rope. He tied one end securely to the trunk of the nearest tree and tossed the rope over the edge. It swung down freely to one side of the pleasant waterfall that still flowed over the lip of the pool. He opened the equipment bag and withdrew a motorized rapeller, a triangular-shaped item that resembled a stirrup. Part of it unfolded upward to expose two handholds. Central to the device were two small, motorized wheels in tandem.

Zip attached the device to the rope, made sure it was fastened securely, and then slipped it over the edge. He put a strap around his waist and clipped it to the rapeller, then, with his hands in the handholds, slid over the lip of the boulder himself. He put both feet into the stirrup.

“Going down,” he said, and activated a control. The wheels began to turn and lower him down the face of the cliff. In less than a minute he was at the bottom. He pressed another button and the device returned to the top. Almost at once, Mark was standing next to Zip. Mark used the motorized rapeller as an anchor for the rope, and moved it into the pool at the bottom of the waterfall. Most of the rope slipped sideways into the falling water, making it likely to escape casual observation.

Then the Starmen turned to face the empty desert. Keeping in cover as best they could, they moved carefully from rock to rock. Their rifles were in their hands ready for instant use. It did not take them long to come to the end of the scree at the bottom of the cliff and the beginning of the desert proper. Although making quick time was essential, they waited for at least five minutes before venturing out into the sand, watching for any sign of movement. As they traversed the distance from the rocks to the wreck they would be exposed to the view of anyone on the cliff or in an aircraft.

An uneasy ten-minute trek brought the two Starmen to the site of the crash. A good part of the ship was imbedded in the sand dune, but the latter part of the fuselage was exposed. The wings and ailerons were broken off and lay in large, twisted pieces farther out in the sands. A swath of light debris littered the sandy expanse. Between the tail and the place where it connected with the fuselage there was a wide gap edged with ripped metal, plastic, fine netting, and tubing.

“Can we get in here?” asked Zip.

“We will in a minute,” said Mark. He pulled out a small pocket tool, ignited it, and tried to cut away a few lengths of framework that were blocking the way into the wreck. Nothing happened.

“Hey,” said Mark. “This should cut through any normal framework! What is this frame made of?” He peered closely at it, ran his hands over it, and then pulled out a small spectrometer. “I’m not getting a good reading, Zip. I’d like to work on this some more but I know we don’t have time. We’ll just have to squeeze past the ribs here.”

There were some pieces of broken material at Mark’s feet and he kicked them aside. Turning sideways, exhaling and pulling his abdomen in, he slid gingerly through the gash and entered the wreck with Zip close behind. As they advanced into the gray dimness of the ship, both Starmen turned on their suit lights. Surrounded by cocoons of illumination, they made their way along the narrow central deckway.

At one point, Mark pushed aside a twisted panel of tubing and wires that hung from the ceiling. There was a hissing sound as a last gasp of escaping gas fled into the Martian atmosphere.

“Are you sure there’s nothing alive aboard this ship?” asked Mark.

“Definite. Nothing could have survived the corkscrew course this bucket went through, even if it hadn’t crashed.”

“Hmph. Pilot’s compartment still sealed,” said Mark when he got to the end of the corridor.

“Not sealed,” observed Zip. “See? The seal’s broken; the

doors just haven't popped open."

"They will now," said Mark. He let fly with a powerful side kick. With a loud noise, the doors burst open. Beyond was complete darkness. As the Starmen stepped into the pilot's compartment, the light of their suits revealed a scene of devastation. Three panels of the window had popped out of their frames and sand had poured in. Thick dust hung in the air, caused mostly by Mark's forcing the doors to open.

"Surprisingly intact," said Zip, stepping past Mark and surveying the control panel. "Maybe not so surprising since this is the best-protected part of any ship. Hey! Look at this, Mark." He pointed to the control panel.

"What could that mean?" asked Mark. The notations on all the controls were written on tape laid down over the permanent markings. He reached over to the label that read, "Altimeter" and pulled it off. Beneath it were markings that were completely unfamiliar and incomprehensible.

"What...?" said Mark.

"That's not the Benefactors' writing, I'll bet two weeks' leave time," said Zip. "This must be a Xenobot ship. It has the same look as the ones we saw on Nyx. That's what I was afraid of. There are some disturbing signs on this crate."

"Like how the aileron would sheer off rather easily but the framework won't cut?"

"Right. And the windows shouldn't have popped out as easily as this. I suspect that the fuselage of this craft is a Xenobot product made for space travel, but the wings, tail, windows, and probably a lot of other stuff have been added later for human use."

"Right," nodded Mark. "And look at this. The seats are not original to this ship—they've been bolted down to the deck where other pieces have been removed. See, here're the marks that show where something else was fastened."

"Turn on the computer, if it'll still work," said Zip. "Just open it to probe the files, don't boot it for flying or it'll give off too much energy and draw the enemy here."

Mark sat down at one of the chairs and faced the computer. “Hmmm, this is still on. Unusual!”

~

Back in the Banjoman’s citadel, a technician announced, “Sir, there’s someone in the wreck! He just accessed the computer!”

“Send a missile over, immediately! It’s got to be the other two Starmen!”

“Yes sir,” the man said. He traced the coordinates of the wreck, locked them into a missile, and launched it.

~

“Yep,” Mark said. “These files have been translated. The access course is unusual, but the information is in English.” For several minutes he scanned the data. Suddenly he started and looked at the screen incredulously.

“Zip, look at this! This is fantastic!”

Zip looked at where Mark was indicating and his brow furrowed. “Okay, Mark, what am I looking at?”

“Do you see this number over here? This is the thrust the vehicle ordinarily gets. It’s a sizable amount, but nothing extraordinary.” Mark pressed a few buttons. “Here is the ship’s speed...its firepower...fuel capacity...”

Zip nodded. “It looks as though this ship was a pretty decent ship, Mark. I imagine the Banjoman and his ilk got a lot of good use out of it.”

Mark nodded impatiently. “Yes, Zip, those numbers aren’t bad—but look at *these!*” Mark pressed a button, and suddenly all the numbers increased by several orders of magnitude.

Zip almost choked. “You’ve got to be kidding! There’s no way this crate could move that fast or have that much power! There’s got to be a mistake somewhere!”

Mark shook his head. “There’s no mistake about it! This ship was designed with those speeds in mind; its hull strength, laser

battery size, and everything about the ship was optimized for that set of numbers. That's why I couldn't cut the frame back there where we got in."

"Well then, I don't understand! Why were they only using a fraction of the ship's power? They could have blown any vessel out of the sky with this ship, so why didn't they just destroy the *Star Ranger*?"

"The answer is simple, Zip—it's because this ship isn't 'plugged in'." Mark paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. "This ship has two different types of drives. The first drive is a normal nuclear fusion drive. There's nothing very special or extraordinary about it. That is the drive the ship has been using. Right now, that was the only power source the ship had, so it's been the pilot's only choice.

"However, the computers show that the ship has the capacity to draw power from an outside source. There's a little box on this machine that can draw fantastic amounts of power from somewhere out in deep space. I can't tell with this short investigation how it works, or where that source away out yonder gets it power. Actually, the fact of the matter is, this ship was designed to operate *solely* on that power source, but a nuclear fusion drive has been installed so the ship could operate without it. That's a big job!"

"So the ship could operate without it!" The whole picture suddenly clicked. "Mark—that must be why the Xenobots are operating through human agents! Their ships must depend on this... this outside power source. They can't tap into it from here, so they can't oppose us directly. That's why they are working through men such as Zimbardo and the Banjoman! They *can't* come here, except in these little fighters!"

Mark shook his head. "I don't think so, Zip. There is another alternative that's much more likely. The Xenobots are definitely an interstellar race, and since they depend on this power source to propel their spacecraft, they have to port that source around with them from star to star. I think it's more likely that the Xenobots are preoccupied right now looking for the Benefactors

and simply haven't brought their power source into our Solar System. Zimbardo's crew on Nyx told us that the Xenobots consider us beneath their notice; right now we're not even worth bothering about. As soon as we do something they don't like or that gets their attention, they'll come after us."

Zip's throat grew dry. "If that is the case, then at any moment they might decide we are becoming bothersome and simply establish their power generator in our neighborhood—and then wipe us out as if we were defenseless! That means that if we *succeed* against the Banjoman and frustrate the Xenobots' operation here, the way we did against Zimbardo—"

"—we move beyond inconvenient and annoying," finished Mark, "and draw their attention to us directly, after which it would all be over!"

"We've been here long enough," said Zip, shaking his head. "Too long. We can't stay here talking. Let's get back to our ship and talk along the way."

Mark turned off the wreck's computer system and the two Starmen made their way back out to the desert. The sun was an hour above the western horizon and the quiet starry night was already appearing in the east. Lying prone on the sand, the Starmen scanned the desert in all directions but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

A slight whistling sound caught their attention. Both recognized it at once.

"Run!" yelled Mark. Both Starmen ran headlong back toward the bottom of the cliff. Seconds later a missile struck the wreck and blew it into tiny pieces. The concussion knocked them both off their feet.

~

"Mr. Forge," said the operator. "The Starmen got away!"

"I saw it myself," grunted the Banjoman. The missile had a video camera on it that showed its target as it zeroed in. Just before it struck, the screen in the Banjoman's citadel showed two human figures dashing across the sand away from the impact

point.

The Banjoman scowled, then an evil grin appeared on his face.

“Call up the metal men! Tell ’em that their enemy—the ones that scared them off of Nyx—is up there in that canyon somewhere. That ought to do it. A few of those clanking horrors ought to be able to take care of two Starmen.”

~

While Zip stood guard below, Mark crawled toward the top of the sand dune closest to the base of the cliff and scrutinized its face first with his eyes, and then with binoculars. He could descry no sign of movement or unusual presence. He came back down and joined Zip.

“It appears to be clear, Zip. The sooner we get back the better.”

“Let’s go,” said the redheaded Starman. The two of them scuttled across the purple-gray sands to the base of the stone cliff, then zigzagged through the boulders to the bottom of the thin waterfall. Behind them, where the sun was approaching the line where earth met sky, the desert was clad in old gold, pocked with violet shadows. A smudge of smoke drifted upward, showing the site of the missile impact.

“We must have more information, Mark!” Zip emphasized urgently as they prepared to ascend the precipice. “It can’t be that hopeless! The Xenobots have a weakness: they rely completely upon this power source. We’ve got to find out more about it! How large is this power source? How does it operate? Why haven’t they brought it into our Solar System? If we could jam it—if we could prevent them from entering our Solar System with their full energy capacity, and we might have a chance. But we’ve got to find out more about it—”

“—and that means the Benefactors!” Mark suddenly understood.

“Yes! They’re our only hope, Mark. They have dealt with the Xenobots before. They would surely know how their enemy’s

systems worked. They *must* have the answer, and we have *got* to find them! We're back to the reason we came to Mars in the first place! The Benefactors are the key to our whole problem, Mark. We can't rescue Joe because the Banjoman has raised Mars against us. We can't attack the Banjoman because the Xenobots are guarding him. We can't go after the Xenobots because we just don't have the knowledge—but the Benefactors do! They've dealt with them before. We've got to find them, and quickly! We *must* be close! However many there are, they've got to be here! They've promised to help us and they've already done so more than once!"

Mark pressed the control and the rappeller brought him quickly to the top of the rope. He detached himself and sent it back down to Zip. Zip stepped into the stirrup, strapped himself in, and activated the device. Once Zip had ascended, the two Starmen made their way back to where they had concealed the *Star Ranger*.

"Obviously the Banjoman knows we're here," said Zip. "Let's take a chance and send a message to Mars Base. We need help, fast!"

Just as the two Starmen were about to enter their ship, three spacecraft passed overhead. Zip's blood ran cold. They were the familiar, hexagonal ships he had seen on Nyx. Xenobots! It was clear from their flight pattern that they were landing somewhere in the vicinity of the opening of the ravine above, on the tableland. The Starmen were trapped.

Chapter 18: Three Against One

THE ARACHNOID with the atomic package had maintained a steady pace throughout the afternoon. Joe had stayed close behind but had refrained from asking any more questions. As he walked, he fed himself with the nutritious liquid that was a standard provision with spacesuits. Even a small amount furnished all basic necessities for optimal subsistence without

any waste.

For several hours, the silver spider and its red-suited human captive plodded across the tableland. They avoided the crevasses that descended darkly into the rock and skirted shallow pools of gathered rainwater. The pools reflected the tan Martian sky like huge mirrors, rippled by incessant wind. Scattered patches of short brown grass struggled upward. From time to time Joe saw grottoes that had been formed in the weak places of the stone. Small waterfalls laced down into the darkness.

This bluff must be honeycombed with caves, thought the captive Starman.

Toward the late afternoon, the wind dropped and vanished like a sigh. Clouds began to gather in the west, rising and unfolding into the south, the topmost edge spread out and feathered. The sun, radiant as a bead of superhot metal, dropped into the separating vaporous strands so that the sky looked like a stand of wheat on fire.

At length, the arachnoid came unerringly to a spot on the edge of the plateau. At that point, the face of the cliff had crumbled, thereby producing a hazardous and difficult, but possible, means of descending to the desert about half a mile below. The robot employed its eight limbs constantly, crabwalking downward. Joe was compelled to follow as best he could.

At one point he paused, casting about for the best handhold.

"Follow this unit," commanded the soulless voice.

"I don't have eight legs!" retorted the Starman. For a second he wondered if he could get close enough to the arachnoid to flip it over and down the cliff, getting it far enough away from him before the threatened atomic detonation occurred. He quickly concluded that even if he could do so, the resulting explosion would blow out the rocks he was standing on. He gave up the idea, but the image of the silver spider spiraling out into the air gave him an inner satisfaction.

Before long, Joe could see what he supposed was their goal. Nestled between two extensive outcroppings there was a sizable

lake with an island in the middle. There were a few structures on the island; adjacent to the lake on the opposite shore was a small landing field. The lake was fed by a majestic river that poured out of the side of the cliff in a rushing waterfall. The cataract fell only about fifty feet before cascading into the lake. Clouds of vapor issued from the cavern through which the river rushed and formed an eternal cloud over the island. On the opposite side of the lake, the river flowed smoothly out into the desert, a broad ribbon of orange water.



The arachnoid came to a spot on the edge of the plateau.

“Oh, beautiful!” exclaimed Joe involuntarily, to himself.

“Follow this unit,” the arachnoid droned.

Eventually they came to the bottom of the slope. The arachnoid scuttled along the hard sand toward the body of water. A short walk brought them to the shore. Like a moat around a castle, a narrow expanse of dark water separated Joe and his robotic captor from the island. Directly opposite them on the island was a featureless rectangular building. Once the robot stopped moving, a panel at the bottom of the structure slid upward and a thin walkway began to unroll toward them, extending stiffly over the water. As soon as it struck the sand near the place Joe was standing, the arachnoid spoke.

“Follow this unit,” monotoned the electronic voice. Joe followed the machine over the bridge and entered the building on

the island. Once he was inside, the bridge rolled back up and the panel slid shut behind him. The arachnoid scuttled forward, its eight appendages clacking on the cement floor. It led the Starman down a short corridor and then into an immense service elevator, lined on all sides with thick, brown canvas. The door closed and the conveyance began to descend. Joe tested the atmosphere and noted that he could open his helmet. He slid back the front, breathed in the fresh air, and gave his facial muscles a welcome massage.

After about a minute, the door opened onto a plain receiving room. Standing in the middle were three men—two nondescript individuals with laser rifles leveled at Joe stood on either side of a grinning Andrew Forge!

“Welcome, Joe!” gushed the man whom Joe now knew to be the Banjoman. “It’s good to see you again! Thank you for accepting my invitation to join me in my backcountry citadel! I have a room reserved for you. Please follow me and my attendants.”

The arachnoid clicked its way out of the elevator and stopped not far from the three men. Joe trudged into the room showing an expression that he hoped was defiant but cowed. The rifles followed him as he moved.

“Right this way,” announced the Banjoman grandly, moving his right hand in a generous sweep. Quick as a blink, Joe extended his left hand and grasped the man’s right wrist and pulled so that the old man was placed between him and the gunman on the left. Simultaneously the Starman kicked powerfully upward with his right foot, connecting with the other laser rifle and sending it to the ceiling.

The arachnoid let loose a spray of needle lasers. Wincing from the sudden onslaught, Joe brought the Banjoman in between him and the arachnoid. Forge’s expression changed from wide-opened surprise to one of agony as the lasers dotted his backside like buckshot. A hoarse cry erupted from his O-shaped mouth. He scrambled frantically with his left hand at a control he wore at his wrist and deactivated the arachnoid.

Joe reached across with his right hand and gripped the Banjoman's wrist. The large man was howling with outrage and pain. Joe straightened his enemy's arm with a sharp pull and then twisted the wrist so that the fingers spread outward. With a mighty push, he sent the Banjoman flying backward so that he bowled over the remaining gunman.

The first gunman had hesitated between retrieving the rifle Joe had kicked and leaping in to rescue the Banjoman. When he saw the spray of needle lasers, he had done nothing, but now he bore down on Joe, roaring in with both arms spread. He was a big man and expected that his size and ferocity would be more than a match for the tall but slender Starman.

Just before the assailant's hands closed on Joe, the Starman, freely and gladly giving vent to the frustration he had contained while being led captive by the arachnoid for hours, emitted a piercing yell and took a step forward into his attacker's lunge. Taken by surprise, the man lost his focus. Joe's right fist slammed full force into the man's solar plexus. The air rushed out of his lungs. Joe whirled, grabbed his assailant's right wrist and used the man's own momentum to hurl him head over heels onto the arachnoid.

Joe quickly took stock of the situation and saw that the other gunman was scrambling to his feet, still in possession of his rifle. Uncontrolled rage was written all over his face. At Joe's feet was the other rifle. He scooped it up by the barrel, which was the part he could reach the quickest. Gripping it like a sword, Joe leaped toward the last man. As the enemy's gun began to swing toward him, Joe brought his rifle down hard on the other man's weapon.

Ready for the blow, the man's aim was deterred but he didn't drop the rifle. He brought it up again. Joe swung his weapon in a small circle and caught the other gun by the bottom this time and hefted it high. The other man's rifle flipped up toward the ceiling but he still didn't lose control of it. Then Joe tossed his own gun into his assailant's face, stepped in and grabbed the man's right leg behind the knee and pulled forcefully. The man's feet shot out from under him and he landed hard on his back. When he hit

the deck, Joe was waiting for him. A powerful, well-aimed punch knocked the man unconscious.

Joe stood and surveyed the scene. The big gunman was sprawled upside down over the arachnoid, gasping painfully for breath. The Banjoman was lying curled up with his face in his hands, turning his head from side to side and whimpering. The last man was out cold.

The Starman snorted with savage satisfaction. He picked up both rifles and took a quick glance at the elevator door. It had shut during the fight and the call box was a series of buttons marked with letters and numbers. Joe grimaced. Obviously a password was needed to call the elevator car.

Well, then, I'll look for some other way out, he thought. Maybe I'll find Steve Cliff. If he's alive, he's probably here somewhere.

When the Banjoman was still gloating over Joe's appearance, he'd indicated that he was going to escort Joe down a passage to the right of the elevator door. That was probably where they keep prisoners, Joe said to himself, and began to run down that corridor.

In the headquarters of the island base, a deeply concerned security officer had observed the entire scene through his security camera. As soon as he'd seen Joe begin the attack, he set out to call for reinforcements. Just before he sounded a general alarm, he realized with a start that most of the personnel in the base were scientists and technicians. The Banjoman had sent the majority of the security force out to track down the other two Starman.

The one Starman they had brought into their citadel had proven alarmingly capable of disabling three men at once, two of them armed with rifles! Who was left, beside himself? The man gulped when he realized that there were only two others, and they were at their dinner.

He entered the men's personal codes into his security system.

"Yeah?" they responded together. The security officer

quickly outlined the situation to them. They set their meals aside and left the dining area.

Meanwhile, Joe was making his way down the corridor, looking for a way back to the surface but hoping for a sign of where Steve might be imprisoned. All doors were locked and he could find no other elevator. Joe began to feel that he was trapped, even if, at the moment, he were unbound and doubly armed.

Suddenly, about fifty feet away at the corner of the corridor, two men calmly stepped into view. Both held rifles leveled at Joe.

“Come quietly, Starman,” commanded one. “You’re only delaying the inevitable.” Joe hefted the rifles he carried and pulled the triggers on both, intending to blast the ceiling directly over the place where the men were standing. Nothing happened.

With a cry of disgust, Joe realized that the rifles had been matched to their owners—no one else could fire them! He threw them both to the floor.

Just then something struck Joe on the back of his head. He dropped to the deck and everything went black.

Chapter 19: Headlong Flight

THE XENOBOT SHIPS swept slowly but deliberately over the canyon in which Zip and Mark were hiding. The Starmen crouched down among the bushes, knowing that the action could not conceal them from the enemy. They watched through the leafy canopy and saw the three hexagonal ships separate from one another slightly and then lower down for a landing.

Zip felt an overwhelming panic steal over him when he saw the Xenobots’ ships in Martian airspace. He remembered the ferocious attack they had launched on what they believed was a troop of Benefactors in the abandoned base on Nyx. He recalled Derf Bors’ description of the shocking appearance of the repulsive aliens, and how Lurton Zimbardo’s cronies had poured

out their tale of the enemy's utterly merciless and violent nature.

Zip knew that he and Mark had to find some way to escape if they were to survive the next few minutes. The Starman leader looked at Mark, then made gestures to show that he thought that the ships had taken positions at the mouth of the canyon on the tableland and on either side.

Mark nodded, then pointed back to the waterfall and raised his eyebrows.

Zip furrowed his brow and shook his head vehemently.

Mark shrugged and lifted his hands, open palms upward.

Zip tipped his head toward the *Star Ranger*.

An expression of astonishment leaped into Mark's face. "What?!" he mouthed through his helmet. He knew that the two of them were completely trapped and that there could be no hope of escape by trying to fly their spacecraft out of the canyon.

Zip leaped up and ran toward the ship. Mark followed.

The redheaded Starman charged into the *Star Ranger* and lunged toward the computer banks. With amazing speed, he brought up the files having to do with Ahmanya, and deleted them. Occasionally he copied one onto a cellophane disk before removing the file from the ship's records. Mark nodded with understanding, then set about checking the weapons while Zip worked.

Seven minutes later, Zip withdrew the thin disk from the ship's master computer, crumpled it into a ball, and placed it into a secure storage compartment in his right boot. Then he turned wild eyes to Mark and the two of them dashed frantically from the ship. Each wore a laser pistol on his side and carried a laser rifle in both hands.

Zip made a way back up the canyon, but before long he paused. The Starmen had come to a turn in the streambed from which they could see about a hundred yards up the ravine. It was empty. The shadows of evening were growing long in the canyon.

Zip turned toward Mark and indicated that he should stand in cover and keep watch on the path. As the big Starman moved

into position, Zip looked around and selected a tree growing not far from the streambed. He slung his rifle over his shoulder by its strap, leaped up to the tree's lowest branches, and then with alacrity climbed up as high as he could without making himself visible. In less than a minute he was over forty feet off the ground, just at the point where the shadow of the west wall topped off and the light of the setting sun still blazed.

The tree swayed slightly in the dying evening breeze. The Starman could see over the tops of many of the trees, and the plateau was partially visible through the thinning branches of the taller ones. More than half a mile distant, he could see the dull silver shapes of three Xenobot ships in the places he had guessed they would be. He clapped the binoculars to his helmet's faceplate and examined them closely.

A half dozen or so of the repulsive shapes he had seen on Nyx were in motion around each ship. It didn't take Zip long to see that they were forming a large semi-circle around the entrance to the ravine. All were armed, but two in particular carried enormous weapons. As he watched, three Xenobots marched into the opening of the ravine. With a chill, Zip surmised that they were the last of an exploratory party that had already begun to descend. He was certain that the Xenobots already knew where he and Mark were.

With frantic speed, Zip put his binoculars away and shot down the tree. When he was still fifteen feet off the ground, he jumped. The comparatively lighter Martian gravity made the leap less hazardous than it would have been on Earth. Landing with his knees flexed, Zip gestured to Mark and led the way up the side of the ravine. He was looking for an entrance to a cave, any cave. During their foray into the ravine earlier in the day, they had seen shadows that betokened openings in the clefts of the walls.

If they could find a cave, they might be able to elude their pursuers for a time. There were simply no other options. They were without a ship, lightly armed, vastly outnumbered by a cruel foe, and had no way of communicating safely with each

other or anyone else on the planet.

Zip clambered up among the stony formations of the side of the canyon. Not far behind him, Mark looked over his right shoulder. For all they knew, the Xenobots could be seconds away. With only the slightest hesitation, the Starmen scrambled up above the layer of shrubbery into plain sight.

~

On the opposite side of the ravine and closer to the surface of the tableland than where the Starmen were climbing, three tall figures stood in a compact group. Behind them was a narrow fissure in the scored rock wall. A small flat place, floored with loose stones and pebbles, gave them a position to stand where they could not be seen. An oversized, sharp wedge of fallen stone lay between them and easy access to the ravine, and made an ideal point for covert observation.

One of them was using an instrument to spy on the invaders. He directed a small tube over the lip of the fallen stone but kept his attention on a screen laid out in front of him. The screen was held in a harness he wore like a jumper, and folded outward almost like a portable writing table. Now it was showing the top of the path into the canyon.

When he had seen his fill he drew the screen close to himself and folded it away. Grimly he turned back to the other two and laid a hand on each of them. When he was in contact with them they could hear his words directly.

“Seventeen of our enemy have entered the canyon. They will reach the Starmen in about ten minutes. Sotik, you must warn Richard Starlight and beg his help! This invasion party must be stopped!”

“But Saadervo!” interjected Stenafi. “If we attack this contingent of Xenobots it may well draw the wrath of the rest of them to the place where we least want them!”

“There are only a few of the enemy in our Solar System, and they cannot come in large numbers until they build a solar power

station—which we have prevented so far! We must take the risk, for if we do nothing now the Starmen will be killed! Stenafi, the time has come when we must reveal ourselves to the Starmen—sooner than we had planned.”

Stenafi’s eyes flashed. “Not sooner than *I* would have wished, Saadervo!”

“I know. That is why I have chosen you to accompany me. They will find one of the long tunnels in a moment and we will meet them as they descend. You will find this encounter gratifying. Come. We must hurry. But remember! We are under orders not to reveal everything yet—not until the immediate danger is past, lest the Starmen possess information we cannot risk the Xenobots’ discovering.”

“You don’t have to tell me again, Saadervo! I understand! We are wasting time! Let us hurry!”

The three ancient Martians melted into the fissure. Seconds later the opening gave the appearance of being no more than a solid wall of rock. Even sensitive instruments could not have told the difference.

~

This land is riddled with caves, thought Mark as he and Zip burrowed into the side of the ravine. More quickly than they had expected, the two Starmen had found an opening barely halfway up the rock wall and reasonably well concealed by shrubbery.

Thinking it was only a shallow depression, they had hesitated only a second before plunging into it and discovering that it continued into the darkness.

Let’s hope this is too narrow for the Xenobots to notice, thought Zip. *It’s almost too narrow even for us to squeeze into! I’d better not get too far ahead so that if I get stuck, Mark can pull me out.*

The Starmen had put their suit lights on the dimmest setting once they had passed several turns beyond the entrance and come into a place of utter darkness. At one-tenth candlepower, the illumination was barely sufficient to allow them to see their

own feet. Still they pressed on. Gradually the slope led downward, becoming a maze of twisty passages, all alike.

Zip suddenly realized that they could be trapped! They had passed at least half a dozen side passages and he doubted he could find his way back to the canyon.

Then the walls of the passage shuddered—once, then twice. A slight tremor ran through the stone. A panicky feeling coursed through both the Starmen as they imagined the walls closing in and crushing them. Then the vibrations became rhythmic, and they realized that the Xenobots were probably scouring the canyon for them by ripping out any living thing. The blanket destruction of the first indigenous Martian trees they had seen made Zip sad, then furious. He pictured the black machines of their enemy sheering trees off at the ground level and tossing them aside.

He began to breathe hard with his anger, and found that he could not make headway quite as fast as before. The sides of the passage were just too close together to admit him when his lungs filled completely. Though Mark was directly behind him, Zip couldn't even turn his head in the narrow passage to see his partner. He wondered how the other Starman was faring; his girth was larger than his own.

He must be feeling smothered, Zip thought, but he'll never complain.

~

Far to the northeast, Richard Starlight was sitting in his office. The gorgeous vermilion of sunset's end covered the western sky. Before long, it would be completely dark. With a pang, Richard perceived the bright light of Earth. Next to the two moons that orbited Mars, Earth was the brightest object in the Martian sky. It showed almost like a double planet, for the Moon gleamed to the left side of the third planet like a fluorescent pearl.

Richard smiled. All in all, he was pleased with the events of the day. He had achieved a major coup with the public and the redoubtable Mark Johnson had forced the mayor to call off the

police hunt for the Starmen. His own security network showed that there were still a few maverick police ships involved in the search, but most had gone back to their bases.

But his relief was not complete. He still had no idea where the Starmen were, nor did he know the whereabouts of Andrew Forge. Ortiz Konig had taken three ships to Seven Leaves, fully armed but with peaceful intent. Ortiz knew well how to use a show of strength to prevent violence. He'd only been on the ground for an hour and hadn't succeeded yet in getting through to Forge Manor. He had no right to enter by force and had no plans to try to do so. He was hoping for cooperation from whomever was still in residence there.

"Mr. Starlight."

The voice raised the hackles on Richard's neck. It was unearthly, almost ghostly. There was wind in the voice, like a flute. The thought shot through his brain: *Who could have broken through security to get into my office?*

He quickly swiveled in his chair. For a split second, he thought it *was* a ghost, and then his reason took over. It was a hologram, a very good hologram. A tall man draped in a voluminous green garment, stared at him. Richard stared back, saying nothing. He knew he was seeing a Benefactor. *Is this what Mark saw on the Asteroid?* he wondered.

"Mr. Starlight," said the voice again, a ghostly artificiality.

Richard blinked and cleared his head. "Yes?" he said, amazed that he could speak at all and slightly embarrassed that his voice cracked.

"Xenobots have landed and are hunting the Starmen. We Ahmanyans will protect the Starmen but we cannot fight the Xenobots. You must come, and quickly. Bring ships prepared for battle."

Richard said, "Where are they? What must I do?"

"They are here," said the hologram, raising an arm and pointing. Richard looked where he was pointing and saw a red light appear on his wall map of Mars. He stood up, walked over to the wall, and made a note of the coordinates.

“Will six ships be enough? What must I do?” Richard repeated.

“Six will be enough,” said the windy voice. “Don’t delay!” The hologram disappeared.

Richard began to tremble. He was about to face Xenobot warships in battle—the first engagement of humans in defense of their home planet against an impossible enemy. He wondered what the Xenobots were doing on Mars and how they had gotten there.

With sudden resolve, he picked up the communicator and in a firm voice ordered that six heavily armed ships be prepared for immediate takeoff.

Chapter 20: The Sun Stands Still

DEEP IN THE MOUNTAIN FASTNESSES the two fleeing Starmen slowly made their way forward. Whenever there was a choice in direction Zip always took the path that appeared to lead downward the most. After almost an hour, the constricted passageway began to widen, at first almost imperceptibly but after a time the Starmen were able to face directly ahead and walk almost normally.

Zip longed to be able to talk with his friend, but he dared not attempt to do so until he was certain they were safe from pursuit. Had they been chased by an enemy whose traits and capabilities they knew, he would have been confident that they had been safe for a long time, but he was terrified of the Xenobots. He did not know what they were capable of, but he knew that their weapons had once scoured an entire planet and rendered it uninhabitable. They had dried up oceans, blown away an atmosphere, and turned lush forested country into sand. He would take no risks now. He just wanted to get away—as far away as he could.

He had lost all sense of direction within a few yards of entering the fissure. Since there was no significant magnetic field on Mars, compasses were useless and apparently the satellite

location system on the compad was not functioning since Richard had destroyed the large swath of satellites. Whatever the reason, he could get no reading.

We're completely lost, he thought to himself, *but we can survive a long time. We have a full supply of liquid nutriment and we have the NPACs. We can last for days in here. Before our food gives out we ought to be able to find a way out.*

Just then the walls of the mountain shook with a powerful shudder, followed seconds later by another massive vibration. *What was that?* thought Zip with terrible disquiet. *What are they doing up there?* With great apprehension he wondered if the Xenobots had somehow determined their location and were simply blasting away the mountain to get at them. He had no doubt they were capable of such wanton destruction.

~

Six warships from Starlight Enterprise chased the sunset. Racing into the southwest from Mars Base, the red ball of the sun, two-thirds the size of the disc when seen from Earth, seemed to hover on the horizon in front the humans' warcraft.

Time is standing still for us, thought Richard. *I'll take that as a sign that we're going to win!*

He was exultant with a fierce sense of honor, glad to be able to strike Earth's first blow against the ancient enemy it had never known until now. At the helm of the flagship, his eyes glinted with a fell light and his strong fingers were wrapped strongly around the controls.

"Coming in close now," Richard informed the five other pilots in his formation. "Derek, give me the enemy's position," he ordered his navigator. "We're less than a minute away, so go ahead and use the scanner. We'll take the risk that they'll detect us in the hope that they won't have time to prepare a counterattack in that short a time."

The warship's navigator, Derek Dewdney, had been keeping a close eye on the map of Mars that was laid out on the screen in

front of him. The warships' destination had been clearly marked, using the coordinates provided by the Benefactor who had visited Richard.

"Three enemy ships, sir," responded the navigator, and provided their positions.

"Good!" reveled Richard. He was feeling terrific! The head of Starlight Enterprise had always relished being on the front lines of major projects, but more than three years had gone by since he'd been out of the Earth-Moon system. He was a thoughtful and dignified man, but in the heat of the coming battle his total commitment to the engagement showcased the leadership style that had made him so popular with the personnel of Starlight Enterprise.

When the SE warships were less than a mile from their target, Richard gave orders to the other craft to alter the formation slightly. Three ships fell behind and slightly below the first three. Seconds later, when the Xenobot ships were in range, Richard gave the order.

"Get 'em!" he yelled. As one, all six ships fired laser cannons at the enemy craft and ripped them open.

Then Richard brought his ships down to an altitude of only about forty feet, and a rank of the first three Starlight warships screamed over the plateau at five times the speed of sound, bringing with them a mighty sonic wave. As they passed over the place where the smoking Xenobots' ships were located, a fierce sonic boom blasted all three of the enemy's now vulnerable spacecraft. Sand whipped through the turbulent airwash, filling the air with a dense cloud of lacerating particles.

Immediately after the first wave of three SE warships had passed, a second set of three ships shot over the plateau, bringing a second sonic boom and blowing the enemy's ships across the flatland like dry leaves in a gale.

The metal-encased bodies of the Xenobots that had been standing in a semi-circle above the mouth of the canyon likewise whirled and tumbled violently across the plateau. Several of the artificial limbs were torn off the bodies as they slewed over the

hard rock, and the long-unmaintained exoskeletons cracked open, exposing the repulsive creatures inside to the thin, cold air of Mars. Unprotected from the hostile environment for which they themselves had been responsible, the Xenobots withered like salted slugs.

The six Starlight warcraft had passed the plateau almost too fast to be noticed. Far out over the desert, the six ships slowed down to approximately 350 miles per hour, reformed into a single line, and then wheeled back toward the site of their successful attack.

“Great job!” Richard shouted. Once his ship was headed back toward the raised land, he let go of the controls momentarily and clapped his hands over his head. He could hear the cheers of the rest of his crew behind him. Through the communicators, the crewmembers of the other five ships were equally elated.

“Now for the rest of ’em!” Richard shouted. “We won’t take these by surprise, so let’s go in firing!” He flew his ship directly toward the open end of the canyon on the cliff wall. The other five ships followed, ten seconds apart.

Coming in fast, he zoomed into the canyon, all four front laser cannons blazing. As he passed into the ravine, he saw the *Star Ranger* but the image barely registered before he saw the ripped up trees, blazing bushes, hammered rock walls, and, among the damage, a line of Xenobots scuttling back up the canyon.

Several turned and raised laser rifles as the Starlight ship flashed overhead in the evening light, but the warship’s laser cannons were plowing up the ground all around them before they could activate their weapons.

In ten seconds, Richard’s ship had completed its course through the canyon and the second Starlight ship was beginning its pass. When a full minute had gone by, all six ships had zoomed through the ravine, lasers blazing. The sides of the ravine had slumped down into the floor, and most of the vegetation had turned to ash or charcoal.

The six warships from Mars Base circled slowly around the scene of the first battle against the Xenobots. The sun had completely set and a murky darkness filled the canyon, offset here and there by the orange fire of a few smoldering treetops.

“Scan it,” ordered Richard presently. Dewdney took careful readings of the site.

“Well?” asked Richard, observing that the navigator was taking longer than expected.

“No sign of anything living, sir,” Dewdney said, looking up. “No movement, no unexplainable heat, no unnatural phenomena. The bottom of the canyon is relatively unscathed, however. The Xenobots hadn’t reached the *Star Ranger* before we arrived, and our ship is accessible.

“Very well,” said Richard with a nod. He gave orders that three of the ships would land and three would continue to circle. Inwardly he felt uncomfortably anxious for the Starmen. He had taken the holographic messenger at his word, that the Starmen were safe, but Dewdney’s words, “no sign of anything living,” wrenched at him. Could they have been caught in the battle? What if they were in a side pocket of the mountain, now sealed up by avalanches?

Under Richard’s direction, eighteen crewmembers of the three ships explored the canyon and the surrounding tableland for the next hour. Confidently but warily they moved in companies of two, carrying powerful laser rifles. The circling ships shone powerful lights over the scene as their fellows scoured the ground.

When the terrain had been thoroughly searched, the parties returned to a central site and reported to Richard.

“Nothing, sir—no living Xenobots,” was the common refrain.

“Good work!” said Richard. “We have won our first battle! We’ll remain here until morning and take another look in the early light. We’ll see what we can learn from the *Star Ranger*.”

“Very good, sir,” said the five pilots.

Moments later, the crewmembers were safely inside their

vehicles. The electronic surveillance systems were the best that Starlight could make, but even so, Richard wanted several pairs of eyes to keep watch at all times. He gave orders that six crewmembers at a time were to monitor the equipment while the others slept in shifts.

~

Deep underground, Zip and Mark had emerged from the tortuous passage into a moderately sized hollow space in the heart of the mountain. Its floor was of soft sand, and three other passages led off into other directions, all upward.

“This can’t be,” said Mark, hazarding a low-powered communication after more than two hours of silence. “A formation like this, these pathways leading down, can’t just simply stop in the heart of the mountain! There has to be a way downward!”

“You’re right, Mark,” agreed Zip, “but here it is in front of us. There’s no way out except back up.”

“I’m going to probe the sand and see if there’s a means of egress covered up somehow. This just can’t be!” He reached for his compad.

Just then a portion of the wall on one side of the hollow space opened inward with a quiet, scraping sound. Two people stepped out onto the sand.

The first one was a slender woman, just over six feet tall. Her hair was long and slightly wavy. She wore an expression of barely contained excitement. Behind her was a tall, smiling man with straight dark hair. Both had smooth skin the color of tea. Their eyes were dark brown, and both appeared to be just a trifle too tall and thin. Identical garments of voluminous cloth draped their bodies from their necks almost to their feet.

Shocked into immobility, the Starmen stared. The woman spoke first.

“Greetings, Starman David Foster and Starman Mark Seaton,” she said, nodding to each in turn. “I am Stenafi. Welcome to Ahmanya!”

Chapter 21: A Refuge in Twilight

FOR A MOMENT, Zip couldn't breathe. He stood speechless, mouth agape. Behind him, Mark stood equally mute.

"I—" Zip began. Wild, irrational thoughts sped through his mind. "Wh—?" He felt like a fool. He wanted to make a good first impression on the people he had been seeking with such fervor for so long, and now he didn't know what to do or say. He was caught completely by surprise.

"Please forgive me," said Stenafi. "We have surprised, perhaps even shocked you. You are unprepared for this meeting for you have been fleeing from the hateful Xenobots. You are tired and probably hungry. You are safe now. The Xenobots cannot find you here. Come with us."

"You may remove your helmets, Starmen," spoke up the other Ahmanyen. "I am Saadervo. I assure you that the atmosphere is breathable at this point and will improve as we descend."

"Descend?" Zip managed to say.

"We will take you to where we live. The others are waiting to meet you. Please come with us."

"Others?" asked Mark as he and Zip followed Stenafi and Saadervo into a chamber behind the stone wall, removing their helmets as they walked.

"There are 167 of us in this enclave," explained Stenafi. "We call it *Imlah Taltahni*. The words mean 'Refuge of Twilight.'" She pressed a button inside the chamber and a portion of the rock slid over to close the aperture. It moved into place with a quiet "snick" sound, leaving no seam. Once it was secure, a second door slid over to enclose the chamber.

"*Prenta*," said Saadervo. The Starmen felt a slight lift in their gut, indicating that they had begun to descend.

"The Xenobots above," said Zip, with a note of inquiry in his voice.

Stenafi turned to face him. "They have been destroyed," she said with a smile of satisfaction. "Your Richard Starlight

attacked them and destroyed all of them.”

“Richard fought Xenobots?” queried Mark. “And won? With all their weapons? We saw what they can do! On Nyx, they—”

Saadervo raised a hand. “We know very well what the Xenobots can do, Starman. Richard destroyed them in a sudden attack. If they had known he was coming he would not have been able to succeed. But he did.”

“But,” Zip said, and his brow furrowed. “If the Xenobots are on Mars, they must know how to find you! They were looking for their ‘ancient enemy’. That’s you, isn’t it? Will they attack you—and Earth?”

“We indeed took a risk in calling Richard Starlight to destroy the Xenobots, Starman Foster,” said Stenafi. “Our community had no capability of doing so ourselves and couldn’t risk revealing the location of our fastness below. But if we had not destroyed them, they would have destroyed you. There is little threat at this time.”

“The Xenobots have settled into two places in the Asteroid Belt, Starmen,” explained Saadervo, “and nowhere else in our Solar System. There are eighty-three individuals left, now that Richard has destroyed thirty-four of them. And those eighty-three are estranged from their fellows on their planet. The Xenobots cannot enter our Solar System in great numbers yet. They must travel through hyperspace and we are always aware whenever they do so, though we cannot prevent it. Their power source is limitless, for they use the power of the stars, but they must transfer that power from the stars to their own ships by establishing a power transfer station in orbit close around the sun. Without that transfer station they must use conventional power.”

“Precisely what we concluded!” exclaimed Mark. “We examined the wreck on the desert and realized it had been built for another kind of propulsive system from what it was using!”

“They tried to bring in a shipment of parts needed to build such a station, but Saadervo led a brave attack against them,” said Stenafi proudly, “and destroyed their supply ship! The

Xenobots chased him through the Asteroid Belt, and disaster almost struck! The engines on his spacecraft malfunctioned. He landed his ship with a crash on a large asteroid. He and his crew were forced to conceal themselves on the asteroid's surface while the Xenobots searched the crashed ship. But Saadervo was clever. He had brought models of our bodies and left them inside the ship and the Xenobots believed that all the Ahmanyans aboard had perished. When the enemy departed, Saadervo called for help and we came to rescue him and his crew."

"We have been moving for a long time," observed Mark. "How far down are we going?"

Stenafi turned to the big Starman. "*Imlah Taltahni* is located approximately five miles below the surface, Starman Seaton."

"We arrive now," said Saadervo. With a barely discernible jolt, the elevator came to a stop and the door slid open.

When they saw what the open door revealed, Zip sighed as if in deep pleasure, and Mark drew his breath in sharply. Before them opened a cavernous room illuminated in twilight blue, with silver stars sparkling over an apparent horizon. A series of pillars, suggestive of tree trunks, stood on either side of a central space and continued up into shadows.

Most impressive of all, there was a crowd of people standing together facing the elevator door. After the door had opened, they all opened their mouths and sang "Allamah!" Each individual raised both arms and extended them, palms forward, their long fingers splayed.

"It is how we show that we are pleased and wish to welcome you," explained Saadervo. He and Stenafi stepped out to either side of the elevator door and likewise lifted their arms and sang "Allamah!"

Mark turned to Zip. "What'll we do?" he asked.

"We'll go out and bow," said Zip and proceeded to do so, with Mark only a second behind him.

Saadervo moved to the center and addressed the group, which became quiet as soon as he began to speak.

"He is telling them that the Xenobots above have been

annihilated,” whispered Stenafi. Once again, with more vigor than before, the crowd sang its delight.

“Now he is directing them back to their business, and telling them that they will have an opportunity to meet you later.”

The crowd began to disperse, with many casting backward glances at their guests. Soon only two individuals were left. Saadervo and Stenafi escorted the Starmen to the place where these two were waiting.

Saadervo remained behind the Starmen, and Stenafi stood before an old man and addressed him with obvious reverence.

“This is the Elder,” explained Saadervo. “In our community it is to him that we pay most honor, for he knows our history best.”

“Is he the governor of your people?” asked Mark.

“No, Starman Seaton. In this place, I govern, but I do nothing without the Elder to advise me. Now you must meet him.” Gently Saadervo guided them forward. Both Starmen were surprised at the impression of incredible strength they perceived in the Ahmanyen’s touch.

The Starmen came before the Elder and bowed deeply. Then Zip said, “Thank you for allowing us to come to your citadel.”

Stenafi immediately translated, and then turned to the Starmen and said, “He does not speak English. Most of us do not. Only those of us who have contact with the people of Earth have learned to speak English.”

The other Ahmanyen stepped forward and said, “I speak better now, Mark.”

Mark turned to face the other Ahmanyen, incredulity written across his features.

“It is I, Jogren. Now you see me without mask. Now you can know I am from this planet.”

“Jogren,” whispered Mark. “We have been looking for you. We thought maybe we’d never find you in this wilderness.”

Jogren’s clear, intelligent brown eyes looked on Mark fondly, and he smiled. A little awkwardly, he extended his hand. Mark laughed and took it. Then he introduced Zip to the first Benefactor he had met, though he did not know it at the time.

“We have much to talk about,” said Saadervo. “Come. We will eat and then we will talk a little. Tomorrow we will talk much. We have many things to do.”

Saadervo led the group across the great hall into a corridor. For a short space it appeared to have been cut from a hard, rippled red stone like marble, but quickly became a glass passageway spanning a wide-open area. Visible to the right was a crystalline waterfall cascading down a jumble of boulders, its white water breaking into streams like a horse’s tail before reaching the lower level. The water fell from dark, invisible heights and eventually entered a small lake. Foam covered the stones closest to the observers. To the left the lake spread out into velvet darkness.

“How can this exist so far underground?” asked Mark with amazement.

“Much of what you will see is artificial,” explained Stenafi, “made by us to remind us of the planet that once was but now is gone, as well as to provide stimulation for the mind. We live here. Few of us go to the surface. This, however,” she indicated the waterfall and the lake, “is genuine. The mountains and plateaus in this part of Ahmanyia are filled with many caves; even this far down there are natural wonders. The caves descend deeper and there are beauties that surpass even this. Nearly a mile away, a river leaves the lake and courses through stone passages before its waters fall more deeply, beyond our knowledge, perhaps into the heart of the planet.”

They continued to walk along the crystal corridor as it crossed the black water below. Here and there, however, artificial lights had been placed beneath the surface. They lit up grottoes and rock formations of singular beauty.

When they reached the end of the walkway, Saadervo led them to the left and, after a few turns, he brought them to a comfortable room. A heavy stone table was situated in its center, with places for up to eight people. The sides of the table were rough-hewn, but the top was smooth.

“Please be seated,” said Saadervo. “I have asked that food be

brought to us here. While we wait, we may talk more.”

The Starmen and the Ahmanyans took seats. The top of the table appeared to be made of glass and revealed splendors within. Dark green veins coursed through a black field, with fans of rich blue showing in a few places.

As soon as they were seated, Mark spoke. “What do you know about Joe? Is he safe?”

Saadervo’s brows narrowed. He folded his hands and looked downward.

“Starman Joseph Taylor has been captured by your human enemy,” he said. “We do not know what has happened to him. We know only that he was taken into the enemy’s base here in the desert. He entered that base in the custody of a robot a short time ago—a matter of less than an hour. That base is not far from the canyon where your spacecraft, the *Star Ranger*, is located. It is perhaps fifteen miles distant.

“We must speak of this enemy first. He is an evil man. He has already tried to kill you. Andrew Forge ordered a man to shoot you while you were in Eagle City, but I prevented him from doing so.”

“What?” chorused the Starmen.

“Someone tried to shoot us?” cried Mark.

“When?” added Zip.

“A man with a laser rifle on top of a building when you were on the landing field. He was going to shoot you, but I was watching you to protect you. Several Ahmanyans have watched you to protect you. While you were in Eagle City and in Seven Leaves, you were protected. You must stop Andrew Forge for us, for his actions threaten Ahmanya.”

“He is destroying the *illunas*,” said Stenafi. It seemed to Zip that tears appeared in the corners of her eyes, but he couldn’t be sure. “We need the *illunas* if what remains of Ahmanya is to live. The *illunas* is what you call lichen.”

“We saw lichen in desert, Mark,” said Jogren.

“The bioluminous lichen!” exclaimed Mark.

“Yes,” confirmed Saadervo. “This is very scarce on Ahmanya.

Once it was common, but now there is very little of it. There are other fields of lichen on our planet, but they are distant and small. The field close to here is the largest on Ahmanya. The *illunas* grows slowly. But the human enemy, this Andrew Forge, is taking it. He harvests it and turns it into flilox and sells it to spacemen. They sell it to others for much money. The flilox is a fine, dry powder. People from Earth put it into liquid and drink it and it makes visions in their mind.”

“Flilox—that terrible hallucinogen!” exclaimed Zip.

“I do not know this word,” said Saadervo.

“It is a drug,” said Zip.

“The bioluminescence must act as some sort of stimulant,” mused Mark.

“I do not know,” said Stenafi, “but if we do not have the *illunas*, our people will die.”

“Is it a food, or some sort of nutrient?” asked Mark.

“It is like a medicine,” answered Saadervo hesitantly.

At that moment, three people entered the room carrying trays of food and drink, and prepared the table for a meal. They set places for each of the six people, and put serving dishes in the center. Saadervo briefly described each dish and encouraged the Starmen to partake. The meal consisted only of food that had been grown—fruit, leafy greens, some substance that resembled stalks of wheat, and thick cakes like a moist bread. Clear liquid was poured into wide-mouthed vessels shaped somewhere between a bowl and a glass.

The Starmen enjoyed some of the food, but found the leafy substance to be too bitter for their taste. The cake was very chewy and hard to swallow, but filling. They liked the fruit best.

After the dishes had been cleared away, Saadervo said, “Now I will show you where you may sleep. In the morning we will talk of many things.”

Sleeping quarters were arranged for the Starmen. In spite of their excitement at making contact at last with the Benefactors, the respite from the intensity of the previous few days brought them both into deep, dreamless sleep.

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When Zip came to consciousness the next morning, he felt the warmth of the sun on his face and sensed light on his eyelids even before he'd opened them. With a sudden realization of where he was, he sat up and stared about him. Warm, honeyed sunlight streamed in through an open window next to his bed.

"What—?" he said to himself, threw back the covers, and stepped over to the window. A scene of stunning beauty met his unbelieving eyes. A bright sun, smaller than what he was used to, had just risen over low, rolling, distant hills dusted with orange. A field of bright orange flowers stretched out from just beneath the windowsill straight out as far as he could see. He could almost cry out for pleasure in the scene. A light breeze wafted through the flowers and brushed the skin of his face. A delicious earthy scent drifted through the portal.

He leaned forward and banged his head hard against the glass.

"Ow!" he muttered, and pulled back rubbing the top of his forehead. *If the window's closed, why am I feeling the breeze and smelling the flowers?* he thought. He reached out his hand and touched something solid. It's not real, he concluded; it's the wall.

A poignant sadness filled him as he realized that he was seeing what Ahmnya had been like thousands of years earlier.

Mark came out of the bathroom.

"Glad you're awake," he said. "I hope I didn't disturb you when I got out of bed. I saw the sun just ready to come up and stood by the window, near where you were sleeping. Amazing what the Martians can do with holograms and projections, isn't it? The dawn was gorgeous as it lit up the field of flowers! When you're ready, we'll go out and find breakfast. Hey! Where'd you get that bump on your head?"

~

They met Saadervo, Stenafi, and the Elder back in the room where they had dined the previous night, and bade them good

morning.

“Jogren has his duties, and will not join us for breakfast,” explained Stenafi when the Starmen had seated themselves. “When we have finished breakfast, I will explain our history to you. The Elder will not understand what I say, but it is he who bids me to tell you—a task I myself am eager to perform.”

When the meal was over, Stenafi suggested that they move to a sitting area at one end of the room. The five of them moved over to comfortable chairs that had been set in a semi-circle facing a blank wall. Others came in and quickly cleared the table, then left the room.

“I have been waiting for many years to tell this tale to people from Earth,” Stenafi began, “but now that the time has come to do so, I am afraid, for it is painful to relate and the hope is small that we will resist our enemy successfully in our own lifetimes. Saadervo does me honor by allowing me to tell our history, for he recognized that though he is governor here, for long I, among all Ahmanyans, have been most eager for contact with people from Earth.”

Saadervo nodded his head to Stenafi, then leaned back in his chair and folded his hands together almost as if he were praying.

“Begin,” he said simply.

Stenafi drew a deep breath and her face looked as if she were looking into a far distance.

“Many thousands of years ago, Ahmanya had large oceans, a livable atmosphere, and many beasts, birds, and fish. There were extensive forests and many places where flowers grew. Among all the planets in our Solar System, we were the green planet. Almost a billion people lived on Ahmanya. Our cities covered most of the planet in three separate kingdoms.

“Usually we lived in peace, but in the far past, occasionally the kingdoms went to war with one another. In time we learned to live without conflict. We worked together and developed the science necessary for space flight, and we built an outpost on Phobos. Next we ventured to Azemir, the planet of fire that once hung in space between Ahmanya and Jupiter, and learned to

mine its abundant riches.”

Mark and Zip leaned forward, straining to hear every word. The confirmation of the theory that there had been a planet between Mars and Jupiter thrilled them. Though he could not understand what was being said, the Elder noted the Starmen’s interest and showed a smile tinged with sadness. Stenafi continued.

“We landed also on Mercury and found valuable minerals. We came to Venus and, finding it without life, set about to transform its atmosphere and terrain to make it habitable, for it is a planet of unique beauty. The holographic wall can show you a likeness of its terrain.”

The blank wall suddenly lit up with a view of scenery on Venus. A three-dimensional view showed high and sharp mountains that rose up like teeth, their tops wreathed in clouds. To one side, a smooth plain reached to the horizon.

Then the view changed to show the night sky with a bluish globe in the middle. Proximate to it was a white sphere, bright with reflected light.

“One of the most beautiful of our nighttime sights was what we called the double planet: your Earth and its Moon. We landed on your Moon and from there made preliminary journeys to your planet, but Earth’s high gravity, dense atmosphere, and vicious animal life deterred us from long visits.

“Also, on your planet there were primitive peoples. They were frightened of us and we did not want to interfere with their development. So we stayed away, but we observed. The discovery of intelligent life on another planet, our close neighbor, engendered high excitement in the people of Ahmany! We knew that it would be long before your race would learn to travel between the planets, but we waited eagerly for that moment to arrive!”

Stenafi smiled broadly and engaged her human audience with a look that bordered on affection. Then she deactivated the holographic wall and continued her story.

“Slowly, we built better spaceships and expanded outward to

Jupiter, Saturn, and beyond. We established outposts and bases on Azemir and on the moons of the giant planets. Our explorers discovered an exceedingly unusual isotope in the solid matter of Europa, far below the ice on its surface. In one of the engineering marvels of our age, we built a city at the bottom of the sea on Europa to support an extensive and valuable mining project. From this isotope we were able to develop a means of transforming matter into energy in a safe, inexpensive, and controllable manner. This made it possible for us to invent a hyperspatial drive. Once it had been perfected, we eagerly launched our first fleet into space beyond the Solar System.

“Boldly, our explorers set a course for the globular cluster you call Omega Centauri. It contains some of the oldest material in the galaxy. The stars there are so old that they are no longer fusing hydrogen into helium, but helium into carbon. Here, the Ahmalyan space explorers hoped to find the oldest life in the galaxy.”

Stenafi paused for a moment, and looked away. An expression of sudden grief crossed her features. The Starmen did not interrupt. She waited a moment to compose herself, and then continued in a low voice.

“Perhaps we did encounter some of the galaxy’s oldest life, but it was not as we had hoped. What we found was an incredibly cruel space-faring race—the Xenobots. The Xenobots had been at war for centuries—first with the inhabitants of their neighboring planets, and then had systemically conquered, looted, and exterminated the few races in their nearest star systems. When we innocently came into contact with this alien race, initially we rejoiced that we had encountered new life, but the Xenobots exulted that they had a new enemy to conquer, a new race to exploit!”

Zip and Mark were caught up in her tale. The Elder kept his eyes on the speaker. Stenafi continued with animation. “The Xenobots attacked our fleet without warning and destroyed two of our ships! The remainder of our fleet fled and reentered hyperspace to return home. They did not know that the Xenobots

could follow them. Many Xenobot ships entered our Solar System and began to attack our bases.

“Before their ships could come to Ahmanya, our largest fleet counterattacked. We found that we had an advantage over the Xenobots. While the Xenobots had more resources, their natural warlike tendency had made it difficult for them to use those resources efficiently and develop new technologies. As a result, we had a number of very powerful weapons that they lacked. Further, they cannot easily unite into a common force, for they are constantly fighting one another. The Xenobots had probably never been so effectively resisted. We beat them badly, and their ships that survived our counterattack fled through hyperspace.”

For a long time, Stenafi said nothing. She kept her gaze averted, and then continued her narrative in a measured voice.

“There was extensive debate on Ahmanya over what should be the next course of action. Some wanted to pursue the Xenobots with a massive war fleet and put an end to their capability to retaliate against us and end their reign of rapacity.” She shook her head with a grim expression. “If that course of action had been followed, our history would have been markedly different, but other counsel prevailed.

“Many said that the Xenobots, having been beaten once, would not return. Omega Centauri was far away and they had no reason to come again to Ahmanya. Others said that we ought to leave the Xenobots to their own star system but prepare a defense should they renew the attack.”

Stenafi’s lips tightened and her eyes glinted. “In the end, there was a compromise. There were many who opposed the expense and resisted the mentality that accompanied the preparation for war, so we did not pursue our advantage; but the planet prepared itself for defense should an attack be made against us and a massive war fleet was prepared. A strong outpost was established on Azemir as a first line of defense.

“Azemir was a barren and fiery, volcanic planet slightly larger than Ahmanya. It was constantly torn by the stresses that wore upon it because of its proximity to the gas giant, but it was rich

in heavy metals and our ships had often landed on it.”

Her voice became stronger. “Several years went by. We sent spy ships back to the Xenobots’ star system to try to learn their plans. Those ships that returned reported that they had discovered nothing—but there were other ships that did not return. That alone should have warned us, but few heeded the implications.”

The Ahmanyen stiffened her back and raised her voice even more.

“Even our wisest had underestimated by far the Xenobots’ dedication to violence and enthusiasm for destruction! With a suddenness that caused us overwhelming panic, a massive fleet of Xenobot warships appeared in the orbit of Azemir, unleashed a weapon of incalculable fury against the planet of fire, and blew it to pieces. Many fragments of the planet showered down upon Ahmanyen. Some fell upon your Earth and much was scattered throughout the Solar System. The remnants formed what is now the Asteroid Belt.

“Then the enemy came by the hundreds and laid siege to Ahmanyen. But our fleet was not long in responding. The attack upon Azemir stirred our people against its enemy. We expected that Ahmanyen would be demolished as Azemir had been, but apparently the Xenobots had only one weapon with such capability. Had they known which planet was our home, all of Ahmanyen would undoubtedly have been blown to fragments. The enemy’s failure to discern which planet to annihilate gave us time to launch our defense. We learned that we had prepared well and our defense was powerful and effective!” She spoke with pride.

Here Stenafi paused again. Saadervo kept his eyes focused downward. The Starmen knew that the Ahmanyen woman had come to the critical part of her tale.

“The Xenobots, once they learned that we had been prepared for them and that their victory was by no means certain, set about merely to ravage as much as they could. Their battle fleet separated into smaller units and moved to different places in the

Solar System with our warships in pursuit. Our terraformation project on Venus was attacked. The thick atmosphere of the silver planet was poisoned, and its ecosystem was damaged beyond the ability to regenerate itself—dooming it to become, after several centuries, an intolerable furnace.

“Our outposts on most of the moons of Saturn and Jupiter were likewise attacked. The city on Europa, fortunately, was well hidden and survived, though our people abandoned it soon after and returned to Ahmanya.”

Here Stenafi raised tender eyes to the Starmen. “The enemy laid siege to Earth, but the Ahmanyans had moved first to protect the blue planet and were ready for the attack. Our forces made a valiant defense and wiped out completely those ships that would have burned your planet. It was, perhaps, our greatest moment in the War, and we thought that complete victory was at hand!

“That was the greatest moment in the War, and the remaining Xenobot ships fled and entered hyperspace. We detected only a few Xenobot ships that remained undamaged in our Solar System—so we thought—and they were scattered. The War had been immeasurably fierce, but we exulted in the assurance of victory and, in the flush of success, most of our ships pursued the Xenobot fleet through hyperspace and took the battle back to Omega Centauri. We left thirty of our own ships in our Solar System to chase down the remaining Xenobot invaders. It seemed wise at the time, but, as you will learn in a moment, it was a tactical error.

“In Omega Centauri, many warships lifted off from the Xenobots’ home planet and made their last stand, but our fleet fought masterfully and reduced the planet of the Xenobots to a primitive condition. Our ships also found and rescued the people of Malda and brought them to our Solar System, for the Xenobots had ravaged most of their culture and reduced their planet to a frigid wasteland that could barely support life. These small, uncomplicated creatures live now on Titan.”

Stenafi smiled with fondness, and then sighed deeply. “It was a great triumph, for the Xenobots had never been defeated in

war.”

Then the Ahmanyans lost control. She placed her hands over her face and, through her long slender fingers, began to weep silently. Her shoulders shook. Zip and Mark glanced at Saadervo, but he too was weeping. The Elder, though he could understand nothing of what was said, wore a look of utter bereavement as if he had just been given catastrophic news. The men from Earth did not know what to say or do. They waited in acute discomfort for Stenafi to continue her tale.

After a moment she sighed again. “I am sorry, Starmen. It is a tale that, though now thousands of years old, still seems to us almost to have happened in our own time.” She gathered her resolve, exhaled, and then picked up the narrative, her voice straining with the effort.

“Unknown to us the Xenobots had kept back a small but monstrously armed fleet, which none of us had discovered,” she continued. “It had waited on one of the moons of Neptune, far out of the site of the battles. When this fleet observed that their fellows had been defeated and that most of our ships had pursued the enemy to their home planet, they launched a second attack. This time fertile Ahmanya itself was the target, and against this second wave of ships we were almost defenseless. When it came, the strike was far fiercer than we had anticipated in our worst imaginings. The Xenobots clearly wanted not only to exterminate our entire people, but also intended to wipe out any trace that we had ever lived. The vehemence of the attack was overwhelming.

“Almost all of the aboveground Ahmanyans civilization was annihilated, and the oceans were boiled. The only survivors of the attack lived in cities located deep underground, or in a few bases hidden in deep space, or in the thirty warships that had been pursuing the enemy in other parts of the Solar System or had been overlooked by the marauders. We had won the War, but were nearly exterminated ourselves.”

Now that she had gotten started, she related the narrative with determination. The Starmen were afraid to interrupt.

“The attack lasted for only two days, but when it was over, all of our cities and gardens, the fields, forests, and most animal life were utterly destroyed, reduced to little more than dust. Most of the water in the oceans had vanished. This radically altered the atmosphere and weather patterns, and started a process by which the remaining waters receded. The water at the poles froze. Most of the atmosphere had been blown away.

“Our urgent pleas for help reached the few Ahmanyen ships that remained in our space, though they were dispersed throughout the Solar System. They came together and made a counter attack. Our primary weapon was the great Asteroid that you have discovered. It had just returned from Omega Centauri in advance of the rest of the great fleet, and carried within it the people of Malda. Eons earlier it had been the largest of our moons, but we transformed it into the flagship of our armada. It overwhelmed every Xenobot ship that had attacked Ahmanyen, but it was far too late to preserve our planet.

“After the Solar System had been completely cleansed of Xenobots, we made a home for the Maldan people on Titan and then concealed the flagship within the shattered remnants of Azemir, as a watchful guardian against the return of the Xenobots. We knew that their destruction was not complete, though we had reduced almost to nothing their ability to retaliate—at least, until they rebuilt.

“Some wanted to return to Omega Centauri and exterminate the menace for ever, but others urged us against a course of vengeance against those who were now weak and defenseless, and their counsel prevailed. The enemy had no more spacecraft and they could neither raid nor steal others’ ships. Additionally, we had much urgent work to do to preserve what little we could of Ahmanyen culture and could spare no one for any other work.

“Moreover, we believed, but could never be certain, that the enemy would even forget the knowledge of where our Solar System was located, for it was many light years distant from Omega Centauri and the Xenobots no longer had the capability of traveling through hyperspace, or even of leaving their own

planet. Even now, they cannot do so in great numbers without the use of a solar power transfer station, for they have forgotten their original means of propulsion.”

Stenafi paused to rest her voice, then continued.

“The tale is almost finished. The centuries that followed saw the continuing decay of the atmosphere of Ahmanya and the ultimate drying up of its oceans. All that was left for the people of Earth to find, millennia later, were crumbled ruins scattered widely, and the minutest evidence of manufactured items, but not in sufficient quantity to tell them to whom they had belonged or what the state of our civilization had once been.

“Occasionally a small Ahmanyan crew would take a spaceship and leave our planet to visit an old base or to see whether there were signs that the Xenobots had returned.

“Often, but secretly, we visited Earth to learn how your race was advancing. We came to expect that the Xenobots would return to exact their final revenge upon the only race that had ever conquered them, but our race and our knowledge were fading and we knew that when the Xenobots returned, we would not be able to resist them alone. The people of Earth became our hope. We lived in tension to see which would come first: your achievement of interstellar travel or the return of the Xenobots. Our hope was that your race would develop the capability of space travel before the Xenobots returned, and come to Ahmanya with technology we ourselves no longer remembered, join with us in friendship, and, when it became necessary, to resist the Xenobots—for they are your enemies as well as ours.”

Stenafi finally came to the end of her long narrative. She gazed into the eyes of the Starmen with warmth, and smiled.

“You saw us as your hope?” asked Zip, finally feeling free to speak. “And all this time we have been looking to *you* as *our* only hope for success against the Xenobots!”

“It is possible that we will both be proven right,” said Saadervo. “The Ahmanyans celebrated your development of space travel and first landing upon your Moon in 1969. We rejoiced when you first visited Ahmanya in 2014. But we had

become wary—you were a warlike people and Earth itself was unstable. We despaired when your civilization decimated itself a century ago.

“At that time, most of the first settlers from Earth returned from Ahmanya to their own planet, except for a few hardy people. They remained, but would have perished within a few years had we not chosen to reveal ourselves to them and aid them. We pledged them to secrecy. They have kept their promise, even to this day. They had little loyalty to Earth and felt much gratitude to us for preserving their lives.

“We helped them just enough so that they would survive on Ahmanya, but not so much that they lost their own culture. We call them the *Kuznika*, the Settlers, but they call themselves the Wind People.

“Our hope regenerated when, beyond all prediction, a great leader on Earth began to set your race back on a good course. He was Thomas, the father of Richard Starlight. We mourned when he and his wife were killed in an accident on Mercury. It was ironic and somehow most fitting that he was the only son of one of the arch villains of your 21st century, responsible for killing many millions of his own people.”

“What?” exclaimed Zip and Mark together. They turned and looked at one another with astonishment.

“Richard Starlight is the grandson of the nuclear terrorist Reuben Ridger?” cried Mark. He could feel his skin creep with the revelation.

“That explains the ‘R’ on Richard Starlight’s silver tea set!” croaked Zip.

Chapter 22: Alliances Against a Common Enemy

SAADERVO AND THE ELDER went to other responsibilities, and Stenafi remained alone with the Starmen. For some time, no one spoke. Then their hostess rose to her feet.

“Come, let me show you more of *Imlah Taltahni*,” she said.

Having finished her narrative, it seemed as if a shadow had departed. She spoke merrily and, with a wave of her hand, bade them follow her.

Passing the large table where they had eaten, she walked toward a door on the side of the room opposite to that where they had entered. As she approached the door, it slid open silently and revealed the beginning of a fern garden. Dark stones had been put into places that drew the eye, and lush green ferns grew among them on both sides of a curving path. The sound of running water greeted the threesome as they passed through the portal, which closed behind them.

The garden was a blend of cool shadows and sunlit spaces, so that one had the impression that he was surrounded by shade but walked in mild sunshine. The still air carried the scent of healthy vegetation, and a scarcely discernible mist hung in open spaces.

“Where does the light come from, Stenafi?” asked Zip.

“I do not know precisely how it works, Starman Foster, but our engineers are able to draw light—and heat when necessary—from the very stones. We usually keep the light at rather low intensity but it can be increased to incandescence. They consider it not only a matter of practicality for our survival, but also as an art form.”

“Stenafi,” began Zip, somewhat shyly. “Saadervo told us that there are 167 Ahmanyans in *Imlah Taltahni*. If it is not intrusive to ask, how many Ahmanyans are there today?”

The Ahmanyans’ face stiffened slightly. Without looking at the Starman, she said, “There are other refuges like *Imlah Taltahni*. The inhabitants of all of them together number 3,881. This is the community of Ahmanyans today.”

“It is so few,” said Zip with acute sensitivity. “I am sorry, Stenafi, if I have grieved you by asking.” For a long time, the company was silent.

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They were walking leisurely along a stone-paved path. On both sides a low ground cover, dotted with tiny flowers, spread out toward stands of ferns and thick shrubbery. Many small trees, narrow in trunk and broad in leaf, were spaced with apparent randomness upon the grounds. A few benches with three sides like triangles were artfully positioned in arbors and bays.

As the threesome continued their walk, a few Ahmanyans who were raking leaves or pruning branches on the trees paused for a moment in their work and nodded their greetings. The Starmen smiled and nodded back.



A triangular bench

The sound of running water became louder as they strolled along the path. They turned a corner and came to a narrow bridge that spanned a dark brown dimpled stream bubbling over round stones.

“Such peacefulness, such beauty,” said Mark as they paused to gaze into the water. “It is a sharp contrast to the history you just shared with us, Stenafi. The tenacious spirit of Ahmanya is inspiring!”

“Most Ahmanyans always valued beauty, Starman Seaton, but after our planet was destroyed the love of beauty and the skills to create it became most important to the survivors.”

“Yes,” said Mark somberly. “It is usually the case that after terrible suffering, great good will follow. The loss is real and becomes part of history, and the people are changed drastically—but the evil never prevails.”

Stenafi discerned some emotional intensity in Mark's tone and glanced at him inquiringly. He was keeping his expression under rigid control. Suddenly she started.

"Mark," she said, turning to face him with deep, dark eyes, "forgive me. In telling my tale of the disaster of my planet and people, I had almost forgotten that your race has a similar story."

Mark stared intently at the foliage, but tears filled his eyes for a moment. "Several billion people," he whispered. "For us, only a century ago. There are still a few people on Earth for whom it is not history, but memory." The big Starman turned and looked directly into the Ahmanyans's eyes. "But a remnant survived, and now we have come to Ahmanya, and we have become friends."

~

"Stenafi," began Zip much later in their walk, his brow furrowing in the effort to frame his words. "We have met the peoples of Titan and Europa. The Titanians remember very little, even of their own history, and the Europeans know only that you built a city and that you were threatened by a powerful enemy. Are there any other thinking, reasoning peoples in our Solar System who know about the Ahmanyans, or whom the Xenobots might attack?"

Stenafi mused for a moment. "There are the *alzenta*, but they are not living, nor, I think, can they be threatened even by the Xenobots."

"The *alzenta*? Who are they?"

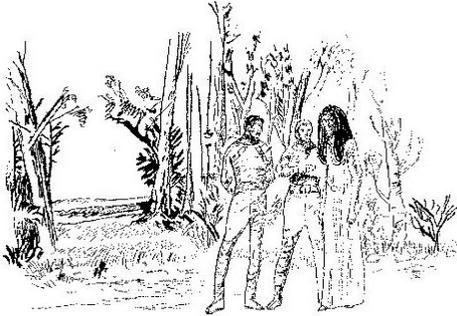
"They were inhabitants of Azemir—self-replicating mechanisms, left behind from the time of the First Races. They are data-gatherers and record-keepers, but they hold aloof from most people. Only a few of our people have ever held converse with them. Since they survived the destruction of Azemir, we believe that they cannot be destroyed by any means we know. They still exist in the Asteroid Belt."

"The greegles!" exclaimed Mark. "Wait'll I tell Joe! I *knew* I was right!"

His unbidden mention of Joe suddenly sobered Mark. As they continued their walk, he became thoughtful.

“What are the First Races?” asked Zip.

“They were the first peoples in the galaxy,” said Stenafi, “and achieved the ability to travel between the stars at the dawn of time. We know little about them. What we know, we learned from the *alzenta*. The *alzenta* never forget, but they have had no new data on the First Races for eons, and we have not contacted the *alzenta* for many lives of our people. They simply don’t permit easy contact.”



As they continued their walk, Mark became thoughtful.

Zip picked up on Mark’s altered mood, feeling concern for Joe himself. He felt a little uncomfortable, being in a place of such beauty and safety while their partner was a captive of their enemy.

“Stenafi,” he addressed her again, looking up into her liquid brown eyes, “we have been looking for the Benefactors—for you, the Ahmanyans—for over a year, since we first learned of you from the Titanians. Mark and I treasure the time we have spent with you—your hospitality, our new friendship, your trust in us. But now you have told us that the threat from the Xenobots is not as urgent as we had feared—what has become urgent is to rescue our partner.”

“Indeed, Starman Foster and Starman Seaton—indeed you must. We in *Imlah Taltanhi* have no intention of keeping you for long. There is much more that we can share with you, but the time for that sharing is not now. As we stated last night, you must stop the evil work of Andrew Forge—not only to rescue your friend, but also to save the lives of the Ahmanyans! In the morning we will return you to the surface of our planet. When you have succeeded, there will be time for us to spend together without haste or anxiety.

“Tonight, if you are agreeable, those in our community who have children would like you to join them for the evening meal. They and their children want to visit with our guests from Earth.” Her smooth brown face broke into a smile that verged on a laugh. “Indeed, Starmen, we could barely contain our children’s eagerness to meet you! There are twenty-two *tali*—children—in our community, and they could hardly sleep last night for excitement. They will be tired after the feast, but it will be an occasion they will remember always!”

Zip and Mark looked at one another and smiled.

“Yes, Stenafi,” said Zip. “We would enjoy that! Thank you!”

They came to a place that felt like a cloister. The path they had been following turned into an ancient pavement of interlocking stone slabs. Shaped blocks of stone, roughly three feet square, made walls on both sides up to fifteen feet high, and had been set in place so tightly that there was no space between them. The stones seemed almost soft, for their color was a rich, yellowish-brown, and looked as if they had been in place for thousands of years. Every ten feet or so a stone archway stretched over the path, and light from above shone through the openings above them and cast sickle-shaped patterns over the pavement.

For three or four minutes they walked along the cloister, greeting several others who were going in the opposite direction. Then they came to an open doorway that brought them into an enclosed hall, from which several passages led. The sound of distant voices came to them.

“Here is where some of our people are occupied during the day,” explained Stenafi. “I will show you the map rooms, laboratories, data centers, and music and art studios.”

The Starmen followed her down the corridor to the left.

~

About five miles straight up, the sun was trying to blaze through a cloudy morning. Richard Starlight was leading an expedition of five men across the lip of the tableland that oversaw the east ridge of the canyon. Each was heavily armed and kept a careful lookout in all directions. On the opposite side of the canyon, three of the SE warcraft were situated, having moved as soon as the sun was up. With three ships on both sides of the canyon, the crew of Mars Base was in complete possession of the site of the previous evening’s battle, though there was no sign of any challengers.

Richard had sent a dozen personnel to investigate the wreckage of the Xenobot ships and what was left of the Xenobot casualties. The first report came in as Richard reached a likely location where he could descend the wall of the canyon to the place where the *Star Ranger* had been concealed.

“Mr. Starlight, this is Captain Cave Johnson.”

“Yes, Cave, what is it?”

“We’ve come on the first Xenobot casualty, sir. I haven’t any idea what to make of it.”

“Explain, Johnson.”

“It was torn open by a laser strike, apparently. The substance inside is all dried up and hard. It looks frozen. This atmosphere didn’t do it any good. There are mechanical pieces lying around, and inside the torso I can’t make out where the flesh ends and the metal begins.”

“Very well, Cave. Keep looking. We can’t radio to Mars Base with the air being jammed, but you can lift off with one of the ships when you’re ready. Take it up a mile or so and then radio the Base and have a transporter sent out to pick up

whatever wreckage we can find. Maybe we can learn something from it.”

“Yes sir.”

Richard peered over the edge of the canyon. The slumped rock from the previous evening’s attack came to an end just below, and clumped trees and shrubs covered the ground from that point southward for a quarter mile to the place where the canyon reached the cliff wall.

“The *Star Ranger* is down there,” indicated Richard with his left hand outstretched. “You can barely see it through the leaves. The Starmen did a good job of hiding it.”

“Shall I go first, sir?” asked a young officer. Richard gave a quick nod.

The man secured the rope to a large stone a few yards from the edge of the ravine and then lowered himself over the side. Since the way down was not a straight drop, he constantly pushed himself off the side of the slope as he dropped. He was only halfway to the bottom when the slope became more gradual. He abandoned the rope and began an easy descent using his hands and feet.

Richard appointed two of his exploratory crew to remain at the top and wait. Then he and one other person followed the first climber down in turn. Before long, all three were at the bottom. A light, momentary breeze shook the branches of the trees, and then was still.

“Let’s go,” said Richard.

A short walk brought them to the Starmen’s ship. Richard was shocked when he saw the damage. The *Star Ranger* was badly scarred, deeply dented, and scored with deep holes and grooves, and the right wing was severely distorted. He could hardly believe that the ship could fly.

“Did this ship actually fly here?” he said out loud. “More to the point, can we fly it out of here?”

“Mr. Starlight,” said one of his companions. “We have company.”

Richard turned and saw that six people had emerged from

the cover of the trees. In spite of all the reconnaissance the SE personnel had done, no one had seen them coming. They wore space suits of a fashion that had not been seen for several decades, and all were armed with laser pistols, but no one held a weapon in a threatening manner.

“Good morning, men of Earth,” said one of them, standing with his legs spread and arms crossed, holding a pistol in the crook of his arm. He was a solid, burly man. His faceplate showed that he had a full beard—highly unusual, especially for one who had to wear a space suit on occasion.

“Where did you come from?” asked Richard, surprised but not showing it.

The man jerked his head toward the bottom of the canyon. “We climbed up about three o’clock this morning. Been waiting for you to get here. It’s a wonder you didn’t set a guard.”

“We did,” said the man who’d climbed into the canyon first. Richard raised a hand and stopped the man from saying anything more.

“I know you did,” said the man with the pistol. “I’m just making a point. We’re hard to detect if we don’t want to be seen.”

“Who are you?” asked Richard.

“Well now, it seems that you’re the visitors here and I ought to ask *you* that question—except I already know who you are, Mr. Richard Starlight. So I’ll answer you. We’re really allies—uneasy allies, maybe, but allies just the same against a common enemy. My name is Daniel Teagarden. My family has called Mars home for over a century. I live in a settlement about a hundred miles east of here.” He waved his hand in a sweep in that general direction.

Richard knew about the Wind People, but it had been many years since he’d had any dealings with them. He expected that Daniel was undoubtedly a direct descendant of Colin or Kevin Teagarden, the first leaders of the Wind People.

Teagarden continued. “We heard about the troubles you and your crew had out here yesterday evening, and we flew out to

see if our help might be wanted. We left a small ship at the bottom of the cliff and climbed up in the dark nice and quietly. Now I overheard you say that you were hoping to fly this ship out of here. It'll fly, all right. But if you take it, just how will your boys find their way home? I'm just curious, you see."

"The Starmen are in good hands. I am not concerned for their safety."

Teagarden nodded. "Alright. I think I know where they might be. You know that there are still a few renegade police ships on the lookout for this red spacecraft, don't you?"

Richard smiled. "I doubt they'll take any action against it if it's accompanied by six armed Starlight craft."

Teagarden smiled in his turn.

"Okay, Mr. Starlight. We may have a few things in common besides an enemy. If we can do something to help you, let me know." He provided a radio frequency.

"There is, Mr. Teagarden," Richard said. His crewmembers seemed slightly surprised. If Daniel or his companions were surprised, they didn't show it. "I haven't taken time to try to break through the jamming that Forge has set up. If you're going back to your settlement, would you contact Mars Base and tell them about our conversation here?"

"That I will, Mr. Starlight. That I will." He extended his hand, and Richard took it. Then the Wind People moved back down the canyon and vanished over the edge.

Within half an hour, Richard Starlight had eased the *Star Ranger* into the thin Martian air and set a course for Mars Base. The six warcraft accompanied the red ship into the north. As the array hefted into the midmorning sunlight over an altered terrain, the Banjoman's constantly circling sentinels reported every move until the ships had gone out of range.

Chapter 23: Hiding in the Light

AFTER HE'D BEEN CRACKED on the head, Joe had fallen to the floor unconscious. The blow from behind had been violent. Like most bullies, his assailant was a coward with a deep-seated jealousy of the truly courageous. He was motivated both by fear of how Joe could defend himself if the blow failed, and by a desire for vengeance.

The three security men had then dragged Joe's limp body back to the elevator. At the threshold, the other two security officers were staggering to their feet. When the big man whom Joe had thrown over the arachnoid saw that the others had captured the Starman, he came over and dealt the unconscious captive a vicious kick to the ribs.

"That'll teach you who's in charge here, you skinny little worm!" he snarled.

"I doubt it'll teach him any such thing," said Mr. Forge, weaving slightly on unsteady feet and wincing from the pain of his wounds, "since he won't have any idea who kicked him. Maybe when he's quite himself again you can teach him a second time."

"Aw, Mr. Forge, he just got in a lucky blow," whined the man. "Look at this beanpole. He can't beat me in a fight."

"Seems to me that he just beat the three of us in a fight. I must admit I underestimated him. Gordon, take him down to Cliff's cell. Be sure you take his compad and all his apparatus. Empty his equipment kit and drain the in-suit nutrients."

"Yes sir," said the man the Banjoman had addressed, and entered the correct access code on the elevator callpad. When the elevator door opened, he and his partners dragged Joe inside and entered another code; the door closed, and the elevator began to descend. A few seconds later, the door opened onto a poorly lit passageway.

"Has anybody remembered to feed that blowhard?" asked one of the men.

"Yeah—he just got a meal yesterday," answered the man

called Gordon. He jerked Joe out of the elevator and removed his utility kit and compad. Then his assistants dragged Joe along the floor, each pulling an arm, while Gordon led the way down the hall. They dragged the unconscious Starman past unfrequented storage areas until they came to a metal door with a window in it. The window had been blocked up with a piece of scrap metal plate that had been carelessly welded over it.

“Open it,” ordered Gordon. He stepped back and held his laser pistol in the ready position. One of the others unlocked the door and swung it open, then they lugged Joe through the opening and left him lying flat on the floor.

“A friend for you, fat boy,” said the man with the pistol contemptuously. Then the three security personnel left the room and closed the door.

As soon as the door had been locked, a heavy man lumbered over to Joe.

“Joe Taylor?” he muttered. He carefully took Joe’s head between his hands and gently turned it from side to side.

“Joe?” he said quietly. His hand felt wet. He pulled it away and looked at it in the gray light. “Blood!” he muttered. “What have they done to you, you little lightweight?”

~

When the six heavily armed spacecraft from Mars Base attacked the Xenobots, Mr. Andrew Forge was taken completely by surprise. His dozen walnut-sized sentinels, flying in formation for twenty miles in every direction around his desert citadel, barely had time to register their presence before the craft had passed over the tableland and zoomed out over the sandy terrain to the south, leaving behind the wreckage of the Xenobots’ ships.

But when the six ships passed through the canyon and eliminated the last of the Xenobots, the sentinels reported every bit of information. Then when the Starlight ships settled down comfortably for the night, Mr. Forge felt anxiety clutching at his heart. He hadn’t experienced anything like it for many years. His

customary arrogance had been punctured and the resulting dread caused him severe and mounting distress.

Never had he considered the possibility that anyone would be able to defy the Xenobots! How did Richard Starlight even know where his Starmen were? How did he know that the Xenobots had landed? How could he *possibly* have overcome them? And then the SE ships had calmly landed and taken possession of the area.

“Contact Zootz,” he said quietly. “Tell him to bring the patrol back to base. Tell him to be careful that he’s not observed.”

Second-in-command Peter Bellar lifted the communicator and Forge left the control center. It had been a terrible evening. His backside smarted in a dozen places where his own arachnoid had sprayed him with needle lasers, and he was unable to sit down comfortably. Worst of all, his followers had become aware of the humiliation the captive Starman had caused him, and that had been followed by the escape of the other two Starmen and the defeat of the Xenobots. Forge was furious, but he was intelligent enough not to let his anger get the better of him. The anxiety he was feeling now could work for him, if he let it. It would keep him on edge. He’d been lax, he realized. His record of unbroken successes had made him overconfident.

He paced down the hallway toward his quarters, trying not to let the wounds on his back affect his walk too much. He knew that every time he winced or took a gingerly step, he was telling the personnel that he was weak and vulnerable. That could not be permitted! He hoped that he wouldn’t have to break down and ask someone to apply some lotion to his wounds.

He entered his quarters and left word that he was not to be disturbed except for matters of urgency. He wanted uninterrupted time to think. Despite the setbacks of this wayward evening, he had the skinny Starman in a cell, as well as the fat adventurer. A plan was forming in his cunning mind.

Even so, he found it difficult to sleep and had to swallow a drink with some medication in it to ensure that he would get the

rest he needed. He didn't like ingesting anything that interfered with his natural capabilities, and having to do so made him even angrier. He slept on his stomach that night.

He awoke with a plan almost fully formed. His breakfast was brought to him in his living quarters, and with it the news that the *Star Ranger* and the Starlight warships had left the area. When he had finished his meal, he called his second-in-command to come to him.

Peter Bellar didn't keep his boss waiting long. He walked purposefully into the room and, at Forge's gesture of invitation, sat down and waited for the other to begin.

"Starlight left with the other two Starmen this morning," said the Banjoman. Bellar nodded. "They're not going to abandon their colleague, whom we've got down below." Again, Bellar nodded. "So we may assume that they will come for him soon. They know where we are and they may even know what we're doing out here." Bellar nodded a third time.

"We will abandon this base, but we will set a trap that will catch them all." Bellar didn't nod this time, but his expression altered slightly to show that he had become curious.

~

Over breakfast the following morning, Zip and Mark conversed with Stenafi, Saadervo, the Elder, and Jogren. The holographic wall showed a number of cozy dwellings built on a gently sloping rise. Behind them, several rows of rolling hills moved into the distance in front of a lavender sky. It was a scene from Ahmanya's ancient history.

"We will never forget meeting the families last night, Stenafi," said Zip, looking down at his plate and awkwardly touching one of the purple fruits that lay on it.

"Nor will we forget it, Starman Foster," said Stenafi. "In our seclusion it is easy to feel more solitary than is healthful. To resist that tendency we come together for many social occasions, but never in our extensive history have we had such an historic

gathering as last night's festivity. It was the first meeting between the people of Earth and Ahmanya, and the beginning of the fulfillment of our long hope."

Mark looked up. "You made contact with the Wind People a century ago. Wouldn't your first encounter with them be the first meeting between people of Earth and Ahmanya?"

"We do not count it so, Starman Seaton," said Saadervo. "When we saw the *Kuznikas'* desperate need and chose to assist them, it was indeed the first contact between the peoples of our two planets, but by that time the *Kuznika* had made their home on Ahmanya. They had rejected Earth, the planet that is your home. We consider them what you would call 'Martians'."

Mark looked surprised. "I hadn't thought of it in that way," he said, "but I see your logic—I think."

"The *Kuznika* are our allies," explained Saadervo, "though the relationship between these humans and we Ahmanyans is not intimate. The closest settlement is about a hundred miles east of here. It is governed by a man named Daniel Teagarden. At our request, he has already met with Richard Starlight. We have asked him to meet you this morning once you come to the desert. He will be your contact with Richard Starlight."

After breakfast, Saadervo rose and said, "I know that concern for your friend weighs on your minds, and you are eager to rescue him. We will take you through the portal that leads to the surface, and provide you with gifts that will make your task easier. When you rescue him, you will also be able to save the *illunas* from Mr. Andrew Forge."

The company left the room and followed a series of passages to a part of the facility that the Starmen had not seen before. They passed dozens of wall-sized, hanging tapestries adorned with patterns of exquisite complexity, many of which showed scenes of what Mark supposed was the history of ancient Ahmanya. He regretted that there was no time to ask about them.

The company met several citizens of *Imlah Taltahni* going about their business, each of whom greeted the Starmen with particular courtesy. Zip and Mark recognized several individuals

whose acquaintance they had made the previous evening at the feast that had been held in their honor. After about ten minutes of walking, the Starmen and their hosts came to a narrow stone staircase that descended several levels and then passed through an archway that opened onto a semi-circular courtyard. The courtyard was deserted.

Though the Starmen knew that they were deep underground, the courtyard gave the illusion of being outside under a sunny sky. A stone balustrade marked the far boundary of a multi-colored mosaic of fitted stonework. Beyond it the land seemed to drop into far dark, distance. The gurgle of a waterfall sounded pleasantly.

“The sun, of course, is artificial,” explained Saadervo, “but the abyss is not. We are at the far edge of *Imlah Taltahni*. Here there is an enormous crack in the planet’s crust, and the waters drop into depths we have never fully explored.” The governor of the Ahmanyen refuge led them to the edge of the balcony.

“Here is where our knowledge of the stream ends,” he said, pointing off to the right. A short distance away, there was an indentation in the wall of the chasm, showing where the stream had worn away the side by centuries of flow. The Ahmanyans had apparently constructed an artificial bed for the last portion of the stream, to prevent further erosion of the wall of the abyss. The water came through heavy undergrowth, flowed along an attractive channel of shaped stones, and fell over a curving stone lip. The cascade turned to spray before it collided with the sides of the crevasse far below.

“Watch,” said Saadervo. He put his hand into his cloak and withdrew a ball about the size of an orange. He turned a small dial on the ball, then drew back and hurled it far out into the abyss. Seconds later it illuminated brightly, revealing the shape of the chasm as it fell. Far, far down it plummeted, still burning radiantly.

“Ah!” exclaimed Mark, leaning over the rail. By the light of the ball, the Starmen could see long stone columns, occasionally striated and showing gleams of crystal. Where the water fell, the

side of the abyss had been worn smooth. Gradually the falling light faded.

“The abyss drops unbroken for almost six miles,” announced Stenafi, “and then turns southward under the desert. After that, we have not measured.”

“From here, Starmen, Jogren will take you to the south portal,” said Saadervo. “By mercy, we shall meet again and before long, to celebrate your success. And now Stenafi has gifts for you.” The governor looked inquiringly to the Ahmnyan woman.

She smiled, tossed her head so that her tresses swung away from her face, and then turned back toward the double door through which the party had passed moments before.

“*Dala,*” she said. There was a burst of childish giggles, and then, at the bottom of the stairway, a small dark face appeared as if floating in midair. A second later another materialized. For a moment the Starmen felt themselves reeling, but the laughter brought them down to earth. “*Dala,*” repeated Stenafi, “*varna alati ohn.*”

She turned back to the Starmen. “It is two of the children. I told them to come and not to be shy.”

“Stenafi,” said Saadervo sternly. “This is no occasion for children!”

“Forgive me, Saadervo. They begged, and I had no heart to forbid them. They must know and remember this occasion.”

Saadervo’s face softened slightly, and he relented.

Seeing that the governor’s face had softened, the little faces floated toward the Starmen.

“How can this be? What are they?” asked Zip.

“These are children?” said Mark.

“They are bearing our gifts to you, Starmen,” said Saadervo. “They bring each of you a light cloak. Ahmnyans have known the secret of bending light for many generations, and we have used cloaks like these a number of times over the past century and more to walk unseen among your people—never to do harm, but to learn of you and your ways without putting ourselves at

risk.”

“You may wrap the cloaks around your bodies and the light will pass around them,” explained Stenafi further.

“An invisibility cloak?” asked Mark, incredulously.

“No, it is not as effective as that,” that Saadervo. “You are not invisible to motion or heat detectors, and if you move even the light will make a ripple as it passes around you since it distorts a little. But for casual moving in places where there are people whom you wish not to see you, it may hide your movements. We will show you.”

Stenafi reached out to a place a little below the grinning faces. Suddenly there were two beaming children standing in front of the Starmen, covered in hooded capes that seemed to be made of mirrors. Stenafi drew the cloak off of one and handed it to Mark, and then the other, which she handed to Zip.

“*Talil and talitha*,” said Mark, with a smile.

The children and the Elder laughed when they heard Mark say the words for “little boy” and “little girl”.

“You are learning Ahmanyen,” said Saadervo, obviously pleased.

“This is Tayan,” said Stenafi, indicating a grinning little girl, “and this is Timon,” she added, referring to the little boy. The Starmen remembered the children from the previous evening, and greeted them kindly.

Stenafi turned one of the cloaks inside out and showed them a small pad. “Here are the controls.” She explained how the cloaks were to be wrapped around the entire body and then sealed. There were places where the hands could come through into glove-shaped appendages so that the wearer could use his hands. The hood was drawn around the wearer’s head, leaving only the face exposed. Then a second control created a tiny force field across the wearer’s face to make that invisible also.

“Thank you!” said the Starmen. “These are wonderful gifts!”

“If they help you to succeed, Starmen,” said Saadervo, “they are a gift we have given to ourselves.”

“This is where we part, Starmen,” said Stenafi. She looked at

them fondly.

An awkward but heartfelt farewell was exchanged, and then Jogren led the Starmen off the right side of the courtyard into the bush. They followed a path for a short way. It led over a bridge laid across the stream, then continued through a thinly planted orchard. Beyond the orchard an expanse of hard, plain, rocky soil extended to a wall of dark gray stone.



A small dark face appeared as if floating in midair.

“Here is end of *Imlah Taltahni*,” said Jogren. “People live and work there,” he added, pointing off to the right. “Above, only stone. We go here.” He led the Starmen along a narrow pathway that skirted the wall of rock for a short distance, and then came to a doorway. He opened the door and brought them in to an elevator chamber. The door shut behind them, and Jogren pressed several buttons on the keypad. The Starmen felt the slight pressure in their knees that told them that they were

moving upward.

Chapter 24: Across the Stone Rainbow

STEVE CLIFF could feel a lump in his throat as he took Joe's pulse. The Starman's heartbeat was weak and erratic.

"What have they done to you?" Steve whispered again. Joe's breathing was slow but regular. He seemed to be deep asleep.

There was only one low wattage bulb in the storage room, so Steve could not see very clearly. He went over to the sink, soaked a cloth, and wrung it out. Kneeling next to Joe, he tenderly removed the Starman's helmet and wiped the young man's neck where blood from his wound had run down.

The adventurer carefully ran his fingers over the back of Joe's head, probing for the wound. He found no place where there was a depression, a conclusion that considerably relieved him. Steve returned to the sink to rinse the cloth. He made several trips before he could wring the cloth out without a trace of dark showing in the runoff. Then he placed a rolled-up canvas under Joe's head, elevated his feet slightly, and covered him with a tarpaulin.

After that, he waited. Occasionally he soaked a cloth in water and brought it to Joe's lips.

Hours later, Joe sighed deeply and his eyes fluttered. Instantly Steve knelt down next to the Starman. Joe opened his eyes, blinked, focused on a point on the ceiling, and then rolled his eyes aside so he could see Steve. Then he groaned and closed his eyes in a painful grimace. That simple movement caused a sharp twinge to shoot through his cranium.

"Ooh, man," he said. "I get smashed on the back of my head and knocked cold. Then the first thing I see when I wake up is Steve Cliff. That Andrew Forge is a very mean man."

Steve laughed out loud. "Oh, Joe," he chuckled when he finally got control of himself. His relief was palpable. He took hold of the Starman's hand and gripped it. "How're you

feeling?”

“How’m I feeling? If you’re hoping that I got some sense knocked into me, you’re gonna be disappointed. I’m the same old Joe, except that I think the back half of my head might be missing. If it’s not, I sure wish it were because it hurts like blazes.”

“You were lucky that you still had your helmet on when you got hit.”

Joe sat up with difficulty and Steve helped him stagger over to a chair. Joe plumped down into it with a sudden wince, then leaned back and shut his eyes. “Oh, man, my side feels as if it’s been caved in, too. What happened there?”

“I don’t know, Joe. I only noticed the wallop on the back of your head.”

“Well,” he said, running his hands over his side, “it’s tender but nothing’s broken.” He dropped his hands.

“So how’d you get here?” the Starman asked.

“It’s a short story,” said Steve. “I was in Eagle City Spaceport a while back—what day is it, anyway?”

“It’s Friday, April 20,” said Joe. “At least it was when I was brought in here. It was evening. How long was I out?”

“Several hours,” said Steve. “It’s probably morning by now. I was captured on Tuesday afternoon, so that was four days ago. I’d arrived in Eagle City a few days before that and saw your ship land. By the time I got my bulk to the spaceport you’d already left—that was about midday—, so I went to the poobah there at the spaceport and asked where you’d gone. He looked at me real funny. It’s not like I was a stranger or had my clothes on inside out or something, either—they knew who I was when I landed a few days earlier. And a strange reception I got too, for someone who’d helped ’em liberate their dear ol’ hometown from the pirates a coupla years ago. It ’peared like I was some sorta specimen or something.

“Well, it never bothered me much if some galoot wants to act like he’d had raw lemons for breakfast. That’s his lookout.”

“Steve?” said Joe, his eyes closed. “So what happened when

you went back last Tuesday?”

“Oh yeah—I was comin’ to that. Well, anyway, so the lemon-sucker I was talkin’ to says he’s goin’ to go get some other churl to answer my simple question. Then a minute later three guys come outta the back and one slams his hand onto my arm before I could do anything about it, and the next I know I’m gettin’ woozy. I knew he’d poked some needle into me but there wasn’t a thing I could do to protest this ill treatment except drift off to sleep.

“When I wake up, I’m in this room, and I guess I been here goin’ on four days. Apparently they don’t feed their prisoners very often, they don’t give us much light, and I dunno who brought me here or why. Do you know more ’n that?”

Haltingly, and without revealing Zip’s discovery about Ahmanya, Joe told his story and brought Steve up to date. When he related that their enemy was Andrew Forge, Steve looked startled.

“Andy Forge? No kiddin’! We were friends twenty years ago! But keep goin’—I’ll tell you about it later.”

Joe went on to tell how the Starmen had fought the android that had tried to pass for Steve.

“Guess those lizards must’ve read my vitals when I was unconscious!” The usually irrepressible Steve became acutely disturbed with the revelation.

“I don’t know where Zip and Mark are now, or what Forge’s plans are for us,” Joe concluded weakly.

“Guess pulling Mars out of the fire is going to be a little harder this time,” said Steve.

Joe didn’t hear him. He had fallen asleep again, stretched out in the chair with his chin jutting upward.

~

The elevator door opened and Jogren led the way into a large room that was evidently a hangar. To one side, there were two other Ahmanyans in deep conversation, facing each other over a

bench strewn with hand tools and a variety of parts whose function was not known to the Starmen. The two looked up as Jogren entered and greeted him and their visitors warmly.

Though there was room for a half dozen ships, there were only two rather small spacecraft on the deck. Workstations, cabinets, and other signs of labor lined the walls.

“Two ships left now,” said their guide as he crossed the floor with the two Earthmen close behind. “One big ship crash on asteroid. You hear story from Stenafi.”

Jogren came to a large control panel on the side of the hangar opposite to that in which the elevator was situated. He manipulated some dials, took a reading, and then pressed a series of buttons. All at once, an entire wall of the hangar became transparent.

“Oh!” exclaimed Mark. A narrow valley was revealed, with trees and shrubbery covering most of the steep walls that formed it. The view did not go far before it was cut off by the tops of tree-clad ridges.

“Outside, wall look like rock,” explained Jogren. “It is door for spacecraft. If no one nearby, we open door and fly out and in. Now, no one nearby. I show you.” He guided the Starmen to a small door adjacent to the hangar door.

“Airlock,” said Jogren and pointed to their helmets and NPACs. As they secured their helmets, he put on his own helmet from a rack next to the doorway. When they were ready, they entered the airlock and a moment later were outside in the Ahmanyman mountains.

To their left was a sheer wall of rock, but the Starmen knew that this was the hangar door for the Ahmanyman ships. *Must be built like the secret doors on the Asteroid*, thought Zip.

“I show you,” repeated Jogren, “Come.” He followed a narrow path along the top of a ridge with a precipitous drop down on both sides. It followed the natural curve of the lines of the mountain in a gradual descent, turning from side to side, dropping steeply for a short distance then rising again.

After a walk of about half a mile, Jogren stopped. The path

had turned sharply to the right and its continuance could be seen without obstruction for at least another half mile; then it became lost in the bewildering turns of the sharp foothills. Their Ahmanyman friend raised his arm and pointed down the path.

“Follow path. Beyond turn below, there is big arch. Walk on arch to come to desert. Wear light cloaks on arch. *Illunas* fields straight from arch. You will see. Go on machine to Andrew Forge base.”

“Is that clear to you, Mark?” asked Zip.

“Seems to me he wants us to go to the lichen fields and hitch a ride on that harvest machine we saw from the end of our ravine two days ago. That’ll take us to Forge’s hideout and probably get us inside.”

“Yes,” said Jogren. “Find Andrew Forge. Wear cloaks.”

“Then once we’re inside, I guess we’re on our own,” said Mark.

“Let’s go,” said Zip. “I want to find Joe.” He turned to Jogren. “Thank you, Jogren. It has been a pleasure to meet you at last.”

Jogren smiled and extended his hand. Zip shook it.

“We meet again soon,” said Jogren.

“I hope so,” said Mark, also shaking the Ahmanyman’s hand. “Soon.”

Jogren turned and retraced his steps back up the path. The Starmen continued their trek downward. A moment later when Mark looked over his shoulder, Jogren was no longer in sight.

Step by step, the Starmen made their way along the narrow path. Around them the highlands of the Martian plateau were gradually receding. They were moving among thick brown dust. The woods of the small, hidden valley in front of the hangar door had been left behind long before, and now only undersized plants dotted the steep terrain.

Mark knew that although the plants were only about the size of a fist, their roots went down at least fifteen feet. Around the Starmen moving sheets of dust scudded as the easterly winds rose and the men slogged into the wild lands on the fringe of the

desert.

Zip looked into the sky and saw the bright sun positioned just before noon. A haze the color of bronze surrounded it like a halo. As he stared down the path, he saw two dust devils spinning on a level place ahead.

Eventually the Starmen came around the last shoulder of the hill country and the desert floor opened out in front of them, spreading like a vast sea whose opposite shore was far out of sight. Immediately in front of them, however, was a sight for which they were completely unprepared. An immense natural stone arch struck out from the side of the hill and stretched for at least a hundred yards before it dropped down into the nearest approach of desert sands. The dusty foothills disappeared and the ridge they were following turned into a solid wall of stone, from which the arch emerged.

“The arch he mentioned,” said Mark. “That’s something!”

“We have to walk along that?” said Zip. “Should be an adventure. We’ll have to watch our steps!”

“And put on the cloaks, too, he said,” added Mark. “We must be visible to somebody around here.”

The Starmen withdrew the light cloaks from their storage packs and wrapped themselves in the garments that the Ahmanyans had given them. After Zip had sealed the seam on his cloak, he operated the controls.

“Astounding,” muttered Mark as he saw that Zip had disappeared in front of his eyes. He squinted to see whether he could detect any change in his field of vision where he knew Zip was standing. He could detect nothing.

“Nothing?” asked Zip. “You can’t see anything at all?”

“No,” said Mark. “Absolutely amazing! I know you’re standing in front of me, but I can see right through you. The light passes around your body.” Mark reached out his hand slowly until he came into contact with Zip’s cloak. He pressed on it, but there was no change in what he could see.

“Now me,” said Mark. He sealed his own cloak and operated the light-bending feature.

“You’re just gone,” Zip said. “With these, we shouldn’t have too much trouble getting the best of Mr. Andrew Forge.”

“If we’re careful,” said Mark. “Let’s go.” He turned and stepped along the ridge to the point where the arch was connected.

“Hey!” exclaimed Zip. “I can see you! That is, I can’t see *you*, but I can see where you are! When you move, there are wavy lines in the air, like heat waves! We’ll have to be careful!”

“Well, that’s what Saadervo said. Guess we’d better make sure we don’t get overconfident with these.”

Gingerly they stepped out onto the stone arch and began to traverse its top. The footing seemed reasonably secure, but was deceptive. One misstep on a loose pebble and the result could be a slide along a steeply curving downward surface and a plunge through the thin Martian air to a jumble of hard, sharp boulders below. The farther along the arch they moved, the steeper it became.

“Whoops, here I go!” said Mark, who was in the lead, as he came to the point where he couldn’t stop his forward motion. Faster and faster he began to scoot down the arch, hoping that he wouldn’t trip over the edge of the light cloak. Zip was not far behind him.

The Starmen’s footing was sure and they ran, one after the other, onto the smooth, soft sand where the far end of the arch entered the Martian desert. Once they reached the level, they quickly controlled their pace, came to a stop, and caught their breath. Then they began to survey their surroundings.

Behind them was the last outcroppings of the talus from the severe foothills. Stretched out before them was the vast ocean of sand, but interrupted by a sparse, random emergence of boulders or squat stone pillars. On the edge of sight was the northern periphery of the lichen field.

“Well, we’re in the desert now. Someone was supposed to meet us right about here,” said Mark.

“He’s here,” said a voice. Both Starmen turned and looked around until they saw a man approaching from the east. He had

come from behind a weathered jumble of stone that had fallen from the side of the cliff decades earlier. The man's suit was the same color as the sand; he would have been as good as invisible from more than fifty yards away.

"Daniel Teagarden," he said. "I've been waiting for you. I can't see you, but I saw where you kicked up the sand when you came down the arch." The Starmen introduced themselves. "Follow me," said Daniel. "We'll get out of the open into a secluded place where we can talk better."

~

One meal had been brought to Steve and Joe after the Starman had awakened for the second time. His headache was slightly improved and the food had also helped to overcome the throb in his cranium. Both he and Steve could have eaten more, but what they had was nourishing if not particularly appetizing.

After a long wait from the time of their meal, the door scraped open again. Both men hoped that another meal was being brought to them, but they rose to their feet when they saw that their visitor was Andrew Forge himself. Eight armed men surrounded him in the dim hallway outside.

"You won't be able to overcome all of us," he stated without preamble. "I admit that I do make a mistake once in a rare while, but I don't repeat them. Come with us." He pushed the door completely open and moved out of the way.

Saying nothing, Joe and Steve stepped out into the corridor, blinking in the light. Dim as it was, it was brighter than the bare illumination in their room.

The party moved down the hallway back toward the elevator. As they came to the threshold, Joe saw with a shock that the arachnoid that had brought him to the Banjoman was positioned inside. It still carried the atomic bomb strapped to its back. The metallic spider was motionless.

When all eleven people were inside, the Banjoman ordered, "Take us down!" One of his men pressed three buttons on the

keypad.

“Farther down?” muttered Joe.

“Oh, yes!” said Andrew Forge. “There is one level below your previous quarters. You’ll be my guests there, too, but not for long.” There was very little inflection to his words, but Joe could discern a very real menace behind his explanation. He could tell, with a chill, that this was a very dangerous man indeed.

In seconds the door opened onto another ill-lit hallway. The Banjoman’s party conducted the prisoners along the gray corridor to a room little different from the one they had just quitted. The arachnoid followed them. Forge motioned for his prisoners to go into the room. They walked in and took stock of their new surroundings.

“There’s no water in here,” said Steve, turning to face Forge from the center of the room.

“And no light, either,” said Forge, as he raised a laser pistol and shot out the bulb in the middle of the ceiling. “But you won’t need water or light here.”

The clacking sound of the arachnoid’s eight legs was loud in the resulting silence as the machine followed the captives into the room. Then the door closed, leaving Joe and Steve in complete darkness. They could hear the tumble of the lock being secured. Then the sound of several men walking away. Then nothing.

Chapter 25: Maneuvering for Position

“I’LL BE YOUR CONTACT with Richard Starlight,” said Daniel Teagarden as he trudged across the sand back toward the wall of the plateau. “He returned to Mars Base yesterday midmorning and is waiting for word on the next move. You can’t use your compads to send a message that far, or the bloated toad will pinpoint your location and skewer you before you can cry ‘what was that?’”

“Bloated toad?” asked Mark.

“Forge—the Banjoman, who else?” responded Teagarden contemptuously without slowing his pace or turning to face the Starmen. “That bottomless pit of greed has put his clutching, pudgy hand on just about everything of importance on Mars and gotten away with it. Maybe you’ll be the ones to stop his relentless heaping up of riches. Nobody else on Mars could—or would. They either ignored him or crawled under his shadow like jackdaws to try to fatten themselves on what little fell out of his hand. And just like a century ago when things turned bad, no one on Earth took much notice or cared but just watched evil run rampant.”

A dry wind blew intermittently among the maze of pathways that laced through the rise and fall of foothills. Daniel clearly knew where he was going. Noonday sun bore down upon the threesome. Teagarden’s small shadow moved ahead of him as they walked; the Starmen, in their cloaks, cast no shadows.

“In here,” said their guide after a moment. He had brought them to the bottom of a nearly vertical cliff, and then turned a corner around a knife-like ridge that came down from far above. Unexpectedly there was a narrow canyon that went deep into the side of the mountain. At one time the cliff itself had cracked apart, opening up a passageway into its heart, about twenty feet wide at the bottom.

The Starmen entered the sand-floored crevasse. It rose up in cool dimness above them for over a hundred feet, slanting a little to the left, and opening to the sky in a narrow line of light. About thirty feet inside the opening Daniel had parked a small shuttlecraft. Like his suit, it was the same color as the sand.

Daniel walked up to the shuttlecraft, opened its storage compartment, and withdrew an inflatable tent. In seconds he had it set up adjacent to his vehicle. “C’mon in,” he invited. “You can deactivate the light cloaks now, if you like. Nobody but me’s going to see you here.”

“Sorry,” said Zip. He and Mark switched off their light cloaks and removed them.

Once the three of them were enclosed by the tent, Daniel sealed it. He opened a small tank of air and filled it with a breathable atmosphere. He took a reading on a small gauge, and then removed his helmet. The Starmen followed his example. He grinned at Zip and Mark and extended his hand once more. Pleasant blue eyes looked out from under a thatch of grizzled blond hair. His skin was lined and tough, and his teeth were white and even, showing through a full, blond beard. He appeared to be about forty years old.

“The tent will allow us to talk without communicators, and I’ve got detectors set out that’ll alert us to most kinds of invaders or eavesdroppers. It’s not safe to take any chances in this part of the planet, what with the south portal to the Ahmanyen settlement so near and the bloated toad’s desert base fifteen miles to the west.”



The Starmen entered the sand-floored crevasse.

“You’ve kept the Ahmanyans’ secret for a century,” said Zip. “I am impressed!”

“Not much temptation to break the promise, Starman,” admitted Daniel, “but even so, none of us would betray the people who saved us back then. They’re good folks, and deserve the respect we have for ’em. Now we have to save them, if we can. This Forge blight has been scooping up the lichen and turning it into poison.” Daniel pressed his lips together.

“None of us out here could stop ’im. If we’d tried, we’d only have gotten ourselves wiped out for our efforts and nobody’d take the time or trouble to miss us. The Ahmanyans couldn’t take the risk—one slip on their part and their secret would be out, and their very survival at this point depends on nobody knowing about them. The fact that they’ve trusted you is a sign that things may be changing soon.” He grunted. “Maybe that’ll be good for the Wind People, maybe not, but it’s not up to us to make choices for the Ahmanyans. That’s their business.”

“Tell us what you know about Forge’s base,” said Zip.

“It’s a pretty basic outfit,” answered Teagarden. “Never been in it myself, but I have discovered where it is. Usually there are only a dozen or so people out there to oversee the operation, but since the toad moved in there’s maybe three times that many there now.

“He’s only been scavenging the lichen for about two years. He doesn’t overdo it—just a bit now and then. He doesn’t want to flood the market with flilox and he doesn’t want to plunder too much of the lichen too fast. It grows very slowly. There’s maybe five square miles out there and he harvests it in small areas, maybe a square foot at a time, from scattered places.”

“Five square miles?” queried Mark with amazement. “When I was here two summers ago it looked like only a few acres.”

“You can bet your last uranium atom that Jogren didn’t take you through the major field—just the southernmost edge and only because he had no choice. There’s a small outcropping down that way, but all the lichen patches are connected.”

“If he only takes a square foot from scattered places, why is

his harvesting so threatening to the Ahmanyans?” asked Zip. “A few square feet out of five square miles doesn’t sound like much.”

“Nobody said anything about a *few* square feet, Starman,” elucidated Teagarden with a sniff. “He takes a *lotta* square feet! Still, it doesn’t take much to make a lot of fillox. The bloated toad doesn’t want to get noticed, so he sends his harvesters out there seldom; but when they’re out there, they come back loaded—a patch here, a patch there, and pretty soon the field looks full of holes. It’s diminishing, there’s no question about that!

“He doesn’t know about the Ahmanyans, of course, or why they need the stuff. He wouldn’t care a solar if he did. To be honest,” he crinkled his brow, “I’m not up on the details myself. All I know is that they need it and that’s good enough for me and my people to choose to defend ’em.”

“What can we do?” asked Zip.

“It’s not for the likes of me to make that kind of decision, Starman Foster,” protested Daniel. “I’m just here to be your contact with Richard Starlight. I met him yesterday and I liked him. I can send him a message safely—no enemy will intercept it. You make a recording here for me to send to your boss, and I’ll see that he gets it within the hour. I can scoot across the desert in my special craft here,” he tossed his head backward to indicate his vehicle, “and be home and at my communicator by the time you two get to the near edge of the lichen field, going on foot. But if you do ask my advice,” he leaned in a little closer, “I’d clamber onto that harvester that’s out there now and let it take you straight into the bloated toad’s hideaway.

“You Starmen ought to be able to wreak a little interesting havoc in that den of serpents and prepare the way for a major invasion by Richard Starlight. The best proof that you aren’t murderers of ‘Mars’ upright citizen’ is to bring his bloated, cringing self out into the open for all to see.” He leaned back with a sidelong smile of satisfaction. “And maybe when he left his comfortable, protected home in Seven Leaves to come out to

this godforsaken place, he made a bad decision. He's got some sting out there, but nowhere near what he had at home."

Zip furrowed his brow and ran his fingers through his red hair. He hadn't been asking Daniel what he ought to do, but he didn't press the point. He considered various options and didn't have to think long before agreeing that what Daniel Teagarden had suggested was the best plan. He made a recording for Teagarden to transmit to Richard. In it, he brought Richard briefly up to date while saying very little about the stay with the Ahmanyans. He asked him to send a force to Andrew Forge's base at dawn, with the intention of taking it by storm. He promised—but couldn't guarantee—that he and Mark would do their best to neutralize any resistance Forge's crew might offer, and referred Richard to the data aboard the *Star Ranger* that would provide the coordinates to the site of Forge's base. He signed off.

Zip felt the weight of anxiety press upon him. He knew that he and Mark had to succeed in getting into Forge's base and bringing down its defenses before dawn. If they failed, the Starlight forces could be coming into a more dangerous situation than they anticipated. He knew that Richard would be prepared for that possibility, but Zip knew that many lives could be lost if he and Mark failed in their mission.

He and Mark shared a dour and silent lunch with Daniel Teagarden. After telling his story, the taciturn man had little more to say and the Starmen were too wrapped up in their own thoughts to carry on casual conversation.

After they had finished eating, Daniel Teagarden said, "You are Starmen, and I know what that means. No doubt you're able to deal with just about whatever might come up. But if you need to reach me for anything, use this frequency." He provided the information. "We use it for our own communications and no one else gives it a thought—just like they don't give *us* much of a thought. Sometimes that works to our advantage."

The Starmen thanked him. Then they bade each other a quiet farewell and the Starmen walked out of the narrow crevasse into the ruddy, wind-strewn outland. A moment later their contact's

shuttlecraft zoomed across the desert and vanished into the east.

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“There’s the lichen field,” pointed out Zip, “not more than a couple of miles away.”

“That’s our goal,” said Mark.

Having replaced their light cloaks, they struck out toward the acreage that was so vital to the Ahmanyans. Zip hoped that the particles in the winds that gusted occasionally across their path would help to conceal any ripples their cloaks might show as he and Mark walked deliberately toward the Banjoman’s workers.

The afternoon had become cool and gray, and the sunlight had grown weak. Light gray and lavender gauzy clouds had swept over the western sky and were moving eastward. Judging from the appearance of the sky, Zip guessed that the temperature had dropped at least ten degrees from the bright midmorning and looked as if it would drop still more.

The land sloped down into an oval depression, littered with small pebbles at the bottom. The Starmen moved slowly through the pebbles, occasionally kicking one or two aside in their invisible movements. The pebbles rattled as they skipped across the barren landscape.

After Zip and Mark reached the opposite side of the low space, they stepped up the slope and approached the lip of the hollow. The sand showed their prints as their feet sank into the loose powder. They shuffled to the top of the gradient. The boundary of the lichen field was close; at least a mile into the growing area there was a vehicle, shining dully in the wan afternoon sunlight.

Five minutes’ more walking brought the two Starmen to the edge of the lichen field. The ground had become hard and their footprints did not show. Low rocks and stretches of hard stone apparently provided the best terrain for the lichen. A few drops of rain dropped onto the stones, but the sky did not open. The occasional blustery sweep of drops spattered the ground and then

the drizzle moved on, only to return a few moments later.

Zip looked down from time to time to see that Mark's footsteps were barely visible next to him, pressing onto the wetness on the rock.

Far ahead was the Banjoman's vehicle. After the Starmen made their approach, they could see that it was a truck with four oversized wheels. Behind the cab there was a horizontal cylindrical tank, surrounded on three sides with narrow metal decking and a guardrail. On the side of the tank, large letters read "SEWAGE".

Two figures were in the field intent upon the work of gathering lichen. Each held a pole with a round disk at the end. A hose about two inches in diameter led from each disk into the tank on the back of the vehicle. The figures walked a few feet, applied the disk to the ground for a moment, and then moved on to a new site.

The Starmen approached cautiously, but no one was attentive to the environment. For several minutes Zip and Mark watched the procedure. Once the two figures had moved far out in front of the vehicle and come to the end of their hoses, they stood up straight and signaled. A third person, seated in the truck, drove the vehicle slowly forward until the two figures outside were behind it. Then they began to harvest the lichen again.

Zip reached out and moved his arm blindly until he felt Mark's bulk not far from him. He pressed gently forward to show his partner that he was going to board the truck, then eased his way toward the vehicle. Mark followed closely. No one paid them any attention. They moved slowly, hoping that that would minimize the ripple effect of the light cloaks. When they came to the truck, Zip pulled himself aboard and held tightly to the rail that ran around the tank. He moved so slowly that he doubted that the driver would notice the slight shift as the vehicle took on additional weight, but when Mark pulled himself aboard, Zip could feel the difference. He hoped no one else would.

Sitting close together and saying nothing, the two Starmen were content to wait until the day's harvesting was done. They

hoped that the crew would drive directly to the Banjoman's hidden base. The night ahead would be decisive for someone.

~

Back at Mars Base, Richard was elated. When he'd returned the previous day from his mission to the ravine and brought back the *Star Ranger*, he'd learned that in his absence Oritz Konig had come back from Seven Leaves. Although Konig had not been successful in his attempt to gain entrance to Andrew Forge's mansion, overall the reports were very encouraging. The majority of citizens in the Asteroid Belt and Earth had received the news of the accusations leveled against the Starmen with incredulity, and support for them on the Moon was virtually unanimous. Dana Graham had reported publicly that a commission had been sent from Earth to investigate Edmund Warner's effectiveness as mayor of Eagle City, and that it had authority to remove him from office.

Then Richard had received the message from Mark and Zip through Daniel Teagarden. He was preparing a fleet of ten armed Starlight ships to make a nighttime journey back to the desert's edge, and planning a dawn assault with 300 men on the Banjoman's retreat.

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In Eagle City, Mayor Edmund Warner was feeling none too secure. He looked around his office and saw the familiar sights, but it looked strange to him. It felt as if everything were caving in. Earth was against him, the Belt was against him, and the people of Mars were turning against him. Anxiety was causing the skin of his palms to flake. His hands felt cold, all the time cold. He wrung them vigorously, but still they remained cold. His scalp itched and his backbone seemed to be crawling with ants.

With sudden, desperate resolve, he picked up his communicator and punched in a number that had never been

written down. The connection was made and the communicator automatically encrypted every exchange.

“Hello?” moaned Mayor Warner. “Yes, listen, I need your help! Everything’s falling to pieces around here. The whole of civilization is turning against us and all the fury is falling on me.”

“Warner, cut the whining! You have to hang on for one more day! You’ll get your reward, don’t worry! Just keep it together for one more day! Tut, tut, tut, don’t interrupt me, Warner! Sit tight, do you hear me? I’ve got everything under control! It’s all going my way! I know precisely what’s going on, what Starlight is going to do and when he’s going to do it, and I’m ready for him! You’re on the winning side, so don’t get weak on me now, or you’ll be horribly sorry! Tomorrow at this time all our enemies will be gone!”

“Why? What’re you going to do? What’s going to happen?”

“*Just sit tight*, Warner! You won’t hear about it in the news, but I’ll contact you tomorrow morning when it’s all over. I guarantee you’ll be safe, and after that you’ll be rich and beyond anyone’s power.”

Andrew Forge signed off. He’d had his dozen circling sentinels relocated to focus on the area between Mars Base and his own citadel. He would have plenty of notice when Richard came with a fleet of ships to attack him. He was a little puzzled why the attack was taking so long to materialize, but he was sure it would come.

Forge’s refuge was now packed and ready to evacuate. He gave the order and the caravan began to move out. As the last ship lifted off the pad that was concealed by the constant mist that accompanied the cataract that flowed out of the yawning cavern, Forge pressed a button on a remote control mechanism he carried.

There was a rumble deep under the earth. Staircases and elevator shafts fell in as their support beams were blown out. The upper levels of the citadel collapsed. A cloud of dust rose from the site of the Banjoman’s apparent last stand. The ruins of three

abandoned ships showed under the rubble of what had been the ceiling of the hangar.

Ten minutes later, after the dust had settled a little, Forge tuned in to a common universal radio frequency and pressed another button. A weak signal came through.

“Help! Is anyone out there? We’re trapped under the debris!” The plaintive voice coughed twice, then struggled painfully in the effort to continue. “We can’t last much longer... Help, anyone!” It was the first of twenty-three different recorded pleas for rescue that would be sent out over a three-hour time span, each one more desperate than the one before.

Forge shut off the recording and set the trigger that would initiate it five minutes after the sentinels detected the incoming fleet of Starlight ships from Mars Base. The same signal would activate a countdown timer on the atomic explosive carried by the arachnoid. Three hours after the activation of the timer, the bomb would detonate in the lightless room where Joe Taylor and Steve Cliff were imprisoned, thus vaporizing Richard Starlight, the three Starmen, Steve Cliff, and hopefully a large number of Starlight employees—and destroy all the evidence as well.

Andrew Forge smiled. He only regretted that he wouldn’t be able to see the expressions on the faces of his two prisoners once the countdown timer began.

Far down, in the lowest level of the Banjoman’s retreat, in the dimness Joe and Steve looked up with haggard, drawn faces. The only illumination they had was from Joe’s suit lights. The lack of food for two days and the absence of water since the previous evening had sapped their strength and dulled their curiosity, but the sound of an avalanche definitely caught their attention. When their room shook with the intensity of the rockfall, they started up with alarm then began to choke on the rising dust.

“What was that?” Joe struggled to get the words out.

“Something big’s happened upstairs,” surmised Steve speaking through dry, swollen lips. “I think the elevator shaft has been plugged up.”

Chapter 26: The Plans Go Awry

ZIP NEVER IMAGINED that he could show such patience. He hated to be doing nothing and he always got itchy if he had to sit too long in one place. He looked up one more time and saw that both harvesters had grazed past the middle of the vehicle and were several yards in front of it. The harvesters and the driver talked very little, and when they did it was only about their immediate task. Zip had long since stopped paying attention to their boring exchanges, which were little better than grunts.

The truck had moved nine times since he and Mark had climbed aboard. Zip chafed at not being able to check his compad since it was under the light cloak. He couldn't find out what the time was or how cold it was getting. It felt as though he and Mark had been sitting for hours. It probably *had* been hours.

Mark looked up at the sky and tried to guess where the sun was, but the cloud cover was a dull, uniform gray. A few drops of rain spattered down around them, then stopped. A few minutes later several large, wet snowflakes drifted down. Idly he lifted his hand up, making a lump in the light cloak, and caught a flake.

Fascinating, he thought. The delicate flake appeared to float in mid air. He leaned forward and admired the hexagonal crystalline design and the web-thin tracery that connected the frozen spines. As he watched, the flake slowly melted until it was a silver drop, suspended over the deck of the truck. He lowered his hand and watched the drop become a line of water that rolled to the edge of his invisible cloak, and then fall to the ground. He looked up at the feathery, spinning flakes, hoping to catch another.

Moments later he had his chance. A flake came down and he caught it. Again, it seemed to float in air. He thought about the beauties of nature that he had seen, and remembered that even Nyx, that dark, frigid dwarf planet of blades and spires, had a breathtaking grandeur. His companions had considered his comment at the time to be, at best, curious.

Suddenly something smacked Mark's hand hard, and the

snowflake went flying. His heart leaped into his throat! His adrenaline surged into him and his pulse began to race!

What was it? It took him only a few seconds to realize that it was Zip who had hit him. *What in the name of all the comets?...*

Then he heard the voices. Something was different about them.

“Let’s get going!” said one of the harvesters. “I’ve had it walking around out here all day! I’ll pack the last of it in, then let’s go.” The man walked by the back of the truck, no more than three feet from where the Starmen’s feet were tucked up close. Two or three snowflakes hung on his shoulders.

With a sudden fear that chilled him, Mark realized why Zip had struck the flake out of his hand! If the Banjoman’s crew noted any snowflakes hanging in the middle of the air, the Starmen would be discovered! And if it began to snow, or even rain, in earnest, their light cloaks would do them no good whatever! Slowly he reached a hand over to where his laser pistol was packed. He pulled it out and, by feel, released the safety and held it ready for instant use.

The harvester went to the side of the tank and turned a dial, and there was an increase in the intensity of the mind-numbing machine sound that had been the background to the Starmen’s thoughts all afternoon. The other harvester came up and stood next to the first. The Starmen couldn’t see what he was doing. After about a minute, the first man turned the machine off altogether. The silence sharpened Zip’s sense of watchfulness.

“All done,” said the man as the two harvesters wrapped their hoses up into coils and hung them on hooks that protruded from the side of the tank. “That’ll bring the Banjoman another million solars or so and us about five thousand each.” His words were toned with a hint of sarcasm.

“Get in, Az—hurry it up!” The voice belonged to the driver.

“Aw, stow it! You’ve been sitting down all day while we’ve been walking, and we both want to get back as much as you do.”

Someone opened the door of the truck and both harvesters stepped in, then the door slammed shut. The engine revved and

the vehicle lurched forward. The Starmen gripped the rail that ran around the deck. The truck bounced across the lichen field, swerving to miss the largest of the rocks but rolling over the smaller ones. The Starmen jounced as the wheels jerked over the uneven ground.

After a few minutes, they reached the end of the lichen field and entered smoother terrain, littered with pebbles and small rocks. The truck picked up speed. After a while it came to the sand and accelerated further. Before long it was moving at a good clip.

The precipitation had stopped again. The Starmen were safe for the moment. Zip knew that Forge's refuge was only about fifteen miles away. He anticipated that it wouldn't take them long to reach it.

~

More than an hour later, Zip had become quite concerned. It was obvious now that Forge's refuge was not their destination. They had been moving northeastward, paralleling the cliff that made the boundary between the high plateau and the desert. Forge's island hideaway was in the other direction, and they were now at least fifty miles from it.

Zip felt sick with dismay. Joe was still a captive, but his alleged rescuers were going farther and farther away from him. Worse—Richard was due to attack the refuge before dawn and expected Forge's defenses to be down, but at this rate Zip and Mark wouldn't even get the chance to enter the base, much less ruin Forge's ability to fight back.

There was only one thing to do. He and Mark would have to take over the truck, turn it around, and drive it back to where they desperately needed to be. He decided to take a chance and deactivated his light cloak. He and Mark were behind the tank and wouldn't be seen by the three men in the cab.

Seeing that Zip had become visible, Mark followed suit and turned an inquiring expression to the redheaded Starman. Zip mouthed the words: We're not going to where Forge is. We have

to capture the truck and take it there ourselves. Mark looked doubtful, but he nodded. Zip became invisible again, followed at once by Mark.

Just then a voice spoke up.

“Shouldn’t we have caught up to Forge by now?”

“Naw, he’s way ahead,” was the reply. It was the voice of the driver. “Most of the team went by spacecraft anyway. He only sent two trucks ahead of him. All the others had to remain in the base, to make the destruction more convincing.”

Zip clutched Mark’s arm. What destruction were they talking about? Where were they going? Where was Joe? What was happening? Zip held Mark down to show him that he had decided to stay put and wait for what would transpire next. They needed more information. He was confused and worried. The ground had shifted under his feet, and his friends’ lives could depend on what he decided to do.

“All right, ten miles to go,” said the driver after at least another hour had passed.

Before long the vehicle skirted an outcropping of stony foothills. A sparse woods extended into the desert a short way, but became more dense as the land rose up into the area closer to the cliff. A tiny sliver of water curled out of the upland and crossed the track they were following. Before long, a second stream showed, and then another.

As the truck drove on, it grew gradually nearer to the terminus of the foothills. The dusk was beginning to gather and frost lay on the ground. Trees that resembled pine and fir stood up tall in the gray cold, and a slate-colored pool lay sullenly in a hollow fed by a fourth small stream. Its overflow washed across their trail as the truck continued forward, creating yet another rivulet that led out across the bare desert to the south and east.

Coursing around one last great square stone, the driver turned the vehicle due north.

“There it is!” he grunted. “The end of a long day.”

Moving slowly, the truck turned east, crossed a pontoon bridge that spanned a barely moving river a good hundred yards

wide or more, then picked up speed again and headed back north. The sky had grown dark and stars were beginning to show. Almost at once the truck was among decrepit brick buildings and moving over a paved road. The driver sent a signal that opened an airlock, then eased the truck through it into a garage. Two other vehicles were parked to one side and a sizable work stall for mechanics was straight ahead.

“I’ll get it,” spoke a voice, and a door opened in the truck. A man got out, strode over to the wall, and pressed a button. There was a clutching sound and the noise of gears catching, and the floor began to lower. The truck had been parked on a freight elevator.

The man who’d pressed the buttons strolled over to the edge of the elevator pit and jumped down a foot or so onto the descending floor, then leaped onto the deck of the truck and gripped the handrail. He was only a few feet from where Mark was hunched up. Zip took a quick look at himself and where Mark was to see whether there were any raindrops or other signs that could give their presence away. There was nothing, but he kept his pistol handy just in case.

The freight elevator came to the bottom of the shaft about twenty-five feet down, and then rolled off down a brightly lit tunnel. The passageway was only about sixty feet long, and then opened up into a warehouse and working area. At one end there were pipes and stanchions, and nearby were several dozen metal pressure tanks. Some were connected to a mechanism with hoses and dials. A large scale was adjacent to the tanks. One other truck similar to the one on which the Starmen had hitched their ride was parked in the middle of the area. At least half a dozen workers were busy in the warehouse. The far side was stacked up with crates.

The truck rolled over to where the dials and storage tanks were located, then stopped. The engine shut down. All three men jumped out and began to banter loudly with those who were in the warehouse. Zip pressed on Mark’s arm and the two of them stepped quickly but carefully down and away from the truck, and

then walked slowly away. They kept their arms in contact so that they would not lose each other.

Ah, it feels good to be moving, thought Zip. His legs had almost fallen asleep and he had to walk delicately for a few steps to get the circulation going again.

Moments after they abandoned the truck, two men hauled themselves up onto the back part of the deck where the Starmen had been sitting and pulled a hose up to the top of the tank. One man climbed to the top and attached the hose, then turned to another on the floor and waved. A liquid chemical of some kind began to flow along the hose into the truck.

One of the men in the warehouse held a small electronic board. He was talking to the driver and writing on the screen with a stylus. When he was finished he placed the stylus into a shirt pocket and said in a louder voice over the sound of the pumping, "Okay, Jock, good work. The boss oughta be pleased! The news hasn't been good today, but this'll cheer him up a little. I'll go report it. You're done for the day."

The man with the board turned and walked past the hidden Starmen and headed for a door. Zip pressed Mark's arm to tell him to stay put, then he set out to follow the man.

His quarry passed through the door, apparently preoccupied with his electronic pad. Zip was close on his heels and let the door fall to behind him. The man stumped down a narrow corridor then turned to the right into an office and sat down at a desk. Zip was right behind him. He passed through the door that the man had left open, then edged over to the left.

The man, seated in a chair, paused from his work for a moment and turned his head slightly to the right. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched. He cocked his ear as if he were listening, then gave his attention back to his work. He connected the electronic pad to a computer and began to transfer information.

Suddenly he rose from his chair and whirled, a pistol in his hand. His eyes flashed and his nostrils were flared. A belligerent look consumed his features. He took a quick glance around the

room, and then leaped toward the open doorway. Zip slid a little farther away from the opening.

The man caught a subtle movement out of the corner of his eye and without thinking turned and fired his pistol at Zip point blank. An explosion of light filled the room and with an exclamation the man threw his hands up over his eyes. With horror, Zip realized that although the light cloak had absorbed and diffused the laser blast, its circuits had been overloaded in the defense. The Starman was completely visible now.

~

“We’re helpless,” croaked Joe. “I’ve never felt so helpless in my life. Those needle lasers keep us from getting close to that thing to try to defuse the bomb, even if we had any tools to do so—which we don’t.”

“Wal,” responded Steve after a long silence, “I gotta admit that I’ve never been worse off.” He kept feeling the urge to swallow to get some kind of moisture into his throat, but as the hours of their captivity had passed his saliva had thickened and then all but dried up.

“You think that Forge is going to win this one?” Joe felt shaky inside at putting his fears into words.

“No,” said Steve without a pause. “He’s been on the defensive ever since you three Starman landed on Mars, and he’s been giving ground at every step. I’ve believed in you Starmen ever since I saw what you and Mark could do, and Zip too, when we rallied the Tunnel People and overcame the pirates. I—” here he paused for a moment and tried to swallow. “You know I’m kinduva loner, and my resume’s not the cleanest it could be.” He pronounced it “reh-zyoo-may”.

Joe waited for him to continue. “And I’ve always had an innate kind o’ distrust of people who had titles or wore uniforms or the like—and often for good reason, I might add.” The talking had gotten his moisture flowing a little and Steve was talking more clearly now.

“But I learned years ago that when you choose the shady side o’ things—that is, when you get too close to the way of real evil—it’s easy to fall under its influence. That’s what Forge did years ago. He and I were friends more’n twenty years back, in the early years, when Eagle City was comin’ back into its own and Mars was a pretty exciting place to be. I liked adventure and easy money; he just liked the money.”

Joe was paying close attention. Steve wasn’t looking at him. He was staring off into the distance, into the distance of years.

“Andy and I took off one day into the far desert, down near where Seven Leaves is now. I remember the date well: January 3, 2137. That’s when Halley’s Comet was here, and we had a spectacular view!”

“I remember that!” said Joe, sitting up straight. “I was two years old! It’s my earliest memory! I think it’s what made me want to choose a career in space! For sure, it was a handsome sight!”

“Yeah,” agreed Steve wistfully. “There hadn’t been a better viewing since 837 when the comet passed Earth by less than four million miles!” He sighed, and then gave a wry smile.

“I remember that I said to Andy, ‘Andy, look at that sight! Doesn’t it just wanta make you shiver?’ And he looked up for a long time without changing his expression. Then he got this quizzical kind o’ look and muttered, ‘You know, Steve—if we took a ship out there we could capture that comet and bring it in. I’m sure I could do it. And boy, just think what pieces of that thing would fetch on the market.’ At first I thought he was joking, but then I saw that he wasn’t. Made my heart feel like ice, I tell you.” Steve sighed again.

“I told him what I thought of his ‘scheme’, and he’s hated me ever since. We parted ways and he just kept getting richer—he left the comet alone, o’ course—but he piled up the solars by the tens o’ thousands after that. After that day I steered my course back into more honest work. I saw in Andy what a purely mercenary soul can shrivel into.”

“Still—” observed Joe. “He’s out there free and we’re down

here, and I don't think there's any way out of this room at all."

Steve turned toward Joe. "I know you, Joe, enough t' be sure that you wouldn't want t' trade places with him, even now. When I found out that he was the one who'd engineered my capture, I thought that maybe he'd remember something of our old friendship, but since he's left us here under these circumstances, apparently he doesn't. But he's a worse prisoner than we are. It doesn't take much figurin' to see that."

"I wouldn't change anything, Steve—any of the choices I've made, that is."

"I know you wouldn't, Joe."

Chapter 27: Battle in the Warehouse

THE MAN WHO HAD SHOT ZIP was momentarily blinded by the sudden emanation of intense light. He staggered back a step with his hands over his eyes. For a split second Zip entertained the idea of striking him a hard blow, but instantly resisted the temptation. He couldn't hit a blind man, even if the blindness were only temporary. He thought it unlikely that the man had even seen him.

Zip fled out the door and slammed it shut. Frantically he unsealed the light cloak, withdrew his laser pistol and set it on high heat. He fired at least a dozen bursts and melted the metal door into the doorframe. He knew it wouldn't stop the man for long but he only wanted a little time to find a place to hide.

Suddenly his pistol began to sputter. With a surge of panic, the Starman checked the energy level on the weapon and saw that it still registered almost half a load. With a grimace he realized that the pistol had malfunctioned, most likely because of the power surge that had erupted when the light cloak had been overloaded. He thrust it back into its holster and hoped that the dozen seals he had made would hold long enough for him to make his escape.

Even as he put the weapon away there was a sudden pressure

on the door from the inside, then a hard thrust, and finally loud pounding. A strident alarm began with a rising sound that ended with a series of three loud chirps, and then the pattern repeated. Zip abandoned the door and cast his eyes both ways along the corridor. With an alarm sounding he expected that the men from the warehouse would come charging along the way he had come, but going farther along the corridor was a gamble. He chose the unknown and raced down the passage, away from the warehouse and also away from Mark.

As he fled, he berated himself for his carelessness. He knew that Mark would figure out quickly that he had been discovered and would do his best to help him. He just hoped he could keep out of the clutches of his pursuers long enough for Mark to effect a rescue.

The passage soon ran into a "T" intersection and Zip chose the left turn. Doors led off of both sides, and about a dozen yards farther the passage turned to the right. He could hear people shouting from that direction. Before they reached the junction Zip opened the closest door, leaped through, and shut it behind him.

The room he entered was dark. Zip put his suit lights on at their lowest level and saw that he had plunged into a storage room of some kind. Crates were stacked up in rows that made three aisles, and also against the back wall. The area closest to the door was empty. Two motorized lifts on wheels were set close to the door, and a workbench and a rack of cabinets covered the nearest wall on the other side of the entrance.

A small group of men ran by the door outside. Zip knew he had only a few seconds before they would make a careful search for him. He pulled off the light cloak with alacrity and stuffed it into his pack. Freed from the restraints in his movement that the cloak placed on him, he felt a little more confident. His eye had already spotted two push brooms leaning carelessly against the workbench. The Starman snatched one of them, jumped to the top of a nearby stack of crates, and lay flat. He put out his suit lights and slowly unscrewed the brush from the broom handle.

Then he waited in the darkness.

~

After Zip had followed the man with the electronic board out of the warehouse, Mark watched the other workers begin the transfer of the lichen from the tank. First they added some liquid to the tank through the hose that had been attached to the top.

“Okay,” called the one who had climbed to the top of the truck. “That’s enough.” When the flow had stopped he detached the hose and sealed the tank at the top, and then leaped down and approached a panel of dials and switches on the side of the tank. He made some adjustments in the settings, and then pressed a switch. A quiet churning sound came from the truck.

“It’ll be raw flilox in about ten minutes,” he said.

Just then an alarm sounded throughout the warehouse.

“Hey!” shouted the man at the controls. “That’s the code for the boss’ office! Something’s wrong!”

The workers looked at each other and then made a dash for the corridor through which Zip had gone. Except for Mark, the warehouse was deserted. Mark drew his laser pistol and made his way to the door. It was ajar. He peeked down the corridor to see what he could learn.

A short way down the passage six or seven men were huddled together in front of a door.

“Get a crowbar!” ordered one. One of them hurried back down the passage toward Mark, who quickly stepped aside as the man whipped through the door, picked up a crowbar from a tool rack, and returned to the group. Mark took his position at the door.

“Somebody sealed this door with a hot laser,” grunted a straining individual as he pressed the crowbar into the seam and put his weight against it. Coming down the corridor from the other direction a second group approached the scene of the rescue effort.

“What’s the problem?” shouted a florid individual at the forefront of the newcomers.

“The boss is sealed in there, Hod!” someone responded excitedly.

The burly man with the crowbar was beginning to sweat. He removed the tool and placed it at another spot on the door and leaned into it. He worked it back and forth.

“How’d that happen?” asked the man called Hod.

“We don’t know! He left his radio in the warehouse so we can’t contact him!”

“Fool! Can’t you see that there’s an intruder?”

“Can’t be! We didn’t see anybody coming or going and I guess you didn’t either!”

“Who sealed this door? A disgruntled customer? Somebody’s hiding in the facility! Spread out and find ’im!”

Just then the door burst open under the prying effort of the man with the crowbar. A furious man came through into the corridor. His face was distorted with rage.

“Did you get him?” he shouted.

“Who, Mr. Bellar?” asked the man named Hod.

“Blast it, whoever it was that attacked me!”

“We didn’t see anybody, sir,” said one of the men from the warehouse.

“What happened?” asked Hod.

“I saw something in my office! I don’t know what it was and didn’t have time to look carefully! I drew and fired! There was an explosion of light and it blinded me! When I could see again, the door was sealed! Then I hit the alarm! Now don’t just stand here! Go find him!”

“Nobody came to the warehouse, so he’s got to be headed through the facility and up to the surface,” said one of the workers.

“Nobody passed us,” said Hod, “so he probably hid in one of the rooms. He’s either still there or he kept going out after we passed him!” Hod grabbed his communicator. “Attention! This is Hod! We have an intruder! Don’t let anyone past the entrance! We’ll search the warehouse facility!”

Hod turned to the group. “He’s armed. Go in pairs. Search

every room. Two of you go back to the warehouse and comb it.”

“But Hod,” protested one. “There’s no one in there or we would have seen him.”

“Somebody got in here and he didn’t get past us in the front, so he must have come through the warehouse! You obviously missed him once! Now go and make sure that, if he’s back there, you don’t miss him again!”

“Yes sir!”

The group scattered. Two men came back into the warehouse and the rest headed down the corridor away from where Mark was standing. Bellar went back into his office.

Mark had to make a quick decision. He didn’t know what had happened to Zip, but whatever it was, he was in trouble. Bellar had fired a laser at him and his suit had flared up. What had that meant? Was Zip still invisible but lying wounded or dead on the floor of the office? No—he’d been able to escape and seal the office behind him with his laser. He was hiding somewhere. If he were still invisible, the search was not particularly threatening. But if his suit had failed, Zip could be in big trouble.

If Zip were able to make his way back into the warehouse he would expect Mark to be there. If he were not able to get to the warehouse he would need Mark’s help badly. Mark decided to make a quick but careful survey of the rooms closest to the warehouse. He knew Zip would not go far as long as he knew Mark was close. If he could, he would come out of hiding and let Mark find him.

Mark glided down the corridor and came to Bellar’s office. The door was ripped open. The man himself was at the desk, efficiently finishing the transfer of information from the pad to a large computer. Mark eased past the door and continued down the hallway, intending to check the closest rooms.

~

The door of the storage room where Zip was hiding flew open. Illumination from the hallway cast a rectangular glow across the

floor. From where he lay on top of the crates, Zip saw two men jump into the room and separate into the darkness. After a few seconds the lights of the room went on.

Moving warily and silently, both men began to search the room. They were at a high pitch of watchfulness and each carried his laser pistol in both hands, ready to fire at the slightest suspicion. One stayed close to the workbench, his eyes constantly moving around the room while the other began to examine the stacks of crates. The second man moved out of Zip's range of vision but Zip could still track his position by the slight sounds he made when he moved. The Starman intended to wait until the second man was at the back of the room and then leap on the first man.

Altering his position very slowly, Zip lifted himself up and began to bring his feet under him for a concerted leap. To his dismay, the crate he was lying on creaked as he moved. The man by the workbench whipped his eyes toward the sound, aimed his pistol, and fired.

As soon as the man began to move, Zip rolled over, pulling the broomstick over with him. He dropped into an aisle out of view of the first man and, he hoped, of the second man as well. The moment his feet hit the floor he charged forward, bent over double. As he expected, the second laser shot went over his head. Before the man could aim again, Zip had struck him a solid blow on the forehead with the broomstick. Even before the man could react, Zip whirled the stick and caught the man behind his right knee. Zip fiercely pulled the broomstick toward himself and jerked his assailant off his feet. The man slammed down hard onto his back.

Taking advantage of the momentum, Zip whirled and leaped to one side. He had heard the other man running toward the front of the room. The instant he appeared Zip struck him on his right side with the stick, then quickly shifted and struck him on the other side. The man's face contorted with pain and he hunched over with a groan, pulling his elbows into both sides. With a rapid spin of the stick, Zip caught the man on the top of his right

wrist and sent the laser pistol flying. Then the Starman dropped the broomstick and clouted the man's jaw with the back of his right fist. The man fell to the floor.

"Silly me," said Mark. "I thought you might need some help. Why the broomstick?"

Zip spun to face the open door. "My laser's not working! Let's get out of here!" he said. "Somebody else will be along any second! Is the way clear back to the warehouse?"

"The fellow who shot you is still in his office and there are two men in the warehouse. We can handle them!"

"Let's go! Stay close to me. My cloak's burned out."

"Your pistol and your cloak both burned out? What've you been doing, Zip? You're not taking good care of your equipment."

The Starmen ran back to Bellar's office, Zip in the lead. As soon as they got to the door, Zip slammed it shut again and Mark began to seal it with his laser.

"Hey!" came a muffled shout from within. In seconds it was sealed up better than before. Then Zip picked up the crowbar where it had been discarded.

"Now you take the lead!" ordered Zip. "Have your laser ready!" A dull pounding came from behind the door as the two Starmen ran back into the warehouse. Mark pulled his laser out, brought it through a temporary opening in the light cloak, and held it with the gloved appendages. It appeared to float in the air. After the two passed through the doorway into the main room, they slammed it shut and Mark sealed it with laser blasts as well while Zip kept an eye out for the two men inside.

"There he is!" shouted one of the men, sticking his head around the crates at the far end of the room. As he raised his weapon toward Zip, Mark fired his laser at the man. The look of surprise on his eyes was almost comic. He'd only seen one man by the door and he had no weapon, but a laser shot had come out of the air from some other direction!

"There's two of 'em, Jock!" yelled the man as he ducked his head down. While both men were hiding behind the crates, Mark

ran across the room toward them. Zip took refuge on the truck, still standing by the hoses with the sound of churning going on inside.

Zip heard the sound of a thud.

“Jock?” cried a voice. There was no answer. “Jock!” This time it was a shout. All at once there was a terrorized scream, suddenly cut off by the sound of a hard punch. Seconds later, Zip saw ripples in the air as Mark hurried to his side.

“Let’s get out of here the way we came in,” urged Mark. “It’s the only escape route left to us now!”

“Right,” said Zip. The two of them sped down the tunnel through which the truck had driven. They passed through human-sized openings in the huge airlock and came to the freight elevator that was still at the bottom of the shaft.

“Cover me,” said Zip. He crouched down and leapt as high as he could, then grabbed one of the girders that ran around the inside of the shaft. The top was about eight feet above him. He clambered up, peeked over the top, and then pulled himself over the edge. He looked back down and waved Mark up to join him. Encumbered by the light cloak, Mark didn’t jump but decided to climb up from the bottom of the shaft. He didn’t know whether his feet and legs would show from the bottom if anyone chased them down the tunnel but he decided to take that risk.

Before long, the two Starmen were standing together at the top of the shaft inside the garage. The door was still closed.

“Can you open it?” said Zip.

Mark ran to the control pad. “Yeah,” he said. “The pad here is a simple ‘open and close’ setting. The coded pad is only on the outside.”

“I’ll get one of these trucks and we’ll drive out of here. I’ll take the wheel since I’m visible and if we’re seen your presence won’t be suspected.”

“Okay. If we get separated somehow, let’s meet at the pontoon bridge on the far side from the town.”

“We’re not likely to get separated now,” said Zip, climbing into the truck. Like the truck that had carried the harvested

lichen, this one also had a tank at the back with the word “SEWAGE” on its sides.

“Good to have a plan. Ready?”

“As soon as I get the engine going.” He started the truck and eased it forward. “Okay!” he said. Mark pressed the button and the door began to roll up. By the time it had opened completely, Mark was an invisible passenger next to Zip in the truck’s cab.

The redheaded Starman pressed the accelerator lightly and moved the truck out.

Unexpectedly, there was a crowd milling in the avenue and on the opposite side of the street. Zip rolled the truck forward nonchalantly. The people turned to look at him but didn’t clear his way; he leaned out of the window.

“Hey! Coming through!” he said. “Make way, please!”

Suddenly he saw that among the crowd were several uniformed, helmeted police officers, all looking in his direction. His heart began to race. Had the Starmen been cleared of the murder of Andrew Forge or were they still the object of a planetwide manhunt? He hadn’t clarified that with Richard Starlight, and Daniel Teagarden had said nothing about it. He remembered that Teagarden had said that the best way they could clear themselves was to bring the Banjoman into the open.

Blast! They weren’t in the clear yet!

“Get down from that truck!” one of the officers said. “Where are you going at this time of night?”

Slowly and apprehensively, Zip opened the door of the truck. He left the engine running.

Chapter 28: The Iron Foundry

ZIP STEPPED CAUTIOUSLY out of the truck and closed the door behind him.

“Mr. David Foster!” acknowledged one of the officers with a grin. His voice betrayed an unusual measure of excitement, and he leveled a laser rifle at the Starman in his telltale red suit.

“We’ve been looking for you! Move away from the vehicle! Keep your hands where we can see them! Move away from the vehicle—now!”

Zip raised his hands slowly and kept his fingers spread. He edged away from the truck. To one side of the garage was a high wall that apparently marked the edge of the settlement. As the crowd came toward him, he backed up against the rampart.

Several people surged out of a doorway in a building adjacent to the garage. A sign over the door said BRANDOW SEWAGE AND SANITATION DEPARTMENT. From his place in the cab, Mark saw that the man at their forefront was the one named Hod.

“Good work, officers!” he shouted over the muttering of the crowd. “That’s the man who broke into our offices! He attacked two of our men! And look—he’s trying to steal one of our trucks!”

Zip was speechless with outrage. Everything the big man was shouting was factual, but it wasn’t the truth. His accuser was using facts to create a monstrous lie. All four police officers moved to the front of the crowd.

The largest of the four helmeted men ordered Zip to take out his laser pistol and drop it. Slowly Zip scanned the crowd that was forming around the four officers. All the faces were angry, some distorted with fury. Many were shouting insults or booing the Starman and raised fists at him. Their words came together in a cacophony of hatred.

All four men had their powerful laser rifles pointed directly at him. Shocked and deeply hurt by the fickleness of the citizens of Mars, Zip’s face flushed and he clenched his jaw with anger.

“I ordered you to drop your weapon, you murdering scum!” shouted the menacing figure as he thrust his rifle forward. Zip instinctively stepped back against the ancient stone wall. Slowly he drew his pistol, making certain that the officers could see that he was holding it by the top, with his fingers far from the trigger. He held it out between his thumb and forefinger and tossed it in front of him. As he swung it away, with his middle finger he

pressed the button that opened the power cells for recharging. He hoped fervently that the malfunction wouldn't spoil his plan. When the gun hit the pavement, all the energy that hadn't been used yet was liberated in an intense flash of white light.

Momentarily blinded, all the people stepped back and covered their eyes. Almost as one, the four officers fired their lasers even though they couldn't see their target. When their vision cleared, they realized that Zip was gone.

In the instant his pistol hit the ground Zip closed his eyes to avoid the flash. He opened them up immediately afterward and leaped straight up. In Mars' light gravity, he reached the top of the wall easily and looked over the other side. As expected, he saw oozing swampland with its oily surface glinting in the starlight. A strong breeze was blowing from the west and such light as there was showed in ripples and pocks. Twenty feet directly below him, at the foot of the wall, the ground rose slightly out of the muck and showed tangled creepers and black weeds, with an occasional soggy log or fungus-covered rock. In the darkness of night he could see no details. He dropped down and splattered into the dripping mess and began to push through the filth.

"Where did he go?" shouted several voices in the crowd.

"Over the wall, you fools! Where else could he have gone!" answered the chief officer with a voice like a bludgeon. "Go after him!" he commanded his men. They leaped to the top of the wall.

In the excitement no one noticed that the truck slowly moved down the street, away from the crowd. It turned a corner and rolled quietly away into the darkness.

"There he is!" shouted two of the officers at once, and fired their rifles toward the disturbance in the quagmire.

Zip could hear them shouting through his radio set. He had adjusted his set so that he could hear but not be heard. The leader's next order froze his blood.

"Get the infrared detector! Bring the heat-seekers!"

Not lasers now, but heat-seeking projectiles. In the swamp he

was sure he could elude the lasers but he couldn't avoid the heat-seekers. He had only one option, only one chance for safety. With a sob, he dropped to his knees in the clutching black ooze so that he was covered almost up to his neck. He brought his dripping arms out of the mess and reached for his suit's control mechanism, imbedded on the inside of his left sleeve. He quickly found the program that would shut down its life-support system. He pressed the button that deactivated it.

“WARNING!” The letters screamed out in danger yellow. “Air temperature is 35.1° Fahrenheit. Deactivating this system under current conditions will cause death in approximately 47 minutes. Do you wish to continue?” Dreading the result but knowing he had no choice, Zip pressed “Yes.” His suit shut down.

Almost at once it felt as if he had walked into a huge freezer. It would only get worse. Move. He had to move to maintain warmth as best he could. He rose slowly from the filthy, clinging water and edged back over to the wall.

They'll never guess I've gone back to the wall, he thought.

Not far away the barrier ran into a century-old aqueduct that connected the town with a long-abandoned iron foundry on the eastern bank of the river. The gradual terraformation of the planet had widened the river and turned its shore at this point into a reeking swamp. Zip sneaked along the base of the wall until he could see the branches of a large tree reaching over the top from some yard on the inhabited side. He jumped, caught a chipped place on the cornice, and slid to the top where he lay flat, facing away from the searchers.

Freezing. Painfully cold and getting worse. He felt as if he were lying on a slab of ice.

“Where is he?” The man's shout stood out from the scrabble of angry voices behind him. Zip raised his head and looked back over his shoulder. Just about thirty yards away he saw the four officers standing in a line, peering down into the swamp. The captain held a large rifle with a display panel on it.

“There!” shouted one of the men and fired a shot at some

movement in the swamp. The men were silhouettes with the pale yellow light of the buildings behind them.

The captain quickly turned the viewscreen toward the man's target. "That's not the Starman," he snorted. "There's nothing warm there!" He continued to sweep the swampland with the heat detector.

Zip raised up on all fours. His teeth were chattering badly and his air was already getting stale. He crawled into the branches that overhung the wall, and pressed through them to the far side of the tree. With the breeze blowing as it was, he wasn't anxious about the officers' using motion detectors. On the other side of the tree branches he stood up and, bending low, came to the place where the wall intersected with the aqueduct in a wide angle. He stepped up four feet to the old watercourse, turned toward the riverbank, and began to trot.

His breath was coming in short gasps now and made a fog that began to obscure the inside of his helmet. Staying calm, Zip tried not to breathe too strongly in a vain hope of keeping his helmet clear a little longer. He had to be able to see the old, broken stonework to ensure that he wouldn't miss a step. His teeth chattered violently and his body shuddered in the cold. He began to moan with the pain, but he kept moving forward.

"Check the wall! Check the aqueduct!" came the captain's order. Zip's heart skipped a beat when he heard the command. Through the fog on the inside of his helmet he could discern that the shore was still about forty yards away. To the right was a drop of about fifty feet into the stagnant backwater, to the left the aqueduct sloped outward and down into a dense tangle of vines and creepers that filled the watercourse.

If I fall into that, he thought, it'd be the end for sure. I'd never get out before either freezing or getting shot.

"I think I saw him!" shouted one of the officers. "A shape ran along the top of the aqueduct! I could see it outlined in the starlight!"

At that moment Zip reached the end of the crumbling stone causeway. There was a gap of about five feet between the last

cornice stone and the nearest wall of the old iron foundry. Over the decades, the aqueduct had slowly sunk into the swamp and pulled away from the building.

Zip leaped across the gap and upward to the top of the foundry enclosure. A projectile slammed into the stone parapet beyond him, shattering the old mortared work. Another followed, searing a screaming path in front of his helmet and missing it by only a few inches. The Starman dropped down behind the wall. Frantic now almost to the point of recklessness, he scuttled across the roof like a crab until he found an iron ladder that dropped through an opening into the dark interior of the structure. He knew the officers would be running along the wall at that moment.

Less than a minute, he thought. Less than a minute until they get here.

Gripping the outside of the framework with his hands and insoles, the fugitive slid down the ladder, plummeting thirty feet into a cavernous room, gutted of all machinery. He slammed into the ground and fell down hard. Immediately he leaped to his feet and looked around. The walls were made of poured concrete, long weathered. Huge blank windows on one side showed the broad streak of the river, its murky water reflecting pinpoints of light that flickered in the smooth current. On the opposite side of the great vacant shell were a window and a dark empty doorspace.

To his left were three huge concave round openings with iron doorways like hatches. The first two were shut tight, but in the last was a circular inner hatch about a foot and a half in diameter. Its cover was missing.

Here, thought the fleeing Starman. *I'll squeeze through here and they'll assume I escaped through the doorway.*

He jumped onto a narrow shelf in front of the opening, put his legs through first, and wriggled his way through. On the other side was a small concrete platform that faced an iron-lined pit about ten feet across. Through the fog in his helmet he could barely make out a twisted and broken rusted ladder that angled

out of it. A dank tree grew in black, muddy soil next to the pit. Both tree and pit were at the bottom of a windowless concrete tower about twenty feet square. High above, the stars shone in their brilliance.

No way out, thought Zip. He could hear his pursuers talking to one another and knew they had discovered the ladder that dropped down into the great room.

Too late to change my mind now, he thought. He dropped to the floor of the tower, dashed to the side of the pit and took hold of the misshapen ladder. It shifted and turned as the fleeing Starman descended. The cold was piercing his bones now. He felt that there was no warmth left inside him anywhere. He was moving sluggishly and couldn't see much at all. The hunted man could sense that his body temperature was dropping.

Step by step, he carefully climbed down the ladder to the bottom of the pit, fifteen feet below. He stepped away from the ladder and crumpled into a small ball behind some refuse. The bottom was thick, chilled mud.

"He must have gone through the door," shouted one man.

"Couldn't have," said another a few seconds later. "It's a thick web of brambles out there that nobody could get through. No one's passed that way."

"Then he must have gone out one of the windows into the river," said the first man with disappointment in his voice. Zip winced. Why hadn't he done that very thing? With the fog in his helmet he hadn't had a clear view of the foundry's far wall.

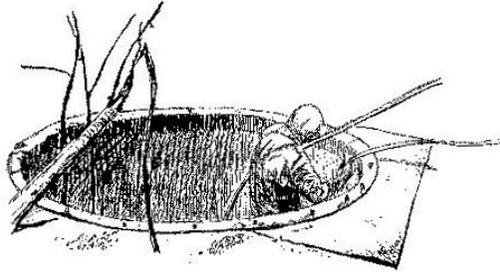
"He might have gone through here," said someone else. "Through this hatch."

"Nah," returned the first voice. "There's nothing behind that wall, and no way out. He wouldn't go in there."

"Check it," ordered the voice of the captain.

Zip slumped even farther down. He was trapped, weaponless, and shivering violently and uncontrollably with deathly cold. Through the last clear portion of his helmet he saw a feeble light. He only noticed it because his surroundings were as black as pitch. He bent down to look, and then lay flat.

Under one side of the iron pit there was a passageway. Its top was a broad brick arch, and a channel of black water extended outward to the river about fifty feet away. The crystal cold light of stars was reflected on the still surface. There was at most about a foot of clearance at the topmost part of the arch, and the passage was strewn with wreckage.



*The misshapen ladder shifted and turned
as the fleeing Starman descended.*

If I could only get through there, Zip thought, if only the mud isn't too clingy, I could get to the river. Then I could put my life-support system back on and let the current take me away.

He recoiled from the thought, for the water was so cold and filthy. But it was his only chance to escape. Above him an armed man was scrambling through the small aperture in the iron hatch.

With a gasp, Zip began to crawl under the arch. He lay flat on his stomach and immersed himself in the stagnant, black water, then began to pull forward with his fingers and push with his toes. He scooted ahead like a lizard, expecting at any moment that the searing beam of a laser would hit the back of his helmet.

"This busted ladder can't hold my weight!" The complaint was a welcome message to the desperate Starman. "There's no way he could have gone this way!"

"Check it!" repeated the captain sternly.

Just a few feet farther and he'd be in the river! He was going

to make it, thought Zip with a wave of relief. All at once the ground fell away and he was in deeper water; the arched tunnel was behind him. He struck out, swimming under the surface of water as black as ink. He held his arms straight out in front of him and kicked with his feet. In a minute or so he felt the beginning of a current, gently moving toward his left. He came to the surface.

Badly shaking with cold, he tried to make his fingers hold still enough so that he could operate the small buttons on his compad. With enormous relief he saw the colors on the panel light up and welcome warmth began to surge through his suit. He checked his clock and saw that only a little more than fifteen minutes had passed since he had deactivated the life-support system.

The Starman rolled over and looked back at the iron foundry, more than fifty yards away. Now that his helmet was clear he could see the gaping, empty windows in the weathered concrete wall that faced the water. He could neither see nor hear the officers, but he knew he wasn't completely in the clear. They were undoubtedly rushing back to the town to organize a search of the riverbanks.

Zip turned over again and began to swim hard toward the opposite shore of the river. He expected that Mark would be waiting for him at the pontoon bridge. If he could get there before their pursuers did, they had a good chance of escaping into the desert.

"Mark!" he said through his compad. "Don't respond to this message! I'm safe and will meet you in a few minutes! Be prepared for pursuit!"

Chapter 29: The Siege of Brandow

ZIP REACHED the opposite shore of the river, speeded by an occasional sandbar along which he could run. He pulled himself out of the water and began to dash down the western side of the flowing watercourse. In front of him the black bulk of the last

outcropping of the plateau rose up, barely discernible in the slightly lesser blackness of the partially cloudy night sky. A ragged patch of star-filled sky opened straight overhead.

Drawing on his discipline, Zip's active mind was racing as his legs pumped up and down. The warmth of his body filled him with pleasure and the freedom to move at top speed exulted him. From time to time he leaped up and forward, covering many yards in a magnificent broad jump as he did so.

He remembered that Joe had broken a track and field record at Starlight Academy that had stood for over a generation, and wondered what his companion could do on Mars. The thought of his missing friend filled him with even greater determination and Zip leaped forward; for a moment he felt as if he were flying. He hit the wet sand on the run and sped onward.

After at least ten minutes of running he looked back over his left shoulder and saw a number of soft lights on the eastern shore far behind him, scattered randomly and moving down close to the river. They were searching for him but he was far ahead of them.

The Starman began to feel a little winded, but the evidence of the lights convinced him that there were probably other searchers in vehicles speeding toward the pontoon bridge, hoping to catch him on the western shore. Just as he drew that conclusion he saw the dimmed headlights of three vehicles, directly opposite him and pulling ahead.

Seconds later he saw the bridge. There was no sign of Mark's truck. Zip turned away from the river and onto the dry sand. His going became slower but it was less likely that he would be spotted. The caravan of vehicles on the eastern side slowed as the lead truck approached the bridge. It turned to the right. Its somber yellow headlights swept over the sand in a wide arc, and then illuminated the pontoons. The truck eased onto the bridge and then began to roll over the planks, dipping a little each time its wheels came to a place between the floats.

A little uncertainly, Zip moved away westward into the darkness, keeping close watch on the progress of the lead truck.

As it came almost to the end of the bridge suddenly the front end dipped down and didn't come up. The front wheels dropped over the edge of a plank, which had separated from the last few on the western side. Zip could hear a few faint cries of dismay chorusing through the night air.

"Zip!" came a voice. It was Mark. "I can see you. Keep coming. Fifty yards. That's it." A pause while Zip moved. Then, "Stop. Turn slowly. Stop. Go straight ahead. Keep coming."

Zip passed a small hillock on its dark side. A little way beyond it was a copse of leafy trees. A hundred or more other scattered trees were growing on a slightly sloping land that led down from the outthrust foothills. On the far side of the copse Zip saw the silhouette of the truck. He ran. When he arrived, the engine was already purring. He leaped into the passenger seat through the open door and the truck rolled away.

"Nice idea to cut the ties on the pontoon bridge," said Zip. Mark had removed his light cloak. He acknowledged the compliment with a nod but kept his eyes forward. There was no road and little illumination.

"I reached Daniel Teagarden just moments ago," began Mark. "I brought him up to date and told him we needed help, and asked him to inform Richard that he should come to Brandow instead of Forge's mountain base, and that we need him in force as soon as he can get here."

"Excellent!" said Zip.

"Teagarden's community is only about twenty-five miles from here. We're meeting him in the desert at a point he described to me, and then we're going back to Brandow to capture Forge and his cronies. It's Teagarden's plan, but I didn't see any reason to challenge it."

"Sounds good to me, Mark."

"What happened back there?"

Zip told him briefly.

"I wondered if that's what you'd done when I saw that intense flash. Didn't you get burned? That's a lot of energy to let out all at once and I doubt that even these suits can absorb all the

radiation.”

“Well, yes, I did get burned. I haven’t had time to think about it until now, but I can feel the discomfort all across my front. I think turning the life-support off may have helped a little, since the sudden cold kept the burn from getting worse—but man, I can feel it now!”

“We’ve got to get you some treatment right away! That could be serious!”

“No chance now. Maybe when we get back to Brandow and things are under control.”

“I can call Teagarden and see if he can bring a tent and some ointment.”

“Well, Mark, I think that would be a good idea.” Zip spoke quietly, but his easy acceptance of the suggestion alarmed Mark. He glanced at Zip and saw that he was sweating a little inside his suit. His partner was facing forward but Mark had the feeling that he was putting effort into it. He opened the communicator.

“Sure, Mr. Seaton,” said Teagarden after Mark had told the man of his need. “We’re already on our way and I’ve got a tent and a medic with me, just in case anyone got an injury in the battle ahead. We’ll be at the rendezvous in about fifteen minutes and we’ll get the tent set up first thing.”

Mark gripped the wheel with greater intensity. The truck leaped ahead.

~

Mr. Andrew Forge received the report from an enraged Peter Bellar. The fact that his head of security had been locked into his own office twice in one night would have mildly amused him if the stakes hadn’t been so high. But when Bellar revealed that the intruder had been the leader of the Starmen and that he had gotten away, Forge exploded. He spluttered with rage, for his ire was beyond words.

Filled suddenly with desperation, he cut off communication with Bellar. Forge knew that where the Starmen were, Richard Starlight and his forces must be also—or would be soon. He

would not wait to find out. His spacecraft were kept in a private section of Eagle City Spaceport. He would take one of the best, one that required only a crew of five, and escape.

Forge ordered five selected individuals to meet him in ten minutes at the shuttlecraft in Brandow hangar. Precisely twelve minutes later, the sleek shuttlecraft rose out of the hangar and shot southeastward on a heading for Eagle City. Peter Bellar was not among those selected to accompany the Banjoman in his flight to safety.

~

It was nearly midnight when Mark pulled the truck to a stop beside a granite obelisk. More than a dozen shuttlecraft were resting on the sand and nearly thirty people stood nearby. In the midst of the group a tent had been set up. As soon as Mark stopped the truck, Zip got out and Mark helped him stumble over to the tent. Seconds later they were inside where Daniel and someone else were waiting for them.

“This is Mandy Oskay,” said Daniel, introducing the other person inside the tent. “She’s our medic. Get his suit off.” With the help of the others, Zip managed to remove his suit. First and second degree burns covered most of the front of his body. His hands and arms were least affected since they had been pointed directly at the pistol when its energy released. By reaching forward Zip had exposed the least amount of surface skin. His face had been thoroughly shielded by his helmet and suffered no injury, but his shins and chest were bright red. His groin had been well protected by an extra layer of clothing, but the backs of his fingers were blistered, as were his thighs and abdomen.

“Painful,” said Mandy after a quick examination, “but he’ll heal up without scarring, I should think. Here,” she said, handing Zip a canister of juice, “drink this. You’ll need to replace some of the bodily liquids you’ve lost through these blisters. Here’s some medication for the pain, too,” she added, handing him two tablets. She then sprayed his wounds with a soothing ointment and wrapped the worst of them in gauze.

“Best thing now is to put him back into his suit. Increase the pressure in your suit a little, Starman Foster, and it’ll help the healing. When this is all over we’ll send you to Bethesda where you can get better treatment.”

“What’s Bethesda?” asked the grateful Starman.

“A community of herbalists,” answered Mandy. “They live not far from Eagle City.”

“No time for more chatting,” said Daniel Teagarden. “Let’s make our plans.”

“Did you reach Richard Starlight?” asked Zip.

“Yes. He launched within minutes of our conversation. At the speed he has available to him, he can be here in an hour. I’m hoping that we’ll do our job well enough that he’ll just arrive on time to congratulate us.”

The Starmen described the situation as they had left it in Brandow.

“Looks as if we have three sites that will need to be secured,” said Teagarden. “The pontoon bridge where there are, or were, three trucks; the flilox factory; and the little spaceport, to make sure no one leaves. From what you’ve said, we can’t count on the support of the police force. And you don’t know where Forge is himself?”

“No,” said Zip. “In fact, we only have the conversation we overheard this afternoon on the harvester that indicates that Forge is in Brandow at all.”

“Well, it’s likely that he’s there but well hidden—probably somewhere in the flilox factory.”

They made plans for a concerted and sudden attack on the three sites at once. Zip took possession of an extra laser pistol. Then Daniel Teagarden called his entire force together and gave each person a responsibility. The Starmen left the truck where it was on the sand. Zip and Mark crawled into selected shuttlecraft, and in seconds Teagarden was leading the squadron across the desert at a fast clip. They zoomed over the sand at an altitude of barely thirty feet. Before long, the lights of Brandow appeared before them.

~

Three ships landed in the vicinity of the pontoon bridge, one on the west bank and two on the east. The truck that had fallen into the river had been pulled out, and a small group of people was working to reconnect the bridge. The Wind People quickly deployed and surrounded the people on the bridge. One or two of the searchers who had reached the west bank fled into the hills. Those on the east bank ran back into Brandow.

In the town itself, two ships landed on the north side of the town and their crew spread out in a line to prevent anyone from fleeing that way. Several ships touched down on the immediate outskirts of the town closest to the fillox factory. Mark led an assault through the main doors of the alleged Sanitation Department while Daniel led another force through the garage.

As soon as Mark's force charged through the main doors, a siren went off. Two people, a man and a woman, were standing nervously in the front room. They'd seen the ships land and a dozen or so armed individuals charging toward them. As soon as Mark crashed through the door, they sounded the alarm.

"What's going on?" shrieked the man. "Get out or we'll call the police!"

"Call them!" shouted Mark. "That's what we want!" He designated four of the Wind People to stay in the front office with the two employees and guide the police to the fillox factory. "The rest of you, follow me to the warehouse below!"

He charged into the back parts of the building. Forge's men were flushed from places where they were hiding and pressed ahead of Mark's forces until they were herded down the staircases and passageways that led to the warehouse.

"Search the rest of the facility," ordered Mark, designating a few of the Wind People to the task. "Make sure we're not taken from behind. Look especially for Andrew Forge!"

When Mark came to the door of the storage room where he had found Zip earlier, he felt certain that he had scoured the entire building except for the upper story which was being

searched by those he had designated. He could hear shouts, some of anger and some of panic, coming from the direction of the warehouse.

The big Starman led his force around the corner of the passageway. Straight ahead was the main entrance to the warehouse. Forge's men had pried it open after he had sealed it with his laser pistol earlier in the evening. To the left side of the passage was the main office, whose door had been opened twice that night with a crowbar to release the prisoner the Starmen had sealed up inside.

"Daniel?" called Mark over his compad.

"Right here, Mark! We've got the warehouse secure, with a crowd of unhappy people."

"I'm coming through the main door right now."

"Come ahead."

~

Teagarden's remaining ships landed in the immediate vicinity of the tiny spaceport. Six people, including Zip Foster, poured from the craft and surrounded the landing field where all the ships of Brandow were situated. Zip strode decisively to the airlock that led into the primary hangar.

"What are you doing? Who are you? What do you want?" The voice, characterized by alarm and outrage, came through the communicator. With the sudden deluge of ships, the controller had charged out of his bed and run to the control center.

Zip shouted, "Starmen here to capture Andrew Forge, who has taken refuge in your town! Open up!"

At Zip's insistence, the airlock was opened and three men strode in, weapons at the ready. The other three remained outside, keeping watch. The controller met them, stepping out of the control room into the open area under the dome. It was the same man who had met the Starmen four days earlier. He had pajamas on and the blond hair on his bullet-shaped head was sticking out in several directions.

"You again?" he exclaimed.

“We’re after Forge and his crew,” said Zip, stepping forward. “The town is surrounded! We’re not leaving until we’ve captured them!”

“Andrew Forge? I don’t know what you’re talking about! You’re supposed to have murdered him! There’s a search going on for you all over the planet!”

“Forge is right here in Brandow! We’ve tracked him here! No one is leaving this town until we’ve found him!”

~

The Wind People led the four Brandow police officers from the main doors of the Sanitation Department into the facility, escorting the two employees through the building to the warehouse.

“Now we’re all in one place,” said Mark.

The officers were plainly angry but showed no inclination to take any action since they were uncomfortable with the show of arms carried by the Wind People.

“What’s going on?” demanded the senior officer.

“We’ve shut down the planet’s biggest flilox factory, operating right here, and we’re looking for Andrew Forge, the mastermind behind it!” asserted Mark.

“Nonsense!” retorted the officer. “You murdered Forge in his home, and now you’re bullying your way into our town with these outlaws! Flilox!” he spat derisively.

“Flilox or sewage, just about the same thing,” said Daniel Teagarden nonchalantly. He lifted his laser rifle and fired it at the tank truck. Everyone recoiled as the beam cut through the metal. Raw flilox sprayed out of the hole.

“Now are you with us or against us?” asked Teagarden. “If you’re with us, we’ll help you arrest these devils and put them into custody. If you’re against us, we can put them and you into custody until some real authorities arrive.”

As the police officers and the Wind People began to take the prisoners into custody, Peter Bellar began to shout, “It was

Forge, all right! He was here, but he fled for his life an hour ago! He left us to take the fall for him, the coward! He's heading for his spaceship in Eagle City!"

~

"Zip!" called Mark. "We're all secure at the factory, but they say that Forge took off an hour ago, heading for Eagle City!"

"Thanks, Mark! Come to the spaceport as soon as you can! I'll get in touch with Richard and see if he can head Forge off!"

Zip turned to the controller. "May I use your communicator?" The controller shrugged his shoulders and indicated the control room.

Before long, Zip was in contact with Richard Starlight aboard the *Lux Mundi*.

"Zip!" cried Richard when the call had gone through. "I'm glad you're safe! What's happening?"

"Greetings, Mr. Starlight," began Zip urgently. He gave Richard a full but concise report.

"I've got Forge's ship on the radar now, Starman," said Richard. "He's about fifteen minutes outside of Eagle City. I'll head him off with half our force and send Konig with the other half to meet you in Brandow. He should arrive in about half an hour."

"Yes sir!" said Zip, and signed off.

As Daniel Teagarden had hoped, by the time the Starlight ships landed all of Forge's cronies in Brandow had been rounded up. The flilox factory had been put out of business. The police officers, with Konig's men supervising, were searching the records in the office to gather information on the extent of the criminal organization.

With the Starlight security forces at hand, the Wind People decided to bid farewell to the Starmen and return to their community. Just before they departed for their ships, Daniel Teagarden came up to Mark.

"We found this," he said quietly. "You should have it before

someone else sees it and asks about it.” Mark looked down and saw that the man was holding an NPAC.

“Joe’s NPAC!” Mark exclaimed. “Where was it?”

“There is a suite in the upper story of the sanitation department. It was there.”

“And Joe?” asked Mark with trepidation.

“There was no sign of him.”

~

“Lend us a ship!” exclaimed Zip to Konig. “We’re going to Eagle City!”

“Take one,” said the head of Starlight security, waving his hand generously to the site where they had landed.

Zip and Mark leaped aboard the *Suncatcher* and set off for Eagle City at top speed. They were grim and determined, for a thorough search of the fillox factory had turned up no sign of Starman Joe Taylor. The Banjoman had some questions to answer.

Chapter 30: Where Loyalty Is Tested

DESMOND UBUNTU, the manager of Starlight Eagle City, was jerked out of sleep by an urgent message from Richard Starlight, coming in over the frequency reserved by Starlight Enterprise for emergencies. Quickly, Richard informed Desmond that he was coming in to Eagle City in a few minutes in hot pursuit of Andrew Forge.

“Andrew Forge!” exclaimed Ubuntu, the sleep suddenly cleared from his mind.

“He was hiding out in Brandow. The Starmen flushed him out and he’s on the run, presumably heading for Eagle City Spaceport. I’m hoping to intercept him, but you make sure that he doesn’t reach a ship!”

“Yes sir!”

Ubuntu immediately mobilized the security personnel of Starlight Eagle City. Next he called the Eagle City police and the office of Space Command at the control tower and told them that Andrew Forge was fleeing arrest in Brandow and heading for Eagle City. As expected, he didn't get sympathetic responses.

Next he awakened the mayor, Edmund Warner. The news made the mayor's head spin.

"What?" he managed to splutter through sleep-fogged reasoning.

"If you want to show the populace that you're not a total fool, Mayor Warner, this is your chance!" asserted Desmond Ubuntu. "Call up the police and make sure they prevent this criminal from escaping!" He signed off.

Then, having no confidence whatever in the officials of Eagle City or the local office of Space Command, Ubuntu awakened Dana Gresham and urged him to be ready to wrap up the story of the murder of Andrew Forge. Finally, the Starlight manager roused Mark Johnson, the owner of Johnson Construction and Exploration Company whose public demonstration of loyalty to the Starmen had already proven of immeasurable value.

Johnson in turn roused a few of his dependable friends, then jumped into his clothes and hurried to the spaceport.

~

Northwest of Eagle Crater, Andrew Forge's shuttlecraft was zooming over the Martian Sea on a direct bearing to Eagle City Spaceport.

"Seven spacecraft coming toward us at top speed, Mr. Forge!" announced his navigator. "Coming in from the north!"

The Banjoman gasped. "More information, you fool! Where are they?"

"We'll reach the city before them, Mr. Forge, but only by a few minutes."

"Get Warner up!" Almost at once Forge was talking to the

mayor of Eagle City.

“We’ve got to get off the planet, Edmund!” said the fugitive. “I’ll need your help. Meet me at your chemical plant. Take an official city vehicle.” He went on to give particulars to his plan.

Moments later, the shuttlecraft was in view of Eagle Crater. Three other small craft were cruising the air space. As soon as Forge’s ship was spotted, they zoomed in close.

“Set your vehicle down at Eagle City.” A commanding voice came over the communicator.

“Starlight security ships,” muttered the Banjoman. “They don’t have any authority.” He raised his voice, “Where are the seven ships, navigator?”

“About five minutes off, sir.”

“Ignore those three ships and land where I tell you, pilot! Stay close to the ground and come in to the city from the west!”

The fugitive shuttlecraft crossed the jagged top of the western crater wall with minimal clearance, then zoomed down the inside slope to the outskirts of the city. The craft flew down one of the wide thoroughfares with the Starlight security craft keeping close watch overhead. As they circled, the Banjoman’s ship landed on the top of a large building.

“He’s landed on the Garrison Building,” announced one of the pilots of the Starlight shuttlecraft. “Ground personnel surround the site!”

Within moments the security personnel of Starlight Eagle City had arrived at the Garrison Building. Almost immediately members of Eagle City police joined them.

“What are you doing here?” asked the man in charge of Starlight security.

“Mayor Warner ordered us to surround this building and capture Mr. Andrew Forge!”

“It’s about time he did something right!” said the Starlight man.

“Thanks for your help! We’ll take over now!” The officer raised his communicator to his lips. “Surround the building, then search it!” He moved off toward the main entrance of the

Garrison Building.

“You may be in charge here, but we’re staying in place,” asserted the Starlight man, and he gave those orders to his own personnel.

Unknown to any of them, the Banjoman and his companions were already gone. Forge knew Eagle City well and had chosen his landing site appropriately. The Garrison Building was located next to two buildings owned by Mayor Edmund Warner. It was the darkest part of the night, and no one saw the fugitives leap in the low gravity of Mars from roof to roof, hiding among the pipes and vents until they reached the roof access of Warner’s chemical plant.

~

For the second time in three days, Richard Starlight landed the *Lux Mundi* at Eagle City Spaceport, accompanied by six burgundy Starlight aircraft. Richard strode into the tower and demanded to see the commander.

“Commander, Andrew Forge is on his way here. He has landed his craft in the city and will try to force an entry into this base and then escape on one of his spacecraft. I’m asking you to prevent that.”

The Commander looked at Richard with just a hint of scorn. “You don’t give the orders here, Mr. Starlight. If there is a need for our protective services, I will see to it that that need is met.”

Richard leaned in toward the commander. “You’d better decide now whose side you’re on, Commander, before it’s too late to choose!”

“I’m on the side of law and order, Mr. Starlight,” said the official, not cowed by Richard’s presence or reputation.

“Then, Commander,” said Richard firmly, “we are on the same side. Let your actions prove it, for there will probably be plenty of action here soon!”

“Mr. Starlight?” It was a big, broad-shouldered man with a full head of blond hair. Richard turned to face him.

“My name is Mark Johnson, sir. I’m here to help you. Mr.

Ubuntu can vouch for me, sir. He called me up as soon as he received your message this morning. I've brought a few friends with me." He indicated two men and two women who were standing in the reception hall with him.

"Mr. Johnson!" said Richard. His face broke open in a wide grin and he extended his hand. "Ubuntu told me how you stood up to Mayor Warner the other day, after our address to the people here. I am delighted to meet you, and welcome your help!"

"Anything I can do for the Starmen, sir. My friends and I remember how they saved our city two summers ago—even if there are some here who don't."

"Well, we're all private citizens here, Mr. Johnson," said Richard, with a glance that took in his four companions as well. "I'll lend you a few of my personnel and you and they can take up positions at all the entrances to the spaceport and watch to see that Forge doesn't get in. I'll divide the rest of my personnel—some to join the local security crew and the rest will stay by our ships in the yard in case we're needed to fight or to chase."

"It's a pleasure to be of service, Mr. Starlight." They set their communicators on a common frequency and parted. For half an hour, nothing happened.

~

During the night, the clouds had thinned and then evaporated. The star-splashed heavens blazed in a glory that was beyond words. As the *Suncatcher* raced over the Martian Sea, it looked as if there were stars below as well as above the two Starmen.

Like molten bronze, the eastern horizon began to glow as the *Suncatcher* came up on Eagle Crater. As he flew over the city, Zip easily picked out the *Lux Mundi* and the other Starlight ships on the landing pad and set the *Suncatcher* down nearby. No transport vehicle greeted them, but Richard and a few others were hurrying on foot to meet them.

Warm greetings had barely begun when word came from Mark Johnson that a cavalcade was coming through the tower

entrance to the spaceport. The mayor was leading three police vehicles into the yard directly in front of the control tower. Richard, Zip, Mark, and several Starlight employees hastened to the area. The mayor was standing up through a skylight in a personnel carrier and was giving orders through a loudspeaker.

“First patrol, take the eastern gate! Second patrol, take charge of the hangars! Third patrol, remain here and guard the main entrance! Those with me will stand guard over the Forge compound! Go on—move!” Two of the three vehicles sped off, while six officers in the third leaped down and took charge of the gate through which they had just entered. They shouldered aside Mark Johnson and the Starlight personnel who had been keeping watch there.

Edmund Warner caught sight of Richard Starlight and the Starmen and waved to them. “Mr. Starlight!” he yelled. “I apologize deeply for doubting you before. I was a fool and I acted most unadvisedly. My own officials in Brandow have confirmed that Andrew Forge was seen there, and I freely admit that I was wrong and you were right! Starmen, my apologies! Now, please forgive me for rushing away! I must do my best to redress my wrongs and will personally see to it that no one gains access to the Forge compound!” He lowered himself down through the skylight and waved to his driver. The personnel carrier began to roll across the launching pad.

“Richard, he’s lying!” cried Zip. “No one saw Forge in Brandow—certainly not any officials! Forge left before our forces attacked the town! I’ll bet Forge is inside that personnel carrier! He’s getting away!”

Richard shouted to the guards at the gate. “Stop the personnel carrier! Stop it and search it!”

The police officers at the gate seemed frozen to the spot. But when Richard and the Starmen began to run toward a transport vehicle parked nearby, one of them raised a rifle in the direction of the Starmen. Before he could fire, a powerful blow from Mark Johnson felled the man.

“Get them!” shouted Johnson. By sheer weight of numbers,

his friends and the Starlight personnel quickly overwhelmed and disarmed the police officers. Then the blond man ran toward the landing field.

Richard and the two Starmen had commandeered the transport and were racing across the huge field in speedy pursuit of the personnel carrier.

“Stop the personnel carrier!” Richard radioed his crew who were standing watch where their ships were situated. They pulled laser pistols and fired warning shots at the speeding vehicle, and drew fire in return. With the return fire, the Starlight forces aimed directly at the vehicle. In spite of several hits, the personnel carrier maintained its velocity, weaving around obstacles when necessary and soon outdistanced the Starlight personnel who were on foot.

The transport vehicle was no match for the heavier vehicle’s more powerful engine. The mayor and his passengers were gradually increasing the distance.

“I can’t believe it!” shouted Zip in frustration. “They’re going to make it! Let’s get back to our ships, Richard, and chase them! They can’t escape the *Lux Mundi!*”

Just then a small shuttlecraft zoomed by overhead. It circled around and then shot across the track that the two ground vehicles were making. The craft passed over the personnel carrier, barely missing it. The backwash caused the ground vehicle to wobble, but then it straightened and shot forward again.

The shuttlecraft looped around and came toward the mayor’s vehicle head on. At the last possible second it pulled upward and shot over the top, firing its hoverjets as it flew. The personnel carrier glowed red for a split second as the jets strafed it, then it wobbled again, spun around, lifted up on two wheels for a second, and fell over onto its side. Its momentum carried it forward for at least thirty yards, scooping curving grooves into the field.

By the time Richard and the Starmen pulled up next to the wreck, one of the doors was opening and a shaken man was

crawling out. Before long Starlight personnel had surrounded the site, each person with a laser pistol or rifle. One by one, the fugitives inside were lifted out of the vehicle and deposited on the ground, where they were commanded to lie flat, with their arms outstretched.

The shuttlecraft that had stopped the personnel carrier landed gently fifty yards away. Its canopy slid open and Mark Johnson stepped out. With a grin almost big enough to split his head in half, he approached the group.

“How was that, Mr. Starlight?” he said.

Richard embraced him and said, “That was just fine, just fine! Amazing! Absolutely amazing!”

Andrew Forge was pulled from the wreck. He was covering his face with both hands and moaning. Two sizable gashes on the left side of his head were bleeding profusely. Before he was laid flat next to the others, Zip and Mark stepped up to him. Putting their faces inches away from their defeated enemy’s, Zip said seethingly, “Where is Joe Taylor?”

The Banjoman opened his hands, revealing a tragic, tear-stained face.

“I can see it’s all over for me,” he said weakly. “There’s no reason you shouldn’t know, Mr. Foster. He was my prisoner in my desert base—the place where your *Star Ranger* eluded me. I put him and Steve Cliff in the lowest level. But we had an accident and the upper levels collapsed. That was why I left that place to go to Brandow. Your partner and his friend were still alive yesterday morning, but there was no way we could rescue them. Maybe you have the resources to do so—if you hurry.”

Zip turned a frantic face to the head of Starlight Enterprise. “Richard?” he said hoarsely.

“We’ll go as soon as things are secure here. If they’re alive, we’ll get ’em out!”

The Banjoman smiled.

A truck skidded to a stop nearby and Dana Gresham stepped out with two camera operators. He approached the scene of the wreck.

“Mr. Andrew Forge, isn’t it?” he said. “We’re all so glad to see you! We’d heard you were dead.”

Chapter 31: Pillar of Ruby Fire

THE *LUX MUNDI*, accompanied by one other Starlight craft, flew across the wasteland that lay between Eagle Crater and the site of Andrew Forge’s desert refuge. Desmond Ubuntu had taken charge of the Starlight security procedures and, backed by Mark Johnson, had not transferred Andrew Forge, Edmund Warner, and their cronies into authoritative custody until they had been well satisfied that the officials who had come for them were trustworthy. Dana Gresham had recorded all aspects of the arrest for immediate broadcast throughout the worlds.

Now all that remained to do was rescue Joe Taylor and Steve Cliff.

Richard had turned the controls of his personal craft over to another pilot—one of the exceedingly rare occasions when he did so—so that he could sit with Zip and Mark. The three of them were eating breakfast while the golden spacecraft sped through Martian airspace at over 500 miles per hour.

“Ortiz will have locating and digging equipment prepared when we get to the site,” Richard said. “He’s got everything secure in Brandow.” Richard exhaled and leaned back. “I haven’t had this much excitement for several years! I always enjoyed being at the forefront of whatever was going on, but that hasn’t been possible for a long time—not until now.” He leaned forward again and took a sip of his coffee. “Don’t worry too much about Joe and Steve. If Forge was telling the truth, we’ll be able to get them out all right. We should have them out in two or three days, none the worse for wear.”

Richard and the Starmen were eating dried meat strips, fruit, flat bread, and coffee. The fare was plain but nourishing. In spite of having only their in-suit nutrients to eat since lunch with Daniel Teagarden the previous day, they ate without looking at

their food and spoke little. The last time they had slept was in *Imlah Taltahni*. Was it only twenty-four hours ago that they had made their farewell to Stenafi and Saadervo and Jogren?

“We did what they wanted,” whispered Zip absently. “We stopped Forge from stealing the lichen—the *illunas*. I don’t know what it means, but it was important to the Ahmanyans.”

“Since the action started,” Mark said, “we haven’t had any time to rest or even think.” He rubbed his eyes. “I really need to sleep, but I can’t until I know about Joe.”

“We’ll know before long, men,” said Richard, laying a hand on each of their hands as they sat at the table.

Below them the badlands of Mars showed the long shadows of early morning. Two miles ahead, a tiny spherical sentinel detected the fast approach of the *Lux Mundi*. It sent a signal to a communicator that had been in the possession of Mr. Andrew Forge. That communicator now lay unattended in a locker in Eagle City.

It also sent a signal to the desert refuge where two men were lying in darkness. A short series of beeps and clicks got their attention. The younger one raised up on one elbow and turned his head toward a silent mechanical silver spider. He saw a red glow on top of a cylinder that was fastened to the back of the immobile robot. His heart rate quickened. With an effort, he scrambled to his feet and approached the arachnoid, but not so closely that it released its needle lasers.

He made out numbers on a countdown timer: **02:59:10**, and decreasing by the second. He decided not to wake his companion, and lay down again with his eyes open.

~

Two Starlight ships had landed on the ruined airfield that had been the site of the Banjoman’s desert refuge and watch base for his lichen-harvesting project. One other ship hovered over the site. Inside the hovering craft, Oritz Konig was monitoring his scanning equipment—the same apparatus Folding Jim had used

to map the ocean floor on Europa.

“Nothing living on the first three levels,” he said. “Forge was right. The top levels are collapsed. Moving on to the fourth now.”

“What about those voices?” asked Mark.

Konig made a dismissive gesture. “Nothing. A recording. Forge couldn’t have known that we’d have this kind of apparatus with us. Most ships would have been furnished with standard equipment and they’d have been fooled. But why did he set up the recording?” His brow crinkled with puzzlement.

“Fourth level,” he continued, “still nothing living, but the collapse isn’t so complete here; that’s a good sign. Moving on to the fifth.”

Suddenly Konig gasped. “Oh no! Oh, we’re in trouble!”

Zip and Mark, seated in the workroom with Konig, could feel their hearts clutch inside them. “What is it?” cried Zip.

Konig looked up, his face white. “They’re down there, and they’re alive, but,” he licked his lips, “there’s an active atomic weapon in the same room with them!”

The mouths of both Starmen dropped, and their eyes opened wide with shock.

“Wha—, what can you tell about it?” asked Zip. A sudden chill coursed through him, paradoxically emphasizing the sting of the burns on his body. He shivered. Mark sat quite still.

“It’s armed. It’s small—based on an isotope of mercury. The entire mechanism can’t be larger than a loaf of bread, but it’s got enough energy to blow this island into dust and pebbles. The chamber is on the lowest level, 132 feet below the surface. With the equipment we’ve got, we could easily dig down that far by tomorrow morning, but with an armed bomb down there... who knows how long we’ve got?”

“Forge set it up,” asserted Zip, his eyes smoldering. “He wanted to destroy us all. It had to be on some sort of timer, a timer set to begin when we got in the area. Our presence must have initiated it somehow. It could go off at any moment!”

“Let’s contact Richard,” said Konig. “We’ll have to get out

of the area and make a plan.”

“We’re not abandoning Joe!” cried Mark.

“No, we’re not abandoning Joe or anyone,” said Konig, “but we’re not staying here needlessly.” He reached for the communicator.

~

It was an unusually beautiful day for Mars. The midmorning sun was bright in a cloudless sky, and the winds were uncharacteristically mild. A westerly breeze brooded over the ocean of sand and the sparse vegetation wafted gently. Three Starlight ships were situated two miles away from the mist-shrouded island refuge that had become an appalling atomic trap.

Richard Starlight, Oritz Konig, and the two Starmen were in desperate council together aboard Richard’s lustrous golden ship. An encrypted link had been established with the control center at Mars Base.

“It’s the only possibility, Evan,” said Konig to the satellite engineer at Starlight’s headquarters on Mars.

“I can have a grade III weapons satellite over your site in one hour and forty-seven minutes.” The crisp voice of Evan Torbin, chief engineer at Starlight Enterprise’s Mars Base, came through the link. “Give me ten minutes on the outside to get fixed on the target, and then twenty minutes to bore through the stone.”

Konig lifted his eyes and looked at his partners. The distress written across the faces of the Starmen was heart wrenching.

“That’s well over two hours. Sounds too long to me,” said Mark, the strain twisting his voice almost out of recognition.

“What else can you do, Evan? We need something faster.”

After a brief pause, the engineer replied, “Grade V over your site in forty-three minutes, same ten-minute setup, and thirty-seven minutes to drill.”

Konig raised inquiring eyes. Richard was deferring to Zip and Mark. They glanced at one another and nodded to Konig.

“Okay, Evan; let’s do that one. We’ll keep the line open. Keep us informed.”

“Of course.”

For several minutes no one said anything. Once in a while Mark sighed deeply.

“You know,” began Zip. He looked out the window to the sunny desert expanse. “The cure might kill them too. The hole we drill will let all the air escape. If they don’t have helmets or air tanks, they’ll die just as certainly.”

“We know,” said Richard quietly.

Not a word was said for a long time after that. Zip kept drinking water from a beaker he’d found in the sterile rack of the lab. As the minutes passed, they couldn’t keep from glancing at the clock.

“Satellite in place,” came the voice of Evan Torbin. The four men leaped to their places by the communicator. Only thirty-four minutes had elapsed since they had formulated their plan.

“You’re ahead of schedule,” said Konig.

“I plan conservatively,” said Torbin. “Drawing a bead on the site now. Ah yes, I can see the radiation. That’s our target. Now I need three points to fix the satellite’s sights in place. Man, Oritz, these satellites were not made for this kind of work. I wish I had time to practice.”

“You don’t! Just get the sights, Torbin!” Konig’s voice was sharp.

“I’m doing that very thing while we’re talking, Oritz. Got one already. Now I have another.”

The tension in the room was thick. Mark looked out the window toward the cliffside, beneath which was Forge’s hidden refuge. For a moment he imagined a massive plume of dust arising from the base of the slope, and then boulders flying slowly upward in a dirt-filled billow that got larger and larger.

“Got the third! Ready to drill!”

“Then do it, man, do it!” shouted Konig.

“Initiating now,” said Evan Torbin. All at once the air seemed charged. Zip’s hair rose slightly. Absently he reached up and patted it down. He glanced over to Mark and saw his friend’s black thatch ruffle a little on its own. If they had been outside,

they would have sworn that a thunderstorm was brewing.

Mark looked out the window again and saw a white pillar of cloud rising up over the mound of sand that separated them from the island. As the vapor rose, it caught the breeze and blew away into the east. Inside the shifting plume he could see an ethereal beam the color of a ruby.

Ten minutes passed.

“Fifty feet down,” said Torbin. His voice startled the anxious men inside the *Lux Mundi*.

Konig looked at the clock. “You’re ahead of schedule again, Evan.”

“I told you I figure conservatively. I expect to be through in about seventeen more minutes.”

“We’d better be ready to get over there as soon as the bomb is destroyed,” said Zip. “Mark and I’ll be in the ground shuttle, waiting to move as soon as you tell us it’s okay, Oritz!”

Richard shook their hands warmly and gave each of the Starmen a confident smile.

~

Fifteen minutes later, Joe Taylor raised his head. Something was puzzling him. There was a sound, a strange sound he couldn’t identify. It was like a hiss or a sizzle. He listened curiously. Gradually it became louder. No doubt about it—something was happening. Something was coming their way.

He got to his feet and glanced at the countdown timer. It read **00:32:17**. He decided to wake Steve. If somebody was digging down, they’d better have their helmets on. Steve’s air tanks had been taken from him and Joe’s NPAC was gone too; the only air they had was in their suits and that wouldn’t last more than a few minutes but it was better than nothing. Joe turned his suit lights on and blinked in the gray light.

“Steve!” Joe said. His voice was almost gone, and it was painful to use his throat. He swallowed but there was no saliva. “Steve!” he screamed, but even to him it sounded little more than a croak. He shook the big man vehemently.

“Hmph,” grunted the sleeping man. Joe rolled him over vigorously.

“What?” Steve complained. He opened his eyes. “What is it? Time for breakfast?” Joe could hardly recognize the words that came through his friend’s dry throat.

“Something’s happening, Steve!” Joe croaked. “Get your helmet on.” The hissing noise was noticeably loud now.

“No air tanks,” he said.

“There’s gonna be no air in this room at all in a minute!”

Steve froze for a second, and then scrambled for his headpiece. Both men fixed their helmets in place.

“Let’s get in the back of the room,” croaked Joe, “and cover ourselves. Something’s coming through the roof.” The two of them hustled to the back corner of the chamber as far away from the sizzling sound as they could, and covered themselves with two layers of tarpaulins that they found there.

A moment later the ceiling opened up and the arachnoid crumpled into a heap. The bomb it was carrying melted. The air whooshed out of the chamber.

~

“Got it!” said Evan Torbin. “The bomb is gone.”

Whoops of delight filled the cabin where Richard and Oritz were waiting.

“Wonderful shooting, Evan!” shouted Konig. He sent a message to the Starmen, who were chafing in a ground vehicle outside.

“Thanks, Oritz! Thank Evan for us!” said Zip. “Mark, let’s go see if... if they...” Mark couldn’t tell whether Zip’s expression showed relief or tension. He didn’t have time to wonder for long, as Zip pressed the accelerator and the vehicle leaped forward.

Zip drove the vehicle over the sand, not swerving for minor obstacles. At one point he zoomed over the top of a dune and the vehicle was briefly airborne. It slammed down and kept going.

The redheaded Starman brought it skidding up to the edge of what once been a picturesque lake but was now a jumble of boulders and cut stones. Watercourses, some deep and some shallow, laced their way through the rocky ruin.

The Starmen made their zigzag way across the terrain until they came to the island.

“Where is it? Where is it?” called Zip frantically. “You look over there!” he said to Mark.

“Here it is,” said the big Starman. He was on his knees in front of a perfectly round, utterly black hole about six inches in diameter. Mark fumbled for his compad.

“Joe? Joe? Are you there?” he cried. Zip came up next to him and waited anxiously for a response.

“Joe?” Zip said plaintively.

There was no answer. The two Starmen looked at one another with horrified expressions.

“Try the helmet communicators,” whispered Zip. “Maybe he doesn’t have his compad.”

“Joe?” said Mark through his helmet.

“We’re here,” came a hoarse voice. “We need air tanks.” There was a brief silence. “We’re only breathing what’s in our suits. Hurry.”

“Don’t talk, Joe,” said Zip as relief coursed through his entire body. “We’ll lower some tanks to you right away!”

Mark was already striving to reach Richard. The *Lux Mundi* was even then in flight back to the island.

Chapter 32: Stargazer Lilies

IT TOOK ALMOST TWENTY HOURS to rescue Joe and Steve from the chamber. Zip and Mark refused to leave the site where a shaft was being excavated until Richard firmly ordered them to go to the *Lux Mundi* and sleep. The Starmen protested but knew that he was right, and as soon as their heads hit the pillows they slept soundly for over twelve hours. They awoke within half an hour

of each other, refreshed and ravenous.

Richard had forbidden them to reappear at the work site until they had eaten.

“We should make some Darjeeling tea and lower it down to Joe,” suggested Mark as he and Zip were inhaling a meal.

“Great idea!” said Zip, cramming a piece of flatbread into his mouth. “Hey! —Steve’s been down there a week! What if he comes out thin?”

“I couldn’t handle it,” responded Mark, chewing on a piece of fruit. “That would almost deplete our arsenal of Steve jokes.”

“We’d better lower him a hot fudge sundae.”

“Great idea!” said Mark.

Only minutes later they were on site. A sizable pile of gravel and small boulders was growing off to one side of a gantry where a digging machine was sinking a shaft forty feet away from the hole that the laser cannon had made.

“How deep are you?” asked Zip.

“Just a hundred feet even, five minutes ago,” said Konig. “In a couple more hours we’ll be at their depth. Then we’ll cut a horizontal shaft over. They should be on the surface by early afternoon.”

~

Just past midday, Steve Cliff was brought up in a sling through the shaft that the engineers from Starlight Enterprise had dug. A few minutes later the lanky Starman followed him. Intravenous solutions were immediately given to them. Neither could talk without major effort and their rescuers quickly abandoned conversation except for the most basic and vital needs.

“We’ll take them back to Eagle City,” said Richard. “They’ll get good care there and should be fine before long.”

“Mandy Oskay said we should go to Bethesda,” said Zip.

“Who’s Mandy Oskay?” asked Richard.

“She’s the medic for Daniel Teagarden’s community. She provided thoroughly effective treatment for my burns.”

“Burns?” said Richard, concern written across his face. “What burns are these?”

Zip explained. Richard tried to control his frustration with the Starman who had ignored his own injuries as they were capturing the Banjoman and then rescuing Joe and Steve.

“But I didn’t ignore the burns,” Zip protested. “Mandy’s treatment was so effective that I just didn’t think about them—until now, that is. They do itch and smart a little.”

“Bethesda’s a good place,” whispered Steve with an effort.

“I’ll make the arrangements,” said Richard.

~

Two hours before dusk on the same day, Richard Starlight’s golden ship and one of the burgundy Starlight ships settled quietly and easily onto the small pad in the community of Bethesda, located in a moderately sized crater about eighty miles north of Eagle Crater. Slanting sunbeams came over the western ridge, rich and filled with light like honey, and bathed the floor with an ambience of stillness. The crater floor was almost filled with cultivated trees and shrubs, and the lushness of the gardens contributed to a faint evening mist in the atmosphere.

Everyone aboard the *Lux Mundi* debarked from the ship, aglow in the sunlight with radiance almost too glorious to look at. Richard had informed them that they would not need helmets inside the crater as its atmosphere was thick enough to breathe.

Zip, Mark, and the others walked down a gracefully curved path toward the main buildings, while Steve and Joe were carried on pallets. A complex mixture of scents greeted them as they walked among the beds of flowers, herbs, and vines. The mist bedizened their clothing like dust.

“What’s that?” said Zip, who was in the lead.

“What’s what?” said Mark.

“Listen.” The procession stopped. Ethereal, feminine voices were singing together; a chant of delicate beauty rose and fell, its cadences marked by the natural rhythms of the words being

sung.

“Jubiláte Déo ómnis térra, allelúia: psálmum dícite nómini éjus, allelúia: dáte glóriam láudi éjus, allelúia, allelúia, allelúia.

....”

“Where is it coming from?” asked Zip after a moment.

“The trees,” explained Steve, his voice somewhat stronger than before.

“Trees?” asked Mark, wondering whether perhaps Steve was suffering from delirium as well as dehydration and hunger.

“The Sisters, beanhead!” admonished Steve with quiet emphasis.

Mark smiled wryly. “The Sisters?”

“Bethesda is run by the Sisters of Saint Hildegard,” explained Richard. “It’s a community of nuns who specialize in herbal medication. They grow all their own herbs, fruits, and vegetables, and serve a huge constituency. Eighteen women live here, and a priest named Father Elijah. Two of the Sisters are physicians. There is also a small village where two or three dozen people live. They help the Sisters take care of the gardens and orchards.”

“Where’d you learn all that?” asked Zip.

“Looked it up as we flew here. Let’s go.”

The people from Starlight entered into a grove of linden trees. Dense, heart-shaped leaves and fragrant, yellow flowers made a setting of lush beauty. The singing became louder.

“Dícite Déo, quam terribília sunt ópera túa, Dómine! in multitudíne virtútis túae mentiéntur tibi inimíci túi....”

As the party passed under the trees, they saw that half a dozen Sisters were standing on ladders among the branches of the trees, harvesting the linden blossoms and singing together. They wore identical long habits of plain light blue material. Without interrupting their chanting, they waved to the visitors and indicated with a gesture that they should continue along the path.

“I feel better already,” said Joe.

“You should,” said Mark. “You’re getting carried

everywhere you go.”

They came to a courtyard in front of an imposing edifice made of bricks. Two towers stood on the corners and a large single door with a window in it fitted snugly into an archway. As they approached the door, it opened and two Sisters stepped out.

“Welcome to Bethesda,” one said. “I am Sister Hilda, the Guestmistress. This is Sister Hroswitha; she is a skilled physician who will be treating those of you who are injured.” Sister Hilda was a stout, middle-aged woman with a wisp of blond hair escaping from her wimple.

Sister Hroswitha was a tall, young woman with kindly brown eyes. She said, “Sister Hilda and I will show you to your rooms, and then I will examine the injured.”

“Thank you, Sisters, for allowing us to come with such short notice,” said Richard.

“We are pleased to receive the Starmen and their friends who, once again, have brought peace to our people,” said Sister Hilda.

Richard and his company followed the Sisters down a broad hallway paved in hard-baked tiles and covered with area rugs. Wrought iron fixtures held lamps. Simple wooden tables and chairs with iron legs were placed in the passage. The cushions on the chairs showed intricate designs in embroidery.

Only the Starmen, Steve Cliff, and Richard were going to stay in Bethesda. After they had been settled in their rooms, they said farewell to Oritz Konig and the others. Konig took his leave and returned to the launching pad. His ship lifted off and set a course for Mars Base.

Sister Hroswitha determined that Joe and Steve would recover quickly and completely with good, simple fare and rest alternated with exercise. After examining Zip, she prescribed daily baths in mineral water that flowed from hot springs in the Sisters’ facility.

“Then after the bath, you’ll have a rubdown with aloe vera gel,” said the Sister. “And on the second degree burns, dressings soaked in lavender oil to relieve the pain and inflammation and soothe the skin. You’ll have your first treatment after supper,

Starman Foster,” she concluded with authority.

“Hah!” exclaimed Joe. “My treatment is to eat! I can do that!”

~

The following morning the five men were served breakfast in an alcove that overlooked several acres of cultivated herbs and vegetables. An orchard of fruit trees was set behind a short box hedge that marked the boundary of the garden. On one side of the garden there were several large glasshouses.

“Gorgeous here,” said Mark.

“Mmm hmm,” agreed Joe. No one wanted or needed to speak much. Bethesda was a place of rich silence, filled with healing influences.

The breakfast consisted of leavened bread—“at least as good as Marjie Prester can bake,” enthused Joe—with a choice of homemade blackberry or blueberry preserves or orange marmalade. A Sister brought them poached eggs on a platter and a bowl of roasted, seasoned potatoes. Dark, aromatic tea steamed in a large pot set in the middle of a round, thick wooden table. Each of the men had a hand-painted, simple ceramic cup.

After they’d cleared their plates, the Sister brought a bowl containing several small purple fruit.

Zip laughed when he saw them. “Martian plums,” he said. “Our adventure ends as it began.” He reached out and took one.

After breakfast, they sat at the table, not wanting to leave each other’s company. Sister Hroswitha appeared with a Sister whom they had not yet met—a short woman with curls of black hair escaping from her wimple.

“This is Sister Maria,” began Sister Hroswitha. “She is our reverend Mother.”

“Welcome to Bethesda,” said Sister Maria after the men had risen and greeted her. “Please be seated. We ask you simply to rest while you stay with us. Let us provide for your needs. Feel free to walk in the gardens and orchards. Our entire facility is open to you except the quarters that are restricted to the Sisters.

Those sites are clearly marked. If you need to send or receive messages, please ask Sister Hilda for assistance.”

Sister Hroswitha spoke up. “Your second treatment, Starman Foster, is scheduled for 3:00 p.m. today. I will meet you at the hot springs I showed you yesterday evening. Don’t be late.”

“Thank you, Sister; I’ll be there,” said Zip.

After the Sisters took their leave, Joe leaned back and laced his hands behind his head.

“Not bad,” he said. “I hope we get to stay here a long time.”

“Let’s go find Sister Hilda and make arrangements to talk to our families,” said Zip. “I’m sure by this time they’ve heard the news that Andrew Forge has been found and arrested and that we’re off the ‘wanted’ list.”

~

Later that morning, the Starman were strolling through the gardens of Bethesda.

“This place is bigger than it appears,” observed Zip. “Must be at least two square miles of gardens and orchards here!”

“Not to mention the chickens, ducks, and geese,” said Joe.

“And the water garden, too,” added Mark. There was a small lake in the middle of the crater, with irrigation pipes that led from it to water the gardens. Streams laced decoratively through the fields, and eventually were routed to a common terminus where they passed underneath the crater wall.

Zip reached down thoughtfully and picked up a handful of soil. He stared at it in the midday sunlight.

“So fertile,” he mused, “if it gets the right combination of water and sunlight and natural additives.” His companions could see in his eyes the shadow of the enormity of the destruction of the planet twelve millennia earlier.

“What’re you thinking, Zip?” asked Mark softly.

The redheaded Starman looked up and stared into the distance where the crater wall showed slight ridges.

“I’m thinking of the design we saw on the ships in the Asteroid—in Tharsos—the Ahmanyen ships that were designed

with such stunning beauty. I'm thinking of their deep forest green color and the subtle impression of leaves in their motif. And I'm thinking of the forest that we saw in the holographic room on Nyx. I'm imagining what this planet must have been like before it was burned."

"Did you notice how Stenafi described it, Zip?" asked Mark. "She called Venus the 'silver planet', and Earth the 'blue planet', and Azemir the 'planet of fire'—but Mars she called 'the green planet' It about broke my heart."

"Yes, I heard," said Zip. Dreamily, sadly he let the handful of dirt fall from his fingers, and then wiped the dust off his hands.

~

In the later afternoon, after Zip's second treatment, the Starmen and Steve Cliff were seated on a terrace outside their rooms. Richard Starlight joined them.

"I've got news," he said. The four others turned toward him as he sat down with a comfortable sigh on one of the easy chairs.

"After dinner I checked on what was happening in Eagle City. Edmund Warner has been removed from office by a reconstituted, interim city council and Mark Johnson was appointed Mayor pro tem. Warner, Andrew Forge, and others were arraigned this morning. A very long list of charges has been drawn up against them. The mansion in Seven Leaves was searched and several individuals were taken into custody there, including Susan Dathan. Several of the guards were discovered to be androids. With Forge in custody, the leadership there fell apart and the defense was ineffective. The commission from Earth is due to land in Eagle City in a few days, but it appears that most of their work will already have been done by the time they arrive."

"Johnson, Mayor pro tem?" exclaimed Zip. "What a great choice!"

"Yes indeed," concurred Richard. "And Desmond Ubuntu has been given a seat on the interim city council as well. The

commission will arrange for elections and appointments for the long term, but in the meantime the government is in good, honest hands. I fully expect that the elections, when they take place, will confirm most of the interim appointments. The same people are still in charge in the tower run by Space Command, but I imagine that there will be some changes there too before long.”

“What of the lichen?” asked Mark. “People will have to know that it is the source of the fillox, but they cannot know that it is vital to the Ahmanyans. Can it be protected?”

“It’s a good question, Mark, and I’ve given that some thought,” said Richard with a nod. “The lichen is a native Martian life form. Because of that, I’m going to do my best to see that it receives special protection. I’ll ask that the whole area be made a nature preserve and declared off-limits. And I’ll ask further that Starlight Enterprise, because of our extensive resources, be given the right to study it. Only a few of us will know that our real responsibility will be to protect and preserve it.”

Joe lifted a hand. “Sounds great, Richard—now what about the *Star Ranger*? My buddies here have told me that as soon as my back was turned, Zip wrecked it by trying to fly it by remote control.”

Richard laughed. “The engineers at Mars Base have been working on your ship, Joe. They’re taking it right down to the framework and completely rebuilding it. It’ll be some time before it’s ready to fly again, but when the work is done, —well, I think you’ll be more than pleased! Its new equipment will include an antimatter drive!”

“Wow!” said Mark and Joe together. “That’ll be worth the wait!”

“And,” Richard’s eyes twinkled, “I learned that we are to have a visitor in a few days—a most special visitor!”

“A visitor?” said Joe. “Who?”

“I’d like to keep that a surprise,” said Richard.

“Maybe it’s our families,” said Zip.

“Naw—he said ‘a visitor’,” said Joe.

~

Two days later a shuttlecraft touched down on the Bethesda landing area. The Starmen were walking in the apple orchard when they saw a small white craft enter the crater's airspace, then engage its hoverjets. It dropped out of sight behind the lines of trees.

"Our visitor!" shouted Joe. "Let's go!" The three of them hustled back toward the main building, Mark holding back his eagerness to accommodate to Zip and Joe's slower pace. They had not yet fully recovered.

As they came into the courtyard before the great door in the center of the main building, a yellow wheelchair emerged from the shadow of the linden trees.

"Kristina!" shouted Zip, and ran to meet her. His companions were not far behind.

The girl's sparkling eyes radiated excitement as Zip ran up and kissed her. In her hands she held a magnificent bouquet of flowers—large, white, six-pointed blossoms with red stripes down the center of each petal. Bright yellow stamens emerged from the center, where the petals were decorated with red dots.

"It's for you, Zip," she said, and extended her hands.

The Starman's eyes and mouth opened wide, and Kristina laughed gaily. "They're called 'stargazer lilies'," she said, "so when I saw them in the market back in Eagle City, I got them for you."

"Thank you, Kristina," Zip managed to gasp as he took the flowers. "Nobody's ever bought me flowers before."

"Now Zip!" she said with mock sternness. "Do you remember the last thing we talked about when we met on Titan?"

"Uhh...what?" said Zip.

"I said that next time we meet, make sure you're not sick."

Zip laughed, as did Joe and Mark.

"I'm not really sick," Zip said.

"You're just wearing those bandages for fun, then. I see," Kristina said.

“I’m getting better very fast,” explained Zip, his face becoming almost as red as his hair. “Sister Hroswitha is plying me with gotu kola. That’s an herb that stimulates the connective tissue in the skin. Also echinacea and zinc, and vitamins A and C. With all that, I shouldn’t have any infection or scarring!”

“I can see you’re in good hands,” Kristina approved.

“How did you get here?” asked Zip. “It takes several weeks to get here from Titan, so you couldn’t have come just because you heard we’d been injured.”



“They’re called ‘stargazer lilies.’”

“No, Starman Foster. I decided on the spur of the moment about a week after your birthday that I would take a six-month leave and visit my family on Earth, and visit you in Amundsen City. I was in flight when I heard that you were on Mars, and changed my plans and decided to meet you here instead. I did want to surprise you, and I suppose I have done that, although not as I had anticipated.”

“I have not seen you for over a year,” said Zip smiling hugely. “I’m so glad you came! Let me introduce you to Sister Hilda—she’s the Guestmistress—then we’ll show you around this place. It’s remarkable! I’ve never been anyplace like it!”

Chapter 33: The Making of Family

KRISTINA BETHANY stayed for six days, then took her shuttlecraft back to Eagle City and continued her journey to Earth. She promised Zip that, after a long visit with her family there, she would come to Amundsen City and see him again.

Later that same day, Richard and the Starmen took a leisurely walk. Steve decided he'd rather take a nap in his room while the others set off along a winding path that meandered through the vegetable patches. They crossed a narrow irrigation canal on a wooden bridge and came to a stand of elm trees. Beyond the trees was a field where villagers tended the extensive herb gardens. They walked beside a patch of mint that was followed by a border of jasmine.

"I can't get enough of these smells," said Joe, inhaling indulgently.

"Hmmm," agreed Mark.

A line of eucalyptus trees marked the far side of the field. The foursome passed under the tall, stately trees and came to a stretch of gently sloping land that led to the shore of the pond. Clover covered most of the slope, but occasional, random patches of dark soil dotted the ground. Two benches were set beside the trees, and offered a placid view of the stretch of water. Richard and the Starmen took the seats and gazed at the pond. A small boat floated in the middle and a woman was casting a small net into the deeps and drawing it back again.

"Richard," began Mark. Then he glanced away with an awkward expression.

"Yes, Mark?" said Richard. He was sitting comfortably with both arms laid out on the back of the bench and his right ankle crossed over his left knee.

"Forgive me if I speak out of turn," Mark continued. "It is not our business, and I suppose that if you wanted us to know you'd have told us."

Richard's forehead creased in curiosity, and he turned his head slightly to one side.

“We learned something in *Imlah Taltahni*,” Mark said. “Zip and I, that is. It wasn’t put forth as breaking a confidence. I don’t think that Stenafi suspected that she was revealing anything that should not have been spoken.” Mark glanced at Richard out of the corner of his eye, and Richard nodded to him to continue.

“When she told us the history of Ahmanya and its war with the Xenobots, she gave a quick rundown of the Ahmanyans’ hope in Earth.”

Richard stiffened and turned his gaze toward the fisherwoman on the water.

“I’m sorry,” said Mark with obvious discomfort. “She told us that your father was the son of Reuben Ridger. She said it with the greatest pride in what your father had accomplished—but she revealed his family line. I—, we—, well, that is, we are curious. Is her information correct? Is she right?”

Richard relaxed visibly. For almost a minute he said nothing. The fisherwoman cast her net and drew it in. The water dripping from it gleamed like quicksilver in the late afternoon sunlight. She reached into it and pulled out a fish or two and put them into a wooden barrel she kept inside the dinghy. Then she cast the net again.

“Thomas, my father, ran away from his father when he was only thirteen,” said Richard at last. “Reuben was the ruler of an extremist group that specialized in hatred and destruction. My father had wanted to flee from the time he learned that Reuben was responsible for the nuclear incidents in the United States.

“At first, the authorities believed that the incidents were the work of overseas terrorists, but they gradually learned that most of them were the responsibility of the cult group Reuben had founded in 2038. My father was born five years later and grew up in an atmosphere of fanatical hatred and defiance.”

Richard spoke with a quiet but deliberate voice, as one whose words were crossing a gulf of time.

“When he was ten, the seventh nuclear incident for which my grandfather was responsible occurred, and my father learned of his father’s part in it. He realized then why he and his parents

and a few hangers-on had no fixed place to live, no friends outside their group, and why they moved so frequently and furtively. He determined then that he would disown his father and flee, but he couldn't bring himself to leave his mother. She had no part in the schemes, but was a prisoner of his father and his partners.

"One day his mother told him to run, to make a name for himself, and not to mind her. He didn't want to leave her. He begged her to come with him, but she refused. She told him that Reuben had planted a locator chip inside her heart and that it couldn't be removed without killing her. And she told him that when Thomas turned fourteen, Reuben would plant a chip inside his heart too."

The Starmen sat as if carved from stone. The horror of the story repelled them, but now that Richard was telling it they wanted to know the details.

"That convinced Thomas to make a break for freedom. He went into town one day with a handful of solars to buy supplies but never returned. It was the darkest time of the Collapse, and living as a vagabond was common. He took an assumed name, which was easy to do during those years, and worked his way from town to town. Reuben searched, but never found him. Never.

"During his teen years, my father's genius showed itself, and he began to gain a reputation for honesty as well as scientific acumen. One day he learned on the news that the authorities had located and surrounded his father's cell. His father refused to surrender and instead initiated a blaze of artillery in one last allegiance to violent destruction. My father watched as a firestorm of weapons showered down upon the desperate, determined, hate-filled people with whom he had grown up. He saw the buildings where his father had been hiding overcome by the assault against them.

"While the rest of the country rejoiced at the end of Reuben's ability to terrorize the nation, Thomas was racked with anxiety about his mother. He was relieved when it was reported

that three survivors had been taken from a hiding place in the ruin and that one was his mother, and felt deep release when he learned that his father's remains had been positively identified.

"Later he learned that his mother had suffered radiation poisoning. She told the authorities that when it had become obvious that escape from the hideout could not be achieved, Ridger, in a last ditch attempt to terrorize, removed the shields around his atomic isotopes in an effort to irradiate not only his own followers but also their attackers."

Richard paused for a moment and took a deep breath. The fisherwoman brought the little, flat-bottomed boat toward shore and tied it up at a short dock. She pulled the wooden bucket out and carried it with evident difficulty along a path that led to the village.

Richard resumed his tale. "After the siege she was put under strict guard and my father was unable to see her or even communicate with her, but he bided his time.

"He was eighteen at the time of the siege. After these events, he reflected on the heritage his father had left him, and he determined not only to reject it utterly, but also to do his best to redress it. He couldn't bring back to life the millions who had died as a result of his father's terrorist activities, but he committed himself to doing good, to becoming a blessing to his generation and, as much as possible, to those who came after. He formally took the name Starlight, for the reasons I've told you before."

Mark and Joe remembered the time they had spent with Richard on the moonbus as he took them on a drive far from Amundsen City. That was when he charged them with the assignment to land secretly on Mars and repel the pirates who had taken over Eagle City.

"His mother was cleared of complicity in his father's activities, and was put under permanent care in a government facility. She received good treatment, but was wearing out. Two years after his father's cell had been eliminated, Thomas was able to visit his mother, and managed to do so without arousing

suspicion about his own heritage.”

Richard sighed, then smiled poignantly.

“He stayed with her for two days. She was able to see that her son had survived and that he was a good man, and that he had vowed to be as good a man as his father had been evil. She died peacefully—the final victim of her husband’s reign of death-dealing evil. Her last act was to bequeath to Thomas the family heirloom—a silver tea set with the letter ‘R’ on the spoons. Everything else of value in the family had been lost, sold, or destroyed.

“The ‘R’ was for Ridger, for it had been in his father’s family for more than 200 years, but Thomas took it as a reminder of his mother. Her name was Rose.”

For five minutes no one said anything. A mild breeze rippled the waters of the lake, and the mild aroma of goldenseal wafted over the foursome. A field of the beneficent flower lay on the other side of the row of eucalyptus.

“More than twenty years later, Thomas founded Starlight Enterprise. He was 46 years old. He had been severely emotionally damaged by his childhood years and it took him half a lifetime to be able to relate to another human being with any measure of trust. The year before he founded SE he finally married. I was born when my father was 51 years old—his only child.

“He determined to found a legacy through his family, so that his commitment could continue in future generations, and I became heir to his vision. Tom and his wife Sandy, my parents, were killed on Mercury in 2119 when a refinery exploded. I was 25 when the mantle fell to me.” Richard paused, clamped his lips together, and gave his head a slight shake. He stared into the sky as if seeing into the past.

“The rest you know,” he concluded. “The tea set belongs to me now. It is the only tie I have to my past. And the only one that I want. My name is Starlight.”

At that moment, the bell for Vespers began to peal solemnly and peacefully throughout the crater.

~

The following day, the Starmen, Steve Cliff, and Richard departed from Bethesda. When the golden ship, the *Lux Mundi*, landed at Eagle City Spaceport, it created quite a stir. The Starmen were greeted with respect by Space Command and acclaim by the people of the city. They went directly to Starlight Eagle City, where Richard arranged for lodgings. Dana Gresham sought them out there and broadcast an interview later that evening.

~

“Guess my ship’s all fixed up now,” said Steve Cliff on their first morning in Eagle City. “I got some business to do in the Asteroid Belt. These past three weeks have delayed me a wee bit, but nothing’s holdin’ me back now. It’s been a big barrel of koalangs bein’ with you Starmen again, and thanks to the Banjoman’s hospitality I guess I’m lighter than I was by about thirty pounds. I don’t even look like myself anymore! But I better get hustlin’! There’s work to be done and throats to be cut!”

Mark looked over at Joe and said, “So that’s where you picked up that stupid line!” Joe lifted his eyebrows.

Steve took a fond farewell from Richard and the Starmen and set out on foot for the spaceport.

“Let’s go visit the McTaggarts and our friends again,” suggested Zip. “Maybe Richard would like to come with us.” His friends agreed and Richard accepted the invitation with alacrity.

~

Long after the sun had set that same day, the Starmen and Richard were enjoying themselves with Stavri Thalassa, Richard and Marjie Prester, Uneven Stephen, Donal and Doris McTaggart, and other denizens of the secret tunnels underneath Eagle City.

“If I’d only known you were coming,” protested Marjie for

at least the sixth time, “I’d have baked bread. I know it’s your favorite!”

“Ah, Mrs. Prester,” said Richard, “these fresh green beans, corn, and pickled beets far surpass anything I’ve eaten for decades, and the béarnaise sauce is unquestionably five star!”

Marjie beamed. “But Mr. Starlight, the bread! If only...”

Uneven Stephen spoke up. “Marjie, you’re going to make the man uncomfortable! We’ll just have to invite them all back again and you can feed them all fresh-baked bread until they decide never to leave!”

“Oh, hush up, Stephen!” she said, embarrassed.

“Now, Mr. Starlight,” continued Stephen. “Someday I’d like to show you my masterpiece! It’s a stone carving. I’m a stone carver, you see! I’ve been working on something down here for almost three years, and you’re just the man to appreciate it, I’m thinking.”

“I’d love to see it, Stephen,” said Richard.

“Let’s go now!” urged Zip. “I know the exceptional quality of Stephen’s work, Richard, but I haven’t seen what he’s been working on since I was here two summers ago.”

“Now Zip, you’re embarrassing me!” said Stephen, none too convincingly.

“Oh, hush up, Stephen,” repeated Marjie.

“Well, then,” Stephen said, rising from his seat, “if it’s not too late.” It was obvious that Stephen was bursting with eagerness to show Richard his work.

The great, strong man with the oversized right arm led a small procession through the widest and most frequented passageways. They walked for several minutes. On both sides of the corridor were scenes from Earth, sculpted directly into the stone. There was a magnificent scene of the Arctic tundra, with the midnight sun on the horizon. In another panel was a swirl of ocean wave. In yet another was a thick, South American jungle with creeping vines stretched between the branches of trees.

“Here we are!” said Stephen, pointing to a panel, the pride and excitement showing in his voice. When he saw the panel,

Richard gasped and began to tremble.

“You like it?” asked the stonemason. “It’s not finished yet, but it’s the Statue of Liberty! That cursed nuclear terrorist Reuben Ridger destroyed it when he set out to blow New York harbor to kingdom come, but he couldn’t destroy the heart of the people! You like it?” he repeated.

“Ye—, yes,” whispered Richard, deeply moved. “I like it very much, Stephen. Thank you for showing it to me.”

Stephen beamed. “I think he really likes it,” he said with enormous satisfaction.

~

The following morning, the Starmen and Richard lingered over breakfast in the main assembly room. They were deciding what to do later that day when Stavri Thalassa stepped into the room, almost diffidently.

“Starmen,” he began with a curious look on his face. “There’s a prospector here to see you, straight from the Martian wilderness. I don’t know how he found us! Gave me quite a shock when he waltzed in here, let me tell you! But he says he knows you, and it appears that he does, for he described you and your adventures pretty well. He said you’d be glad to see ’im. I told him to wait in the lounge while I went to ask you.”

“What’s his name?” asked Joe.

“He wouldn’t tell me.”

“A prospector who won’t give his name?” Zip turned to his companions. “Who could that be?”

“Must be Daniel Teagarden,” said Mark. “Who else? He’d know how to get in here with nobody knowing how.”

“Let’s go see him!” urged Joe. “I haven’t met this Daniel Teagarden!” The Starmen and Richard got up and followed Stavri to a lounge a few doors down the hallway.

“Here they are!” announced Stavri, leading the way into the room. Inside, a dusty and disheveled man was glancing at some of the artifacts on the shelves. He looked as if he had lived for a long time in the wild lands of Mars. When Stavri stepped aside,

Zip and Mark gasped.

“Saadervo!” Zip whispered.

Chapter 34: The Desiccated Kingdom

“HI, ZIP! HI, MARK!” exclaimed their visitor before any of the Starmen could say anything. He rushed to them and shook their hands as if they were old acquaintances. Clearly Saadervo did not want to spoil the impression that he was anything more than a wilderness prospector, but Zip knew that Stavri was already aware that the Ahmanyans existed, and of the Starmen’s search for them.

“Joe,” breathed Zip, “close the door.”

“Do you want me to leave?” asked Stavri, and edged his way to the exit.

“No,” said Zip. “Stay.” Joe shut the door, an inquisitive look on his face.

“Joe, Richard, Stavri,” began Zip, turning to each in turn. “This is Saadervo, the governor of *Imlah Taltahni*, the colony of Ahmanyans. He saved our lives.”

Stavri gasped. “Then your quest was successful!” he cried. “Oh, my goodness! Oh, my goodness! Can I get you something to eat or drink, sir?” he flustered, felt a little faint and sat down with his head in his hands, and then quickly stood up again, at loose ends.

Saadervo smiled. “No, thank you, Stavri. We have eaten this morning.”

“We?” Stavri asked weakly.

“I am here with Stenafi. She is waiting with our vehicle. We have come to invite the Starmen and Richard Starlight to visit us at *Imlah Taltahni*, now that Mr. Andrew Forge has been captured and the Starmen have put an end to his blighting of the *illunas*. It is a time to celebrate!”

The Starmen turned to Richard. “We will be happy to accept!” he said, to the Starmen’s overwhelming joy. “Thank you,

Saadervo!”

“Excellent. Stenafi and I are prepared to take you as soon as you are ready.”

“We can go with you now.”

Saadervo smiled. He turned to Stavri. “Since the Starmen have obviously entrusted you with the information of the existence of our ancient people, I have no need to ask the guarantee of your confidence. My people and yours will have occasion for contact in the near future. The time will come, but if the news of our existence becomes public too soon, it will be disastrous both for us and for you.”

“No sir,” stammered Stavri. “I mean—you can trust me, sir.”

“Then already we are partners. As you will see, the place of contact will be these tunnels.”

“Yes sir.”

~

A few moments later, after the Starmen and Richard had said thanks and farewell to the Tunnel People, they came with Stavri Thalassa and rejoined Saadervo. Saadervo then led them through several of the familiar passages until they came to a confluence of tunnels.

“This is where the pirates captured the lot of us almost two years ago,” said Mark.

“I thought the place looked familiar,” said Joe.

Saadervo moved over to one of the large blocks from which the walls were constructed. He placed an open hand on one place and quietly said, “*sapin*”. In utter silence, the panel receded slightly and slid upward, exposing a wide and high passageway lined with volcanic glass.

Stavri choked. “I’ve lived in these tunnels for many years and walked by here hundreds of times, and never guessed there was a portal here!”

“When it is time for our peoples to begin to work together,” said Saadervo, turning to the leader of the Tunnel People, “it is through here that we shall communicate. You will see me again

before long, Stavri Thalassa. Richard, David, Mark, Joe—please follow me.”

Richard and the Starmen said good-bye to Stavri Thalassa and followed the Ahmanyen into the passageway. Then Saadervo turned to face the door and said “*donor*”, and the panel dropped down and slid into place. The Starmen’s last view of Stavri was the look of amazement on his face.

“Come,” said Saadervo.

“*Dala*,” interpreted Mark.

The Ahmanyen laughed as he strode forward into the passage.

The sides and roof of the walkway were a shiny, charcoal gray color that reflected their motions as if there were shadowy people walking alongside them inside the walls. The floor was of the same color but rough and easy to walk on. There were no visible lights, but the corridor lit up in the place where the company walked, and faded into darkness after they had passed.

A downhill walk of only a few minutes brought them to a spacious, brightly illuminated room. It was obviously a port, for there were slips for various kinds of craft, but for now there was only one in place. A lustrous and silky shuttlecraft of design unfamiliar to the humans was centrally located in the otherwise empty area. A crystal canopy stood open. Stenafi was standing next to the craft.

“Greetings, Starmen and Mr. Richard Starlight!” she said with evident pleasure. Her long tresses framed her face and her brown skin was aglow with health.

After greetings and introductions, she invited them all to enter the silver craft. The Earthmen sat four across in the rear seat.

“We will be at the portal of *Imlah Taltahni* in a little more than an hour,” she said. When all were seated and the canopy had been sealed, she manipulated a few controls. The ship rose and turned toward a large black opening at the far side of the room.

“Are you ready?” she asked. “We will travel swiftly.” Without waiting for an answer, she pressed a button on the panel of the craft and it moved forward at high acceleration and achieved an impressive speed.

“I assume the craft uses radar to keep it equidistant from the walls of the tunnel,” said Richard.

“Yes, it is something very like that,” agreed Stenafi.

“What are the tunnels?” asked Mark. “I know that some of the work was done by the Tunnel People, but most of the tunnels were there long before humans came to Ahmanya.”

“The site of your Eagle City,” began Saadervo, “was once the location of a small but influential research center for our people. The aboveground structures were completely destroyed in the attack by the Xenobot fleet, but the tunnels beneath the foundations remained mostly intact. They had been made to permit easy travel between the buildings, maintain uniformity of temperature of the research stations with minimal cost, and to provide some measure of protection for their work. This passageway in which we are now traveling was the primary transit route between the research center and the closest great city. Much farming was done at that city, located in a fertile valley at the bottom of what you now call the Martian Sea. That is our current destination. There is no city there now, of course, but it is our exit point. The fact that it is underwater aids immeasurably in keeping this passage unknown.”

“Coming up on the terminus now,” said Stenafi. The craft slowed and then entered a round room at least fifty yards in diameter. In the center was an open pool of dark water. Stenafi took manual control of the craft and brought it to hover over the water, then lowered it into the pool. After it was completely submersed it continued to sink for a short distance. In the complete darkness Stenafi eased it forward for a short time, and then pointed the nose upward.

“All clear above,” she said, checking instruments. The craft accelerated rapidly. The humans felt themselves pressed into the backs of their seats. They could hear the comfortable hiss of the streamlined craft shooting through the water. Almost before they knew it, the color of the water around them made the transition from black to deep purple, then into midnight blue, then turquoise, and suddenly they were airborne.

“Ooowow!” cried Joe. His eyes gleamed with jubilation and he craned his neck to look out of the canopy. Already the ship was high over the sea and the western shore was becoming visible. Gloriously vivid midmorning sunlight washed the land below them. The Starmen and Richard chatted happily, enjoying the contentment that followed their victory over the Banjoman and anticipating the thrill of a leisurely stay with the Ahmanyans. They didn’t notice that Saadervo and Stenafi had become strangely quiet.

For some time they sped over the empty land, crossing the desert and the mud palisade and finally approaching the southern cliff wall in which were the stone arch and the concealed entrance to *Imlah Taltahni*.

“Friends,” Saadervo broke into their chatter with sudden solemnity. “We are not going to our home directly. If you will be patient with us for a time, we want to bring you to the treasure of Ahmanya. First we will take on a passenger here.”

The Earthmen picked up on his tone. Their pulses quickened with excitement and a little apprehension.

“The treasure of Ahmanya?” queried Zip.

“You will see,” said Saadervo. Unexpectedly there was thick tension inside the ship. Stenafi’s face was pinched and she kept her eyes locked forward. “It is not for us to speak of it. That privilege belongs to another.”

The glossy silver craft came to a gentle landing in the desert at the foot of the stone arch. A figure detached himself from the terrain and approached the ship.

“Put on your helmets,” said Saadervo as he and Stenafi donned their own helmets to prepare themselves for exposure to the thin atmosphere of Mars. The humans obeyed.

The figure came to the ship and Stenafi opened the canopy for him. He slid in next to the Ahmanyans in the front seat. Once he was in place, Stenafi closed and sealed the ship’s canopy. A moment later, Saadervo said, “You may remove your helmets now.”

The newcomer removed his headpiece. It was Jogren.

“Greetings, friends,” he said, turning to face them. “It is good to see you again, Joe. It is good to meet Mr. Richard Starlight.”

The excitement, which normally would have taken place at such a reunion of friends, was subdued by the indefinable tension inside the ship. The Earthmen had many questions, but voiced none of them. They waited for the Ahmanyans to unfold events as they wished.

Stenafi launched the ship into the air once again. Following the same heading as before, they traveled for about half an hour before setting down.



A figure detached himself from the terrain.

“Now we will get out,” said Stenafi. Her voice was taut with strain. She had brought the ship down in a place of twisting, narrow canyons. Immediately adjacent to their landing spot was the opening of a cave.

The seven people debarked from the craft. A strong breeze gusted along the canyon, and the narrowing walls of ruddy sand and stone intensified the power of the wind. Quickly they entered the cave. It was not deep. Only several yards along the passage they came to a dead end.

“Familiar, Joe?” asked Mark.

“Maybe,” said Joe noncommittally. His face reflected the unnamed strain.

Jogren led the way to the back of the cave. After a few seconds, the stone slab changed appearance and showed itself to be the door of an airlock. Joe and Mark looked at one another and nodded.

The party passed through the airlock and came into an enormous room, lit with a gentle light. The room was furnished with many tables and chairs. Against the walls there were counters and cabinets, arrayed with scientific instruments of unknown design. Several passages led out of the room.

“This is where Jogren took us after he rescued us from the snowstorm,” explained Mark. “It looks just the same.”

“Today we go beyond doors,” said Jogren, removing his helmet. The others followed his example.

Jogren moved to a massive portal close to the far corner of the room. The others followed him without speaking. The humans had no idea what they were about to see, but it was manifest that Saadervo and Stenafi were deeply moved.

The door was constructed out of a dull, dark metal that the humans could not place. There was no evidence of hinges, locks, or any kind of hardware at all. It appeared to be no more than a large metal plate set flush into the wall.

Facing the door, Jogren pressed his hand on a smooth place and held it there for many seconds. Then the door glowed with a soft blue light, and a deep, thrumming sound began, just barely discernible. It was almost too low for the humans to hear, but it vibrated through their bodies. Then a whispery and mysterious artificial voice spoke. It was almost without inflection, like an incantation.

“Chendro malatira dantra Ahmanya fornlimwa?”

Jogren answered, *“Jogren dantir, Imlah Taltahni ajuni,”* then withdrew his hand.

There was a slight pause, and then the metal panel slid soundlessly into the floor. Beyond was a dimly lit corridor, cut

directly from the stone of the mountain. It was round and stretched far into dimness.

Mark felt a chill come over him and he shivered.

Jogren stepped forward and the others followed. After all had passed, the door rose from the floor and sealed off the access again. They walked for several minutes into the depth of the mountain, and then came to another door, similar to the first. Jogren repeated the opening procedure. The second metal portal opened onto an elevator car. The seven people entered it and the portal rose after them.

“*Prenta*,” said Jogren, and the car began to descend. Minutes passed.

“We go down five miles,” said Jogren after a time. The Ahmanyans were undeniably moved, and the apprehension in the car was heavy. The humans could feel their hearts beating fast.

Wild thoughts began to go through Zip’s mind. *What did they really know of these people? They were alien, alien. And what did the Ahmanyans know about humans—were they going to be pushed somehow beyond their limits? What were the Ahmanyans going to show them? If it was a “treasure” for goodness’ sake, why was everyone so tense?*

The elevator came to a stop and the door opened.

Jogren turned to the group of five. “We arrive,” he said needlessly. “Now you see.”

The humans strained to see over his shoulders but there was only darkness, immense darkness, cavernous darkness.

Jogren stepped into the lightless world and, in a loud voice, cried, “*Fenna!*”

Suddenly there was light.

The humans shut their eyes against the unexpected intensity, and then blinked until they had adjusted to the illumination. Once they could see, the Starmen were instantly reminded of the vast power plant inside Tharsos. A room of impossibly huge dimensions opened up before them. They saw rank upon uncountable rank of horizontal gold and clear quartz capsules. Each was about eight feet long and two feet in diameter, and they

were stacked in sturdy racks up to about fifty high and anchored solidly to the floor. Each capsule was connected to tubes and cables that led into a large box. Boxes were spaced about twenty feet apart and each was connected to about forty capsules. There were aisles set regularly among the units. The aisle closest to the humans ran for as far as the eye could see.

“Here is Ahmanya!” said Jogren reverently, and extended his hand.

“What?” said Mark in a voice that sounded as if he were at the bottom of a well.

“Look,” said Saadervo solemnly, with a nod.

Slowly and warily, the Starmen and Richard crossed the open space and approached the closest rank of capsules. Zip gazed into it, then jumped back with a gasp and turned frightened eyes on the others. With trepidation, the Earthmen stepped closer and looked through the clear capsule at what lay within.

It was a body—an emaciated Ahmanyan body. Its cheeks were deeply sunken, its eyes were closed, and the shape of its skull was visible around the eye sockets and in the jaw line. The skin was as dark as mahogany and had the pallor of wax. Its hands were folded across its breast, and the fingers looked as if they were little more than skin stretched across brittle bones. The mouth was very slightly open and the humans could see a hint of teeth between the waxlike lips. It had been a man.

Joe felt a little nauseous as he looked at the remains. Mark and Zip and Richard had moved a little farther along the aisle, staring into other capsules.

This is unimaginably strange, thought Zip. This is overwhelmingly morbid. I can't endure it! This is the “treasure” of Ahmanya?

He gazed up and surveyed the endless rows of containers around him, each capsule holding the remains of an Ahmanyan. Tens, hundreds of thousands of them, he guessed. His knees felt weak.

He looked aside and saw Stenafi staring at him curiously. He

felt decidedly uncomfortable and knew he had to say something.

“You—, you’ve mummified your people,” he managed to say.

“‘Mummified?’ I do not know this word,” said Stenafi, her brow wrinkled in puzzlement.

“A long time ago on Earth, there was a people who wanted to preserve their dead. When someone died, they expended great labor to keep their flesh from decaying.”

Stenafi reared back almost as if she had been struck, a look of shock suddenly flashing onto her face. “But Starman Foster!” she protested. “We would not do such a thing! These Ahmanyans are not dead!”

Richard, Mark, and Joe looked up.

“Not dead?” Zip stammered. “These are not dead?” Unconsciously he had raised his voice.

“No, Starman Foster,” said Saadervo. “These are living Ahmanyans! As Jogren said, ‘Here is Ahmanya!’ You have been searching long and far for our people. Today you have found us. Here,” he spread his hands, “is the treasure of Ahmanya. Here is our hope. Here, Starman Foster,” he looked at him with an expression mingled with affection, supplication, tragedy, and nobility, “here is your hope as well.”

“These are living?” Zip could barely speak.

“They are in hypersleep. It is for this we need the *illunas*. It contains a substance that is vital for keeping them alive in the capsules. Now they only require one part in 800,000, but without it, they will indeed die. And when it comes time to rouse them, we will need much *illunas*.”

“How can this be?” asked Richard, amazed.

“Before the war with the Xenobots, we prepared our weapons of defense. Our leaders, with great wisdom, also prepared harbors like this one—shelters for our people if our planet was attacked. And when we realized that a great fleet of Xenobots had been hiding in the far reaches of the Solar System and was speeding toward Ahmanya, and that our own armada had gone through hyperspace, we knew that the extinction of our

race was at hand. We had barely two weeks to put our population into hypersleep.”

“Do you mean to say that your entire generation survived the attack?” asked Richard with incredulity.

“No, Mr. Starlight,” said Saadervo with a somber shake of his head. “Less than one per cent of our people are in hypersleep. All others died in the savage attack. In this harbor there are 500,000 Ahmanyans. In *Imlah Taltahni*, Jogren is their Guardian. It is his right and privilege to speak of these matters. Only by his leave may I answer your questions, and only because I am more fluent in English than he.”

The image stunned Zip, and he reeled. He couldn’t imagine an entire planet knowing that its end was two weeks away and that nothing could prevent it. How could they have selected who would survive? He tried to imagine someone climbing into one of these capsules, not knowing how many eons would pass before he would open his eyes again.

“Here is Ahmanya,” repeated Jogren. “Long asleep. This is one great hall of the people of Ahmanya. Five hundred thousand people sleep here. They sleep for more than 12,000 years. On Ahmanya are fifteen other cities of sleepers, like this city. Also one city on Asteroid. All wait to walk again. Wait for Ahmanya to become green planet again.”

Saadervo continued. “The Asteroid contains 435,672 Ahmanyans—almost our complete army—those who survived the assault on the Xenobots’ home planet and returned to find their planet a complete wasteland, shrouded from pole to pole in superheated whirling dust. They were the last to sleep. Inside the Asteroid there is a complete city, with tall buildings, manufacturing and technological centers, armories, and a great fleet of spacecraft. That and the city on Europa are the only Ahmanyan cities that exist anywhere.

“Altogether, there are exactly 8,439,553 Ahmanyans. Of these 8,435,672 are in hypersleep; there are only 3,881 who are awake. Each harbor has a community with its Guardian to care for it and to preserve the heritage of Ahmanya. Inside the Asteroid is a

community of 387 people. The responsibility of Guardianship and Preservation is passed down through the generations of waking Ahmanyans.”

Zip said, “Is there a harbor below Final Ilien?”

“You are shrewd, Starman Foster,” said Saadervo, nodding. “Yes, there is a harbor five miles beneath the *Kuznikas*’ settlement there.”

“Saadervo,” said Richard. “The process of terraformation on Mars—Ahmanya—began in 2009 when a meteor shower struck your planet. Did the impacts damage any of your harbors?”

“No, Mr. Starlight,” said the Ahmanyan governor. “The harbors were carefully selected for their stability. They are protected by the entire strength of the planet’s crust. A direct, or close, meteor impact would indeed have done much harm, but fortunately none of the harbors was close to the points of impact.”

“When will the Ahmanyans awake?” asked Mark.

“We wait for people of Earth to learn to travel in space,” answered Jogren. “Long ago Ahmanya fight Xenobots to save Earth. Now we need Earth to restore the green planet so sleeping race of Ahmanya can wake.”

“Well, I’m staggered,” said Joe. “Are you sure you can do it? I mean, can these people really be brought back?”

“It is a long, complex, and difficult process, Starman Taylor,” said Saadervo, “but we know how to do it. You have not yet met the Elder, but today you will do so. The Elder is one of the ancient generation. He slept until recently. When Lurton Zimbardo threatened Ahmanya with invisible asteroids, our technicians awoke him, for we craved his wisdom. His eyes saw the Xenobots lay siege to our planet more than twelve millennia in the past. He fought in the defense of Earth.”

While Saadervo was conversing with the humans, Stenafi and Jogren had been talking quietly. Stenafi had apparently convinced Jogren to reveal one more secret.

Jogren said, “Come. I show you special hope of Ahmanya.” He led the party into a side room not far from the entrance.

Inside were five capsules. Two contained adults—a man and a woman—and three contained children.

“Prince Izmaka,” said Jogren reverently. “He is now High King of Ahmanya. His father, High King Santilla, die in defense of Ahmanya. When Prince Izmaka wake, he is High King. And this child”—he pointed to a small body in a capsule—“is Princess Kennatha. She is High Queen after her father.”

~

On the way back up to the surface, Zip’s mind was racing. There are Benefactors, then! Many of them, more than eight million! We have found them!

“Then our challenge is to awaken the Ahmanyans who are in hypersleep,” he said to the group. “The threat that the Xenobots might send a huge force to destroy us all is not as urgent as we had feared—if they cannot come into the Solar System in large numbers.”

“So it would appear, Starman Foster,” agreed Saadervo, “but we cannot take that assumption as proven. We must always be wary.”

“And the sleeping Ahmanyans?”

“Yes—that is our first and most pressing challenge. If the *illunas* is protected, we can awaken them in time. It takes almost two years to effect the enlivening process.”

“Two years?” said Richard, astonished.

“Indeed yes, Mr. Starlight,” said Saadervo, turning to the man. “Though we began to awaken the Elder months ago, he walked among us only quite recently—a matter of weeks. But the complexity of the process is not the first difficulty: we cannot begin to awaken our people, of course, if Ahmanya is unable to support its population. Now the green planet is a red desert. There is no native animal life left, and little native vegetation. The atmosphere is too thin and the temperature too low to sustain our lives. It is not merely a process of awaking the population; we must restore an entire planet.

“We walk what you call a knife-edge, Mr. Starlight. As you well know, a small outpost of renegade Xenobots has already walked on Ahmanya, but their race has apparently no suspicion that this is the home of their ‘ancient enemy’ and that it conceals our remaining population—or indeed that there is any remaining population to be discovered. For now, their implacable hatred seethes and causes them to search for signs of our presence anywhere in the Solar System. In the first war, they destroyed Azemir, tmistakenly hinking it was our home planet. And now their racial memories seem to be only vague impressions. And Ahmanya now is obviously barren, and home only to a few people of Earth.

But if Ahmanya begins to bear life again, the Xenobots will learn of it and will make every effort to attack our planet again and prevent our restoration. The fact that the planet is now occupied only by a few simple people from Earth is, indeed, our shield—and yours. But if Ahmanya does not become green again—even in part—the Ahmanyans must continue to sleep.”

“Then Earth must terraform Ahmanya in such a way that it appears to be for our own use, but in fact prepares the way for the emergence of its true citizens.”

“That is my counsel, Mr. Starlight,” said the governor of *Imlah Taltahni*.

The elevator opened and the three Earthmen and the three Ahmanyans stepped out into the rock-hewn corridor. Moments later they were in the softly lit antechamber. Jogren made certain that the massive metal door was secure. Then he turned to face the company.

“Ahmanyans still sleep and wait,” he said. “Soon is time when long wait is over. Perhaps I am last Guardian of *Imlah Taltahni*.”

The party put on helmets and left the Ahmnyan refuge through the cave. Jogren sealed it against unauthorized entry and altered the appearance of the door so that once again it looked like the back of a shallow natural depression in the wall of the canyon. Then they all walked into the bright light of the noonday sun. The sleek silver ship was waiting for them.

“Now, our new friends and allies!” said Stenafi excitedly. “We will go to *Imlah Taltahni*! Tonight will begin a lavish banquet for all our people! The banquet will last for five days! The preparations have been long in the making, but the memory will last for ever!”

The celebration will be marked by great joy indeed, for a day that had been awaited for more than a dozen millennia had at last come to pass, and the bond between Ahmanyans and humans was ready to be forged. The Xenobots will soon learn that they have powerful reason to fear an alliance with “their ancient enemy” and the peoples of Earth, but they will not go down without a fight! The Ahmanyans are weak and the humans are new to the ways of the stars. If victory is to be gained against the denizens of Omega Centauri, the price may be very high.

Engagement with the Xenobots will take the full attention of the Ahmanyans and the people of Earth in the sixth Starman book, **DOOMSDAY HORIZON**. But now that the allies know that resisting the Xenobots is not quite as urgent as the Starmen had at first feared, vignettes into Ahmanyan history and other Starmen exploits will be recounted in six short stories.

THE SAND TOMB

*Dedicated, with thanksgiving, to Starman fan
Hiawatha Wheelwright,
who gave us permission to use his intriguing name
in a new Starman story.*

*This story is set in the summer of 2060,
eighty-nine years before the events related in
Mutiny on Mars.*

Sometime late in 2006 a Starman fan contacted the Starman Team for the first time. He bore the fascinating name Hiawatha Wheelwright. Hiawatha urged the Team to produce a short story that would resolve the issue of the First Races. David, who likes to use interesting, unusual, and memorable names in the Starman fiction, asked Hiawatha if he could use his name in a future story, and Hiawatha agreed. (David has used the names of several real people in the saga.)

*The Starman Team had long wanted to write the account of the first contact between Ahmanyans and humans—an incident first mentioned in chapter 23 of *The Treasures of Darkness*, but not described—until now. In this story, the character of Hiawatha Wheelwright appears.*

Chapter 1

The summer had lingered that year, so when the wind began to blow harder than usual it almost caught the man by surprise. The stinging sand didn't bother him at first—his outdoor suit seemed to turn away the worst of it. But for the last thirty or forty miles, Hiawatha Wheelwright had difficulty keeping his land-sailer on

course and upright. The routine high winds of Mars had picked up speed and become more erratic than he had known them ever before. The man kept close attention to the balance of his craft and its direction, making corrections seconds apart as the rising gusts fought to wrest control of the wheeled vehicle. Never before had he had to change the spread size of the sail as often as he did now—spreading it when the winds were favorable and constant, rapidly reducing its surface area when the gusts surged over him. He had only seconds' notice before a great blow would come; he kept anxious eyes to the southwest to see when the sand blew up in clouds and rolled across the flats toward him. One miscalculation and the land-sailer could be blown over, its spars and mast likely cracked or broken and the precious load of ice lost.

Scanning the shape of the land, the man quickly calculated how far he was from home. Maybe just fifteen miles now. Going outside the domed settlement of North Outpost where his family lived was always a risk, but not too severe when one stayed close to home and came outside for exploration, exercise, or plain fun. The domes might contain everything necessary to sustain life, but stepping outside onto the land now and then was a welcome change.

Only once a year or so did Hiawatha need to make the long journey to the far north, a thousand miles or more, to gather half a ton of ice from the ice fields up there. Now he was grateful for that load. If it hadn't been for the heavy weight, the land-sailer would have gone over long before now. If the winds had hit when he was two or three hundred miles away on the outward journey, he'd never have returned home.

He calculated that he had time to reach his home before the great dust storm arrived, if that's what it was. The dust haze in the air was noticeable but still quite thin. Hiawatha lifted his eyes from the controls and rapidly scrutinized the expanse for evidence of North Outpost. At first glance the land appeared featureless but on a planet where compasses would not work and among a people that disdained all but the most basic electronics,

the settlers had quickly learned to find their way through the thousands of square miles of desert that surrounded their homes. In that regard, they were like the Polynesian navigators of many centuries before who had learned to read stars and seasons, the colors of ocean water, and the shapes of waves and currents to sail unerringly between the far-flung islands of the south Pacific.

There it was! With a grunt and a grin of satisfaction, Hiawatha Wheelwright noted the inverted bowl of orange light that showed where the main dome of North Outpost lay. His wife May had timed his journey accurately and had illuminated the dome for his return. It was a warm glow, rising like an ember in the russet and tan desiccation of late afternoon.

Within minutes Hiawatha had slewed the wind-sailer up close to the dome and furled its sail. He wasted no time getting through the airlock.

“Hiawatha,” began his wife tenderly the instant the inner door opened. Quickly he threw his helmet back onto his shoulders, took her in his arms, and gave her a hasty kiss, then said, “I need the boys at once! We have to unload the sailer in a hurry! It’s getting bad outside! The wind is rising. Stephen!” he shouted. “Keese!”

Two boys burst into the room, eager delight on their faces. One was in the first flush of early manhood, the other still a child. “Hi, Da—“ began Stephen, the elder, but his father cut him off. “Make speed, son! C’mon Keese! We have to unload the ice fast! There’s a bad windstorm coming, very bad!” The boys saw the urgency on his face and ran to the airlock that Hiawatha had already entered. They squirmed into their outdoor suits and sealed their helmets. Hiawatha depressurized the chamber and opened the outer door.

The unloading took only a few minutes. Enduring the scouring bite of the severely flung sand, in relay fashion they unloaded about two dozen fifty-pound blocks of ice, stacking the chunks haphazardly inside the airlock. Then the boys helped Hiawatha roll the land-sailer to its berth inside a lean-to made of sheets of scrap metal, and tied it down. Hiawatha snatched at the

pack that held his supplies and put it over his shoulder. Then the three of them dashed into the airlock and sealed the door, shutting the fierce wind outside.

When they opened the inner door, May Wheelwright was standing anxiously alongside her sister, Bonnie Brunelli. Behind them stood two girls about the same age—just beginning to show signs of young womanhood. They were Regina Wheelwright and her orphaned cousin Linda Warren. Keese was Linda's brother. Linda and Keese's parents had died the previous winter, and the Wheelwrights and Bonnie had taken the orphans into their own home.

"All finished," said Hiawatha, stepping out of his outdoor suit and setting down his shoulder pack. The boys came in past him, their faces glowing with the exertion and excitement, their chests swelled a little with importance. "Now," smiled Hiawatha, and took his wife into his arms and held her for a moment. Then he stepped back and looked into her brown eyes, half a foot below his own dark blue eyes. The urgency of his first appearance had washed away now that he was inside, and the ice and the land-sailer were safe. He was relaxed and anticipating spending the evening with his family.

"Eleven years since our independence," said Hiawatha, then winced as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"Eleven?" asked Regina, reaching for the flatbread. "Six, I'm sure you mean, Dad." She was at the age where correcting her elders was a new and eminently satisfying pleasure.

"Six," agreed Hiawatha. He was irritated with himself. He hadn't made that mistake for... well, a long time. Translating time into Earth years still came naturally. He still remembered how he'd laughed when the settlers agreed to count the years by Martian reckoning, and he'd turned from 37 to 20 in an instant. That was almost ten—no, five and a half—years ago.

The sun was setting, and an amethyst sky was fully visible above the nearly clear dome. Jupiter and Saturn, Venus and Earth were bright points of silver. The Milky Way would soon appear. On the western horizon a lemon yellow haze was turning toward

orange and vermilion. The wind had dropped a little. Hiawatha hoped it would cease altogether when night was fully come.

The following morning, the man looked at his empty breakfast plate with satisfaction. "Delicious, boys," he said. His son Stephen and nephew, Keese, beamed with pleasure.

"Did you figure out the secret ingredient I put into the tea, Uncle?" asked Keese.

"Deed I did," said Hiawatha. "It was pretty strong, and just right!"

"Cinnamon," said Keese, "along with the herbals really added some body, don't you think?"

"Just the thing to go along with the blackberry jam on flatbread, the cereal, and dried fruit," he said.

At that moment the radio squawked. "Wheelwrights," came a voice edged with static. "North Outpost. Come in. Acknowledge. Over."

Hiawatha pushed back his chair from the breakfast table, strode across the room, and sat down at the radio. "Wheelwrights acknowledging," he said. "What is it, Tuck?"

"Just got an urgent message from Kevin," said the voice. "He said that a sandstorm unlike any he's ever seen is blowing over Final Ilien and is rapidly spreading northward. We're getting in the crest of it here in Woodworth and it's coming on real strong, Hiawatha. It'll be up your way in, maybe, 'bout an hour. It's a big one. Heard about the big ones, o' course, but never seen one like this before."

"Yeah, I almost got caught in a fearful blast last night coming down from the north with ice," responded Hiawatha, "but the gusts mostly died down during the night."

"They're comin' back, Hi, fast and strong. This," the voice faltered for a moment, then came back almost in a whisper, "this could be bad."

The Wheelwrights and their wider family had gradually gathered around the radio and now stood silently by, listening.

"Bad?" asked Hiawatha. "How bad?"

“Hasn’t been a planetwide storm for twenty-two years,” said the voice. “We’re about due for one. This could be it.”

“What about the other settlements? Has anyone heard from them?”

“Kevin said he couldn’t get through to anybody else ’cept Colin, o’ course. They’re doing okay at the moment, but there’s only the four of us here in the north still able to talk to one another.”

“Alright, Tuck. Thanks for the warning. We’d better get ready. Keep in contact.”

“If I can, Hi. If I can. The gusts have picked up measurably just in the past few minutes I been talkin’ to you. Static’s getting real bad; I can hardly hear you.”

“I can tell. Take care of yourselves, then. Wheelwrights out.” Hiawatha shut down the radio and slowly pushed the microphone away. His expression showed he was worried.

“What is it, Dad?” asked Regina anxiously. “What’s wrong?”

The Wind People didn’t believe in softening bad news when they spoke to their children. To survive, they needed everyone’s help and cooperation, and that meant truth-telling at a young age.

“Sometimes,” began Hiawatha, “every few years, an immense dust storm covers large portions of Mars. Storms can even cover the entire planet for weeks at a time. The Teagardens at Final Ilien and Morningstar are already inside the storm, and it’s catching up to Woodworths’ right now.”

“What could happen?” asked Linda.

“Dust—iron oxide, very, very fine powder,” began Hiawatha as he began wriggling into his outdoor suit. “It’s a big part of the sand. That’s what’s on the surface just about all over Mars. The great storms swirl it around so thickly you can’t see through it. It’s fine enough to get into any machinery that’s outside, including the windmills. If it does that, it’ll mean we’ll have to clean and rebuild everything before the machines will work again. Also the storms create static electricity with bolts with power up to 20,000 volts. A direct strike is strong enough to shut down our electronics, and that includes our life supports.”

Without looking back at his family, Hiawatha entered the airlock. Seconds later he was outside, searching the stretch of sand to the south. With reticent disquiet he saw impenetrable clouds in the distance, bronze and gray as if from a monstrous forest fire. But of course on Mars there was no forest—just endless sand and dust. As the minutes passed the clouds grew darker and bigger. At first he couldn't tell if they were getting taller or nearer. Or both. The opaque wall loomed up, looking like a gruesome ocean wave that refused to break.

Suddenly caught in a furious gust, Hiawatha sprinted for the airlock. As the sand scoured his entire body as if shot from a gun, he released a controlled breath in pain, not wanting to show any weakness but having no choice. The breath became a moan wrung from him unwillingly as he opened the door and plunged inside. A huge amount of dust entered with him. When the portal slammed shut, with a surge of panic he wondered whether the seal would be able make contact, but it did.

He could hear the groan and shriek of the wind even through the dome, wrenching at a gut-level that frightened him. He'd never seen, or even heard of, winds like this on Earth. Self-reliant to the point of proud independence and trust in his own capability to handle any situation that had presented itself so far, Hiawatha quailed before the raging force outside. For minutes he stood transfixed, watching darkness gradually take over the outside wall of the airlock as the sand began to pile up against the outer door. The vestibule behind him was already noticeably darker than it should have been, a darkness filled with hovering fine dust that had entered the vestibule with him. Dust-motes appeared wreathed like steam in washed-out sunrays that shone through the portal.

There's a planetful of sand to feed that gale, he thought. For a moment Hiawatha wondered whether he and his family, and those in the other northernmost settlements, might not survive the storm. The dome that had staked a bold and firm claim upon life in the barrenness that was Mars could, almost instantly, become a tomb.

Chapter 2

“Dad? What’s the matter?” The voice was that of his seven-year-old son Stephen—nearly fifteen, by Earth measure.

Hiawatha realized he had been standing immobile with a look of shock on his face for several minutes. Slowly he turned to look at his son.

“It’s a bad storm, Stephen. The sand is already piling up outside.”

“Are we going to be alright?” his son asked anxiously.

“We’ll hold on for a while—for a long while. We’ll have to see what things’ll be like when the storm’s over. May?” he called out. “May? Bonnie? Get the children. We need a family meeting!”

For the next hour or so the three adults and four children discussed their plight and how they would meet it. At the end of the meeting, Hiawatha summed up their situation:

“We can recycle our water as usual, and fortunately I just replenished our supply of ice. The gardens can supply food and oxygen for a long time, and the generators and batteries are in good repair. What we’re losing—” he paused and looked up and around—“is light. Without sunlight the solar cells will be useless and the generators will eventually fail. The windmills will be hard pressed in a storm of this intensity. They won’t last long if they haven’t been torn apart already. When they’re down the batteries will stop charging. And if the generators fail and the batteries run down, everything else will come to a stop. We can only hope and pray that the storm will not last too long, and that when it is over, we’ll be able to dig our way out of the dome, clear the sand away, and repair the windmills and solar cells.”

~

By the end of the day, the worst had been done. The batteries had stopped charging well before noon, showing that the windmills had been wrenched into ruin. The natural light that

came through the dome had gradually dimmed, transitioning from the customary pale golden glow to patched ochre swatches to a coffee-brown gloom that sank into nearly total darkness. The artificial illumination within North Outpost came on in midafternoon. The family ate a subdued dinner under lamps as if at midnight.

The susurrant of the wind was a constant accompaniment to the family's conversations, rising sometimes to a howl that even drowned out their words. A grating, scraping sound within the shriek of the gusts became common.

There was no dawn to herald the beginning of the next day. After breakfast Hiawatha went into his workshop and set to work constructing a strange instrument. May went to the radio and tried to contact the other families. Final Ilien was nearly 400 miles south. Not far from it was Morningstar. She was unable to raise them. Woodworth was just over sixty miles to the southwest, but no one there answered her call either.

"The aerial's down, Aunt May," said Keese after he'd watched her sending out a message for over twenty minutes. "They may be fine and we'd never know. They can't be worse off than we are."

"You're probably right, Keese," said May, turning off the radio. "Guess I'd better save the batteries." She stood up and pushed the chair back under the counter. *We're cut off, she thought; we're on our own. Same as the others are.*

~

By the middle of the afternoon Hiawatha had completed his project and brought it to the entry of the dome. The rest of the family gathered around him. He held a cable about three-eighths of an inch in diameter and about twenty feet long. At one end was a small opening with a bulb covered with porous material.

"It's a miniature anemometer," Hiawatha explained as he began to wrap the cable around a metal rod an eighth of an inch thick. "I've sharpened the end of the rod into a point. I'll connect

the anemometer to the rod and push it through the sand outside the door. If I can get it through the sand, and if the covering is less than twenty feet thick, we'll be able to tell how fast the wind is blowing and when the storm is over, and how much sand we'll have dig through to get out."

"Great idea, Dad!" said Stephen. "Can I help?"

"Yeah. You can help me wrap this cable around the rod. We'll go into the airlock so we can add sections of rod piece by piece while we push it through the sand."

Hiawatha and his son took their tools and supplies into the airlock and shut it. Then Hiawatha drilled a half-inch hole in the outer door. For the next half hour or so he wrapped flatwire around the cable and the metal rod, while Stephen worked after him and wrapped the flatwire with smooth tape. When the first six feet were wrapped, Hiawatha pushed the instrument through the hole in the door and then made a seal around it so that he could continue to push the cable through without breaching the barrier between the airlock and the outside. Then he hammered with a sledge hammer on the end of the metal rod, pushing it bit by bit into the entrapping sand.

The first six feet went through the sand without reaching the outside. Pressing his lips together, Hiawatha welded another length of six-foot long metal rod to the end of the previous section. Then he and Stephen wrapped it and hammered it through the door. The farther it went, the harder it was to push.

At the ten and a half foot mark the end broke through into the atmosphere. The indicator at the end of the cable rang out. Hiawatha read the numbers.

"Wind at 185 miles per hour." The disappointment showed in his face and the tone of his voice. "The storms nowhere near over yet."

Over the next six days, Hiawatha took measurements. The thickness of sand sometimes went down to a minimum of just over eight feet, but the trend was inexorably to bury the dome more and more deeply. The wind speed varied little. When the thickness of the entombing sand reached twelve feet, Hiawatha

leadenly welded another six-foot long metal rod to the cable. The thickness of the sand continued to increase and the windspeed held steady.

After fourteen days the sand had finally had become so thick that the cable could no longer reach the outside. Hiawatha did not have any more raw materials for adding to the cable. Even if he did, the sand was so thick and had become so heavy that he could not drive the cable any further.

Now there was no way to learn how long the storm would last or how deeply the dome was buried. As it was, twenty feet was about the maximum that Hiawatha had estimated that he could dig through. More than that would be too much for him. Even if sand were shoveled into every available space inside the dome to clear a passage to the outside, there would still be too much to clear. Everyone knew that, short of a miracle, they were doomed.

Six days later the batteries were approaching empty. All power systems in North Outpost would flicker and then fail in a week or ten days.

Chapter 3

For several decades, the Ahmanyans who dwelt in the fifteen refuges five miles below the face of their planet had kept close watch on the human settlements and activity on the surface. For nearly a hundred lifetimes they had waited in anticipation of the day when they would reveal themselves to the people of Earth, cultivate their friendship, and seek an alliance against their common enemy. Growing alongside their emerging hope as they watched humanity develop the technology necessary for interplanetary travel was the hesitation, caution, and passivity that would make that contact such a fearful step for them to take. To make themselves known to any sentient being at any time was to take a step that could never be undone, and which might risk their being discovered by the Xenobots—and discovery would

lead to their final extermination.

With great dismay the Ahmanyans witnessed the global holocaust on Earth that decimated its population. What had been done to Ahmanya by cruel enemies twelve thousand years earlier, the people of Earth had done to themselves. The Ahmanyans were not only shocked by the savagery that Earth people launched against each other, but outraged, for their own deep-seated hopes were dashed at the tragic turn of events.

So the Ahmanyans were not drawn to the few humans who remained on their planet when most of the others abandoned their settlements to return home only to face the nuclear devastation. Those who remained were unstable and eschewed the technology that was so vital if the Ahmanyans' hope of allying with Earth were to produce the force that could defeat the Xenobots.

But when the mighty sandstorm arose and put the few human settlers in peril of survival, the usually passive Ahmanyans were stirred. Communication passed among the fifteen refugees with a frenzy never before known in the history of Ahmanya since its spoliation twelve millennia earlier.

Urgently put forward was the argument that the few settlers could not impact the long anticipated alliance between the Ahmanyans and humans, now interminably delayed, and it was too risky to make contact with them. All Ahmanyan voices were colored with the severe disappointment—in some places including even overt indignation—that the people of Earth had committed such a global crime against their own race and planet.

Other voices spoke of mercy, and the inability to watch others perish when it was possible to intervene and save them.

The clash pitted the native Ahmanyan merciful nature, from which came its inherent love of beauty and reverence for life, against the reticence and caution that had become so deeply ingrained over the generations that had lived in refuges under the scarred and desiccated surface of their home planet.

The decision was not easily won through to nor universally acclaimed once it was made. It was not made any easier that a

course of action had to be set far more quickly than the Ahmanyans were accustomed to making decisions.

Chapter 4

Inside North Outpost, the predatory darkness was absolute. The electric lights kept the rooms inside the dome bright, but it was inescapable that beyond the light was blackness that was so heavy and oppressive that the dome may as well have been buried miles under solid, unforgiving rock. In the minds of each of the seven denizens was the certainty that they were inescapably buried alive. Before long the lights would fail and the infinite darkness would conquer forever.

Likewise, the silence was altogether different from what it had been before, when light could come through the dome. The vast emptiness of the Martian desert gave the impression of limitless space, and even simple conversations inside the dome could feel as if they could carry for miles if the speakers wished them to. It was the unboundedness of their lives that appealed so strongly to the Wind People, and made living in the emptiness of Mars an experience of liberation rather than isolation.

But now the words of conversations were dulled as if they were being overheard by an enemy just behind one's shoulder. It was as if one spoke inside a tube. Overnight the world had shrunk from a largeness beyond distant horizons to a fragile pocket of a few rooms' size.

Thus, even speaking became limited to necessary exchanges and then was carried on in subdued tones. Speaking, so essential for human contact, became an indelible reminder of the horrific fate that lay in the close future. Affection and contact became expressed more and more by tender smiles and touch, tears and embraces.

Singing could batter the dread echo away to some extent, so the inhabitants of North Outpost raised their voices in harmony every evening after dinner. Seven voices sang in parts, thereby

making it very clear that each person had a unique place in the family, and was wanted and needed if the song were to express the familial closeness that each craved.

One day over dinner, Bonnie said, "I miss animals. Here on Mars there are no animals. May and I were raised on a farm in Illinois, and," here she laughed, "when I was a girl I didn't like taking care of the cows and chickens and pigs and goats every day, morning and evening, seven days a week even if it were blowing a blizzard."

"*Gosh, that was awful!*" agreed May wholeheartedly. "I never thought I'd miss it!"

"I miss fireflies, too," said Bonnie wistfully. "And butterflies."

"Butterflies," repeated May quietly. "Butterflies in the spring garden. Remember, Bonnie, when we'd look through the sunflowers for chrysalises, and then watch them every day until they'd open and the butterfly would crawl out?"

"Tell us about the fireflies and butterflies, Aunt Bonnie," pleaded Regina. "We've never seen anything like that."

So Bonnie held the children spellbound with the accounts of how fireflies carried their own luminescence, and made swirling lines of cold light in the late evenings of summer days. And how caterpillars would spin cocoons around themselves and attach them to the undersides of leaves, and then weeks later the cocoons would open and butterflies would emerge and unfurl wet wings. And how the wings would dry out and then the butterflies would take to the air. The lowly, slow-moving, undulating caterpillar had become a beautiful winged creature.

When they all finally went to sleep, a few oil lamps were left burning. Even the adults were afraid of the darkness now.

~

The next morning began the eighteenth day of absolute darkness.

"How much longer will the batteries last?" May asked

Hiawatha quietly as they prepared breakfast together. She had refrained from asking that question before, but now she felt that she needed to know.

“A few days—three, maybe four,” her husband replied.

“And then...?”

“And then the air will go bad, long before we run out of food and water. We’ve got enough oil for the lamps to last until... until then.” Neither of them spoke for at least a minute. Then Hiawatha added, “I suppose it’ll be about the same as going to sleep.” He knew it would be rougher than that.

There was a sudden loud *thump*, followed quickly by two others not quite as loud.

“What...?” muttered Hiawatha, looking around. “That wasn’t from in here, not here in the kitchen. Is somebody...?” He set down the bowl of oatmeal he was mixing, turned down the heat on the stove, and strode out into the common room. There was a light scraping noise.

Regina, followed quickly by Stephen, entered the room from their sleeping quarters.

“What’s that noise, Dad?” asked Stephen.

Hiawatha held out a restraining hand and inclined his ear.

“Hiawatha Wheelwright,” spoke a voice with an eerie, even preternatural tone.

Hiawatha’s heart began to race. *What in the world...?*

“What is it?” asked May, who had entered the room on the heels of her husband.

“Hiawatha Wheelwright,” said the voice again. “If you are able, strike the walls of the dome, hard.”

“Stephen,” said his father tensely, “get me a large wrench from the workshop.” Stephen ran and brought back a steel wrench at least eighteen inches long.

“Hiawatha Wheelwright,” uttered the eerie voice a third time. “If you are able...”

At that moment Hiawatha slammed the wrench against the closest wall. Once, twice, three times.

“Good, Hiawatha Wheelwright. You are alive. We will

rescue you. Be patient. You will see light within a few hours.”

Stephen shouted, “We’re saved! We’re going to be saved!” He began to jump up and down. Hiawatha and May fell into each other’s arms and Regina pressed in between them. They were crying and laughing at the same time.

Bonnie and the two other children came into the room.

“What’s the commotion? What’s happening?” she cried out.

“We’re going to be rescued!” shouted Stephen. “Someone’s outside and they’re going to rescue us!”

“Is it true?” Bonnie asked, her expression wide with wonder.

“It’s true,” said Hiawatha, wiping tears from his eyes. “It’s true. A voice came through the dome. Someone must have pushed a bar or cable through the sand outside to the dome and then used it to speak to us. They said, they said we’d be free in a few hours.”

Bonnie collapsed on the floor crying. “Thank God, thank God!” she burst out.

“Who is it? Who could it be?” asked Keese eagerly.

“It has to be one of the other families,” said Hiawatha, “probably Woodworths. They’re closest. They must not have been buried, or at least not as deeply as we are. I don’t know. We’ll just have to wait and find out! Soon! ‘A few hours’, they said. Let’s...” he laughed, “let’s have breakfast!”

~

By midmorning they could hear a sound outside the dome, though the darkness was as impenetrable as before. There was a constant, barely discernible, hum. Very, very gradually it grew in volume. The family sat together in the common room playing a game. The children sang quietly as they moved the game pieces. Keese even squabbled with Regina once over a move. The parents did not interfere.

Suddenly there was extra light in the room. Everyone looked up.

“Light!” screamed Keese, pointing upward. “There they

are!” Almost straight overhead a circular patch of dome about a foot across showed light, and a beam of sunlight lanced into the room. As they watched, the patch became larger and the humming noise became louder. Sand was blowing off the dome under the power of a large blowing machine.

“What’s that?” said Hiawatha to himself quietly. His brow wrinkled in puzzlement. “Tuck doesn’t have anything like that, nor do the Teagardens. Strange.”

The dust on the outside of the dome did not permit them to see who was operating the machine, but now and then the family members could see the bottoms of boots when someone walked across the top of the dome, or maybe a kneepoint as someone knelt. As the dust disappeared, they recognized that there were three figures outside, each working with a powerful blowing machine, removing and scattering the overlaying sand.

For the next several hours they watched as North Outpost gradually emerged into the light once again. The great dome and the outlying domes and the passages between them were set free from the tons of sand that had buried them days before.

Toward the end of the day as the sun was setting, the airlock itself was blown free of the encroaching sand. Hiawatha and the others were inside the airlock dressed in their outdoor suits, eagerly awaiting the moment when they could open the door and greet their rescuers.

At long last the door was free. Hiawatha opened it and everyone rushed outside.

“Thank you, thank you!” he cried, and his family said the same, eagerly and laughingly surrounding three men in dark atmosphere suits covered with red dust, their heads protected by close fitting helmets.

“You are now free, Hiawatha Wheelwright,” said one of the men, “and the others are free also. We will leave you one blower, for there is still some work to be done. We will also leave you some food. Good bye.”

Hiawatha was stunned. “But... who are you?” He recognized that none of the men was from any of the domed communities he

was familiar with. "Who are you?" he repeated, softly this time.

"You are welcome. We will... meet again. But now we are tired and we must go." The three men turned and walked away. Those who had been rescued stood still in a state of shock. This was not what they had expected.

And then Keese ran after them. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hey! Come back! Hey...!" The men kept walking.

"Keese!" Hiawatha's tone was stern. The boy turned and looked back. "Come here," said Hiawatha.

"But..." Keese raised an arm to point at the departing trio.

Hiawatha shook his head. "Come back, Keese," he said gently.

"Aww..." said Keese, and then began to trudge back to his family, his head down.

Hiawatha had observed the shuttlecraft a hundred or so yards off, and knew that it was completely unfamiliar. None of the families from Earth had anything like it. He didn't know all of the former Earth people, but he knew for sure that he had never seen those three men before, nor had he ever seen anything like their vehicle.

When the vehicle lifted off and shot toward the west, any doubts he may have had were dispelled. He was sure that this was not a craft of Earth manufacture. In spite of the unlooked-for rescue, he was uncertain and therefore wary. Maybe even a little anxious.

Chapter 5

Over the next few days Hiawatha and his family replaced the solar cells and got a good start on rebuilding the windmills. Speculation over the identity of their rescuers was an exciting topic of conversation between the four settlements, but it went no farther than sharing confusion and wild guesswork. All the stories of rescue were virtually identical, but no one knew anything for sure. All had been told by their rescuers that they

would meet again, but no one had been told when.

All the settlements had been left the same kind of food.

“What is this?” asked Linda Warren when breakfast was served on the day after the rescue. She was holding up a wafer, thick and rather dry. It needed a lot of water to wash it down.

Much more delectable was the fruit and the juice that Hiawatha, May, and Bonnie had unpacked the night before. There were also strips of strange, dried fruit and something like cheese but wasn’t.

“We don’t know what it is, Linda,” answered Bonnie, “but it’ll fill you up. Don’t eat too much to start with, because we think it will expand in your stomach when you drink.”

“Probably some kind of grain cake pressed together,” mused Hiawatha.

“Grain? On Mars?” queried Stephen.

“We have grain,” said his mother.

“Not like this,” said Stephen as he chewed. “It’s not bad but it sure makes you thirsty. Lemme have some more of that juice.”

~

With the patient resignation that was quickly becoming part of the fiber of the settling families, Hiawatha and the others applied themselves to their work. They cleaned what machinery they could and discarded what couldn’t be fixed, setting it aside to be cannibalized later for whatever need might arise. They finished rebuilding their windmills, used the air blower to send the accumulated sand farther and farther away from the domes, and tended their gardens with a little extra care. They would not know for a while whether the days of darkness had affected the plants so essential for food and oxygen. Life returned to normal, although whenever he was outside, Hiawatha remembered to gaze into the west now and again, searching the horizon for signs of a flying shuttlecraft.

~

One day, just about sunset, he saw something moving. The sun was just at the cusp of the horizon and cast long shadows across the sand. It was easy to mistake distant, scuttling clouds with the sun behind them for unnatural movement. Not being quite sure what he was seeing, Hiawatha continued to peer across the shadow-strewn sandy expanse.

And then he was certain. Something was coming—not a cloud, and not a land-sailer. Something he had seen only once before. It moved smoothly and silently, barely stirring up the sand beneath it as it swept over the desert.

He turned, entered the airlock, and then used the intercom.

“Everyone come outside—quickly. We have visitors. Our rescuers are coming.”

Within a couple of minutes the three adults and four children were standing outside, excited and a little apprehensive. The vehicle stopped about fifty yards away, and then settled slowly to the sand. It was sleek but roomy, and glistened with glass or crystal windows and various components set in a metal hull that appeared nearly black as it was silhouetted in the sun. Just then the final disk of the sun sank below the horizon and the light changed, and the craft was seen to be dark green with hidden depths of glints and sparkles.

Large access portals opened and three figures debarked. Tall and slender, they walked straight toward the settlers and stopped a few feet away. They were dressed in dark outdoor suits like those they had been wearing on the day of the rescue.

“Greetings and peace to you, Hiawatha Wheelwright,” said one of them. “You and your family look well. We are pleased to see you. We welcome you.”

“You weh—you *welcome* us?” stammered Hiawatha.

“You have chosen to settle on our planet. This is our home. We of Ahmanya are agreed that it is now your home also. We welcome you. We call you, in our language, *Kuznika*—the Settlers. We will be friends and allies. There is much to tell you.”

“Come, come in,” said May in a rush. “Come in, please.” She extended her hand and invited the visitors to enter the

airlock.

Before the sun rose again, the Settlers would be assured that they were no longer refugees. Never again would they think of themselves as Earthmen. The fourth planet had indeed become their home.

THE EIGHT TREASURES

This story takes place at the end of the First Xenobot War in 10085 B.C. It is written in the first person, a method selected to lend greater poignancy to what is perhaps the most moving narrative in the Starman saga.

Chapter 1

My official report has been completed and placed into the custody of the Guardians. I have eaten my last meal and disposed of all other official duties. There is still a little time before I am scheduled to report for my suspension. Nearly all the others who've gone before me spent their last hours in interminable, morbid gazing at the surface of what was once our verdant home, but I will not. I have been down there and have no need or desire to see it again—not as it is now. The next time I see it—if that time ever comes—I trust it will be different. The outrage that I saw, smelled, and touched, even tasted if it comes to that, is utterly beyond description. I will spend what little time remains to me writing this informal account. Maybe it will assuage a little of the agonizing emotions that churn inside. It doesn't matter if anyone will ever read it or not.

I don't know how or why I survived the shock of the first revelation. I don't know how any of us survived the horror of that first spectacle. It has been seven days since the war ended. We were riding in high triumph after our complete victory in Omega Centauri. The Xenobot fleet retreated, retreated, retreated in the face of our onslaught, until its remaining ships buzzed around its belching planet with no place left to hide. As they protected their home planet—ha! “protected their home planet”—the image of *them* protecting their home planet curls my lips with irony, scorn, I don't know—but as they did so, we bore in! They fought with implacable, desperate odium. The

contempt they had felt for so many other races was swiftly transformed to obdurate hatred for us when they realized that they had finally met their match, and more.

In the end every last one of their spacecraft was destroyed. The few that survived our onslaught sought shelter among the stinking, squelching swamps of their thrice-cursed planet, but that only delayed the inevitable. We located and obliterated them utterly as, one by one, the repellent hulls came into view. They couldn't hide from us. Their solar-driven propulsion systems retained telltale heat even if they managed to shut them down, and our detectors found them as easily as our children find fireflies in the woods of a warm summer evening.

“Found,” I should say—not “find”.

When the last ship was destroyed and what little Xenobot civilization had survived was left crawling in the mud like lizards, the wiser among us urged our commanders to exterminate the race that had been the scourge of the galaxy for uncountable eons. “Wiser”, I say, but even as I write that I back off from the word. It is not in the Ahmanyen nature to be vindictive. Even now, I say it. We showed mercy to the vanquished, the utterly vanquished enemy. Would we have done so had we known what our homecoming was to be like?

I waited long before writing this next line: I had to answer the question for myself—perhaps grudgingly, but truly, I must admit that we would still have shown mercy to the brutal and irredeemable enemy that they were, for those few who remained to grovel and slither on their home planet were helpless. They were left to live in the muck and welcome to it!

But when we returned through hyperspace with our full fleet, riding in high triumph, as I say, to our own planet, and saw what the unsuspected remaining Xenobots had committed there, we showed no mercy! None was asked. Indeed, none was possible at that time. We saw Ahmanya—our Ahmanya—seething with a hideous, raging storm that covered the entire planet, from pole to pole. The luscious green jewel of the Solar System that we had left was now a bilious gray horror, marked with conflagrations a

thousand miles across, monstrous blizzards of fire and snow, grotesque clouds black and seething, and the enormous white mists of thick water vapor hundreds of miles above the surface. Those frozen white clouds had been our temperate oceans.

The shock was too great for us to absorb, so we didn't try to do so. We rode it rather than tried to contain it! We rode it like a piece of driftwood on a heaving sea. Never have Ahmanyans been so stirred with the martial spirit, not even when we took the battle back to the Xenobots' home planet! We did not pause! Immediately upon our emergence from the hypertube to behold the ghastly apparition that presented itself to us, Prince Izmaka charged us with the order to annihilate every Xenobot warship and to let none, *none*, escape through hyperspace!

We leaped to the task, of course! With senses sharpened beyond belief, powered and directed by that energy that drives us beyond our limits, we surged into battle again! Perhaps some of us sang. I can only imagine the leering attitude of the Xenobot slime as they rested inside their ugly warcraft, gloating over the devastation of once-green Ahmanya and how it churned now with filthy clouds—but whatever self-indulgent wallowing in evil they felt must have changed to sheer panic when we appeared out of hyperspace and instantly launched our vengeance against them. We held nothing back. We did not stop to weigh risks. We flew into battle, and the great warship to which I was posted, the incomparable *Ossëan* that had once been our largest moon, led the attack. There is no doubt that *Ossëan* alone could have won the last battle against our foes, but there were more than a hundred Ahmanyman battlecraft that engaged the enemy with us.

It took only minutes, and we were victorious without the loss of a single ship. The Xenobot War was finally over. But the price...

Chapter 2

In the cosmic stillness that fell after the last Xenobot warship had been reduced to atoms, Prince Izmaka, who had commanded *Ossëan*, brought most of our warships aboard the flying iron moon that had become our flagship. A few he set to patrol the Inner Planets. He also launched a few mapping satellites in orbit around poor Ahmanya to provide for us a map of the new surface of our burning planet. Several of the most sophisticated robotic droids were dispatched to maintain a constant surveillance of the entire Solar System, watching for any sign of Xenobot craft—though we were confident that not one was left in the entire galaxy.

The next day I was summoned to Izmaka's counsel room, along with seven other pilots.

"I am sending you down to the surface," he said to us. "It will be your responsibility to find the Eight Treasures of Ahmanya and bring them back to *Ossëan*." He explained further that he had been in contact with the Guardians of the fifteen refuges where the remaining population of Ahmanya had been taken. All but two had already fulfilled their charge to put their 500,000 people into suspension, and the last would complete their duty by the end of the day. From them, perhaps, someday, Ahmanya may rise again—from this remnant that is less than one percent of the population we had left but a short time before.

"We have several tasks to complete before we begin our own suspensions," he reported. "The new map of Ahmanya must be completed, the access tunnels to the refuges must be repaired and fortified, the survival of the *illunas* must be guaranteed, the Key to *Ossëan* must be removed and concealed, and the Eight Treasures must be found and brought aboard." He sighed. "After that," he said wearily, "we can rest." He said it almost distractedly. "The long time of waiting will begin."

Those among the Ahmanyans of the previous generation who, in their own time, had been considered by some to be doomsayers had been proven right. How we praised them now!

There had been enough of them so that, under their influence, the survivalist plan was enacted, even as the majority of us prepared for war. Just in the remotest chance that mighty Ahmanya were to be attacked and overrun, the refuges had been constructed and the Eight Treasures were placed in secure locations.

The refuges on Ahmanya had been built five miles below the surface, with access shafts. The upper portions of the shafts, as expected, had been destroyed in the attack. Those in the refuges were quite capable of effecting the necessary repairs, but it would be much easier for them if we did the work from the surface. The construction crews had already departed for the storm-wracked planet. They would be the first to touch down. The agrologists whom the commander had charged with preserving and nurturing the *illunas* were still in the laboratory; they'd depart for the surface after the great storms had subsided. Perhaps they will have to wait years. In the meantime, they must ensure the survival of the *illunas* under artificial conditions. If the *illunas* fails, then the Ahmanyan race is doomed to extinction.

The Eight Treasures of Ahmanya were the repositories of all knowledge that are vital for the preservation of Ahmanyan life and culture. They had been defined, assembled, and set under protective measures. In case of attack against the planet, they were to be instantly brought into shelters at least a mile below the surface. They had been distributed equally over the planet.

What were the Eight Treasures? I write with pride. The genetic code of all animal and plant life with organic samples. The encoded and miniaturized text of all Ahmanyan literature. The sum total of all Ahmanyan scientific knowledge. The full account of Ahmanyan history. The complete repository of Ahmanyan musical heritage. The full library of Ahmanyan visual arts. The history of peoples and languages, with genealogies. And archival statements from nearly every Ahmanyan living at the time the Eight Treasures were assembled.

The creation of the Eight Treasures was the greatest task in the history of Ahmanya, and had taken years to accomplish.

Even if the planet were never attacked, the completion of the Eight Treasures was an incomparable cultural achievement. Now that the worst had been realized, it was vital that the Eight Treasures be retrieved from their places of concealment and brought to *Ossëan*. Now, someday, someday, we hoped, a time would come when they would be needed.

Chapter 3

When Prince Izmaka dismissed the eight of us, I rounded up two others for my crew and told them that we had an assignment. I selected Yenl—she whom I was going to marry after the Xenobots had been conquered—and Sione. We had grown up together in the northern city of *Sunis*, and remained close. We knew we could grieve and find comfort with each other in somber silence.

In very little time we prepared the *Suncrest* for launch. The *Suncrest* was a well-equipped shuttlecraft, lightly armed but packed with heavy equipment and scientific apparatus. We'd need it. Our charge was to retrieve the sixth Treasure, the full library of Ahmanyans visual arts, from its place of concealment.

The Treasures had been placed into vaults that could survive almost anything except the breaking of the very fabric of the planet. The sixth Treasure had been kept in the city of *Nsedna*¹ *Zar*, the Diamond of the South. The site of that city was now a lurid desert that glowed with the heat of the attack that had atomized it. About fifteen miles away and five miles down was one of the three refuges situated in the southern hemisphere: *Sando Suan Vu*, the Fortress of Certain Hope, where half a million Ahmanyans now slept. The team that had been sent to repair the access shaft to the *Sando* was already at work.

¹ Name based on Sedna, the name given to what was briefly and unofficially called the “tenth planet”, whose discovery was announced the day before this story was written.

The *Suncrest* was the first of the eight crews sent after the Treasures to launch from *Ossëan*. My stomach retched when I first looked down upon the surface of Ahmanya from the pilot's vantage point. I had seen the horror on the viewscreens of Olovanda, the great city within *Ossëan*, but now I saw it directly below me. Ah, green Ahmanya! How shall we sing your songs now? Your soil is alien. We are an orphan people. The soft-leaved forests that covered most of our continents are now a howling wasteland; the eternal seas are desert basins, their waters now rapidly dispersing clouds of frozen vapor in soulless space; where our children played, millions of homeless memories are now spinning helplessly in hurricane winds. Ah...

Who ever would have thought that we would need spacesuits to walk on our own planet? I had no need to order the crew to don their suits. They knew without being told.

It was only a matter of moments before we entered the upper layers of the atmosphere, a swirling, churning chaos of brown sand and black ash. What little water vapor remained in the atmosphere turned the microscopic particles into a clinging film. My feelings flared into fiery rage and boundless grief as repulsive thoughts assailed me—were these microscopic particles that covered our windshield the ash of cremated Ahmanyans? Was this all that was left of our flora and fauna? I felt my heart race when I concluded that the answer could only be Yes. I began to tremble violently and had to withdraw my hands from the controls. With shaking fingers I pressed the autopilot, and did not connect until the third attempt, for I could not see through my tears.

None of us could speak or even look at one another. We hid our faces in our hands and let the ship find its own way to the surface. The unchecked winds raged like furies and the sludge that covered the ship became thicker and thicker. We gritted our teeth and endured, breathing shallowly with eyes closed, trying not to think as the shuttlecraft came closer and closer to the surface. When the melodious shipvoice announced, "Five

minutes to touchdown,” I hit the mute button so hard I hurt my hand. I didn’t care.

At length I perceived that we were no longer moving. The *Suncrest* had landed, automatically anchored itself in the gale, and then shut down its engines. I looked up. The windshield was completely black.

“Let’s go,” I said. It felt as if someone were sitting on my chest. The three of us put on our helmets, entered the airlock and sealed it, and then, with only the slightest hesitation, I opened the outer portal. The force of the sudden wind almost blew us over, even as we huddled in the airlock. I adjusted the bootweights and stepped out onto the platform. It lowered me gently to the ground and then I strode onto the dark, smoking soil of ravaged Ahmanya.

Chapter 4

Visibility was nearly zero. Instruments showed that the temperature of the soil was not hot enough to boil water, but almost. My companions joined me, not more than dark shapes in a black, ceaseless windstorm.

“Locater beacon,” I said. Yenl held the locater up close to her faceplate so she could see, and activated it.

“Not far,” she said. “This way, only thirty yards.”

“Which way?” asked Sione. “We can’t see.”

Sione and I placed our hands on Yenl’s shoulders and let her lead us, small step by small step, as she followed the indicator on the screen until we stood on the spot below which the sixth Treasure was located in its vault, a mile under our feet.

We had all hesitated to use our lightscanners up to this point, but now I had to engage mine so that I could weigh our environment. Fearful of what I would see, I looked up and turned slowly, very slowly, in a full circle. I could see the *Suncrest* to one side, resting on a featureless plain. It had been several years since I had visited *Nsedna Zar*, a city noted for its sparkling

crystal buildings and graceful spires. It was at its breathtaking best in early morning, when it glittered like the jewel for which it was named, resting harmoniously next to a placid lake, beyond which was a cool forest of *hostisn*. Comfortably rounded mountains lay to the north, clad with grass and fruit trees; to the south were meadows of flowers that reached to the horizon. Eight streams flowed from the lake through the city and out into the meadow where they divided and joined repeatedly, creating a magnificent tapestry of color and flowing, murmuring water.

Now all I saw was a black and brown void. The only feature that was recognizable was the rounded hills to the north, but they were now denuded and smooth like molten metal that had hardened in a flow. It was gut-wrenching. I could feel a sour taste in my mouth. It was as if the city had never existed, as if there had never been homes and parkways, workplaces, shops, and research centers—as if no one had ever lived there at all.

When I finished my slow circuit I saw that my companions had activated their lightscanners, and were also gazing wordlessly at the empty terrain. The screaming, scorching wind made it hard to keep our balance. Its fury rose and fell, and it changed direction unpredictably. I felt insignificant and hopelessly ineffectual. Unbidden despair was on the verge of overwhelming me. I needed action. “Let’s get busy,” I said.

We erected a heavy-duty workdome that covered the *Suncrest* and the site where we would have to dig. Then we removed our spacesuits and could work and talk freely—though we had little to say other than what was essential to get the work done. That’s what kept us going. We just worked. We didn’t share our feelings, not out loud anyway, though our courtesy to one another was almost exaggerated. With unspoken agreement, we determined not to let our Ahmanyen virtues be corroded by our unspeakable tragedy. It was almost as if we *had* to be flawless in our behavior to one another to prove that Ahmanya had survived.

During the day, my shoulders were constantly knotted, and the women’s hands and feet were abnormally cold. Yet we worked.

At the end of the day, they rubbed my shoulders, and each night I bathed their feet in warm water and anointed them.

The digging machines made rapid progress, for the soil was soft. The shattering power of the assault on *Nsedna Zar* had turned the bedrock upon which the city had been built to substance not much harder than sandstone. Twice a day we filled the interior of the dome with so much soil that we had to don our spacesuits and open up one side of the workdome and push the dirt away. The savage gale tore at us relentlessly whenever we exposed ourselves to the outside.

On the third day, Sione was operating the digger. She was the one who announced, "I've found the shaft." We'd dug down nearly a third of a mile at that point. She returned to the surface and received Yenl and me aboard the craft, and then took us all back down. We had sealed the sides of the shaft against collapse, of course, and had run across the first signs of former habitation at about the two hundred foot level—the twisted remnants of girders and platemwork that had been part of the original shaft. The assault that had occurred on the surface had affected the crust of the planet even to this depth, and the shaft had collapsed. It had been constructed, however, with this possibility in mind, and many hatches had been installed at regular intervals. Each was enormously strong, built to withstand the weight of countless tons that might collapse into the passage. This foresight was proven to have been warranted.

What Sione had discovered was an intact hatch. Our instruments showed that the great tube below was clear. Each one of the hatches that had been installed in the shafts over the Eight Treasures had an opening code, and the commander, of course, had provided that information to us. Sione had already cleared the debris from over the hatch. All that remained for us was to open it.

Chapter 5

My time is short now, but my recital is nearly finished. I expect to have enough time to complete it before I must report for my suspension.

We stepped out of the digger where it was clamped tightly to the sides of the shaft and suspended over Sione's discovery. We dropped the few feet to the top of the hatch. I knelt down and gently caressed its mirror smooth surface with my fingers. Then I stood up, looked into the eyes of my companions, and smiled. It was the first unbroken Ahmanyman artifact that we had found.

"Ready to open it?" I asked, unnecessarily. My companions nodded. We moved to the ledge that ran around the perimeter of the hatch and I entered the code into my communicator. The hatch opened up like the iris of an eye. Lights went on in the passage, indicating that it was clear below as far as we could see. It was good.

We returned to the surface in the digger and loaded it back onto the *Suncrest*. Then we rolled the deep explorer to the edge of the shaft we had dug. The deep explorer was a crane with an inhabitable ball suspended at the end of cables. Sione volunteered to remain on the surface while Yenl and I made the descent to the vault.

When we reached the bottom of the shaft, the ball came to a gentle stop and we stepped out onto a smooth, level stone floor. Around us it was cold, still, and utterly silent. A short passageway led off to one side for a few yards. At the end, through an open archway, was a chamber of unimaginable beauty. I admit I burst into tears and fell to my knees when I walked into it. So did Yenl. We held one another and sobbed for a long time. Sione could see through our viewports, and I could hear her weeping uncontrollably as well.

Masters of light as we are, I had been so inured to the hideous reality above and had buried the shock of it so deeply inside me, that I was unprepared for the sight that met my eyes when we stepped into the chamber. All around us the Ahmanyans

of *Nsedna Zar* had installed holograms of unspoiled Ahmanya, the view that one would have if he were standing on the shore of the lake with the city behind. To left and right, above, below, and behind us, we saw the meadows and forests and the clear violet sky that formed the setting of the city called the Diamond of the South. Its glittering spires rose behind us in this setting of untainted beauty.

But before us, —before us was a great crowd of the citizens of the city, standing on the water of the lake. All the people were smiling as if they were conferring upon us a great honor. As indeed they were. The elders of the city were in the front of the crowd, and one held a polished box made of *hostis* wood, extended outward. Written on a crystal plate in dark green light were the extraordinary words: *Nimta Dianda*—The Sixth Treasure.



The words he spoke then should be remembered by every living Ahmanyan forever:

*“Tanmanna, chendro feotra. Zomtor zten byela somnora, ja Ahmanya soross effen. Meliss.”*²

My hands shook as I took the box from his hands. When it was in my possession, the holograms slowly, slowly faded until all that was left was an ordinary, empty stone chamber with artificial lighting. Wordlessly, Yenl and I carried the box back to our conveyance and sealed ourselves in.

“We have the sixth Treasure,” I said. “Take us up, Sione.”

~

² “Greetings, you who live. Receive this gift from the dead, so that Ahmanya may live again. Affectionate farewell.”

Ours was the second of the Eight Treasures to be taken aboard *Ossëan*. Sione, Yenl, and I presented the *hostis* box to Izmaka in his counsel room. He received the box with solemnity, and then laid it down on the table where another already lay.

“Look and see what you have rescued,” he said. Referring to a small keypad, he initiated a code, and then reached over and lifted the top of the box. Inside were eleven multi-faceted crystals, each of a unique design, set in a soft white cloth that sparkled in the light with green flecks. “The sum total of Ahmanya’s visual arts,” he murmured. “Safe, now, on *Ossëan*.”

We smiled. Even with tears in our eyes, we smiled.

~

That was yesterday. All Eight Treasures are now safe aboard our impregnable warship. Except for a few of us citizens of Olovanda, our work is done—for the present. The agrologists and a few other scientists will be busy for some time, and of course the Guardians who will never be suspended. Prince Izmaka has turned the command of *Ossëan* over to the Guardian of Olovanda, and he has departed for the surface where he will be suspended with his family in *Imlah Taltahni*.

The time of my own suspension comes later today. Indeed, it is close now. But I have finished writing this document. Now I will go to the Chamber of Timeless Sleep and climb into the crystal cocoon that will be my home for...well, who knows how long it will be? The nameplate will read Mikel. Yenl will sleep next to me. When we emerge, it will be a new world, a new time. Ahmanya will be green again, I trust. And then we will be married—in the new world. That is my dream and my hope.

I wonder if I *will* dream...

THE INFESTATION AT SULPHUR CREEK

This short story was written at the request of Mark Zahn, who produced the online mystery magazine "The Mysterious Traveler". The story was written after The Last Command had been published, which, so we thought, had effectively shut off any further tales in the Starman saga. Therefore, this story not only had to fit into the world of the Starman without being an essential part of it, but also match the genre of "The Mysterious Traveler" with its predilection for mystery, horror, adventure, and strange tales. "The Infestation at Sulphur Creek" was our answer. It appeared in the December 2005 issue of "The Mysterious Traveler". It takes place on June 1, 2153, less than a month after the end of The Treasures of Darkness. In 2015, when we decided to revise and reissue the Starman series, this story was rewritten to fit into the overall saga, and it was extended with a completely new ending.

STARMAN MARK SEATON stepped carefully along the sandy floor of the arroyo, his ears alert for the ominous buzzing noise he was seeking, his eyes probing recesses in the canyon wall. The sound detectors inside his heavy-duty atmosphere suit were set on their most sensitive setting. In his hands he held a heat rifle, ready for instant use.

The sunlight of mid to late morning poured into the arroyo, lighting up the grainy magenta sand and casting sparkles into his eyes. The very brightness made the shadows darker, where they lay behind outcroppings of baked sandstone that had not known the flow of water for thousands of years. Walls of stone lifted up to the Starman's right and left, reaching to the plateau about fifty feet above him. Rough scrub grew in patches, subsisting on the

scanty dewfall and fogs that appeared only seasonally this far south of the Martian equator.

Suddenly the Starman tensed and gripped his rifle a little tighter. There was the buzz, like the growl of a small machine. Firewasps! If the swarm detected his presence, they would attack. In his atmosphere suit he knew that they couldn't harm him, but eliminating the colony would be far more difficult if he couldn't catch the firewasps unaware and fry the hive with a single blast from the heat rifle.

Mark calmed himself inside. Firewasps could sense human emotions, perhaps even through the suit. He slowed his breathing and then began to step gingerly along the path.

There it was! The nest was in a slot canyon that curled off to his left. Some small but hardy tree had eked out an existence in a crack, and the firewasps had built their nest behind the tree, wedged into the crack. The hive was covered with crawling insects.

Slowly the Starman raised the rifle and released the beam. Instantly the top of the tree burst into flame. Behind it the stone seared, cracked, and flaked. The firewasps crisped into dark ash.

For a full minute, Mark maintained the withering heat ray as he approached the site. Then he shut off the beam, ready to restore it in a split-second. The rock wall behind the smoking stump radiated heat waves. Inside the crack where the hive had been there was only black dust.

Confident that there were no more firewasps in that location, Mark looked upward to make sure his course was clear. Then he ignited his jet pack and lifted up over the rim of the arroyo and flew back toward the village of Sulphur Creek where he had landed his shuttlecraft less than an hour earlier.

~

Five minutes later he passed through the personnel airlock of the domed village and dropped gently next to the home of Major Jett, a retired officer formerly of Space Command. Mark tipped

back the helmet of his suit and walked up to the front door where he removed his jet pack and laid it down. He flipped open his helmet and knocked on the door.

“Come in!” cried a deep voice from inside.

Mark opened the door and stepped into the foyer of a comfortable home.

“C’mon in, Starman!” called the voice. “I heard you coming. I’m on the back patio. You’ll meet LaTanya in the kitchen—my daughter, visiting from Relcon.”

A woman in her early forties appeared around the corner. Black hair was drawn back into a ponytail from a well-shaped forehead. Her skin, nearly as black as ebony, glowed with health.

“Welcome, Starman Seaton!” she said, extending her hand and grasping his in a firm handshake. “My father’s out this way.”

“Thank you,” said Mark as he followed the woman into the back part of the house. She stepped into the covered patio then let him pass.

“I’m glad you could come so quickly!” exclaimed the man the Starman had come to see. “Sorry I can’t get up.”

The man was seated in a wicker chair with his left leg elevated and resting on a pillow. It was bare from mid-thigh downward and swollen more than twice its normal size. Gauze was plentifully wrapped around the thigh.

“Sit down over there,” said the Major, indicating another chair nearby with a generous sweep of his hand. He was almost completely bald. Although he had been retired for about ten years, he appeared solid without too much extra fat.

“LaTanya, some lemonade or something.”

“Of course, father. I’m almost finished making it already.” The woman left the men together.

“How did you get away from the swarm, Major?” asked Mark. “I can’t imagine anyone surviving a firewasp attack.”

“Hmmp!” snorted the man. “I was lucky. I admit it—I was lucky. The swarm didn’t find me—just the one wasp that got me in the leg. I was taking a walk this morning, wearing only an atmosphere suit. Got to the mouth of that arroyo and one of those

blamed things skewered me. Felt like a spike, it did! Oh, it hurt! I slammed my hand down without even thinking and crushed the devil before it got away. Soon as I saw what it was, I ran. My adrenaline took me probably a quarter of a mile before I collapsed. I'd put in an emergency call to the medic and probably hollered at him all the way. I don't usually lose my composure, Starman, I assure you, but these firewasps—*these* firewasps especially—are no laughing matter." He gave Mark a shrewd look.

"Anyway, they found me and brought me home. You know the rest. An urgent call to you at Eagle City, and here you are. Here's the lemonade, too."

LaTanya had brought in three tall glasses and joined the two men. Mark took a sip and smiled his thanks.

"What do you mean by saying '*these* firewasps', Major Jett?"

The man smacked his lips as he put his own glass down, and then leaned forward a little. "Now that it's over, it would be easy to laugh at the picture of a seventy-year-old man leaping across the desert as if his pants were on fire, hollering at the top of his voice." He snorted again. "But this devil has been genetically engineered." He unwrapped a white cloth that was lying on the table, revealing a repulsive, dead insect. "This is no ordinary firewasp. This," he paused for emphasis, "is a weapon."

Mark felt his skin crawl as he bent over the cloth and stared at the vicious insect.

"That was why I called Starlight instead of Pest Control. This was designed to kill."

"We've been tracking down any last enclaves connected with Andrew Forge in these past few weeks," said Mark, "and we've found a few, but most of them have been inside Eagle City, with one or two out in the wilds to the northeast. Joe's in Eagle City right now, and Zip's up at Mars Base working with Konig on a couple of matters. And of course there was the group in Seven Leaves. But there hasn't even been a hint of anyone working this far south."

“There no evidence that this is any of Forge’s work,” said Major Jett, “but that doesn’t mean it’s not. That man had contacts all over the planet, under the pretense of all of his ‘charitable work’. That was a good front, all right!”

Mark peered at the dead firewasp again. “If this strain was engineered,” he said, “what was the swarm doing in the wild?”

“I can’t answer that,” said Major Jett, leaning back. “An experiment gone awry, an escaped queen, I don’t know.” He looked sharply at the Starman. “But I do know that it was manufactured. The swarm you eliminated this morning was not the danger. The danger is in the main colony. You’ve got to find it and who’s responsible for it.”

“Sulphur Creek is an isolated community, Major,” said Mark. He sipped his lemonade. “I doubt that a hive of these firewasps could have traveled far. It must have come from somewhere in this village. The guilty party must be one of the many hidden followers of Andrew Forge, although if he was developing a weapon like this, it’d be a side to him that we hadn’t seen before. Are there any residents who could be responsible for this infestation?”

“There are several who have the skill, Starman Seaton,” said LaTanya, speaking for the first time since she had sat down. “But only one likely suspect.” Her words came with conviction. Her father didn’t say anything, but his nostrils flared.

Mark gave her his full attention and raised his eyebrows a little. The woman looked away, her expression stern.

Finally Major Jett spoke up. “There are three scientists in our little community, Starman, who have the skill and probably the contacts necessary to create this menace. There are an archeologist, a botanist, and a genetic engineer. The geneticist is the obvious suspect—not just because of his field but because he’s got the orneriness to do it!” The Major spoke with emphasis. Then he groaned and rubbed his leg.

“Dr. Luke Hawks is a noted misanthrope, Starman Seaton,” explained LaTanya. “He lives outside of Sulphur Creek in his own self-contained settlement. You probably saw his dome when

you arrived here this morning. Dr. Hawks has prosthetic hands and forearms, having lost his arms in an explosion a few years ago. The same accident also blinded him in one eye and badly scarred his face and chest. He was never very nice before, but now he has a real grudge against the world. He's bound to be your man. It wouldn't be too difficult for any firewasps to escape his dome."

"Mind if I take this specimen with me?" asked Mark.

Major Jett grinned. "I wasn't planning to add it to my butterfly collection. It's yours."

~

About half an hour later, Mark cut the lifters on his jet pack and dropped lightly to the ground on the edge of Dr. Hawks' property. He stepped up to the communication screen at the outer airlock and raised contact with the house. A minute went by without an answer. He tried again.

While he waited he gazed through the dome at a spread of buildings apparently haphazardly strewn across the landscape inside. Further inspection indicated that the placement of the buildings was not haphazard at all, but rather matched the natural features of the land. The best use was made to incorporate the roll of the valley and sizable boulders into the construction. Mark was impressed in spite of himself.

He tried the communicator once again. The screen lit up and revealed the countenance of a man unmistakably more than irritated.

"You're slow on the uptake, Starman!" said the man with undisguised animosity. "If I'd wanted to talk to you I'd have answered you the first time! What's keeping you from getting the message? What must I do to get rid of you as fast as possible?"

The man's face was scored with many ridges of scar tissue. There was a black patch over his left eye. A swath of smooth, totally hairless skin swept up from the eye patch over his forehead and back nearly halfway over the top of his head. What hair grew on the rest of his pate was close-cropped.

Calmly, Mark asked whether the geneticist had been involved in any experiments with firewasps, and began to describe his experience in the arroyo.

“You don’t fool me, you meddler!” sneered the man in the screen. “There’s been some sort of incident and everybody’s pointed the finger at me! Well, no one’s getting into my property, no flipping Starman or anyone, not without a warrant! If you come back with one and force your way in, I’ll accompany you everywhere you go! No one gets a look at my experiments! And if you *do* get a warrant, maybe it’ll be worth it to prove that I’m innocent and keep you from coming back! Until then, get out and leave me alone!”

The screen shut down.

He’s innocent, thought Mark as he ignited the jet pack. Decidedly unpleasant, but there’s no hint of guilt there. Now what?

~

Minutes later, cruising about seventy feet off the ground, Mark passed by another domed residence with outbuildings, separate from the village itself. The dome was filled with a thin white fog. Dimly the Starman could see buildings and many trees through it. He also noticed a row of white boxes about two feet square, set in the middle of a field far from any building.

Beehives, he thought. Bees aren’t wasps, but this is worth investigating.

He dropped to the ground near the entrance to the complex. This time his contact was answered within seconds. The face of a man in his early forties appeared on the communicator screen.

“May I help you?”

Mark introduced himself and asked who lived inside.

“This is the home and laboratory of Dr. Henry Garvey,” the man said. “He’s a botanist.”

The need for the beehives suddenly became evident to the Starman.

“May I come in and talk with him?” asked Mark.

The man looked wary. "Well, he's rather busy at the moment," he said. "Maybe if you come back later..."

"I'm only in Sulphur Creek for a few hours," explained Mark patiently but firmly. "The best time is now. I will not interrupt him for long." The Starman set his jet pack and heat rifle down to indicate that he was not planning to leave anytime soon.

"I'll... I'll tell him you're here." The airlock opened and Mark stepped through. In less than a minute he was inside the dome and knocking on the front door of the residence. The world had altered from the bright sunlight of late morning to a dense, clammy, supermoist atmosphere. The man who had spoken to him through the communicator admitted him to the house.

"Wait right here, please," he said, and left Mark standing in the entrance while he disappeared into the back of the residence.

A few minutes later a middle-aged man came through the hallway and greeted Mark. He was wearing comfortable brown work clothes, slightly damp from the fog. An aroma of rich topsoil wafted from him.

"Welcome, welcome, sir!" said the man, shaking Mark's hand. "I'm Henry Garvey. Please forgive my delay. I had to wash my hands. I was delighted when Waldo said that we had a Starman at the door. How can I help you? Please, come in, sit down!" Dr. Garvey ushered Mark into a sitting room. Potted plants, airplants, and tanks of hydroponic flowers provided tasteful decor.

Mark explained his mission briefly.

"Ah, I see," said Dr. Garvey, tenting his fingers and assuming a thoughtful expression. "I need the bees, as you have no doubt guessed, for my experiments in pollination. Wasps are no good for that purpose, and I don't have any on the property. You are welcome to check, if you like."

"Thank you, I'd like that," said Mark. "I appreciate the offer, especially since your housekeeper said that you were busy at the moment."

Dr. Garvey laughed. “Oh, Waldo’s not my housekeeper. He’s my assistant. He came from Eagle City just a few months ago. Quite a capable fellow,” explained Dr. Garvey as he opened the back door of the house to let Mark pass through into the fields beyond.

Gray silhouettes of trees appeared in the middle distance. Adjacent to the house were ordered plots with vegetables growing in profusion. The orchard began fifty yards or so away. A field rife with flowers lay off to the left. The two men strolled alongside a high hedge on their right, making their way toward the orchard.

“Waldo’s fascinated with botany,” continued Dr. Garvey. “He conducts his own experiments, I’m sure. Packages arrive for him from Eagle City rather frequently—or they used to.” His brow furrowed. “Now that I think about it, he hasn’t had any for several weeks. At least, I haven’t seen any.” Dr. Garvey raised his hand and gestured vaguely toward the back of the property. “He has his own workshop back in that direction. His living quarters are there too. He won’t stay in the house, even though I’ve got plenty of room. He’s probably out there right now. He went out that direction after he notified me you were here. We’ll go over.”

“There he is,” pointed out the Starman. “He’s running!”

Dr. Garvey squinted as he strained to look ahead. “Now, that’s strange. He must have been behind this hedge while we were talking. What’s he doing? Why, what, where are you going?”

The Starman had left his host and begun to sprint across the field in pursuit of the botanist’s assistant. Frantically, Waldo opened the front door of the cottage, cast a look back toward Mark as he leaped through, and slammed it shut. Mark was only a few seconds away when an explosion shook the house from inside. Several windows blew out, and the front door flew open.

Mark skidded to a stop. He took his laser pistol in his hand and approached the house with caution. When he heard an angry buzzing sound, instantly he turned and dashed back toward the

residence. Dr. Garvey was coming up the walk, confusion written across his features.

“What in the world...?” he began.

Mark picked the man up in both his arms and kept running.

“What’s going on?” gasped the botanist.

“Firewasps,” said Mark, grimly. “Waldo set them loose! We’ve got to get into the house and seal it up! It’s the only place inside the dome where you’ll be safe! The fog will help us! They can’t fly very fast in it!”

“I... I don’t understand,” moaned Dr. Garvey.

Mark reached the back door and hurled himself through it. He put the botanist on his own feet and slammed the door.

“Shut the windows!” he ordered.

“The windows are all closed. I keep them shut whenever I fill the compound with fog. I can’t have the dampness get into the house.”

Mark sighed with relief. Just then the indicator showed that the front airlock was in use. Mark ran to the front of the house and saw Waldo fleeing across the fields toward the spaceport.

“Call the spaceport!” Mark ordered. “Tell them to prevent Waldo from taking off!”

“There’s no one to stop him,” said Dr. Garvey, who had followed the Starman. “It’s a small port with only a single attendant. Waldo and anyone else can come and go as they wish. Surely you saw that when you landed.”

Mark had stopped paying attention to the botanist after the first sentence. He had activated his compad.

“Joe! Urgent! A small shuttlecraft will be taking off from Sulphur Creek in a few moments. The pilot is probably one of Forge’s men. Whether he is or not, he’s a dangerous man—engineered firewasps into weapons. He ran when he thought I was about to find him out. You’ll have to trace him and apprehend him!”

“No problem, Mark!” responded Joe Taylor. “I can be airborne in five minutes. I expect I’ll be able to track him! See you for dinner, I assume?”

After Mark signed off, he turned to Dr. Garvey. “You’d better call Pest Control immediately. They’ll clear your dome of the firewasps without too much difficulty. I’ve gotta get going and see if I can help capture this man! Maybe I can stop him before he lifts off! I’m sure I don’t have to tell you to stay inside the house until Pest Control tells you it’s safe to go outside.”

The Starman secured his helmet then quickly let himself out the front door. He picked up his jet pack and heat rifle. He set the audio detectors on his suit and listened for the telltale buzz of the firewasps. There was no revealing sound as he made his way quickly to the airlock that connected Dr. Garvey’s compound with the outside.

Before he opened the outer door of the airlock, he made a careful search of the chamber to make sure that no firewasps had entered it with him. Once outside the dome, he ignited his jet pack and sped toward the spaceport. Just as he touched down next to his own shuttle, another small craft launched and shot off to the north. In less than a minute, Mark was on his tail.

The big Starman raised Joe.

“The man’s escaped from Sulphur Creek in a small shuttle, but I’ve got his vitals,” he reported, and provided the information that would allow his partner to track the fugitive. “I’ll stay with him until you can join us. Then we’ll bring him down.”

“Okay, Mark,” responded Joe. “Shouldn’t take me more than ten minutes or so if he keeps on that course.”

Moments later the Starmen’s two ships were cruising on either side of Waldo’s shuttlecraft, staying unnervingly close.

“Waldo, this is Starman Mark Seaton. It must be obvious that you can’t escape us. Please proceed to Eagle City Spaceport and land. We will take you into custody there. If you decide not to do that, we’ll just follow you. We can go wherever you go and stay up longer than you can, and if we get bored, we’ll just disable your ship and then pick you up from wherever you land—assuming you land safely.”

There was no answer, but the fleeing ship slowed and changed course to Eagle City. The Starmen had ordered a place

on the tarmac cleared, and guided Waldo to a landing there. As they took him in charge, fury and frustration showed themselves plainly in the carriage of his body, only kept in check by his unarguable helplessness.

“Do you think we can link Waldo to Forge?” asked Mark after Space Command had taken the erstwhile botanical assistant into custody. “Doesn’t look as though he’s going to talk any time soon.”

“Forge won’t talk, either,” stated Joe. “Does it matter?”

“Maybe not much if we’re trying to build a case against either one of them; the cases are pretty solid as it is,” said Mark, “but I’d sure like to know if there is a connection. And I have an idea how we can find out. Let’s go see Forge.”

~

“Thank you, Frank,” said Mark to the officer in charge of the block where Andrew Forge was being held. “We’ll just be a few minutes.”

“Sure, Starmen. Just call when you’re ready to leave.”

The Starmen approached the cell where Andrew Forge was confined. A tempered glass wall separated the inmate from the corridor, and a speaker system allowed visitors to converse with those inside. A sealed turntable allowed for secure passage of small items from those outside to those held in confinement. This was how Mr. Forge received his meals.

“Mr. Forge,” began Mark. The man who’d been known as the Banjoman didn’t acknowledge their presence. “We arrested Waldo today. He was pretty careless with his work. When you signed him up, you were not up to your usual competence in recruiting personnel for your work, Mr. Forge.”

There was no response from inside the cell.

“He was right angry when he was taken away,” added Joe. “Just furious. Sullen would be the wrong word to describe him. He was a smoldering firecracker, he was.” Joe shook his head.

“We, uh, thought you might want one of these, Mr. Forge,” said Mark, producing a small cage with a firewasp in it. “It came from Waldo. I know that prisoners are not usually allowed pets while they’re in custody, but we managed to obtain an exception for you. After all, you are rather a prominent detainee.”

“You deserve the best,” added Joe. “I guess we can work this turntable thing. It doesn’t look too complicated.”

Andrew Forge slid his eyes over toward the Starmen. When he saw the firewasp in the cage, he turned his head and then sat up quickly, his back against the far wall, his hands clutching the edge of his bed.

“What the blazes are you doing?” he screamed. “Frank, Frank, these Starmen are trying to kill me! *FRANK!!*”

“There’s no need for Frank,” said Mark. “This firewasp’s dead. But I think you’ve told us what we wanted to know. Didn’t he, Joe?”

THE PLIGHT OF THE BUMBLEBEE

In the very earliest days of the Starman Team's planning, we envisioned a saga comprised of 23 novels. Experience quickly forced us to reduce that number to ten. As our vision for the Starman saga became more realistic, each member of the Starman Team had to relinquish some part of the plan that he was keenly interested in. For Jon Cooper, that included the tale we called Danger at L5! Later Jon wrote the light-hearted story he called "The Plight of the Bumblebee". On another occasion, Valerie Kramer suggested a story having to do with codes and encryptions. From the exchanges Jon shared with Valerie on the subject, he wrote another light tale he called "The Ultimate Code". These two stories are set at the Solar System's largest space station, located at Earth's fifth LaGrange point: L5. Is there "danger at L5"? Jon's two short stories answer that question.

Chapter 1

June 13, 2153 began as a peaceful day for Richard Starlight. On that fateful afternoon the CEO of Starlight Enterprise found himself in his office making the final preparations for an expedition to Europa. Starlight Enterprise had been interested in returning to Jupiter's watery moon ever since Starmen Zip Foster, Joe Taylor, and Mark Seaton made the trip there that had so nearly cost them their lives. In another four months those same Starmen would be making a return visit, and Richard still had a lot of arrangements to make before they could leave.

Over the past few months Richard's life had seen great changes. Ever since his battle with Ban Zhou Men on the plateaus of Mars he had been trying to refocus the energies of his company to reflect a new and dangerous world. No longer was Earth safe; now there was a rapacious alien threat lurking on the

horizon—a threat that Richard knew would soon be more than just hypothetical. What he did not know was what could be done about it.

Richard reclined in his chair and looked out over his office. Starlight Tower was located forty miles north of Amundsen City, where it had stood for almost twenty years as the tallest building on the Moon. His private office was on the 121st floor and could only be reached by two private express elevators. The beauty of the lunar landscape was always fresh and new to him; through his office's treated glass walls he could see the cratered gray landscape stretch for miles into the distance. His red parakeet—a marvel of genetic engineering—chirped quietly on its stand behind his chair. *I do my best thinking up here*, he thought. *Now -*

The phone rang. Richard saw that it was an urgent call on his private line and quickly pressed a button on his desk. The image of a harried individual was projected into the air over his desk.

“Richard!” the individual shouted. “It’s terrible! You must *do* something!”

Richard smiled. He immediately recognized the caller as his long-time friend Alfred Nelson, the easily excitable director of the L5 space station. He had met him as a child when his father Thomas Starlight was supervising the construction of the station, and he had kept in touch with him ever since. *He had to be in his seventies by now*, he thought, *and yet he hasn't changed a bit.*

“It’s good to see you,” Richard said warmly. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“I can’t—no, I just can’t explain it over the phone,” he said urgently, “it’s too important. The safety of the entire Solar System is at stake! I need your best Starmen here immediately. We don’t have much time!”

Richard was a little surprised. His friend had a tendency to become agitated but this was exceptional. “I’ll send one of my top people right over,” he promised. “Can you give me any idea what is going on? If there is something seriously wrong - “

“Oh, yes, there *is*,” Mr. Nelson repeated. “There most certainly is, and—well—no, I just can’t say anything. But

please—you must hurry!” And at that, Mr. Nelson severed the connection.

Richard folded his hands together and thought for a moment. Mr. Nelson had a long history of over-dramatizing small concerns, but he knew that he would never have called if there wasn't something actually wrong. The L5 space station that he managed was the largest one in the entire Solar System and did make a tempting target. Given the recent incursion that the Starmen had battled a few months ago he did not dare ignore the message. The question was, which of his Starmen were currently available for an immediate trip into Earth orbit?

He decided to contact David Foster. Zip was currently on the Moon, enjoying some well-earned time off by visiting his parents at their home on the outskirts of Amundsen City. Richard was in luck as Zip answered his compad almost immediately.

“I need you to make an emergency trip to L5 for me,” Richard said after pleasantries had been exchanged. “I just received an urgent call from a very animated Alfred Nelson, who requested immediate assistance. Are Mark and Joe with you?”

“Yes they are,” Zip replied, “and we can leave right away. What seems to be the trouble?”

“I don't really know. Alfred refused to talk to me over the phone. He claimed that all of mankind was in danger and that it had to be discussed in person. I haven't heard any other reports of trouble but I don't think we can take any chances.”

“We'll come prepared for anything, then. What's the fastest way to get there?”

“Probably by shuttle, Zip. I'll call the Amundsen City spaceport and have our personnel there prepare one for you.”

“We're heading out the door right now. I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I can. Zip out.”

Chapter 2

David Foster, Mark Seaton, and Joe Taylor had been enjoying a late-afternoon meal in an obscure restaurant in Amundsen City when Richard called. They had spent the day discussing their upcoming mission to Europa, and were just finishing dinner when Zip answered his compad. After Zip hung up he briefed his friends on what had happened.

“It sounds urgent,” Joe said, “and I don’t have any of my equipment with me.”

“I’m sure that Richard will have everything prepared for us by the time we get to the spaceport,” Mark said, as he paid for their meal. “I just wonder what’s going on.”

“We’ll soon find out,” Zip said. The three of them walked out of the restaurant and began hurrying down the sidewalk. Joe was heading for their car when Zip stopped him.

“There’s too much traffic to drive,” he said. “The subway would be much faster than trying to fight rush-hour traffic.”

The three Starmen rushed over to the nearest subway stop, where they boarded an underground high-speed monorail. They had to change trains twice, but within twenty minutes they were at the spaceport.

“I wish we could take the *Star Ranger*,” Zip said wistfully as they began jogging through the spaceport terminals. The Starlight Enterprise section of the spaceport was almost within sight.

“I’m sure we can, Zip, if Richard doesn’t mind our waiting for—oh, another ten years,” Joe replied. “After all, there were probably a few parts to our ship that they were able to salvage. Doorknobs, for instance.”

“To be honest I’m surprised they decided to fix her at all,” Mark replied. “There really wasn’t a lot left of her after Zip fought off Ban Zhou Men’s attack—especially after you reversed the thrust in mid-air, Zip, and clipped off the tail of the attacker—”

“—thus neatly grounding the attacking ship without damaging it,” Zip replied, fondly remembering the incident. “I really didn’t think she had it in her. When they get done with the repairs, though, she’ll be a new ship, and the fastest one in space at that! The antimatter drive alone will give us more power than even the *Spud Peeler* did.”

“Which was another fine craft that got obliterated in the line of duty,” Joe said. “Maybe we’re just not reading the owner’s manuals closely enough.”

By this time the three Starmen had reached the Starlight Enterprise wing of the spaceport, where a uniformed SE officer was ready and waiting.

“Starman Zip Foster?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Zip said, stepping forward to shake her hand. “I’m sorry,” he said, eyeing the jeans and T-shirts that the three of them were wearing, “we were out, and didn’t have time to stop and change into our red uniforms. We were hoping—”

“Right this way,” she said, turning around and walking down a hallway. “The craft is here, in Hangar 9. It is fueled and ready to go. Your departure time is in five minutes. Please be ready for takeoff.” With that, she turned around and walked off down the hall.

The three Starmen entered the hangar, boarded the ship, and prepared for takeoff. Joe sat in the pilot’s seat and the other two Starmen took up seats directly behind him. The craft was a small, sleek passenger shuttle that was designed to transport up to four people to and from any location in the Earth-Moon system within a few hours.

“The *Red Tiger*,” Joe said aloud. “I’ve never flown this craft before, but she looks pretty fast. You just don’t see too many shuttles with antimatter drives—the technology is just too new.”

“How fast?” Zip asked. Joe was silent for a few minutes as he opened the hangar door, taxied the shuttle out onto the runway, and prepared for takeoff.

“Oh, we’ll probably be there in about an hour or so.”

The takeoff went very smoothly and before ten minutes had passed the craft had left the moon and was streaking through space on a course to L5. After making sure that everything was operating normally Joe set the craft on auto-pilot and settled back into the pilot's chair.

"I wonder what's going on, anyway?" Joe asked. "I've never heard of anything going wrong at L5 before."

"Why don't you call them up and ask?" Mark replied, motioning toward the ship's communicator. "I'm sure that Alfred Nelson would love to know that we are en-route."

"Good idea," Joe said approvingly. He was able to contact the station and speak directly to the station director, letting them know that they would be there in about 45 minutes. The director curtly acknowledged Joe's message and then abruptly signed off.

"Um." Joe said. "Well, I guess we'll find out when we get there."

* * * *

Forty minutes later the ship was within visual range of the giant L5 space station. Mark had seen it many times before but it never failed to fill him with awe. The station was the most massive structure in space; it was home to 30,000 people and bustled with the activity of countless spaceships going about their business all hours of the day and night. L5, so named because it was located at LaGrange Point 5, was composed of two giant wheels, each connected to the other by means of a cylinder that ran between the middle of the two wheels. The station did not spin but instead used an artificial gravity grid to provide Earth-like gravity to its residents. Mark reflected that it must be nearly fifty years old, but Alfred Nelson was still its director. That was a long time to spend running a space station, he thought.

As the *Red Tiger* approached the station Joe contacted it once more and requested permission to dock. "Look at all those ships!" Joe enthused. "Now *there* is some variety for you."

“No kidding,” Zip said. “Is that an *Ares*-class ship over there? I didn’t realize any of those were still flying. It can’t possibly land on a planet, can it?”

“I don’t think so,” Mark said. “Those ships were built to travel solely in space, carrying cargo from one space station to another. It’s probably just come back from the asteroid belt with a cargo full of processed ore and is dropping it off at the L5, where some other ship will carry it down to Earth. It’ll probably return with a cargo of food and other perishable goods for lonely asteroid miners.”

“I’m sure George St George will appreciate that,” Zip remarked, thinking of the eccentric asteroid miner that they had met a few years ago. “He’s still prospecting out there, isn’t he?”

“Last I heard,” Mark said affirmatively.

Joe received clearance from the automated docking system and turned over the *Red Tiger*’s navigation to the station computer, which robotically guided it into a hangar. “Looks as though we’ve got ourselves a reception crew,” Zip muttered as Joe powered down the ship and opened the doors. Standing just outside were three armed guards.

The Starmen exited the craft and walked forward to meet them, eying them warily. “I’m David Foster, and this is Joe Taylor and Mark Seaton,” he said, introducing his friends. “We’ve come -”

The largest guard interrupted them. “Howard, Fine, and Howard, at your service,” he said curtly. “Right this way.” He opened a door leading into the station and stepped through it, while the other two guards beckoned the three Starmen to follow him. They did so, and the two guards followed them in the rear.

“We were told that there was a serious problem here,” Zip began again, “and Richard Starlight sent us to help. Do you know what is going on?”

“Right this way,” the lead guard repeated, walking on down the hall. The three Starmen followed them. *What*, Zip wondered, *was the nature of their emergency?*

Chapter 3

“Is there a longer route that we could take from the hangar to Nelson’s office?” Joe asked Zip.

Zip shook his head grimly. The director’s office was some distance from the hangar, and the guards seemed determined to take the longest possible route to their destination. *They were probably new*, Zip thought, *and not well-acquainted with the layout of the station.*

Had it not been for the urgency of their situation he might not have minded; the station reflected Thomas Starlight’s love for elegance and grace, and he marveled at its beauty. Instead of dark, narrow corridors the base was filled with large, open spaces; there were tall galleries, waterfalls, small streams, trees, and even simulated glass ceilings through which streamed a soft, yellow light. Tom had gone to great lengths to make the base feel as Earth-like as possible and the effort had paid off; he understood how people could spend their lives here and not feel as though they were cramped inside a metal container out in space.

It took them a full ten minutes to arrive at the director’s office. The guards deposited the Starmen in the secretary’s office and then, to their surprise, abruptly left. The secretary seemed unruffled as she pressed a button on her desk.

“Three Starmen from Starlight Enterprise are here to see you,” she said calmly. “At least, I think they’re Starmen.”

“Send them in immediately!” the director barked. “There’s no time to waste!”

The secretary gestured toward the director’s office door but did not move to open it for them. Zip walked up, opened it, and stepped inside.

Mark had to admit that Alfred Nelson had a real taste for interior design. The office was decorated in a beautiful African theme: it had a large mahogany desk, a comfortable-looking couch decorated with a print of animals from the African plains, shelves filled with books on the Dark Continent, and pictures of

what he guessed was Alfred Nelson on various African hunting expeditions. Hanging on the wall behind the director's desk was a pair of ancient rifles, but curiously, he didn't see any mounted animal remains. To one side of the room was a wide, low glass case that was filled with odd models. Mark spotted a very old-looking motorcycle, airship, and submarine that had to date back to at least the 1920's, if not earlier.

Before the Starmen even had a chance to introduce themselves the director spoke up. "I'm so glad you're here!" he said. He acted as if he was going to say more, and then stopped, got out of his chair behind his desk, and began pacing around the room. "It's terrible, just terrible," he said, as if to himself. "You've got to *do* something!"

"How can we help you, Mr. Nelson?" Zip asked. "Richard Starlight told us that you have a problem."

"I have a problem! *We* have a problem!" he shouted. "*Earth* has a problem, young man! If you don't do something they're going to destroy us all!"

"Who is going to destroy us all?" Mark asked.

"The Xenobots! They're here!"

The Starmen were astonished. "Xenobots?" Joe asked. "Here? Where?"

"I *know* they're here," the director said, looking at them excitedly. "They've infiltrated this station and are using it as a base of operations! They have a secret laboratory where they are manufacturing trillions of tiny nanobots. Once they finish their evil work they are going to release them in swarms on the helpless planet below, where they will multiply in the oceans and then boil them away! We'll all die and the planet will be ruined!"

Zip was speechless, but Joe was not. "Have you considered evicting the Xenobots?" he asked. "That's got to be a violation of their renter's agreement."

Alfred Nelson continued on ranting without missing a beat. "I tell you I've got Xenobots on this station, and you've got to get rid of them," he said, pointing his finger right at Mark.

“They’ve been wreaking havoc with my station. Do you realize that this station has started *singing*?”

“Singing?” Mark asked in surprise.

“Yes, singing,” the director insisted. “Late at night I’ll hear it over the intercom: someone is singing *Away Down Yonder With Davy Jones*. It’s terrible—the words are right, but it’s off-key. I don’t know where it’s coming from; no one can pin it down. Just ask anybody. We keep hearing distant rumblings that don’t seem to have any particular source, and shadowy figures have been spotted in places where they don’t belong!

“And that’s only the beginning!” he raged. “Hangar doors open and close on their own—which is blasted inconvenient, if you happen to be in them and get sucked out into the void of space. The power keeps fluctuating, as if someone’s straining it, and high-security authorization codes just suddenly stop working. *Someone* is messing with this station, and I tell you that Xenobots are behind it! I have proof, young man!”

While the Starmen were standing there astonished, unsure what to say, he pressed a button on his desk and demanded that Dr Daystorm come in. The doctor entered a few minutes later, carrying a heavy metal briefcase. When the director saw it he pointed to it. “That,” he told the incredulous Starmen, “is our proof.”

“What’s in it?” Zip asked Dr Daystorm. He set the locked steel case on the director’s desk. “Something amazing—something we found just this morning. You’ll never believe it: *self-replicating nanobots*.”

“That’s astonishing,” Zip said. “Starlight Enterprise has been working on that technology for fifty years and has never perfected it. I had no idea that such a thing existed.”

“I’m telling you,” the director said—and then the lights went out. All sound ceased, and it became dark—*very* dark.

Chapter 4

“Um.” Joe said, after a minute had passed by. “Shouldn’t the emergency lights have come on by now?”

“Yes, definitely,” Dr Daystorm replied. “I can’t imagine why they haven’t.”

“It’s Xenobots,” Mr. Nelson muttered quietly. “I just know it.”

“We’ll take it from here,” Zip reassured him, and then turned to his fellow Starmen. He took out his compad and activated its flashlight component—a small, ultra-bright LED that could last indefinitely. Mark and Joe activated theirs as well, and after taking a brief look around they turned their attention to the door.

Mark tried to open it but it refused to open. “Electric doors,” he muttered. “Aren’t these supposed to have a fail-safe in the event of a power outage?” He called Zip over, and the two of them, with their combined strength, were able to force it open with some effort. After bidding Alfred Nelson to be careful the three of them raced out of the office and into the hallway.

“Let’s go to the power plant,” Zip said. “I think it’s down below—we passed it on the trip to the office.”

“Good thinking,” Mark said. “If there’s a base-wide electrical problem then the root cause can probably be found there.”

“And if there are any Xenobots there,” Joe said, “we can take ’em on in hand-to-hand combat. I don’t suppose you brought along any weapons, did you, Zip?”

Zip stopped, suddenly realizing that they were unarmed. “I know there were some in the *Red Tiger* but I didn’t bring them with me. We probably should have, come to think of it, but we were in such a hurry to get to the director...”

“C’mon,” Joe urged. “I, personally, will be surprised if the problem turns out to be anything larger than a mouse.” The three Starmen raced down the hallway, deftly threading their way through the restless, lost mob that roamed the pitch-black

hallways. Here and there the Starmen saw a few flashlights bob in the distance.

In less than three minutes the Starmen found themselves in the power plant, which was a hive of activity. Technicians were running everywhere, working with various stubborn pieces of equipment, and an energetic man, answering to the name of Brown, was barking out orders left and right. Zip noticed that the room was being lit by what looked like a few strategically-placed flashlights. Evidently, he thought, the emergency lighting system was not working here either.

“That’s odd,” Mark suddenly said. “If we don’t have any power then why do we have gravity? Doesn’t the artificial gravity grid draw a lot of power?”

“It certainly does,” the one called Brown replied. “We haven’t lost all power; the life support systems—of which the gravity grid is a part—are still up and running. It’s only everything else that is down, and we don’t really know why.” He turned to give an order, and Mark suddenly realized that he wasn’t talking to people—he was talking to *machines*.

All over the place were little short, squat machines, about two feet high. As Brown directed orders to them they roamed the plant and performed tests: some opened cases, some checked wiring, and some tinkered with various pieces of circuitry. Brown noticed the surprised look on their faces.

“They’re drones,” he said, “the very latest in robotic technology. They don’t really have any more brains than a pea, but they can follow orders and they’re handy in a tight spot. We call ’em bumblebees.”

“I had no idea,” Zip said. “When did you get these? I’ve never seen this type of robot before.”

“We got ’em three weeks ago. We’re modernizing here—moving with the times—I’m sure you understand. They’re highly useful—inside, outside, repairs, lifting, you name it. The central computer system gives ’em orders; when something needs to be done it tells the drones and they make it happen. All they need is

an order; they can carry it out on their own. Huge improvement over using trained monkeys.”

“Hey!” an insulted voice called out from the back of the room.

Another man in blue overalls, with the logo of an ioneer on his sleeve, ran over to Brown. “I think I’ve found the problem, sir. It seems that a huge power surge a few minutes ago blew a fuse. The fuse it blew was faulty, though, and allowed some of the current to flow into the central computer’s data core, which corrupted it. Since the data core is corrupted the computer is not working and the power plant shut down.”

“Then fix it!” Brown barked. “Let’s get these lights on.”

“It’s not that easy,” the ioneer replied. “Sure, we can replace the fuse—we have them in stock, you know—but the data core has been corrupted. If we replace the fuse the lights will stay off because the computer that runs everything won’t start with a corrupted data core. The core has got to be fixed.”

“No problem,” Brown said. He turned to a nearby drone. “Hey—GR9104. Go extract the data core, bring it to the lab, and see that it’s repaired.” The drone acknowledged the command by repeating it to him and then scurried off. Zip watched it roll over to an imposing computer that was against the far wall and unscrew an access panel; once it was open it extended a mechanical arm inside the unit, gripped something, and then pulled out the data core—a small cylindrical device roughly three inches in diameter and six inches high. Zip knew that that particular data core could house entire petabytes of information; fixing it would be no easy task. The drone deftly placed it inside a padded steel cylinder that was a little larger than a thermos, brought it inside its chest and secured it, and then scurried outside.

Satisfied, Brown had turned back to the ioneer. “While it’s doing that, you find a way to get the lights back on—it’s dark in here—and then track down the source of the power surge. We’ve been having power problems all month now, and—”

Mark watched the drone leave the room and head down the hallway, and then suddenly he snapped his fingers. “Wait a minute,” he said, addressing Brown. “Where is your data repair center?”

“Upstairs,” Brown said, irritated that he had been interrupted. “Why?”

“Because the drone is headed downstairs,” Mark replied patiently. “Do you have a spare data core or something?”

Brown’s eyes got wide and he rushed outside, the ioneer following close on his heels. He was just in time to see the drone, far below, open a hangar door and roll inside. “After him!” he shouted, purple with rage. “If we don’t get that data core back and repaired in four hours we’ll have to abandon the station! *Go get him!*”

Even as he gave the order they could hear the airlock door in the hangar below open into space and the noise of a ship leaving the hangar.

Chapter 5

“Oh boy,” Joe muttered, as the Starmen raced back to the *Red Tiger*. “This day just keeps getting stranger.”

“I don’t understand it,” Mark said thoughtfully. “Why would the drone ignore a direct order and evacuate the space station with the data core? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“All I know,” Zip said, “is that if we don’t catch him we’re going to have a huge problem on our hands. I don’t even want to *think* about what evacuating this station would mean.”

The three Starmen weaved their way through the pandemonium inside the darkened space station and made it to their hangar.

“Of all the rotten luck,” Joe said as they boarded their shuttle and prepared to leave. “Do you realize that if the hangars were without power the drone would never have been able to leave?”

And just how are we supposed to find the drone once we get into space, anyway?"

"We'll just have to do the best we can," Zip said.

Joe sent the signal to open the hangar doors. Once they opened he blasted the shuttle into space, and then had to immediately slow it down.

"Watch it!" Mark yelled, as a massive space freighter loomed in their way. Joe turned the shuttle away just in time and desperately tried to cut down his speed.

"What a mess!" he muttered as his hands worked the controls. "Everyone depends on the space station for flight control information. Now that nobody has it everyone is flying blind. It's all I can do to keep from hitting something." Joe carefully weaved the ship through the massive traffic jam. He was a good enough pilot to avoid collisions but they weren't making very good time.

"Of course," Joe said after a brief pause, "we still have our original problem. How are we going to find out what ship the drone took?"

"Call up the space station and ask them," Zip said. "Even if their computers are down there has to be someone there who knows what ship was in that hangar. Once we know its transponder number we should be able to track it."

While Joe tried to keep the ship from being destroyed in a collision Mark attempted to raise the station. Several minutes went by before he was able to get someone to answer his call, and it was ten minutes after that before Mark was finally given the information he wanted.

"This is the one you want to track," Mark said as he typed some information into the shuttle's console. "It's not a very fast ship so we should be able to catch up with it." The computer recognized the tracking information and brought it up on their overhead display.

By this time Joe had piloted the *Red Tiger* beyond the immediate vicinity of L5. He looked at the dot on his overhead display and plotted its course. "It appears to be headed for

Earth,” he said after a few minutes. “If he keeps on his current course he’s going to land somewhere on the East Coast of the United States.”

“Can you arrange to be there when the ship lands?” Zip asked.

“I think so,” Joe said. “He’s gotten a good head-start but we should be able to make up the time.” Joe entered an intercept course into the ship’s computer and then settled back into his chair.

“We really should call Richard,” Zip said. “I’m sure he’s got to be wondering what is going on and we did promise to let him know as soon as we knew something.”

“Do we know what is going on?” Mark asked. “What are you going to tell him?”

“Well,” Joe said, “we can always tell him that Xenobots have invaded the L5 space station and are trying to destroy the Earth’s oceans, and that we’ve got to stop them before it’s too late!”

“Uh-huh,” Zip said skeptically. “What about the drone?”

“It could be a part of their evil plot!” Joe said, warming to the idea. “They’re forcing everyone to evacuate the base so that they can have it all to themselves.”

“Or not,” Zip replied.

“Or not,” Joe agreed.

“I think the problem is tied to their new drone system,” Mark said thoughtfully. “Maybe the addition of the drones hasn’t gone as well as they thought, and the computer has been doing strange things because it just can’t handle them. The fact that the drone just headed off into space after being told to repair the data core sounds like a piece of defective equipment to me. That could explain the whole mess.”

“Sounds good,” Zip said. “Let’s contact Richard and fill him in. If we can’t retrieve the data core in time then I’m sure SE’s help will be needed to evacuate the station.”

“We’ll get back,” Joe said confidently. “After all, what could happen?”

* * * *

Fifty minutes after leaving L5 Joe Taylor landed the *Red Tiger* in a small, grassy field. The drone had chosen a small town on the eastern shore of New Jersey as its landing site and Joe arranged for them to be there well before the drone touched down.

“We should have no trouble intercepting the drone and retrieving the data core,” Zip remarked as they stepped out of the shuttle.

“We just have to make sure we don’t damage it any further when we’re retrieving it,” Mark warned.

“We don’t want to make things even worse than they already are. We only have three hours before the station has to be evacuated, you know.”

“Hey there!” someone behind them shouted. They turned around and saw an agitated old man hurrying their way. “What do you think you’re doing there, landing this flying piece of junk in my field?” he asked, brandishing his cane at them.

Zip took a step backwards, surprised. “It’s an emergency,” he said. “A robot has stolen the data core from the L5 space station, and we need to retrieve it before the whole station has to be evacuated. We don’t have much time.”

“A likely story!” he roared. “Runaway robot indeed. Do you guys think you’re Starmen or something? Now you listen here: you get that ship out of my field or I’ll have you all arrested for trespassing and vandalism!”

In the distance, the Starmen saw the ship they had been tracking make a low pass over the city. It was coming in for a landing. Zip realized that the Starmen didn’t have any time to waste if they wanted to catch it before it escaped again.

“I’m sorry,” Zip said, “but we don’t have the time to move the ship right now! We’ve got to go, but we’ll remove the ship as soon as we can.”

“You bet you will!” the old man yelled as the Starmen ran off into the distance. He picked up his cell phone and began

making calls. “Young people these days,” he muttered. “What’s the world coming to?”

* * * *

The three Starmen raced down the street, heading roughly in the direction where they saw the drone’s ship land.

“I thought he was going to land nearby,” Mark said.

“I guess he changed his mind,” Joe replied. “I sure wish we had brought our red Starman suits. Zip, are you sure that there weren’t any in the shuttle?”

“Definitely,” Zip said. “I wasn’t exactly planning on making a trip to Earth today.”

Joe took out his compad and activated its tracking function. He soon found the drone’s shuttle—a half-mile away. “We’d better hurry,” Joe said. “If it gets out of sight we’ll never find it.”

The Starmen were able to reach the site within five minutes but found it abandoned. A quick search of the ship turned up nothing. Small tire tracks led from the ship to the road but after that there was no further sign.

“So, what do we do now?” Zip asked.

“I can’t get a fix on the drone on my compad,” Joe said sadly. “It’s a small metal object and there are all kinds of those around here.”

“It’s got to be around here somewhere,” Mark said. “Maybe someone saw it go by.”

“I suppose we could start asking around,” Zip replied. “Which way should we go?”

Joe thought a moment. “Well, the tracks lead to the road, and there’s only one road around here. We took the same road here and it didn’t pass us, so it must have gone the other way.”

“Sounds good,” Zip said. “Let’s get going.”

As the Starmen jogged down the road they saw a red-haired lad coming toward them, riding on a bicycle.

“Hey there!” Joe called out. “You haven’t passed any robots, have you?”

The lad eyed them curiously, said nothing, and pedaled harder. He was soon out of sight.

“He ignored me!” Joe said indignantly.

“Maybe he thought you were crazy,” Mark said helpfully. “How many people do you think come out this way looking for runaway robots?”

“Thousands, I bet,” Joe replied. “Maybe this is where the drone came from. Maybe this is its long-lost home. Maybe it’s returning to the halls of its ancestors.”

“There just doesn’t appear to be anything out here at all,” Zip said. “We’ve jogged for nearly ten minutes and haven’t seen anything but countryside. Does anyone even live out here?”

After a few more minutes they came upon a small country village. The Starmen saw a handful of old houses, a few run-down stores, and a decrepit train station. A few people were milling around, going about their business.

“Excuse me, miss,” Mark said to one lady who had just stepped out of a nearby store with a package in her arms. “Have you seen any robots walk this way?”

The lady eyed him oddly. “No, young man, I have not, nor have I seen any elves or dwarves. If I do, though, you’ll be the first to know.” With that, she hurried off down the street.

“This is *not* going well,” Joe remarked, after that same question elicited similar responses from everyone else in sight. “You’d think they’d never seen a runaway robot before.”

“Let’s try the train station,” Zip said. “Maybe the drone’s on his way somewhere else.”

“They why not fly there?” Joe asked reasonably. “Why stop here and then take the train to his final destination?”

“Maybe you can’t fly to where he is going,” Zip said mysteriously.

* * * *

The tiny train station was composed of a single wooden building that sat beside a high-speed railway. “I bet not many

trains stop at this station,” Mark said. “This doesn’t look like a major metropolitan area to me.”

To their surprise, as they stepped onto the platform they saw that there was already a small high-speed train sitting at the station. “Look!” Joe shouted, pointing. The three of them just caught a glimpse of the drone boarding the train!

The three Starmen raced after it, only to be stopped at the door of the train by a conductor. “Tickets, please,” he said.

“It’s an emergency!” Zip said. “A robot just boarded that train with a data core that it stole from the L5 space station an hour ago. We’ve got to recover it before the station has to be evacuated! We don’t want to ride the train—we just want to get our robot back!”

“Tickets, please” the conductor said calmly.

“A *robot* just boarded your train,” Joe said in a strained voice. “Didn’t you notice?”

“The robot had a ticket,” the conductor said, “which is something you seem to lack.”

“It’s an *emergency*,” Joe repeated.

“It always is,” the conductor said calmly.

Zip sighed. “Just go buy three tickets,” he told Joe, “and hurry.”

* * * *

Joe sped off to the ticket booth in a sprint and was thankful (though not surprised) that there was no one in line.

“I’d like three tickets,” he told the lady inside the ticket booth.

“Where would you like to go?” she asked him.

“I don’t care. I just want three tickets for that train that’s about to leave any second with a robot on board.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give you three tickets with no destination. You have to tell me where you want to go.”

Joe sighed. “Fine. Give us three tickets to the Aquapolis.”

The lady typed at her computer for a minute. “I’m sorry, but this train doesn’t go there. The nearest train that stops at the Aquapolis is 40 miles from here.”

“Oh. So where *does* this train go?”

“Just about anywhere. I don’t know exactly; I’ve never taken it.”

“Ok,” Joe said slowly, then he got an idea. “A few minutes ago a robot purchased a ticket from this ticket booth. Where did it want to go?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t see any robots. They don’t often take this train.”

Joe noticed that two people were now in line behind him. “What is the name of this town?”

“Sharps Chapel,” she replied.

“Ok, I’ll take three tickets to Sharps Chapel. Can you do that?”

“I suppose,” she said, surprised. She typed away at her computer. “Ok, that will be \$89.72.”

Joe opened up his wallet and took out his SmartCard. “Here,” he said, handing it to her.

“I’m sorry, but we only take cash.”

“Cash!” Joe said, surprised. “Do they still have that?”

“The sign says cash only,” the lady said, pointing to a faded, illegible sign that was posted on the ticket window. “That will be \$89.72.”

The line behind Joe had grown larger and the people were starting to grumble. “Are you going to pay the lady or not?” the person directly behind him said. “We don’t have all day!”

“ZIP!” Joe yelled.

Zip came sprinting over. “The train is about to leave!” Zip said. “What’s taking so long?”

“We have fallen among philistines who will only accept cash. You don’t happen to have \$89.72 on you, do you?”

Zip shook his head, took out his wallet, and handed a \$100 bill to the ticket master without saying a word. She calmly took

it, gave Zip his change, and handed him his tickets. “Enjoy your trip. Next!”

Zip and Joe sprinted over to the conductor. “Sharps Chapel!” Zip said in surprise, looking at the destination printed on his tickets. “Where’s that?”

Joe sighed. “Don’t ask.”

Zip handed the tickets to the conductor and then the three of them boarded the train. The conductor gave out one final “All aboard!” and then the train began to pull out from the station.

Chapter 6

After stepping inside the train the three Starmen took a quick look around. They were in a sleek high-speed train that was divided into six compartments. Each compartment had 24 booths, with 12 on the left and 12 on the right. The booths were divided into pairs that faced each other, and each one could sit two people.

“I don’t see him,” Zip said as he briefly scanned the people inside. This compartment was roughly half full.

“Neither do I,” Mark replied. “He must have gone to another compartment.”

A conductor came by. “Please sit down. No one is allowed to be standing up while the train is en route.”

The three Starmen sat down in a nearby booth. “Where is this train going?” Joe asked.

The conductor looked at him in surprise. “To New Spindrift, of course,” he said, referring to the giant floating city off the coast of New Jersey. “This train reaches a top speed of 475 miles per hour, so we should reach it in precisely 32 minutes.”

“That explains it,” Zip said after the conductor walked by. “The drone couldn’t land there so he landed at the nearest town and took the train the rest of the route.”

“Wonderful,” Joe said. “It’s amazing what robots can do these days.”

Mark had his compad out and was studying it intently. “I think the drone is in the next compartment,” he said. “I’m picking up some energy signatures from that cabin that correspond to a nuclear power source. I can’t be sure, but that would be my guess.”

Zip nodded. Calling over the conductor, he asked if they could move to the compartment up ahead.

“That’s the first-class cabin,” the conductor told him. “Do you have first-class tickets?”

Zip took them out and looked at them again. “Um, no,” he said.

“Then I guess you can’t.”

“I don’t suppose,” began Joe, “it would help if we told you that we were after a runaway robot who had stolen a data core from the L5 space station, and that if we don’t retrieve it soon the space station will have to be abandoned.”

“Nope. That is a new one, though! Never heard that excuse before.” The conductor calmly went back to his post, leaving the Starmen sitting there.

“Next time,” Zip said grimly, “we *are* going to bring our Starman uniforms with us, even if it means going all the way back home to get them. This is ridiculous.”

“Well,” Mark said reasonably, “it looks as if the drone is headed toward New Spindrift. We’re over the ocean now,” he said, pointing outside the window, “and the drone can hardly leave the train while en-route. We know where he is, so we can just wait until he gets there and then make our move.”

“I’ve got an even better idea,” Zip said. “Let’s call Richard and tell him what happened, and see if he can arrange to have the drone met with a reception committee when it arrives. I’m sure that Starlight Enterprise has a significant presence on New Spindrift—it’s mainly a research facility, isn’t it?”

He got out his compad and dialed Richard’s number. Since he was located on the moon and they were on Earth there was a three-second delay on each end of their conversation.

Zip explained the situation to Richard and asked him how things were going on L5. “They haven’t gotten any better since you left 90 minutes ago,” he said grimly. “If you don’t recover that data core in time the station will have to be evacuated. I’ll arrange for some of our personnel to be there when the train arrives. It should not be difficult to intercept an unarmed drone. I only hope that it hasn’t damaged the core any further.”

Zip signed off. Directly across the aisle a little four-year-old girl was staring at them, wide-eyed. She turned to her mother and said “Look, mommy! Those people think they are *spies!*” The mother hushed her child and picked her up, then turned away from the Starmen and stared out the window.

* * * *

“Twenty more minutes,” Mark said, “until the train arrives. We can wait that long. I’m sure that Richard will have a group awaiting its arrival. Our part, gentlemen, is done.”

“Unless the drone tries to escape,” Zip warned. “It’s done a pretty good job of that already. And we *still* don’t know what is going on up at L5. For all we know there really may *be* Xenobots involved.”

“Or their mothers,” Joe remarked.

There was nothing for them to do but wait, so wait they did. After what seemed like an eternity the train pulled into the station.

“Let’s go!” Zip said, jumping up to his feet—but it was already too late. A large crowd had formed as soon as the train started pulling in, and try as they might they could not fight their way through it. The compartment had two exits and both were blocked: one by a man struggling with his luggage, and the other by a very large lady who was talking in a loud voice to her friend about how *awful* these trains were and how *pushy* everyone was and how things were so much *better* on other lines. They seemed content to just stand there and discuss the situation, while the people behind them grew impatient.

The Starmen tried to push their way through the crowd but all they got were some dirty looks from their fellow passengers.

“The windows?” Zip asked his friends.

“Sealed,” Mark said.

Zip sighed.

When they finally made it outside the train they began looking around. “Look!” Zip shouted, pointing. Over in the distance, emerging from the front compartment, was the drone that they were seeking.

“And look over there!” Joe replied, pointing in the opposite direction. Approaching the drone was a group of men, but they were definitely not from Starlight Enterprise.

Chapter 7

“Oh boy,” Joe said. “Just where is the cavalry when you need them, anyway?”

The three Starmen raced toward the drone, but they knew that they were too far away: by the time they got there it would be too late. Sure enough, the men closed in on the drone—but as they got close the drone flew over their heads and soared into the distance.

The Starmen stopped in their tracks. “Whoa!” Joe said. “I don’t remember anyone telling us that those machines could fly.”

“Wonderful,” Zip said, “just wonderful. *Now* what are we going to do?”

“Um, probably get involved in a fight,” Joe replied, observing that the men who had tried to stop the drone had noticed the three Starmen and were headed their way, looking none-too-pleased. “What do you say you let me take all four of them at once, Zip, just to make it fair?”

“I don’t think so,” Mark said, shaking his head. “The middle two are mine—you can have the others.”

Thirty seconds later the fight ended with their four attackers lying on the ground, moaning in pain. Just as the fight ended the

Starmen noticed a group of three officers running toward them, accompanied by several Starlight Enterprise personnel.

"I'm sorry we were late," one of the officers told Zip, "but it took us longer than we thought to get to the station."

"That's ok," Zip said. "Can you take custody of these men? They tried to grab the drone right after it got off the train, and when it flew off into the distance they turned and attacked us."

The officers helped the injured men off the ground and arrested them. "Ok, let's hear it: what were you doing here?" But they refused to talk. They led them away, leaving the Starmen with the four personnel from Starlight Enterprise.

"We know the drone is here somewhere," Zip said, "we just don't know where. It couldn't have gone far. Do you have a way to search the station?"

"I think so," one of the personnel said. "We should be able to track it by its energy signature. That particular model uses a special nuclear power source that can be tracked from a distance with the right equipment."

Using a special tracking device that the Starlight Enterprise personnel had brought, the Starmen were able to pinpoint the machine on the island. It had apparently taken refuge inside a large building a short walk away. "Very nice," Zip commented. "Remind me to ask Richard to start building those into our compads."

"Don't forget the popcorn maker, too," Joe said. "I've been wanting that for years."

The three Starmen and the four Starlight Enterprise personnel raced toward the location specified on the tracking device. "It doesn't seem to be moving," Mark noticed. "I wonder what it's doing."

"Should we call in any backup units?" a technician named Bradley asked. "We have some on standby in the case of an emergency."

"Not yet," Zip said. "Let's see what is going on first. If trouble breaks out then we'll call them in."

In less than five minutes the group found themselves in front of a large glass building. “Cyragon Data Services, LTD,” Mark said aloud, reading a large sign posted on the building’s front lawn. “I’ve never heard of them before.”

“Let’s go!” Zip yelled, sprinting across the lawn toward the building’s entrance. The entire group charged inside, bursting into the lobby. They raced past the startled secretary in the outer office and ran down a long hallway.

“Which way?” Zip said.

“Down here,” a Starlight technician replied, examining the tracking device, “and to the left—no, to the right,” he said. “It looks as though the drone is in a big room at the end of the hallway.”

“Got it,” Zip said. Within seconds the entire group had burst into that room. Inside they saw what looked like a large laboratory; parts and equipment were strewn everywhere, and technicians in lab coats were scattered around the room. To one corner Zip spied the drone they had been looking for, standing motionless.

The Starmen’s noisy entrance into the room startled all of the workers in the laboratory. All of them, in unison, turned around to see what had caused the commotion. One of them stepped forward to greet them.

“Hello gentlemen,” he said, stepping forward to extend a hand. “I’m Dr. Lowery, the head of the data retrieval department. How can I help you?”

Zip pointed at the drone. “We’ve come to get him. Do you know what he’s doing here?”

“Ah, you must be from L5! Don’t worry – we’ll be done in just a minute,” Dr. Lowery assured him. “This data core has been badly damaged but I think we can transfer its data to a new unit. Give us another fifteen minutes and we should be good to go.”

“The data core?” Joe asked.

“Why, yes! This is where that data core was first designed. It’s pretty badly damaged, but we have a lot of experience in removing data from damaged data cores. This particular core is

actually so old that we're probably the only laboratory in the world that can do the job. We'll have it transferred in a few minutes and then you should be good to go."

"Ah," Zip said. "Thanks. We'll get out of your way, then."

The three Starmen left the room and headed outside.

"Do you need anything else?" Bradley asked.

"No, but thank you," Zip said. "I think we can handle it from here."

As the four Starlight Enterprise personnel walked away the three Starmen looked at each other. "So, the drone was told to go fix the data core --", Zip began.

"-- and did exactly that," Joe responded.

"Yup," said Mark.

There was silence. "I guess we wait," Zip said.

"I guess so," Joe replied.

Fifteen minutes later Zip, Mark, Joe, and the drone were all riding together on a high-speed train, bound for Sharps Chapel, New Jersey. None of them had very much to say.

* * * *

Three hours after leaving the L5 space station Zip, Mark, Joe, and the drone docked once again in the L5 space station. The three Starmen had to fly with the drone because their shuttle, the *Red Tiger*, had been impounded by the police and was no longer parked in the field.

The pandemonium inside L5 was not nearly as bad as it had been when they left. They had contacted the station while en-route to let them know that they would be back in time, and the crowds became calmer after the emergency lighting had been restored and after they were told that things would be back to normal shortly. The three Starmen followed the drone from the hangar to the power plant, where it placed the repaired data core back into the central computing unit. Within minutes the main lights came back on and the station was back to normal.

Once the lights came back on, the Starmen walked upstairs to Alfred Nelson's office to let him know what had happened. When they arrived at his office they saw that he was now a very happy man.

"The police called after you left New Spindrift," he told the Starmen. "The men they arrested have begun to talk."

"That's great!" Zip replied. "What did they have to say?"

"Oh, they said quite enough. It turns out that they were part of a small startup company that had taken residence aboard this station. They were conducting secret nanobot experiments, trying to build self-replicating machines. They didn't have much money so they decided to hack their way into the power supply of the base to avoid running up a huge electrical bill. They also tried to tap directly into the processing unit of this base to avoid paying computer time fees."

"Ah," Joe said.

"The problem is that they didn't do a very good job. Their hacks caused all kinds of problems; the computer started doing weird things, and they drew so much power that the plant blew a fuse and shorted out the data core. They *will* be properly punished," the director said firmly. "I'll have none of that on board this station! I'm going to seriously improve the security around here."

"Sounds good," Zip said. "Did they say what they were doing on New Spindrift?"

"Oh yes!" he replied. "They realized right away what had happened to the space station, and they went to New Spindrift to see if they could expedite the repair process. They arrived shortly before you did, as a matter of fact. When they saw you approaching the drone they thought that you were trying to interfere with it and they attacked you in order to protect it."

After making sure that there was nothing else they could do, the three Starmen walked back toward their hangar, where they boarded a Starlight Enterprise shuttle. Joe guided the ship out of the hangar into space and then set it on a course that would lead back to Amundsen City.

“So,” Zip said after Joe set the ship on auto-pilot, “what did we accomplish this afternoon?”

“Why, obviously, we saved the L5 space station from a horde of angry Xenobots intent on taking it over,” Joe replied.

“Sounds good to me,” Mark said. And that was all they said until they were back on the Moon.

THE ULTIMATE CODE

“Now let me get this straight,” Mark was saying. “We’re supposed to rendezvous with the Ahmanyans where, exactly?”

Starmen Mark Seaton, Zip Foster, and Joe Taylor were sitting in a private conference room in the famous Starlight Tower on the Moon. Papers were strewn all over the mahogany table that was in the center of the room, and a large map of Europa was projected onto one wall. The oblong table was surrounded by six chairs, but the three Starmen were the only ones present. They had been discussing the final preparations for their return to Europa for several hours now.

“We’re supposed to meet Stenafi, Saadervo, and Stavri on a pocket world in the asteroid belt,” Zip said. “I don’t think the asteroid has a name or anything, but we have been given its expected location on the date of our rendezvous. The Ahmanyans have also promised to put a locator beacon on the asteroid to make it easier to find.”

Joe lifted a stack of papers off the table and shuffled through them. “I’ve got the coordinates right here,” he said. “I’ll program them into the *Bonny Swan* after we’ve left lunar orbit. October 15, 2153 is our launch date.”

“Which is exactly nineteen days from now,” Zip said. “I think we all understand how the mission is going to work and what we’re going there to accomplish. Does—”

The phone rang, interrupting Zip’s train of thought. After checking the name to see who was calling, Joe reached over and pressed a button on the conference table. The projected map of Europa disappeared and was replaced with the image of Richard Starlight, the CEO of Starlight Enterprise.

“How are things going?” Richard asked. From what the Starmen could see he appeared to be sitting in his private office. “I’m sorry to interrupt you.”

“Very well, sir,” Zip said. “We were just wrapping up our discussion. How can we help you?”

Richard leaned forward in his chair. "A few minutes ago I received an urgent message from Alfred Nelson," he began.

Looks of intense dismay appeared on the faces of all three Starmen. "Oh, please, no," Joe groaned.

Alfred Nelson managed the L5 space station, which was the largest space station in the Solar System. A few months before, the three Starmen had been called out to L5 at Alfred's request to investigate a problem, and the memory of that experience was still fresh in their minds.

"Please tell me he just called to say that everything was fine," Zip said. "He can't be having more problems."

Richard shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Zip. He called to ask for help, and he specifically requested that I send you three to resolve the matter."

"Isn't there someone else that you could send?" Zip asked. "The last time we went out there—"

"I know, Zip, but this is different. Alfred has received what he thinks is a distress call from a spaceship in the outer planets, and he wants some help decoding the message and responding to it. I'm sure it's nothing that you can't handle."

Zip sighed and looked at Joe and Mark. The mere mention of Alfred Nelson's name had cast a gloom over the entire room. No one was looking forward to making a return trip to L5.

"Ok," Zip said. "We'll go."

* * * *

The trip to L5 was uneventful. Like last time, Richard had the *Red Tiger* waiting for them at the Amundsen City spaceport, and Joe piloted it to the L5 space station. The Starmen said very little on the trip there.

Mark was the first one to break the silence. "At least we have our uniforms with us this time," he said.

"And cash," Joe replied.

Zip shook his head. "I'm sure things will go just fine. Now that we've dealt with Alfred before, we know what to expect."

This time will be different.”

“I sure hope so,” Joe said. “Last time we almost got arrested, our ship was impounded, and we nearly made the news. It took Richard Starlight two weeks to get the mess straightened out.”

“Come on,” Zip said. “We’ve battled aliens on the dwarf planet Nyx. We’ve survived being torpedoed in the oceans of Europa. We escaped destruction in the skies of Mars. You can’t tell me that you’re intimidated by Alfred Nelson.”

“They’re probably still talking about us at that tiny seaside town,” Joe mused. “I bet we’ll go down in history.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Zip,” Mark said. “But, all the same, if another robot takes over a spaceship and escapes, *you* can go and follow him. I’m going to stay home and keep out of trouble.”

No one said anything else for another twenty minutes, when the L5 space station at last came within visual range. Joe contacted the space station’s flight control center, which then automatically took control of the *Red Tiger* and brought it into a hangar.

As soon as the ship landed Joe peered out the cockpit window. “Haven’t we seen those people before?” he asked, gesturing toward the three armed guards that were waiting by the wall.

“I think so,” Mark said. “Aren’t they the same ones—”

“Yup,” Zip said.

The three Starmen disembarked from their ship. One of the armed guards stepped forward to greet them. “Messrs. Howard, Fine, and Howard at your service,” he said. “It’s good to see you again. Right this way, please.” One of the guards opened a door that led inside the station and the three Starmen stepped through it.

The guards escorted the Starmen down the hall and through the station. The inside lighting was set to simulate a pleasant mid-afternoon; the wide hallways were gently lit, and trees and shrubs were strategically placed. A few people that were going about their daily business stopped and stared at the Starmen as they walked by.

“I’m telling you,” Joe said as they followed their armed escort down the hallway, “the uniform makes all the difference. Why, if we had had our uniforms with us last time—”

Zip shook his head. “We would have caught the probe right away, Joe, and brought it back to the station, only to find out that the hapless drone was just trying to repair the data core. We would have then made *another* trip to Earth, but given the delay we would have come back from Dr. Lowery too late to save the largest space station in existence from having to be completely shut down. Our pictures would have still been in the paper weeks later, and we would have gone down in history as the most inept Starmen of all time.”

“That would have been a great day to have overslept,” Joe said. “There’s a lot to be said for strategic, targeted napping. It’s really a lost art.”

The group stopped at an elevator, and proceeded to take it fifteen stories up to the top of the station. The elevator was made of glass and was located in the outside wall of the station, offering its occupants a beautiful view of the bustle of traffic outside. A host of ships, old and new, was flying to their various destinations.

Ten minutes after their arrival the Starmen found themselves walking into a conference room. “The Thomas Starlight Conference Room,” Mark said aloud, reading the sign on the door. “Very nice.”

The room was elaborately furnished. A wide, rectangular table was in the center of the room; it was made of a beautiful dark wood and trimmed in gold. The walls were decorated with famous paintings depicting scenes from deep space, and one entire wall of the conference room was a window that offered a beautiful view of Earth. Mark could see that it was night-time in North America; the day/night divide was somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. In a few hours daylight would reach the East Coast.

After the Starmen entered the conference room their escorts took up guard outside the door. “Just for security, just for

security,” Alfred Nelson said, extending them a hand. “I’m pleased to see you! Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“You’re welcome,” Mark said, shaking his hand. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Please, take a seat,” Alfred responded. “This is Matthew Lewis and this is Vanessa Sloan,” he said, gesturing toward two people that were seated at the table. As he introduced them they rose and shook the Starmen’s hands. “Matthew and Vanessa are our two top cryptographic experts at L5.”

“Cryptographic experts?” Joe asked, as the Starmen took a seat. “I didn’t realize that L5 was involved in cryptography.”

“We’re involved in all sorts of things, young man,” the director replied. “There’s no more important space station in all of the solar system than this one right here! We’ve got departments in every field—biology, physics, chemistry, cooking, the works. Our supercomputer is one of the biggest in existence, and it’s used all the time!”

“I know,” Zip said. “I’m glad that your computer is behaving itself again.”

“Now where was I?” the director mused as he took a seat at the table. “Ah—right. Matthew, you may begin.”

Matthew stood up “Four months ago the spaceship *Luna Merchant* set out for the planet Neptune,” he began.

“That sounds familiar,” Joe said. “Isn’t that Dr. Bayard’s ship?”

“That is correct,” Matthew replied. “Dr. Maxie Bayard was undertaking an expedition to the planet Neptune. He believed that it had been visited by intelligent extraterrestrial beings at some point in the past and hoped that his expedition could uncover further evidence to support that hypothesis.”

“I read about that,” Mark said. “Neptune really hasn’t been the focus of many major expeditions, and Dr. Bayard felt that it had been unduly neglected. I think that Starlight Enterprise was partially funding his voyage and had provided some equipment.”

“That is also correct,” Matthew replied. “Starlight Enterprise provided Dr. Bayard the funds to purchase the most advanced

artificial intelligence system ever made—the TB-9000. His plan was to use it to parse through any readings he took from Neptune for signs of intelligence. He hoped that a computer could spot patterns or signals that would otherwise be—”

“Wonderful,” the director said. “Please get to the point, Matthew. We don’t have all day, you know.”

“Two days ago,” Matthew continued, “this station received a message from the *Luna Merchant*. The message was a surprise for three reasons. First, the *Luna Merchant* did not depart from L5. Second, the *Luna Merchant* had barely had time to pass the orbit of Saturn and was not expected to arrive at Neptune for another six months, so no messages were expected. Third, the message was addressed to Melissa Nova—a person who did not live on L5.”

The director interrupted. “I found out about this when Cody—that’s the young man who delivers the mail on L5—came into my office and asked to speak with me. He gets misdirected mail all the time, but usually he could just return it to the sender and be done with it. Since the sender was on a space expedition he didn’t know what to do, so he came to me.

“I knew immediately that something was up, so I took the message from him and read it. One glance at the message showed that it was a code of some kind, and once I saw that, I knew there was trouble. Coded message from deep space! All kinds of terrible things happen out there in deep space, and if the *Luna Merchant* was in trouble we needed to know immediately so we could dispatch a rescue mission. There was no time to waste! I immediately called in my experts and asked them to decrypt it.”

“We didn’t know what to make of the message at first,” Vanessa said. “I loaded the message into the central computer system and tried to decrypt it but made no progress at all. The encryption is very unusual; it doesn’t correspond with anything I have seen in the past. It does not appear to be a substitution cipher. It does not appear to use any modern or ancient

encryption algorithm. We may be dealing with an advanced alien technology.”

“I don’t understand,” Zip said. “Dr. Bayard sent an encrypted message to L5, addressed to a non-existent person?”

“That’s correct,” Matthew said.

“But how do you know that it’s an emergency message?”

“Think, man!” Alfred Nelson said. “What else could it be? There they are, billions of miles from the Sun, and suddenly they send an encoded message to us. It must be a cry for help! What if their computer system went haywire? What if they were boarded by aliens? I think they were forced to encode the message to hide it from their attackers. They must have been afraid that their message would be intercepted. It’s vital that we find out what is going on!” He gestured over to Vanessa. “Please continue.”

“Wait a minute,” Joe said. “Have you tried contacting Dr. Bayard and asking him what the message meant?”

“Of course not!” the director said. “Use your head! If they’ve been boarded by aliens the very last thing we want to do is let the aliens know that we’re on to them. We’ve got to keep this hush-hush until we know what’s going on. Now Vanessa—please continue.”

“As I was saying,” she said, “it didn’t take us long to discover that the message was encrypted using a completely new algorithm. Matthew and I spent hours working on it before we suddenly had an idea.

“It was obvious, based on the message header, that Dr. Bayard had encrypted the message on his own computer before he sent it. He clearly meant for it to be understood. It is highly likely that he would have chosen a technique that would be meaningless to his attackers but easily understood to us at L5. We decided to take a step back and look at the entire message with fresh eyes.”

Vanessa stood up and pressed a button on the wall, dimming the lights. “This is the encrypted message that we received,” she said, pressing another button on the table.

Instantly a picture appeared floating in mid-air over the conference table. Inside the picture was a note with the following message:

```
From: Dr. Maxie Bayard  
To: Melissa Nova  
Timestamp: 09/24/2153 02:08:24 AM MST
```

x

The three Starmen looked at the note in astonishment. “You mean to tell me that *that* is the message?” Zip asked. “That’s it?”

“That’s right, young man,” the director said. “You can see why it grabbed my attention! You just don’t see coded messages from deep space very often. As soon as I saw that I said to myself, Alfred, now there’s some trouble, and no mistake.”

“When we first saw the message,” Matthew said, “we thought that the message had been cut off while in transit. After examining the logs, however, we saw that we had received the full message header and footer bytes; the message was not truncated. This does represent the entire message that was sent from the *Luna Merchant*.”

“After we verified that the full message had been received, we suddenly realized where we had made our mistake. The message was encoded using MST—Mountain Standard Time. Bayard lived on the L5 space station before he left for Neptune, and the L5 station uses Greenwich Mean Time. There was no reason for him to use MST unless he was trying to tell us something.”

“We knew that MST had to be an acronym for something,” Vanessa said. “We entered that phrase into our cryptographic system and tried to determine its meaning. The computer came back with many likely candidates, but one in particular caught our attention: Madison Symmetric Torus.”

“What?” Zip asked. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

“It’s a type of device that is used in advanced fusion research,” Matthew explained. “We thought that Dr. Bayard was trying to refer to nuclear physics—specifically, to nuclear fusion. We then noticed the time of the message: it was sent at 02:08:24. Two to the third power is eight, and eight times three is twenty-four. It seems unlikely that this was a coincidence; the time is too much like a formula. The solution was obvious: Dr. Bayard was talking about the top-secret formulas for plasma containment in nuclear fusion reactors!”

“Wow,” Zip said. “But—”

“I knew right then what had happened,” the director said. “Dr. Bayard was trying to warn us that Xenobots were trying to steal his secret formulas for plasma containment! His ship must have been boarded after they crossed the orbit of Saturn and he was hiding out in the ship, trying to tell us before it’s too late!”

“What clinches the theory is that the message is addressed to Melissa Nova,” Vanessa said. “Stars can go nova under certain conditions, and stars are powered by nuclear fusion. It all ties together.”

“Ok,” Zip said. “But—”

“The reason I asked you here,” the director said, “is because I need your help. If Dr. Bayard’s ship has been taken over by hostile aliens then we need to mount a rescue expedition immediately. You three have actually been out in deep space before; there’s no reason why you can’t leave immediately. I’m sure you could get there in a matter of weeks and send the Xenobots packing. There’s no time to waste, young man!”

“There are a few things that need clarification, though,” Zip said. “May I ask the base computer a few questions?” When no one objected he took out his compad and connected it to a port on the table.

“Computer,” he said, addressing his compad. “Has a person by the name of Melissa Nova ever lived on the L5 space station?”

“Affirmative,” the computer responded. “Melissa Nova began living on the L5 space station on January 15, 2150. She left L5 on August 15, 2153 when her lease expired.”

Joe spoke up. “Was Melissa Nova any relation to Dr. Bayard?”

“Affirmative. She was his younger sister.”

“Do you know where Melissa Nova is living now?” Mark asked.

“Negative. She did not leave a forwarding address.”

The three Starmen looked at each other. “I think I know what is going on,” Joe said. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket, wrote something on it, and handed it to Mark and Zip. They both read it, nodded, and handed it back.

“What’s going on?” the director said. “I don’t understand.”

“The three of us have a theory,” Joe said, “but we want to test it first. If you’ll give me an envelope I’ll place this piece of paper into it and seal it, so that our theory can be preserved for posterity. After that I’d like to make a phone call.”

“I don’t understand this at all,” the director said, as Vanessa searched the room for an envelope. “It’s quite obvious! You’ve got to head out there immediately; there’s no telling how much trouble the Xenobots have already unleashed. There must be no delay!”

Vanessa was eventually able to find an envelope; she handed it to Joe, who took his piece of paper and placed it inside. He sealed it, wrote “Confidential” on it, and placed it on the table.

“Computer,” Zip said aloud, “I want you to locate Melissa Nova. See if you can find out her current contact information.”

“Please wait,” the computer replied. The three Starmen waited.

“I really don’t see how this will help,” Matthew said. “I doubt that Melissa Nova knows very much about cryptographic analysis.”

“She may know more than you think,” Zip said. “I believe that she alone has the key to this cipher.”

It took the computer a few more minutes to locate the phone number, but it was at last obtained.

“Great!” Joe said. “Call her up.”

The phone rang three times, and then someone answered. “Hello, this is Melissa.”

“Hi there,” Joe said. “This is Starman Joe Taylor, calling you from the L5 space station. I have with me David Foster, Mark Seaton, Alfred Nelson, Matthew Lewis, and Vanessa Sloan.”

“Wow,” she said. “I’m impressed! How can I help you?”

“We’ve got a question for you,” Joe replied. “Two days ago the space station received a message from Dr. Bayard, addressed to you. Since you no longer live at the station the computer could not deliver the message.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Melissa said. “I knew I forgot something. I’d better let him know that my address has changed.”

“The forces of goodness in the universe would greatly appreciate that,” Joe said. “Do you think you could do us a favor?”

“Sure,” she said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Due to the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the message, it has been classified as an encrypted distress call,” Joe said. “A team of cryptologists have been trying to decrypt it for two days now and have had no luck understanding it. We were hoping that you could tell us what it meant.”

“That’s odd,” she said. “I don’t think he’s ever sent his messages encoded before. In fact, I’d be surprised if he even knew how to do that. But, um, sure, just send it to me and I’ll take a look at it.”

Joe asked Matthew to send her a copy of the message. He shook his head, but when Joe pressed him he forwarded the note to Melissa. “It’s been sent,” Joe said, after receiving confirmation of this from Matthew. “You should have it in just a few moments.”

“I can’t believe you would read my mail,” Melissa said. “Do you do that very often?”

“Fortunately, no,” Joe replied. “But in this case we made an exception.”

“Ah, there it is,” Melissa said. “I see it now. Let me read it.” She was silent a moment, and then burst out laughing. The director looked puzzled. “I don’t see anything funny about it,” he muttered.

“Thanks for sending this message to me,” she said. “It made my day. I’ll let my brother know that I received it and that my address has changed.”

“You’re welcome,” Joe replied. “Just for the record, what was Dr. Bayard trying to tell you?”

“Oh, well, you have to understand my brother. I saw him just before he left, you know, and told him to send me a letter after he got past the orbit of Saturn. No one in our family had ever gone out that far before, you see. So after he passed the orbit of Saturn, he did just that—he sent me the letter ‘x’.”

“Wonderful,” Zip said. “I’m glad your brother is safe and sound. Thank you for your time.”

“You’re welcome,” Melissa said. “Bye!” She hung up.

Alfred Nelson picked up the sealed envelope off the desk, tore it open, and read the note inside. He then threw it down on the table. “How could you possibly have known?” he asked.

“Call it a lucky guess,” Zip said.

“Based on past history,” Joe added.

“That’s crazy!” the director said, fuming. “How could we be expected to know that? It’s not fair!”

“That,” Mark said, “is exactly why you’re not supposed to read other people’s mail.”

With that, the three Starmen walked out of the conference room and back down the hall toward their waiting ship.

RETURN TO EUROPA

*This short story takes place October 15-December 31, 2153,
beginning five months after the end of
The Treasures of Darkness
and about a year after the Starmen's first visit to Europa.*

Chapter 1

IN THE DARKNESS OF EARLY NIGHT, Starmen David "Zip" Foster, Mark Seaton, and Joe Taylor sat wordless and almost motionless on the verandah of the farmhouse of Mark's family's home in Montana. The wooden structure, more than two and a half centuries old, had been in the Seaton family since Mark's ancestor Temple Manley had built it for his cattle ranch in the late nineteenth century. Though the cattle were long gone, ten generations later, Mark's grandparents Micah and Jenn still maintained the property as a working and profitable farm.

At midday, the three friends had gone fishing on the deep oval lake that lay behind the farmhouse, where the noonday sun had dappled and dazzled its azure waters. Laid out around the lake were the working fields of the farm. An ancient wooden bridge, embowered in greenery, crossed the stream that flowed from the lake around the side of the farmhouse. The path across the bridge led to several rows of walnut trees a half-mile distant, past acreage where yellow pumpkins had been laid out to dry in the October fields.

After a sumptuous dinner with Mark's grandparents and the hired hands, the Starmen had moved to the front porch to watch the strawberry blond sun set through the greenery of the pine woods due west of the farmhouse. The heavy light of the falling sun ignited flecks in the feathery goldenrod and starry asters in the meadow that stretched a hundred yards from the porch to the

nearest edge of the woods. A dull silver five-seater winged spacecraft of basic design, used mostly for the quick run between the Earth and the Moon, rested on its three fins on the hard-baked earth to the southeast. Starlight Enterprise had lent the ship to the Starmen for local use while the *Star Ranger* was being completely rebuilt and refurbished at Mars Base.

A peaceful brook flowed dreamily across the field where it met the lakestream and continued southward. The brook issued from the damp recesses of the clustered pines, where its bed had lain undisturbed for centuries. One did not have to follow the brook far into the woods to find rocks covered with the purest emerald green moss, and moist, hidden places overshadowed by delicate fronds of maidenhair.

Across the yard to the right, a silo barely fifty years old showed its dark bulk in the big sky of dusky evening, across which a lavish star field had been thrown. The Milky Way was spread across the heavens like fine, soft dust. Beyond the silo a high, jagged tooth of stone reared up out of the land. In front of the house, snuggled among the low rolling hills, many thousand acres of grassland spread out like a sea.

Now as evening merged into true night, fireflies flitted like little sparks among the grasses that waved invisibly in a barely moving breeze. The harvest moon rose in the east over distant buttes and transformed the plain into a sheet of washed silver. A few apple trees close to the front of the house showed their silhouettes against the grassland behind. The chirping of myriad night insects sounded in the background, now and again broken upon by the plaintive cry of a whip-poor-will.

“Someday we’ve got to bring Stenafi, Saadervo, and Jogren here,” suggested Joe.

After a long pause, Mark responded. “We’ll be meeting Saadervo and Stenafi in less than a month. I’ll invite them then.”

“The gravity will make it hard for them,” contributed Zip, “but I think they’ll consider the discomfort worth it for an experience like this.”

“Then it’s decided,” said Mark.

After another long pause, Joe said, “Guess we’d better turn in. Our long journey begins tomorrow. Much as I’ve enjoyed my stay here, Mark, I must admit I’m ready to get back to Europa.”



*Beyond the silo a high, jagged tooth of stone
reared up out of the land.*

The three wooden lounge chairs creaked as the three Starmen stood up. Zip inhaled deeply and breathed out a satisfied, “Aaaah.” They passed into the rambling farmhouse where Mark’s grandparents were already slumbering and tiptoed up the wide staircases to the third story. Almost as soon as their heads hit the pillows, they were asleep.

Chapter 2

A few weeks later, the *Bonny Swan*, a Starlight Enterprise vessel with the three Starmen in command, cruised through the Asteroid Belt to a rendezvous that had been planned nearly half a year earlier. During their extended springtime visit in *Imlah Taltahni*, one of the Ahmanyman refuges on Mars, Richard Starlight and the Starmen had organized a preliminary return mission to Europa. The Ahmanyman Saadervo and Stenafi would accompany Zip, Mark, and Joe on a brief reconnaissance expedition to the long-abandoned Ahmanyman city on the ocean bottom.

The Starmen had asked Stavri Thalassa, leader of the Tunnel People in Eagle City, to be a part of the second European team. Richard Starlight was adamant that the knowledge of the existence of the Ahmanyman colonies remain severely restricted to a small number of people. Stavri was one of the few who were privy to the facts and was therefore the ideal companion for the second European mission. His primary duty would be to remain in the European ice base as contact and trouble-shooter during the descent.

With the Ahmanyman's permission, Kristina Bethany had been apprised of the existence of the Ahmanyman refuges, and also invited to join the mission and bring with her M'hsjewantroi and Tr'halmaheswari, the well-traveled Titanian couple better known as Jack and Jill. Kristina's knowledge of the Titanian language and the history of the diminutive people made her participation potentially vital to the success of the proposed venture. The Starmen knew that the octopoid denizens of Europa could speak Titanian, and presumably they could speak Ahmanyman as well, but since their last contact with the Ahmanyman people had been at the time of the Xenobot war when the Titanians had taken up residence in the Solar System, Kristina's presence was deemed strongly advisable.

Sworn to secrecy, Kristina had shortened her visit to her family on Earth by nearly two months, and begun her journey

back to Elijah Base on Titan at the end of the summer. She was to invite Jack and Jill to accompany her to Europa, and then meet the *Bonny Swan* at the site of the former Starlight base on the Jovian moon on December 5. From there, the group would make the descent to the site of the abandoned Ahmanyans city.

“Touchdown in five minutes, twenty-three seconds,” announced navigator Mark Seaton aboard the *Bonny Swan*. Joe kept the Starlight craft on its bearing to the uncharted and unnamed asteroid whose coordinates the Ahmanyans had provided before the Earthmen had left Mars the previous June. Their destination was a remnant of the volcanic and unstable planet Azemir that the Xenobots had exploded in the interplanetary war more than 12,000 years earlier.

The asteroid was an uneven shard of black glass barely three-quarters of a mile in its longest dimension. When it had formed part of the planet, it had been inside an ever-boiling volcanic basin. As a consequence, this particular chunk of Azemir contained innumerable bubbles that held samples of the primitive atmosphere of the planet of fire. The edge of one enormous bubble, however, had been sheered off in the explosion that destroyed the planet. A small round opening in the asteroid led into a spherical chamber somewhat more than fifty yards in diameter. The ancient Ahmanyans had installed a portal that shielded the opening from the vacuum of space, and furnished the interior with atmosphere tanks and other necessities. When Joe Taylor had heard the description of the site, he'd called it a “pocket world”.

That same Joe Taylor now brought the *Bonny Swan* to a soft landing on the asteroid of glass, and then bolted it to the surface so that it wouldn't float away while the Starmen were out of the ship. Zip led the way down the ladder and set foot on the smooth face of the asteroid. His “smart grip” shoes kept him from losing his footing on the asteroid that had almost no gravity. Escape velocity could be achieved by a strong leap upward. In seconds, Joe and Mark stood next to him.

“This way,” said Zip, consulting his compad. The Ahmanyans

had provided a locator program that would guide the Starman leader to a small airlock that allowed individuals into the pocket world. The bubble was too small to contain an airlock large enough for even an undersized shuttlecraft. The atmosphere in the pocket world was usually stored in two tanks and released when the world was inhabited. At such times, individuals who passed between the interior of the asteroid and the surface could use the airlock.

Zip found the entrance to the portal and opened it, using the code that Saadervo had provided. Once the Starmen were inside the small cubicle, the redheaded Starman shut and sealed the outer door, then operated the mechanism that brought atmosphere into the airlock. As soon as it was filled with breathable air, Zip opened the second door to the airlock and stepped into the pocket world.

“Greetings, men of Earth!” cried Stenafi as soon as Zip and his friends had crossed the threshold and removed their helmets. She, Saadervo, and Stavri Thalassa were waiting by the door to provide a cordial welcome. Stenafi’s friendly, sparkling brown eyes and dark wavy hair were a pleasing sight after the Starmen’s long journey. After the Ahmanyans and the Starmen had renewed their friendship, Saadervo and Stenafi gave the Earthmen a tour of the pocket world.

“As you can see,” began Stenafi, “only a small ship can dock inside the base. Storage, working, and living quarters are fitted snugly around it.”

“Pretty close quarters,” observed Joe.

“Makes me feel right at home,” said Stavri. “These packed digs are not too different from life in the tunnels of Eagle City! We’ve been here six days and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed the stay!”

The six of them stood on a balcony that overlooked the entire interior of the pocket world. Centrally located was a shiny, deep forest green ship that could have been made of satin. It rested in a homely bay, underneath which were tightly packed storage areas.

“There are the atmosphere tanks,” said Saadervo, pointing

toward two large cylinders to one side of the pod, “and to the left are the living quarters. On this side are the work stations.”

“How close are the Xenobots to this asteroid?” asked Zip. “Have there been any other dealings since our encounter last spring?”

“They’ve been silent, Zip,” answered Saadervo. “Their base is far from here. That is one reason why we selected this particular asteroid for our meeting. Our surveillance of them is constant, and they have not left the Asteroid Belt since Richard destroyed their three ships a few months ago.”

“I am uneasy about what they might be planning,” said Zip, his brow creased with anxiety. “The survivors must know that men from Earth were the victors in the incursion, and we are certain that they will not ignore that defeat.”

“You are correct,” said Saadervo, his lips pressed together grimly. “But together our forces are more than a match for the small colony that has taken up residence in our Solar System. As long as they keep to themselves, we will not act against them. At any rate, they cannot interfere with our journey to Europa.”

“Tomorrow we’ll pack our equipment in your ship,” said Stenafi, “and we’ll be ready to continue the journey. Saadervo, Stavri, and I have been here for almost a week preparing what we’ll need. Our work here is finished now.” She turned and smiled at the Starmen. “We’re eager to see Europa and the Ahmanyen city it houses!”

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After the breakfast things had been cleared away the following morning, the Starmen helped the Ahmanyans and Stavri load their personal belongings and the scientific instruments aboard the *Bonny Swan*.

“That’s the last of it,” announced Saadervo as he carried a box through the airlock and handed it to Mark. The Ahmanyen turned and sealed the airlock against the unlikely possibility that the asteroid and its pocket world would be found by any unauthorized personnel. With the technology that had fascinated

the Starmen since they had first seen it on Tharsos, the outside door of the airlock suddenly blended in to the composition of the material surrounding it.

Saadervo had provided the Starmen with the measure of the maximum acceleration the Ahmanyans could endure. Since they made their home on a planet whose gravity was significantly less than Earth's, Joe had to ensure that the *Bonny Swan* did not exceed that rate of acceleration. Moments after the Starlight ship was sealed, Joe launched it from the glass asteroid and directed it toward the giant gas planet whose orbit was next beyond the Asteroid Belt.

Chapter 3

The ice-covered moon Europa followed its elliptical orbit at an average distance of 417,000 miles above Jupiter. The *Bonny Swan* made a graceful approach to the striated white and brown planetoid.

"Mark, please locate our old landing site; Joe, bring us to a hover above it," said Zip.

"Aye aye, sir," they chorused.

"No Ahmanyans have seen this ancient city since the time of the War," breathed Stenafi. She, Saadervo, and Stavri were standing on the control deck as the Starmen prepared for the descent. With eager eyes they stared down at the rough surface of deep frozen water. The brownish white terrain was scored with long cracks and odd geometric patterns that showed where ice plates had shifted and collided. Scattered iron and mineral deposits tinted the terrain with a ruddy hue across wide fields.

"We're on site, Zip," announced Joe as he relinquished the controls and leaned back.

"Let's find out what we're dealing with," said Zip, and activated the Harrison fluxon scanner. All six people stared eagerly at the screen. Shapes and graphs began to appear, and lines of numbers scrolled across the bottom.

“Great news!” exclaimed Mark. “The ice hasn’t shifted much in the year since we were here. I think the shaft we drilled will need a little cleaning up, but the equipment is still in place and the mountain with the city inside it is almost directly below.”

“How about the base that Noah Kitsualuk built?” asked Joe.

“Looks good. Won’t take us long to make it habitable,” answered Zip. “Let’s land and get started. Mark, please contact Kristina and give her a report. She’s expected to arrive about two days from now.”

“Sure, Zip.”

Joe brought the *Bonny Swan* to a precise landing a few yards from the main entrance to the base they had occupied with the crew of the *Silverfire* a year earlier.

“The active shielding’s working fine, Zip,” reported Mark as soon as the engines of the ship were shut down. “As expected, the improvements the engineering department made mean that we won’t have to build another igloo.”

“That’ll cut our time down considerably,” said Zip. “Would you please take Saadervo and Stenafi into the base and give it a careful examination? Fix what needs to be done to get us moved in, and then begin unloading. Joe, Stavri, and I’ll get the crane set up and unload the *Underbird II*.”

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By evening of the following day, the visitors to Europa had moved into the restored base, and the crane and mantaship had been prepared for descent. All that remained to be done was to make a detailed examination of the shaft that had been cut the previous year.

After dinner, Stavri lowered a camera through the shaft that led to the surface of the lightless sea below the ice. The others sat or stood behind him as he checked every foot until the apparatus reached the top of the first barrier that Gray Bennick had designed and installed.

“Some shifting and compression, and a little expansion in

places,” he concluded. “We can lower a robotic laser to make the adjustments, and then send down the ice ring to reseal the sides. Then I’ll ride the elevator down and make a careful assessment of the chamber between the seals. If that section is as clear as the passage above, we’ll have you in the swim tomorrow sometime!”

“Terrific!” said Mark.

“Kristina, Jack, and Jill are due to land a little before 4:00 a.m.,” said Zip. “We’ll give them the day to rest and then start down after dinner.”

The Ahmanyans looked at one another and smiled with anticipation.

Chapter 4

“Get it while it’s hot!” Joe’s voice traveled through the makeshift sound system to every place where work was going on. A few minutes later all nine members of the team had assembled eagerly at the dinner table. Kristina’s yellow wheelchair fitted snugly under the edge, and Jack and Jill sat on the tabletop.

“We’ll eat well and then begin the descent!” announced the Starman turned chef. He plopped a serving spoon into a mound of steaming mashed potatoes on the table, then brought a serving dish filled with string beans. Trays of sliced white cheese and a shallow bowl of marinated tomatoes followed, and a trencher of baked chicken came last.

“And saved for dessert on this special occasion, sweet juicy blood oranges from California, and, courtesy of Stenafi, Martian plums! Wait’ll you taste those, Stavri and Kristina!”

“They are called ‘*moolafentori*’, Joe,” said Stenafi.

“The word’s too long and sounds funny,” said Joe with mock dismissiveness. “I wish we had some Earth plums with us so you Ahmanyans could see what we’re talking about.”

“‘Too long’? ‘Sounds funny’?” observed Mark, his brows

knit together. “I thought you *preferred* your words to be sesquipedalianistic and pulchritudinous.”

Stavri choked on his chicken, and Joe glowered at Mark.

“What did he say?” asked Saadervo, a blank look on his face.

“Nothing!” asserted Joe.

“He is making joke,” explained Jack. “He make joke many times on Mars.”

“What’s the Ahmanyen word for ‘mashed potatoes?’” asked Mark innocently. “I’d like to tell you about the time Joe decided to wear some mashed potatoes.”

Even Zip smiled at that one, remembering the incident aboard the *Starventure*, and even Joe enjoyed it when Mark related the details.

~

“Releasing the barrier,” said Zip.

“Proceed,” answered Stavri. “I can hear you fine.”

The bottom gate of the barrier Gray Bennick had installed fell open and the *Underbird II* came through. The cables that suspended it continued to lower the mantaship toward the inky blackness below. The sides of the ice passage inclined away in all directions, and then disappeared from view. They were now suspended between the bottom of the ice covering and the surface of the everdark ocean.

Suddenly Kristina gasped. All eyes turned toward her. “Sorry,” she said apologetically. “I didn’t realize I was holding my breath. What are those things?” She pointed outside the window, and all heads turned to see where she was indicating.

“Wow!” exclaimed Joe. “Look at all those odd crabbies walking on the ceiling!”

Hanging from the bottom of the ice, about a dozen creatures were clambering away from the mantaship. Their bodies were bladder-like bags a foot or so in diameter attached to a solid mass from which at least eight and in some cases up to perhaps a dozen long, spindly legs protruded.

“I don’t know what they are,” said Zip. “We didn’t see them when we were here before.”

“They must be gas buoyant,” added Mark. “They sure do look weird!”

The colony scuttled into the gray shadow and then into the complete darkness where they could no longer be seen.

After they had disappeared completely, Joe urged Zip to continue to lower the mantaship toward the surface of the water. With all eyes directed forward once again, the redheaded Starman drew the cables out a little more. The lights on the front of the *Underbird II* glistened on the water. Without waves or currents, the surface was mirror smooth, and to the occupants of the mantaship it appeared as if a ship identical to their own were creeping toward them from the depths below.

“Five feet,” announced Mark as the phantom mantaship headed toward them on a collision course, nose to nose. “Two feet. Contact.”

The line that indicated the surface of the water rolled up past the window. There was a noticeable change in the buoyancy of the ship as it became completely immersed.

“Releasing the *UB2*,” said Zip. He pushed a toggle switch forward. “We’re free.”

“I’ve got you on the screen,” said Stavri.

“Let’s go!” said Joe.

“Still 28.2° Fahrenheit,” said Mark.

“Navigator, please turn on the sonarvision,” said Zip.

“Aye aye, sir.”

With the press of a switch, the windows lit up and showed the terrain below as if the ship were flying above a vast desert.

“Let’s go!” repeated Joe. “We’ve got more than ten miles to drop before we get to the city!”

Zip leaned forward in the pilot’s seat and the *Underbird II* began to shoot downward.

Chapter 5

Down, down through the lightless ocean the mantaship made its watery way. The Titanians sat on the top of the control console just inches from the clear window. Directly below them a massive mountain rose from the barely rolling terrain that surrounded it.

“Down there is the main entrance to the caverns that lead to the city,” pointed out Zip. A tiny red laser dot appeared momentarily at the place he indicated.

A “ping” sounded inside the cabin.

“Ah!” exclaimed Mark. “I’ve found the *Underbird*. Its locator is still working. It’s right—” he craned his head slightly, “—right about there.” Another red dot appeared on the window, located on the edge of the display and at least a mile from the foothills of the great mountain. “Shall we go see it?”

“The Europeans said we’re not in any danger from the giant fish,” said Zip. “We won’t have to run for our lives this time. If Saadervo and Stenafi are agreeable, I’d like to see the old ship.”

“Of course, Zip,” said Saadervo.

Zip changed course slightly. The ship passed through the stratum of thick sediment that they had encountered on their previous mission. The bottom of the ocean was a mile below the layer.

“There it is,” muttered Zip a moment later as the *Underbird* came into view. The Starman leader brought the *UB2* to the site and circled the wreck slowly. The damaged mantaship had spiraled down through the black water on Christmas Day the previous year, and had slammed into the solid land and then tilted down to settle on its undercarriage.

“A terrific ship,” said Joe, “and salvageable, I bet, if we want it.”

Stenafi inhaled sharply. “What’s that?” she cried at the same time the others started. Three creatures that resembled octopi scurried out of the wreck and began to swim toward the second mantaship.

“Europeans!” shouted Joe. Those who had not seen the native inhabitants of Europa before pressed forward. Saadervo and Stenafi particularly felt the excitement of imminent contact with the waterborn race of the Jovian satellite.

The three creatures came into close proximity of the clear window, but didn’t touch it. They hovered momentarily, and the crew of the *Underbird II* watched entranced as the eyestalks on the individuals glowed and wavered. Beneath the globes that comprised their bodies, delicate fans quivered.

All at once the octopoid creatures began to swim toward the mountain, skimming the bottom of the sea. Zip moved the controls forward and kept behind the Europeans.

“Mark,” said Zip, “please tell Stavri we have made contact with the Europeans, and will follow them to the abandoned city.”

The big Starman made his report to Stavri and reminded him that communication would be impossible once the mantaship went belowground.

The land at the bottom of the sea was extraordinarily smooth, having no debris or erosion and little subterranean activity to mar its surface. Thin grasses grew and wavered in the light current that moved at that depth. Bearing their phosphorescent light, the Europeans glided ahead of the mantaship.

As they approached the mountain, one quarter-mile-long fish and then another passed overhead but did not bother the mantaship. The Europeans led them into the same tunnel the *Underbird* had entered the previous year. Before long, they had come to the large central spherical hall that was familiar to the Starmen.

“We’ll take that tunnel, if I remember correctly,” said Joe, pointing to one of the openings to their left as they came into the enormous chamber. By this time more than two dozen Europeans had joined the procession, and led the *UB2* unerringly to the cavity Joe had indicated.

For several minutes, Zip piloted the mantaship down the passage until it opened widely into a chamber alight with natural illumination that radiated from the rock walls.

“The abandoned city of Ahmanya!” said Mark. “It has not known a resident for more than a dozen millennia.”

“But now we have returned,” said Saadervo.

The *Underbird II* slipped into a dock and came to rest on the surface of the water.

Chapter 6

“Now we wait,” announced Zip. “They should bring a communicator soon.”

Anticipation filled the cabin of the mantaship as they waited for the telltale scraping sound that indicated that the Europeans had attached the communicator to the side of the *Underbird II*.

Almost at once a slight scraping sound was followed by the artificial voice the Starmen had heard before in that same place.

“Titanian,” said Kristina solemnly.

“It is how we communicated before,” said Mark.

“It is an historic encounter,” noted Zip quietly. “This is the first meeting of all four sentient races of the Solar System.”

Kristina spoke aloud in the language she had been studying for several years; she was one of fewer than a dozen Earthmen who were conversational in the difficult tongue.

She received an immediate response. After several exchanges, she paused and addressed the group inside the mantaship.

“I greeted them in the name of the peoples of Earth, Ahmanya, and Titan, and asked permission to visit their home. They welcomed us to Europa. I told them that I had two people from Titan aboard but I have not yet apprised them of the presence of Saadervo and Stenafi.”

“Ask them if they speak the language of Ahmanya,” urged Zip. There was another brief exchange between Kristina and the Europeans.

“They said that they do,” said Kristina. With his eyes, Zip indicated that Saadervo should speak.

The governor of *Imlah Taltahni* began.

“*Tanmanna byela wollen Ahmanya, pandaka Lamdo. Alto Saadervo anhallo Ahmanya.*” As he spoke, Stenafi translated quietly.

“He said, ‘Greetings from the people of Ahmanya, citizens of Europa. I am Saadervo from Ahmanya,’” she whispered.

The conversation went on for some time. Saadervo asked about the Ahmanyan culture that had once flourished in the city, and inquired in detail about the evacuation that had taken place thousands of years earlier. He asked about the European population and the nature of their erstwhile relationship with the Ahmanyans.

At last, Saadervo terminated the exchange. He turned and addressed the others.

“The population numbers in the several thousands in this place. There are other dwellings, and the overall European population is well over a million individuals. They are well versed in their history and thoroughly loyal to the memory of the Ahmanyan presence. I am very pleased! Now we will go out and explore the city! I will continue the conversation with the Europeans later!”

“Great!” burst out Joe. “I am ready to stretch my legs!”

“And I’ve been waiting to set foot inside that city for a year,” added Mark. “Last time we were here I waited inside the ship.”

“I suppose there’s no need to guard the ship this time,” suggested Zip.

“No, Zip, no need at all,” said Saadervo. “The Europeans are entirely dependable and there is no danger.”

The Starmen and their companions debarked and stepped out onto the pier. Upside down images of the silent buildings and the dome of rock overhead showed in water smooth as glass, with a barely discernible undulation caused by the ingress of the *Underbird II*.

“*Domoli,*” whispered Stenafi. “It is the name of the city, a fabled place for generations of our people. It is immensely moving for us to stand in its streets.”

“Like Cibola,” suggested Joe, “or Shangri-la.”

“But this place is real,” objected Mark, “not a myth.”

Jack and Jill rode in their accustomed shoulder packs on the backs of Joe and Mark. The Starmen and the Ahmanyans treaded softly as they passed into the streets of the city. The non-directed illumination from the rock created a softness with the feel of an early autumn morning. Shadows were so diffuse as to be all but nonexistent.

The party roamed through the avenues of the abandoned settlement and investigated the interiors of many of the buildings. All were interconnected with consummate artistic functionality. Bridges and aerial walkways made it easy to pass from one structure to another.

The explorers wandered through arches and along passageways, ascending and descending by means of geometrically appealing staircases. Light, almost pastel natural colors and effortless patterns gave the impression that the city could have grown organically from the rock rather than been imposed upon it in some unnatural fashion. The predominant hue was an aged ivory, but there were plenty of green, blue, and yellow highlights in trim, lettering, and scrollwork around windows and doorways.

The domes of several minarets and towers were covered with imbricated tiles of deep blue and hardy green. Window boxes showed below narrow apertures in the walls, but nothing grew in them. In several places where paths came to a meeting place, there were delicate fountains made of dark iron and silver, but no water flowed or sprayed.

“We will map the city,” announced Saadervo toward the end of their exploration, “and analyze the terrain. We’ll set up extensive interviews with the Europeans, and chart the entire interior of the mountain and its passageways. We’ll be able to discern the purpose each building served, and compare our data with the traditions and legends we have inherited from the past.”

“Most importantly,” said Stenafi, “we’ll examine the mine. If the traditions are correct, from the isotope available there we will

be able to renew our understanding of hypertravel!”

Chapter 7

During the next four weeks, the party kept busy. Forays out of the tunnel complex into the free ocean made regular contact with Stavri Thalassa possible, and on two occasions the *UB2* returned to the surface for supplies and to exchange equipment. These trips gave Stavri an opportunity to make the descent to *Domoli* while Joe stayed in the ice base.

Kristina Bethany provided invaluable assistance in the conversations with the Europeans, and imparted insights into their understanding of the history of the Ahmanyen presence in their world.

The Titanians offered their considerable expertise when Saadervo wanted to create electronic files or discern the purpose behind the sophisticated but ancient apparatus. Joe, Stenafi, and Jack traversed all the tunnels under the mountain and, with the active cooperation of three Europeans, created a three-dimensional map of the entire complex. Saadervo, Jill, and Mark did the same with the structure of *Domoli* itself.

Several times the entire party traveled to the site of the ancient mine whose existence was the main reason why the city had been established in the first place. Saadervo carefully took several samples of the ore back to the city with him and, with the assistance of Zip and Mark, performed a careful analysis of the substance.

“It’s an abnormal isotope,” he concluded. “It was formed by the unusual juxtaposition of extreme temperatures, the radiation of the Jovian system, and the internal pressures that exist in the mantle of this moon by virtue of its being so close to a giant planet. The conditions all came together here to create this exceedingly rare material.”

Saadervo was also singularly interested in the control center of the city, and spent several hours there with Jack and Jill more

than once.

On the last day of the year, he came back to the *Underbird II* with an expression that verged on smugness.

“What is it, Saadervo?” interrogated Joe. “You look like the cat that swallowed the canary!”

“What?” asked Saadervo.

Stenafi looked up with a wry grin. “You’ll have to explain that most curious statement, Joe.”

“Ah, it just means that Saadervo knows something really important and we don’t know what it is yet.”

“You are correct, Joe,” said the governor of *Imlah Taltahni*. “With the assistance of the Maldans—the Titanians—I have ascertained without a doubt that the Ahmanyans were able to travel from *Domoli* to Ahmanya through hyperspace!”

Stenafi leaned forward excitedly. “You mean direct travel? Without a spacecraft?”

“I think so,” said Saadervo. “Whether they could travel without some kind of vehicle, I don’t know yet, but they could indeed travel through hyperspace. This is the first proof that they could do so in ways other than spacecraft, whose capability to do so is well known. The evidence is unmistakable. The warping of space has altered the atomic structure of the supports in the side chamber of the great hall. The equipment shows settings for eight receiving beacons on Ahmanya: the six largest cities of our ancient civilization and two spaceports. Another is set on *Hol*—Phobos. Two others are fixed on terminuses on the farthest outskirts of the Solar System: Quaoar, which we call *Olancha*, and *Mtalan*—the dwarf planet you call Nyx. There are a few others that must be set on spacecraft that no longer exist.

“All are dark, of course. The receiving beacons were obliterated long ago—but that doesn’t mean that new beacons can’t be created and connected to this sending station!”

An impressed silence fell upon the group. Then Zip spoke.

“Surely one of the others—those receiving beacons set on spacecraft—would have been set on Tharsos? Wouldn’t that one still exist?”

A wave coursed through Saadervo's facial muscles in an expression the Earthmen had seen only once or twice before in the Ahmanyen physiognomy but had never identified. For a moment it even seemed as if his forehead lifted up slightly.

"Of course," he breathed. "Of course! It must!"

"Can you reactivate the destination procedure, Saadervo?" asked Stenafi.

"No. I do not know how to make the machinery operational, either."

The Ahmanyen looked up into the faces of the others. He seemed exhausted with a fatigue of satisfaction. "Soon it will be time for us to depart from *Domoli*," he said. "I have reached the end of what my skills and knowledge can accomplish here. But we shall return before long. Perhaps it is time to awaken others of our race from their deep sleep—those whose knowledge reaches deeper than my own. If they can make the hyperspatial apparatus operational again, the awakening of Ahmanyen can be accomplished sooner than we had thought possible, for *Domoli* can be reinhabited far from the hostile eyes of our enemy."

"And if *Domoli* lives again," exulted Stenafi, her eyes alight, "then the warriors and citizens of *Olovanda* can be awakened soon after!"

"What is *Olovanda*?" asked Zip.

"It is the city of warriors inside Tharsos!" she declared fiercely; "—the bane of the Xenobots!"

BOOK 6: DOOMSDAY HORIZON

They looked like a wheel within a wheel. (Ezekiel 1:16b)

Chapter 1: The Camp at Mooncircle Lake

“FOR SOME REASON,” panted lanky Joe Taylor, wiping his left sleeve across his sweating brow, “I thought that this was supposed to be relaxing.” With an agonized groan, he heaved himself to the top of an immense boulder. With this achievement he had reached the highest point of a steep climb through thick forest in the wilderness of Montana.

“It’s sad,” said his friend, Mark Seaton, shaking his head. The dark-haired native of the great northwestern state turned to the third member of their party, David “Zip” Foster, who sat comfortably next to Mark and watched Joe pull himself painfully to his feet and stumble over to the others.

“To think,” continued Mark with a note of sympathy, “that this is the courageous and heroic Starman who saved us, his feeble partners, just a few months ago when that ledge collapsed under us in the borderland on Mercury and threatened to precipitate us a quarter mile down the slope to the unprotected plain where the sun would have crisped us faster than last night’s barbecue.” The big Starman looked up into the heavens and sighed. “Oh, how I was thankful then for his endurance, his strength, his determination, his... *hey!*”

Air whooshed out of Mark’s lungs as Joe rushed him, coming in low and placing his left shoulder carefully but determinedly into Mark’s gut, then stood up with a loud grunt.

“*Hey!*” croaked Mark as Joe began to stride across the top of the boulder with his friend held over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. Joe began to spin in a circle, twirling with increasing speed. After a half dozen full turns, the gangly, blond Starman set Mark down firmly on his feet and stepped back.

"*You...*" began Mark, and then took a quick step sideways to keep from toppling over. Zip began to chuckle.

"What were you saying about my strength?" laughed Joe. "I can still pick you up over my shoulder, even if you have been eating enough for three during the past month."

Mark smiled and clapped Joe on the shoulder. They sat down next to Zip, who had enjoyed their cavorting.

"It *has* been relaxing," affirmed Zip, "visiting here with your grandparents again, Mark. It was tremendously kind of them to invite the three of us and our families to the ranch for the summer."

"Well, they know that Joe is an outdoors man, and they thought that the forest would please him. It's not like rural Québec, but it's green."

"Now that's an understatement," nodded Joe. "I love this pine-scented forest. It's so old and deep. It seems outside of time, somehow." He turned toward Mark with an affectionate smile. "It was so good of you to discern how disappointed I was when my parents radioed us that they couldn't be here. If I haven't thanked you before, well—thanks!"

"You've thanked me," said Mark, "but not today yet, if I remember right. Besides, it was my grandparents' idea."

"You had to've set 'em up for it." Joe scanned the treetops that surrounded them, and breathed deeply. "I can't imagine anybody inviting the crowd they're entertaining—with us, your parents, David's sister, and my three cousins, that's eleven extra people!"

"They like doing it," said Mark. "Doesn't seem as if that dining table ever runs out of space."

"Kathy and your cousins became friends pretty quickly," contributed Zip. "We can hardly keep the four of them out of the vegetable garden! Kathy hasn't much experience growing anything herself, but she loves gardens and forests."

"Yes; I like watching them digging and weeding out there," said Joe. "And I'll see my parents in Coaticook when we celebrate my birthday there in September. So in a way, I get the

best of both worlds. But it will be good to be back where I grew up.”

“Much as I love our families, it’s nice to be off on our own for a day or two,” said Zip. “How far do you think we’ve hiked so far today, Mark?” The redheaded Starman turned his head toward Mark and raised quizzical eyebrows.

“Fourteen and a half miles,” said Mark as he lifted a canteen to his lips. He took a deep drink before continuing his answer. “It’s that far almost precisely from the ranch to Break’s Knob. That’s what this boulder’s called. Mooncircle Lake’s about another mile farther, and we’ll camp there.”

“Let’s go,” said Joe, getting to his feet and brushing himself off.

“I thought you were tired,” said Mark, innocently.

Joe narrowed his eyes. “I am grateful for your solicitude, but I assure you I was kidding.”

“Ah!” nodded Mark. “I thought so.”

“You *knew* so,” said Joe, shouldering his pack.

Mark led his two companions to the far side of the Knob where the ground rolled away westward on a gentle decline into an uninhabited valley. Behind them lay a steep climb through dense forest. It had taken them most of the afternoon to reach the height. Break’s Knob was an immense granite outcropping at the crest of the slope. From the far side, green grass grew in comparatively open ground. A few trees were dotted here and there across the field.

As the Starman made their way along an infrequently used path, the meadow spread out like an upturned palm at the end of a tapered wrist. On their right, a dark scree-clad precipice cut the sky in half. To the left, a gentle decline led down to a slender river that reflected the sky in blazing fiery orange, like a bright thread drawn across brown moss. The next hilltop was fully shrouded with black pine and spruce, and in the sky behind, the setting sun shone through the clouds so that they resembled ruby fog.

“There’s Mooncircle Lake,” Mark said, pointing. The body

of water was almost perfectly circular. The orange river flowed southward from the lake, and another flowed into it from the north after cascading down the cliff. “See a blue moon reflected in that on a cloudless night, so the legend goes, and you’ll be protected from misfortune until the next blue moon.”

“How do you define ‘blue moon’?” queried Zip. “Some people say it’s the second full moon in a month, and others that it’s the third full moon in a season that has four full moons.”

“I’d rather have the first kind of blue moon,” said Joe. “They’re more common. More good fortune that way.”

“Maybe we’ll find out which definition is correct,” said Mark. “By the first definition, tonight’s a blue moon. That,” he elucidated, turning to his friends with a sly grin, “is why I brought us here at this time.”

“July thirtieth,” grunted Zip. “Right. The last full moon was the first of the month.”

“Nice,” observed Joe. “I like this midsummer warmth. We won’t need a tent.”

The three young men set their packs down in a level spot about ten yards from the shore of the lake. The stream gurgled soothingly not far away, and the brooding cliff was reflected in the waters of the lake as in a mirror.

“There’s Venus,” said Mark. Zip and Joe paused in their work and turned to look into the western sky. A bright point of light gleamed over the ruddy clouds on the horizon.

“And there’s Nyx,” said Joe, pointing to a bright spot in the high southern sky, “three months past its perihelion—a sight that hasn’t been seen from Earth for 6,127 years, if you believe Dr. O.”

“Kathryn’s still there,” said Zip. “Remember when we ran into her in Yellow City?”

“Mullaney’s hard to miss, Zip.”

“I wish we could have gone with her and seen Nyx again,” said Mark wistfully.

“More ’n four years since we were there,” reflected Joe. “We’ve done a lotta traveling since our meeting up with the

Ahmanyans three years ago, but I sure wish we could have got back to Nyx.”

“I thought you didn’t like the place,” said Mark.

“Well, I think maybe I’m waxing sentimental.”

Zip turned and looked at Joe. “Right,” he said.

For a moment the three Starmen stood silently, staring into the heavens. A clear sky above promised a night filled with stars.

~

Fifty yards to the south of the Starmen’s campsite, scattered trees in the meadow thickened into the edge of the black forest. Under the boughs and through the twisted boles little light could penetrate except perhaps on the brightest of summer days. Even then, the resulting illumination gave only a fragile, shadowy murkiness.

Through the pathless tangle, three menacing spheres a few inches in diameter moved unerringly in the direction of Mooncircle Lake. If they could have seen them, the Starmen would have recognized them immediately as dreaded airbots. These particular predatory machines were painted flat black. Soundless and odorless, even the animals of the forest were unaware of their passage. They moved inexorably forward, weaving and bobbing when necessary around interlacing branches

At length, the sinister orbs reached the border of the forest and hovered in the protective gloom. With the barest whisper of noise, each one extended a tiny lens and brought one of the Starmen into focus.

“Hey Mark! When’s the next blue moon? I want to know how long we’ll be able to cruise without misfortune,” asked Joe, rummaging in his pack.

“June 30, 2159,” answered Mark. “Almost three years!”

From the edge of the forest, their voices came distantly but distinctly through the crystal mountain atmosphere.

With a brief but powerful expulsion of highly compressed air,

the three airbots simultaneously fired darts at the Starmen. The inch-long projectiles crossed the distance in a little more than two seconds.

“Ooh,” groaned Zip softly, of the three the only one able to emit any sound whatever. All fell flat and slept.

Sensors in the airbots checked vital signs. With the assurance that the Starmen were truly unconscious, they floated out from under the dark eaves and coursed through the twilight toward the camp at Mooncircle Lake. The airbots hovered a foot above the fallen Starmen.

Then one of the airbots sent a message in a language that had not been heard on Earth for more than twelve thousand years.

Chapter 2: From Dream to Nightmare

IT FELT like a dream, except that it was being forced into him from outside. Mark’s consciousness was wholly passive, but images and sounds impressed themselves on his somnolent awareness, as if coming from a far, far distance.

The dream began to feel mildly intrusive. Though he was deeply unconscious, Mark began to resist. He could feel nothing, see nothing. *Open your eyes*, said a voice from somewhere. *Was that close by?* asked his befuddled mind. With a barely perceptible effort, he tried to open his eyes, and couldn’t. He couldn’t summon enough energy to lift his eyelids.

He tried to breathe deeply, but couldn’t. *Am I wrapped up?* he thought, but didn’t care enough to try to find out. *I’m under water*; he concluded, *but I can still breathe. How odd. I wonder why I don’t care.*

A low voice came through the mental occlusion. His attention was drawn to the voice, as someone in the utter darkness of a cave latches onto a matchflame that is struck two rooms away.

“... should be a sixth,” murmured the voice from far away.

The words faded into babble. Mark began to drift again. Deeper into darkness. Deeper into blackness. Then came another voice. It had the tone of argument, but there were no words.

Then something else penetrated his confusion. A song. Someone was singing, a child was singing “Three Blind Mice”. *Silly*, thought Mark. The song faded. Then the arguing voices came again.

“...should be a sixth! A sixth! Not ...”

“It doesn’t matter. A fifth is close enough...”

There was uneasiness and tension in the voices.

Then the torrents of oblivion broke over Mark. His last, simple image was of the *Underbird*, beginning to drift downward into the black, ten-mile deep ocean on Europa on Christmas Day almost four years earlier. He had watched the ocean swallow it up then, its shape disappear rapidly into the inky depths.

Funny, thought Mark. *I don’t even ...*

Unresisting, he glided into complete unawareness.

~

Suddenly Mark was awake. The mist was gone from his mind. Before opening his eyes, he took an inventory of his senses. There was no sound of any kind. Mustiness filled his nostrils, an intense staleness in the atmosphere. He breathed in slowly but deeply, and almost coughed with the effort. The smell was not unpleasant, but it strained through his nostrils like something old. There was a slight pain at the back of his neck, as if he’d been pinched.

He pursed his lips and felt a thick deposit on his teeth, as if he hadn’t brushed them for several days. His mouth was dry and his eyes itched. Without opening his eyes he grimaced, and then let his facial muscles go slack. He inhaled deeply again, and then exhaled quickly, as if he had resolved to begin a task he had long put off because of its drudgery.

At last, he opened his eyes. As he expected, he saw nothing. He was a little chilly, but not uncomfortably so. He turned his

head slightly to the right, and the darkness lightened. He pulled his left hand up and rubbed his eyes, then the rest of his face. He noted that he wore several days' worth of beard. Then he lifted his head up, raised his chest, and slid his arms back so that he could rest on his elbows. Finally he sat up completely. The illumination increased as he moved. He saw that there were recessed lights in the upper parts of the room.

The Starman looked around him. He sensed no danger, but he was wary. He didn't know where he was, how he'd gotten there, how long he'd been there, or who was responsible for bringing him there. He didn't know if he was among friends, foes, or was alone. He didn't know where Joe and Zip were.

Mark listened intently. There was still no sound.

He was on an uncomfortable metal gurney that was covered with a thin, nondescript, quilted pad. The gurney was in the center of a room about fifteen feet on a side. Counters ran along two opposite sides of the room. A door was in another wall. As Mark sat up, he was facing the door. He turned his head slowly. The wall directly behind him was smooth and unadorned. The room appeared to have been cut from gray stone and shaped with exquisite precision.

The countertops supported several pieces of machinery that Mark did not recognize. One had a simple tube or cable that was attached to his left big toe. Except for his missing left shoe, he was wearing the same clothing he had had on when he was camping in Montana, but it was stiff as if it hadn't been pliable for a long time.

Mark ran his fingers along his scalp, and then rolled his fingers together, noting the unpleasant oily sensation of long unwashed hair. He wiped his hand on his shirt. He peered at the tube that was attached to his toe. The tube widened into a small cap that covered the toe. Curiously, and somewhat apprehensively, he reached out and removed the cap.

Decisively, he swung his feet over the side of the gurney, took one more quick look around, and scooted off the table. His legs immediately buckled. He grabbed for the nearest countertop,

missed, and dropped to all fours.

“Hoo!” He blew a sharp breath and shook his head, then stood up slowly. He stretched his arms upward, and then twisted his torso. He noted a tightness in his knees and shoulders, and a dull pain in his upper right arm. He felt somewhat queasy. Once he was a little more in control, he jumped upward to gain a rough estimate of the strength of the gravity. *About the same as the Moon*, he thought; *definitely not Earth. Where am I?*

He surveyed the room once again, turning slowly in a full circle. It seemed to have been shaped into a perfect square, but the ceiling arched upward into intriguing flutes that met in a stone medallion of some kind, artistically placed off center.

On the second countertop was a large, dun-colored container with what looked like a spigot at the bottom. Mark hobbled over to it. He couldn't tell if it were made of metal, stone, ceramic, or some artificial substance. He pressed on the spigot, but nothing happened. He knocked on the side of the container, and it made a heavy sound. He tried the spigot again and suddenly a spurt of liquid came out. Mark leaped back, and the stream stopped.

Slowly Mark bent down and peered at the puddle on the floor. Tentatively he reached out and pressed a fingertip into it. He lifted his finger to his nostril and smelled it, then touched it to his tongue. Water.

He washed his face as best he could, rinsed his mouth, and then drank. He wiped his hands on his clothing.

Then he turned toward the door. A rack to one side of it held a plain, thick cloak. Mark reached for the cloak and placed it around his shoulders like a cape. Below the cloak were the sock and shoe for his left foot. He put them on.

Then he gave his attention to the door, and to his surprise, saw that it was slightly ajar. He pulled it open. Beyond was a corridor, just as plain and gray and precisely shaped as the room was. He stepped into the passageway, and looked both ways.

The passageway came to a solid end a few feet to his right, but in the other direction it extended for sixty feet or more. Doors were set into the walls on both sides, and a pale, weak

light filtered down from several ceiling fixtures.

The place smells old, thought Mark. *It's as though I've wakened up in a museum. What in blazes is going on?*

Moving a little better now, he stumbled down the corridor a few steps until he came to the closest door. He pressed on it slowly. As the door opened the interior lights rose. Inside, on a gurney just like the one in his own room, lay Joe! He was face up, with a tube attached to his left toe. Like Mark, his hair was unwashed and his face was unshaven.

Mark hastened to Joe's side and looked anxiously into his face.

"Joe!" he cried, and was appalled at how his voice croaked. He swallowed and tried again. "Joe! Joe!" He shook his shoulders gently, but Joe did not wake. Mark clasped his hand and noted how cold it was. He felt for a pulse and found it.

"Alive," he said. "I'd better find Zip!"

The big Starman checked the third room, but it was empty. The countertops held only a few machines and there was no gurney. He glanced into two more rooms, but they were similarly unoccupied. He came to the end of the corridor. An open archway revealed a stairway that went down, but Mark did not follow it. Without looking further, he returned to where Joe was lying.

The other Starman's breathing was a little faster and shallower than before. His eyes rolled underneath closed lids. His mouth pursed. He sighed.

"Joe!" called Mark, quietly but urgently.

After a time, Joe's eyes opened. Mark allowed Joe to adjust to his surroundings as he had done. When Joe's eyes fastened on Mark, he smiled.

"Mark," croaked Joe. "Where on Earth are we?"

Mark didn't answer. He removed the tube from Joe's toe, found a cup of some kind, and drew some water from a container that was similar to the one in his own room. He brought the cup to Joe, and then helped him to sit up and drink the refreshing liquid. Joe took a few swallows, coughed and gasped, then drank

again.

“Where’s Zip?” he asked after he put the cup down.

“I don’t know,” answered Mark. “I can’t find him.”

“Where are we? What happened?”

“I don’t know that either. I just woke up a few minutes ago, in a room just like this one. I don’t know any more than you do, except that there are several rooms in this place, but they’re all empty. It feels as though we’re on the Moon—definitely not Earth.”

Joe stood up and stretched.

“Here’s your shoe,” said Mark, handing him the item with its sock. Joe put them on.

“And here’s a cloak. It’s chilly in here—at least I think it is.” Joe took the cloak and wrapped himself up in it.

Joe shook himself, then staggered over to the cabinets and began to rummage through them. “Here’s your compad,” he said after a moment.

“Mine?” asked Mark. He took the item from Joe and placed it in its accustomed position on his left sleeve.

“Yeah, yours. But where’s mine?” He kept rummaging but didn’t find anything else that belonged to the Starmen. “Nothing else that’s ours.” Joe stood up with a puzzled look on his face. “Well, try your compad and find out who’s in charge here and when breakfast is. The dead silence in this place is positively eerie.”

Mark pressed in the code for Starlight Enterprise. There was no answer.

“What’s wrong?” asked Joe when he saw Mark’s puzzled expression.

“No answer.”

“Battery must be dead.”

“No, the panel’s lit up.” Mark tried another frequency. “Hmmp. Zip’s not answering either.” Mark flipped through several standard frequencies, but aroused no response. Finally he pressed the “search” function for any active frequency. When the search turned up negative, the dark-haired Starman looked up

with alarm.

“Ah, nothing to worry about,” said Joe. “We must be so far underground that no signal can get through. Let’s go see if we can find a way out of here.”

Mark reached over to turn the communicator off. Then his eyes caught sight of the date. Adrenaline surged into his system and he emitted an involuntary gasp. His eyes opened wide.

“What is it?” asked Joe, hastening to the side of his friend.

Wordlessly, Mark extended his left arm to show his compad to Joe.

The date read **March 28, 3118**.

Chapter 3: The Talking Ring

A LOOK OF SHOCK flashed across Joe’s features, replaced quickly by one of skepticism.

“Nooo,” he asserted, “we haven’t been asleep for over nine hundred years. That thing,” he tapped Mark’s compad, “is broken. Or maybe somebody changed the date on it.”

“For what purpose?” asked Mark. “How did we get here, where are we, and who brought us here?” he demanded. “And *where is Zip?*” A cold chill went down his back. *Was it possible?* he wondered. *Could it be 3118?*

“Let’s go look for him,” urged Joe, and headed out the door.

The two Starmen stepped into the silent gray corridor.

“That’s the room where I woke up,” said Mark, indicating the end of the hallway, “and the other rooms are empty.”

“Let’s start with your room. Did you already look in all the cabinets?”

“No—I looked for you and Zip first.”

It didn’t take long for the Starmen to rummage through the cabinets of Mark’s room. There were a few implements and hand tools, curiously wrought out of a substance neither of them could identify, but nothing written, and nothing electronic.

For the next few minutes they ransacked the rooms Mark had glanced into, but found nothing that provided them with any information they could use.

“Did you try the stairs?” asked Joe, when the two of them came to the archway at the end of the corridor.

“No. I didn’t look any farther than this before I went back to where you were sleeping.”

“Zip’s gotta be here somewhere; let’s get some answers,” muttered Joe with quiet determination.

The Starmen eased down the stairs, on the alert for any noise or other evidence that the site was inhabited by anyone other than themselves. Their feet awoke echoes that sounded hollowly up and down the stairwell, but stirred no response. As they descended, lights in the ceiling came on automatically.

They came to the next level below. Directly in front of them was a massive double door with a keypad on the wall next to it. At the top the date appeared in luminous numbers: **03.28.3118**. Below was a jumble of letters. The letters were recognizable but were not assembled to make any sense.

“Must be some sort of abbreviation or acronym,” suggested Mark. “But it’s comforting that the letters were made by Earthmen.”

Joe grunted his assent. “Not so comforting that it bears that same date your compad does.” He pressed some of the buttons on the keypad. They lit up as he pressed them, but the door did not open.

A few yards to their left, at the end of the corridor, was a portal with no apparent means of access—no keypad or hardware for opening. The Starmen examined it thoroughly but located no means of ingress whatever.

“This door must lead to something important, but we’re not getting past it today,” concluded Mark.

“Let’s keep looking around,” suggested Joe. “We can come back here later.”

They moved back down the corridor and came to a door that was protected by a heavy wire mesh. There was a keypad on the

mesh, and beyond it, imbedded in the door itself, was a place where one could rest one's chin and peer into a lens.

"Retina recognition system, I guess," suggested Mark.

"The way that place is secured in a confined site like this, I expect that's the reactor room," said Joe.

There was another room on the opposite side of the corridor and about twenty yards farther down the hall. As they approached it, a double sliding door opened, the panels disappearing into the walls. The room appeared to be a large work center, with tables, chairs, workbenches, shelves, and cabinets. Various pieces of electronic machinery were in position. A fine, almost imperceptible layer of dust lay over everything.

The Starman's eyes were drawn immediately to a curious item centrally located on a table directly in front of the entrance. An empty ring almost two in diameter rose up from a solid console. The ring was an attractive cobalt blue color with violet and black squares on it, and looked as if it ought to have held a mirror. The console was the same color as the ring, and was about fourteen inches long and three inches high and deep. There were no controls on it, but it was marked with turquoise blue and chocolate brown squares and lines, like a circuit board.

Mark stepped closer to the table and peered at the ring. Suddenly a wash of silver filled the space inside it, as if the still surface of a pool had been disturbed and taken the light of the morning sun. The face of an old African man appeared in the silvered opening. He looked tired. His hair was completely white, his features sharp but not quite gaunt. His eyes were clear but guarded, as if he were fulfilling a most unwelcome task.

He wore a khaki uniform with a round, upright collar. Black stripes with yellow piping were fastened to the shirt on one side of his chest. The letters "EDL" were prominently displayed in crimson on the other side.

The man looked intently out of the ring, dropped his eyes momentarily, and took a deep breath. Then he looked up again and began to speak.

"Greetings, Starmen. I am Colonel Raymond Hoskins of the Earth Defense League. I am grieved to have to convey to you news of a grave disaster, and lay upon you a weighty responsibility."

Mark and Joe looked at one another tensely. A gut feeling of immense foreboding flowed through them. They felt their hands grow cold.

"If this message is being played on this holoport," the speaker continued, "then our desperate foray against the enemy has failed. You are among the few last survivors of the human race.

"Of course, all this will be a terrible shock to the two of you. I will recap briefly the events that have transpired since your time. You and your partner David Foster were last heard of in midsummer 2156. At that time the three of you failed to return from a recreational outing in the mountains of what was then the state of Montana. You did not respond to any transmissions directed to your communicators.

"A frantic but painstakingly thorough search was made of the area. Your abandoned supplies were found, but there was no trace whatever of your fate.

"Pressing as your disappearance was, it was overshadowed within a few weeks by a sudden incursion of Xenobot war vessels in the environs of the Asteroid Belt. The Xenobots came in vast numbers and began to

attack our bases in the Belt and range themselves for attacks on our settlements on Mars, Luna, and Earth."

The Starmen gasped. It wasn't possible! All indications from the Ahmanyans were that the Xenobots had no capability of entering the Solar System in such numbers!

"We were completely unprepared for the suddenness and strength of their attack. We suffered overwhelming casualties, and inflicted few.

"Within a day or two of their appearance in our Solar System, the Xenobots were able to transport through hyperspace a weapon of immeasurable energy. Launched against Earth, it killed all life on the planet and rendered it uninhabitable."

Joe and Mark staggered and almost fell to the deck. *Turn it off!* Mark's mind shouted, but the voice continued relentlessly.

"After the destruction of Earth, the Xenobot warfleet made a careful search of the Moon and Mars and destroyed all signs of human life in both places. They also destroyed all major population centers in the Belt. They then vanished through hyperspace.

"Surviving human colonies existed in small, overlooked settlements of the Asteroid Belt, outposts among the outer planets, and a few dozen ships that were in transit during the attack. Eventually all survivors came together on the Moon, near the site of what had been a famous center

for research—Thomas Outbase, near the Schrodinger Impact Basin. We built an underground refuge by scavenging supplies and material from the remnants of Amundsen City.

“For generations, we stayed hidden, deep in the bowels of Luna, desperately afraid that we would attract the attention of the Xenobots—for the enemy made frequent exploratory journeys into our space. With the burning hulk of our planet in the sky overhead, we taught our children who in turn taught their children. We dedicated ourselves to developing weaponry to exterminate the Xenobots. The odds were enormous, and we realized that we were betting everything on success. If we failed, there would be no one left.

“As the centuries passed, our numbers grew and our civilization prospered. We slowly developed to the point where we believed we were strong enough and armed enough with new weapons to keep the Xenobots out of our Solar System forever. We established other settlements on the Moon, and eventually created a warning system in the Asteroid Belt.

“A year and some months ago, our explorers came upon a sealed chamber outside the ruins of Amundsen City. Inside the chamber were several stasis capsules. Most were empty, but in two of them we discovered two of the famous Starmen of the twenty-second century: yourselves! We did not find the body of Starman David Foster, and his fate is not known to us.”

One blow after another. Joe's face was white and frozen. He had no place to turn for refuge. His habitual defensive humor failed him.

"We ourselves had discovered the means of keeping bodies in stasis and of awakening those so placed. We were, however, unable to discover who had placed you in stasis or for what reason. The site of the stasis chamber, however, was more than a hundred feet below the surface of the Moon, and under the ruins of an enormous tower. From our records, we knew that this had been the site of the legendary Starlight Tower.

"Our technicians removed you from the stasis capsules and brought you to our base on the floor of the Schrodinger Impact Basin, the site of the original settlement of refugees from the War of 2156. The discovery of your living bodies was an inestimable inspiration to us—but it also put us into a terrible position. You see, Starmen, four years ago the Xenobots established a permanent mining outpost in the Asteroid Belt. We were certain that they would discover our presence at any time. We determined to make a surprise attack on them, which had to be completely successful if we were to avoid detection!

"Although we had the capability of awakening you, we could not take the personnel necessary for the procedure away from the development of our attack on the Xenobots. Timing was critical. We had to take the initiative and attack our enemy by surprise; our victory had to be total. The

longer we waited, the more likely it was that they would discover the signs of our presence in the Solar System and annihilate us.

"So we set your revival process on automatic and abandoned our base. Automatic revival takes a long time, but it is completely safe. If we were able to attend you during the awakening process, we could achieve it in a matter of weeks. The automatic process takes a little more than a year."

Joe's mind began to race. *No one to revive them? They needed absolutely everybody, so that no one at all would stay with the Starmen? The slightest niggle of doubt began to eat at the side of Joe's mind. This can't be true!*

"Our own families are in stasis, hidden deep inside an asteroid in which we hollowed a space and put into orbit around the sun, and our warriors and technicians set out on a mission to attack the Xenobot base. If our mission had been successful, our technicians would have awakened you late in 3117, and you would have been greeted warmly by your fellow humans."

Here Colonel Hoskins sighed.

"But since you are hearing the message on this holoport instead, our mission has failed and you have been automatically awakened to an empty and silent base. I am sorry, Starmen.

"Now, there remains only one last possibility for success in the fight of the

human race for survival against its enemy. In the hangar across the hall from this door there is a Xenobot spacecraft, captured in the battle of 2156. It is equipped with hyperdrive. Only recently have our researchers been able to decipher the mechanism— and frankly, we are none too sure that we have been successful! We could not experiment with it for fear of losing the only operable Xenobot ship in our possession. We built and experimented with dozens of prototypes over the generations, striving to duplicate their drive; none of our attempts succeeded. All we have is the original.

“Our technicians believe that the hyperdrive can create a wormhole that will take you, not only across space, but through time into the past—if the settings are correct.

“So we beg you, now, Starmen, to commandeer the Xenobot ship and go back into the past—if you can. We are extremely wary about returning you to your own time before you disappeared, since it is likely that that would precipitate a singularity beyond our ability to calculate. Nevertheless, we want to give you as much time as possible to warn Earth and all civilization to be on guard against the Xenobot incursion. Therefore we have set the indicators so that, if the leap is successful, you will emerge from the wormhole on, or about, August 6, 2156. The attack occurred on August 17.

“Vague indications in existence in 2156 were that you had even made contact with

the ancient race, the Benefactors, that had defended the Solar System from the Xenobots in their first incursion into our space. Perhaps this was not true, or they would have allied with us in the second attack. But if, by any chance, it *is* true, then by all means, if you do return to your own time, contact the Benefactors without delay and beg their assistance in the defense of our planet. If it is possible to change history, you and you alone have the opportunity now to do so."

"Change history" indeed! thought Mark almost with rebellion. *What I'm hearing isn't true. It can't be!*

"To be fully candid with you, Starmen," here Colonel Hoskins threw up his hands, "I doubt it is possible. However, there is no other chance. We realize that if you are successful, our lives are forfeit. It may even transpire that we of this generation will never be born. For the sake of Earth and our civilization, we will take that risk—for if you are hearing this message, we are already dead.

"You'll need to enter the passcode 07302156 to get into the hangar. It is the date you were last heard from on Earth. Fly the Xenobot ship into space and activate the hyperdrive. Farewell."

The image faded, and the ring became empty.

Chapter 4: A Suspicious Spacecraft

“IT’S A LIE!!” shouted Joe. He delivered a powerful kick to the closest cabinet. The intensity of his reaction stunned Mark, who had sunk into a chair without saying a word or making a motion.

“It’s a lie!” repeated Joe, turning furiously toward Mark. “We’re being tricked! Someone’s trying to deceive us with some grotesque hoax!”

“You could be right, Joe,” said Mark with some hesitation. “But we can’t be sure until we have some proof one way or the other.”

“Proof!” spat Joe.

“How could the Xenobots have invaded in such numbers so quickly?” asked Mark. “The Ahmanyans were sure that they wouldn’t have the capability to enter our system in force for a long time.”

“Of course they couldn’t!” asserted Joe, spinning away from Mark and striding agitatedly around the room.

“If this is a hoax,” continued Mark, “then who’s behind it, and why?”

“Whoever they are, when I find them they should hope that they’re better fighters than I am!” fumed Joe. “And *where is Zip Foster?* That’s what I want to know right now!”

“What if it’s true?” said Mark, looking into the distance. “What if the Xenobots somehow *did* discover where the Ahmanyans live and that Earth wasn’t a minor, backward planet after all but an ally of their bitter enemy? What if the Xenobots figured out how to come into the Solar System in force? They were driven by that goal. The Ahmanyans don’t know everything—they don’t know what the Xenobots might have been able to achieve in the past twelve millennia.”

“No!” shouted Joe.

Mark focused his eyes on his friend’s face, drawn and pallid. “Joe—it might, *it might*, be true!”

“You’re a fool!” blazed Joe. “Start thinking like a Starman! I need action!”

“Let’s get down to the hangar,” suggested Mark.

Without a word, Joe kicked a chair out of his way and stomped through the doorway into the hall. Inside him, the possibility that what he had just heard was true ate at his vitals like acid.

When Mark passed through the portal, Joe was already more than halfway back to the immense double door that gave access to the hangar. The big Starman hastened after his friend. When the two of them stood in front of the keypad adjacent to the great doors, Joe turned to Mark. Then he shrugged and punched in the code that the man on the holoport had given them.

“July,” said Joe as he pressed the zero and the seven; “thirtieth,” he said, pressing the three and the zero; “twenty-one fifty-six,” he concluded as he pressed those numbers. Almost at once, the great double doors separated and, with a delicate grinding noise, slid apart into the thick walls on either side.

A vast room appeared before the Starmen. It was dim and dusty, and a pale, weak light filtered down from fixtures in a ceiling far above the floor. The air was stale, as if it came from a rarely visited basement or attic. A massive spacecraft was positioned in the farthest part of the cavernous room, its bulk showing little more than a silhouette in the negligible illumination. There were no other craft in the hangar, though workbays were arranged along the walls on the left, and various pieces of large machinery utilized in the maintenance and repair of spacecraft were in place nearby. Bulky tools, gurneys, gantries, cranes, and related items were stored to the right.

At the same time, both Starmen stepped into the hangar. As they passed through the opening, bright lights surged on in the closest portion of the immense room.

“Aghh!” exclaimed Mark, shielding his eyes for a moment from the sudden brightness. Joe winced and blinked rapidly. After a brief adjustment period, the Starmen continued to walk forward. The sound of their footsteps echoed forlornly in the cavernous, abandoned spaceport. As they reached the end of the illuminated part and passed into the central section of the hangar,

a second bank of lights came on. The captured Xenobot ship at the end of the hangar gleamed with reflected radiance.

“Unusual design,” grunted Joe, striding forward without pause.

“To say the least,” agreed Mark.

When they reached the last section of the hangar, the lights came on full.

“*Ugly* piece of work,” assessed Joe. He gazed with a hint of scorn at the huge, box-shaped spacecraft that was docked in the otherwise vacant hangar. It was more than a hundred feet square and twenty-five feet high, with a circular thrust nozzle at the back as wide as the entire ship was high. In the bright illumination, the Starmen could see that the spacecraft was made of a gunmetal blue substance, patterned in a few places with brown inlay. It rested on four supports that resembled skis.

The Starmen made a careful circuit of the entire ship. Across the convex front was a nondescript cabin, over which was a dome that bore what may have been a weapon. The cabin featured two rectangular windows on the sides and an oval window in the front. Flanking the cabin the sides of the box extended forward in what resembled square intakes, with bright orange grillwork inside. A staired ramp descended from the body of the ship onto the floor of the hangar. It was evident that the stairs had been designed for figures that were a little smaller than humans.

Extending from both sides of the ship were heavy bars that ended in a forward-pointing cylinder like an engine cowling. Three thick, bulbed antennas pointed ahead from each fixture.

“We’re supposed to fly that?” commented Mark doubtfully.

“To tell you the truth, my friend,” uttered Joe, “even I have reservations about that contraption.”

“There’s an access stair against the wall at the back of the hangar,” indicated Mark, “with an observation balcony. Let’s climb up and see what the ship looks like on top.”

The two Starmen climbed the stairway that led up five stories to the highest level of the hangar. Then they peered over

the metal frame balcony onto the Xenobot ship. Over the top surface of the vessel was a raised, opaque section that suggested the carapace of a crustacean.

“All right,” said Mark after they had stared for a few minutes. “Let’s get inside it.”

The Starmen clambered down the metal stair, walked across the floor, and approached the ship from the front. Twenty feet behind the cabin they came to the bottom of the flight of steps that led into the belly of the spacecraft.

“It doesn’t feel right,” observed Joe. “I wish we had some weapons.”

Mark led the way up the stairs, with the lanky Starman right behind him. The stairway went past what was clearly the lower of two levels aboard the spacecraft. There was no access from the stairwell into the lower section of the ship. Rather the space at that level was taken up with the apparatus necessary for retracting the stairway and sealing the portal through which it descended.

At the top of the stairs, the Starmen came to a sizable airlock that had both doors open, and passed through it into a spacious entry. Several passageways led both forward and aft, and one each to port and starboard. A control box close to the inner door of the airlock was marked in English.

“The airlock is not original to the ship,” observed Mark.

“Don’t the Xenobots need airlocks?” mused Joe.

“Probably not. Remember what they looked like back on Nyx?”

Joe turned to look at Mark. “Better remind me, Mark. Somehow the memory of those metal monstrosities that tried to kill us with more viciousness than I had ever experienced in my life has faded from my mind.”

“I can’t tell whether you’re still angry or whether your sense of humor has returned.”

“Maybe both.”

The Starmen made a thorough search of the alien vessel. First they checked the control deck. A short walk forward

brought them to a wide stairway that descended to a split-level cabin fronted by the wide windows they had seen from outside. The controls in the cabin had clearly been altered and marked with plates in English. A few tools, recording devices, and data gatherers that were obviously of human manufacture were in evidence.

Mark and Joe did not linger in the cabin, but continued their initial exploration of the ship, passing from room to room. They found the navigator's pod adjacent to the control deck, lockers, storage compartments, the galley, crew quarters, recreation rooms, data center, tool rooms, workshops, and laboratories.

"Small city," observed Mark after more than an hour had passed.

"This box was designed for long voyages," agreed Joe as the two of them made their way toward the rear of the ship.

"Notice that there are no personal weapons aboard?" asked Mark. "That doesn't sound like any Xenobots I know."

"Earth people have made a lot of alterations in this ship," responded the blond Starman. "It's a ship for humans now without a doubt. I wonder what they did with it."

"Think this is the kind of work that would take several hundred years?"

"Hmph," snorted Joe. "Maybe—but not necessarily. You're not convincing me yet that we're in the future."

In the very last section of the ship the Starmen found the power supply and drive room. They came to the end of a wide passageway and passed through a portico at the top of a wide staircase that descended to the true bottom of the ship. There was a series of powerful engines ranged in the largest single open area the Starmen had found on the spacecraft. The back wall was clear and more than twenty feet from top to bottom. A great, externally located circular disk filled the entire wall. On either side of the disk was a large pod where laser gunners could sit.

"Must be a gorgeous view once this vessel is in space!" exclaimed Mark.

"Must be," nodded Joe with grudging admiration.

“Fusion reactor over there,” said Mark, indicating a compartment sealed with transparent walls.

“And here are the engines,” said Joe. “Pretty slick toys, too.” A half dozen massive, sequentially linked but self-contained units were set at the back end of the open space, three on either side of the disk that was obviously the thruster. The two Starmen began to scrutinize one of the fixtures, opening panels and checking readout indicators. As they had seen throughout the ship, metal plates with English terminology had been affixed to the hardware in vital places.

“And what’s this?” queried Mark as he directed his steps toward an unfamiliar apparatus that was almost as large as the fusion reactor. It was a massive gunmetal blue fixture with blades for heat distribution and wide, fluted tubes that wound out of the main body of the mass but showed signs of having been cut off cleanly. There were no access ports, gauges, or labels of any kind.

“Not connected to anything,” observed Mark “unless it’s below deck, but I doubt it.”

“This is a Xenobot ship,” reminded Joe. “This contraption may very well be the energy gatherer from the solar station they use to get full power. Without a solar station, they have to use the usual fusion propulsion.”

“You’re probably right, Joe,” agreed Mark, nodding his head. “And those bulbed antennas outside on the extremities of the ship probably bring the solar energy into the ship, right to this mechanism.”

After more than another hour had passed, Mark pulled his head out of an inspection port on one of the engines, stood up, and stretched. “I’m surprised you haven’t mentioned food yet, Joe. You’ve *got* to be at least as hungry as I am. Who knows how long it’s been since we’ve eaten.”

“Almost a thousand years, if you can believe the blather we’ve been getting on the machines in this place.” Joe replaced a small panel that had been protecting some intricate circuitry, and looked up at Mark.

“The machines include my own compad, Joe,” said Mark thoughtfully.

“Altered,” asserted Joe.

“Compads just don’t let anybody in, Joe.”

“I know that,” said the tall, blond Starman, exasperatedly running both hands through his hair. “But I *am* hungry. Let’s go find the galley.”

Just as the two young men were about to leave the engine room, Mark grabbed Joe’s arm.

“What?” asked Joe, turning toward his friend. “What is it?” he continued when he noted that Mark was intent upon something he had just seen.

“Joe—look!” said Mark, with excitement in his voice. He pointed to a small cubicle that opened directly off the main door to the engine room. Without waiting to see if Joe would follow, Mark entered the cubicle. Inside was a pedestal with an apparatus shaped roughly like a pyramid at its top. On the wall opposite the entrance was a screen that showed a stellar map.

“Another navigator’s cubicle,” suggested Joe.

“Not here,” said Mark without taking his eyes off the pyramid. “At least, I’d be very surprised if it were. This,” he turned toward Joe at last, “is the wormhole drive. I’m sure of it.” He gave his attention back to the pedestal and ran a hand gently over the pyramid. Along one side were data entry ports and small readout screens. Additional controls were placed on two other planes of the pyramid. On the wall screen was a panel with other indicators.

“Look at this!” cried Joe. Mark turned and saw that Joe was staring at a control panel set into the wall adjacent to the screen. Joe pointed. Pleasant green numbers glowed on a screen:

08.06.2156:06:00:00.

“It’s set for the day Colonel Hoskins told us they’d picked for our return,” whispered Mark. “Guess we’re supposed to arrive at six in the morning. And these other indicators might

determine the location.” A row of light blue numbers glowing on a second small screen read:

13080257.10260280.04300748.

“Possibly. Three axes, maybe. Have to be logarithmic, though, right?” said Joe doubtfully.

“Yeah. With that few numbers, accuracy will deteriorate with increased distance traveled. Wormhole travel with this mechanism must put the ship in the vacuum of space close to its destination but not on the surface of a planet. Otherwise, it’d be too easy to come out of hyperspace and find oneself coexisting with a mountain or something.”

Joe nodded knowingly.

The panel was dotted with alien writing, beneath which the English translation was affixed. Mark examined it carefully. Minutes passed.

“This looks like the real thing,” he said finally. “The alien writing appears very similar to what Zip and I saw in the Xenobot warcraft on Mars; the unit on the pedestal seems to connect directly to the hyperdrive and draws a pretty heavy power output from the fusion reactor. It appears to work by altering the wormhole that is created when the FTL drive is engaged. Instead of warping the ship to a distant star, it somehow alters the drive to take you to a different time. Put them together and you can go just about anywhere, any time.”

“Nonsense!” shouted Joe, his nostrils flaring.

“Joe, our own scientists were working on this very principle! Remember when the four Starlights jumped almost four years into the future through a drive similar to this one?”

“I don’t mean the *principle* is nonsense! I mean this whole setup *here* is nonsense! I sense a trap! Every new thing we run across in this abandoned factory is just too, too pat! We don’t even know where we are, and we’re just walking around doing what they want—whoever ‘they’ are!” He shook his head, and then his shoulders slumped. “But I’m weak with hunger. Let’s

find the galley and talk some more after we eat.”

~

Half an hour later the Starmen were sitting at a round table with laden plates in front of them. The table was one of more than a dozen in the refectory.

“Crew of sixty, easily,” said Joe as he ate through a double-decker roast beef sandwich, “and the larder is well-stocked. We won’t starve. A complete crew could last for many months with the supplies on this ship.”

“Plenty of spacesuits in the lockers,” added Mark. “The Earthmen who adapted this ship for space travel were very thorough, but obviously they never tried the hypertravel feature.”

“Think about it, Mark!” said Joe pointedly. “If the hypertravel is as well-developed as you said back there, the Xenobots must be just about unbeatable! Why wouldn’t they just go back in time to the original invasion of the Solar System, and change the outcome?”

“Maybe there are some limitations to the drive. The very thought of the singularities that must be involved in wormhole travel through time stagger the mind—yet we know that subatomic particles do it regularly without ripping the fabric of the creation.” Mark threw up his hands and grimaced. “I certainly can’t figure it out alone.”

“There’s something else strange about this Xenobot ship,” said Joe firmly. “I’m sure you’ve noticed it as well as I.”

Mark waited.

“There a large central part we can’t get into,” said Joe grimly. “Plenty of space unaccounted for—the central portion of the lower floor, between the control cabin and the engine room. And no way to get inside. No doors.”

“I noticed,” said Mark.

“I wonder why we can’t get below,” snorted Joe. “I don’t like that one bit. Who knows what could be down there? Could be an entire platoon of Xenobots and their mothers.”

“We’ll check it later. There’s got to be a way inside. We’ll probably find the information we need somewhere. Let’s keep looking around.”

“There’s too much information missing, Mark! What’s in the part of the ship below this deck”—here Joe stamped a foot—“that we can’t get into? That’s what I want to know. If we were given free access to all the important and sensitive parts of this ship like the cabin and the engine room, why aren’t we allowed into the lower level? What’s so secret about it?”

“Time enough to puzzle that out later. Since we’re supposed to be going back in time when we finally launch this ship, it really doesn’t matter when we leave. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

All the time in the world, repeated Mark to himself. He was suddenly overwhelmed with grief. If, by some improbable chance the story in the holoport were true, his family and friends were long dead. The entire population of Earth was long dead. Zip had said once before that no one was big enough to grieve genocide. Zip was grieving for Ahmanya, then. Now Mark was grieving for his own planet, his own family. A sudden panic coursed through him, then passed. No—Zip was right. No one could bear that much grief and remain sane.

Joe was lost in his own thoughts. Soberly, he glanced back down the passageway that led to the engine room. *Could the past be changed? More to the point, could he and Mark change the past? No*, he thought. *It was all a trick. They weren’t in the future at all—were they?* He was deeply troubled.

Chapter 5: “No Other Chance”

THE STARMEN spent the rest of that day and all of the next examining the captive Xenobot ship in greater detail. They also explored the hangar and found the controls that would open the immense portal that gave access to the surface of the Moon.

They made a thorough search of the facility where they had awakened, but found nothing that was suspicious—just plenty of rooms for sustaining a large population of space travelers and explorers, all abandoned, with nothing of value left behind.

Nothing suspicious except the sealed door that they had discovered near the hangar access on the first day of their awakening.

They also returned to the workroom where the holoport was located, and replayed the message from Colonel Hoskins.

“Well, I still have my doubts,” said Joe when Colonel Hoskins came to the end of his catastrophic communication, “and I don’t like making decisions when I don’t have enough data.” He shook his head. “But it doesn’t look as if we’re going to get any more information from what’s around here. I guess we’ll just have to get in the Xenobot box back there and shoot through the tunnel to the surface and find out where we really are. Then we can decide what to do.”

“I agree with you, Joe,” said Mark.

“Let’s go back to the ship.”

“You go ahead. I want to play this message one more time.”

Joe returned to the hangar, leaving Mark alone in the workroom.

For five minutes, Mark sat quietly. Then he activated the holoport again. Colonel Hoskins’ dire message played one more time.

“...vague indications in existence in 2156 were that you had even made contact with the ancient race, the Benefactors, that had defended the Solar System from the Xenobots in their first incursion into our space. ... If you do return to your own time, contact the Benefactors without delay and beg their assistance in the defense of our planet. If it is possible to change history, you and you alone have the opportunity now to do

so.

"To be fully candid with you, Starmen, I doubt it is possible. However, there is no other chance..."

No other chance, thought Mark. I suppose he's right, if for no other reason than we have no other choice, either. Joe's right. The only way out of wherever we are is to take the Xenobot ship into space and take sightings.

When Mark returned to the spacecraft, he found Joe in the hyperdrive room.

"The controls are not too complicated," Mark explained. "The device works by creating a wormhole. All we have to do is get away from a planet or other large gravity field, plug in our coordinates, and the ship can take us wherever we want to go. The range seems to be pretty sweeping; the ship can zip us between stars that are thousands of light years apart. Making the holes takes a lot of energy but once the ship is powered up the drive can supply more than enough. I'm sure there must be a lot involved but it isn't hard to engage!"

"I'm glad you think so," said Joe. "You're the navigator, so it's your plaything! Mine's the flight deck and the engines, and I can tell you that this ship is remarkably easy to fly. The controls are familiar and the files in the central computer are written clearly in English. There's a lot of other material, but not in any language I've ever seen. Even the letters are completely alien."

"Xenobots' written language, I suppose. Well, are you ready to break out of here?"

Joe nodded soberly. "I can fly this box easily enough, but I still have a feeling of foreboding. It's like we're being watched or tested to see what we'll do. I feel as if we're part of an experiment. We're only left with one choice: to fly out of here. There's no other exit—and I don't like having no options."

"No options' is right. The hyperdrive here can't be reset, as far as I can tell. If we engage it, we're only going one place, one

time.”

“The more I think about it, the more I think we’re being set up! If we were ‘resuscitated’ by ‘allies’ after almost a thousand years, you’d think that we’d be better treated than this, that we’d have been given more information, that at least *one person* would have been left behind to meet us!”

“It’s fishy, all right,” said Mark, “and I’m about ready to call their bluff. I’m ready to charge up the engines and launch!”

Joe nodded briskly. “Except for one thing: we haven’t found out what’s below deck. If we head back to Earth with a Xenobot ship, we might be carrying a planet-destroying device or who knows what? I want to break through one of the walls and get into the parts we can’t enter and find out what our ‘cargo’ is. I hope it’s weapons! We haven’t seen a single weapon in this facility, and the only ones on this ship are the buzzers in the pods at the back and that flashlight in the bubble on top.”

“That’s a medium grade laser, Joe.”

“In the ‘thirty-second century’ or wherever or whenever we are, I’d expect that the ‘advanced humans’ who thought they could conquer the Xenobots alone would have devised something so dazzling that we’d go out of here with some confidence. And all we have is a typical twenty-second century laser mounted on a ‘thousand-year-old’ Xenobot spaceship!”

“I doubt they’d keep the weapons locked up from us in the ship while they give us freedom to examine the engines with the kind of power they’ve got,” nodded Mark, “and I’m a little leery of opening up any of the walls on this ship. This is our only way out of here.”

“I don’t like it at all!” asserted Joe. “I feel as though I’m being tricked somehow!”

“I don’t like it either, Joe, but I don’t see that we have much choice. I don’t want to take the risk of damaging this ship, especially the hyperdrive. I suspect that whatever activates that takes up a lot more space than the little pedestal we see here. I wouldn’t be surprised if most of the sealed area is compacted with complex mechanisms.”

“How about opening that sealed panel back in the base, then? That’s even more suspicious! If I’m going to return to the twenty-second century, it would be nice if we could bring a bit of the thirty-second century back with us! It’s very strange that these people didn’t leave behind any bits of technology for us to take back at all—no advanced weapons, no technical designs for hyperdrives, nothing. If we’re going to go back in time and defeat the Xenobots, we’re going to need some pretty good fighting machines to do it with. There *must* be that sort of thing behind that door; surely they wouldn’t send us back empty-handed!”

Mark exhaled loudly. “It confounds me, Joe, what the implications of time travel are, so I don’t know what it could mean to take advanced technology back in time. But it won’t hurt to look. We’ll have to devise some way of getting through the door.”

“First thing tomorrow morning, then, Starman Seaton. I’ve done so much exploration today that my eyes are seeing spots. Let’s eat, relax, and get to sleep. After breakfast, when we’re really wide-awake, we’ll open the forbidden door.”

~

The next morning, Joe took a tall glass from its storage area, and squeezed into it half a fresh lime harvested from the fruit stasis compartment. Then he opened a cabinet and grasped a small bottle of Tabasco sauce. He shook it briskly, and then dashed in four or five squirts of the spicy liquid. Then, after a second’s pondering, he added three more drops.

“Gotta be sharp,” he muttered. “Today’s a big day.”

Mark, sitting at the table, shook his head, and then lifted his coffee cup to his lips. A plate of scrambled eggs and toast was set in front of him. Joe’s plate was still untouched.

Joe threw a dash or two of Worcester sauce into the glass, and then walked over to a spice rack and took hold of a small cylinder. He brought it over to the countertop where his culinary

handiwork was awaiting its emergence, and added several shakes of coarse ground black pepper.

“Where’d you find all this stuff?” queried Mark, curiously.

“As I told you yesterday,” said Joe without looking up, “while you were playing with the hyperdrive, I examined the other important parts of the vessel.”

“The galley,” stated Mark.

Joe peered at Mark under lowered eyebrows. “Of course. One of the ‘other important parts of the vessel’.” He shook a large container of liquid he had withdrawn from one of the stasis compartments, and poured a thick red liquid from it into his glass until it came almost to the top. “Vegetable juice,” Joe explained. “Tomatoes mostly, and some carrots, a little red pepper, some cayenne pepper—so little as you’d almost not notice it, which is why I added this other stuff—and some cilantro and green onions. Just a trace of those. And everything thoroughly pureed.”

The lanky Starman drew a long spoon from a rack and stirred the mixture enthusiastically. Then he set the spoon aside and held the glass up.

“Whoever it is that’s put us into this detestable position isn’t all bad,” he pronounced. “They left us some top quality supplies. Maybe I’ll let ’em get off easy when I catch up with ’em.” He put his lips tentatively to the rim of the glass and took a sip. His eyes opened wide and he gulped eagerly two or three times.

“Ah!” he articulated loudly when he’d finished drinking, his eyes alight, gazing at the glass with frank admiration. “Wanna try some?” he asked generously, turning to face his friend.

“I’d like to,” said Mark, “but I think we’d better save it in case we need some to burn a hole through the locked door we’ve got to open later this morning.”

“And you call yourself a Starman,” said Joe as he hefted the glass one more time.

~

“Fresh, even sweet, air,” commented Joe as he adjusted the air feed in the spacesuits he and Mark were testing.

“Yes,” agreed Mark. “I sure miss my Starman spacesuit, but this will do for this morning.”

“Now let’s go find what we need.”

They set the suits aside and made their way to the work center located amidships. They rummaged through storage areas and parts inventories, and then cannibalized a few key assemblies from the backup navigational equipment.

“Hah!” burst out Joe when they had deposited their finds on the largest worktable. “This’ll be much easier than building that dragonfly I made on Nyx. Can you bring me that needlegun over there, please? Thanks.” He pursed his lips and gazed intently at the scattered parts, then pulled a small circuit board to the spot he’d cleared directly in front of him. Mark began to build a framework of bars and latticepipe.

A little more than an hour later, the apparatus was finished.

“It’s not elegant or streamlined,” assessed Mark, “but it’ll open the door.”

“Depends on the strength of the door, my friend, but I’m hopeful. Let’s carry it over to the sealed door and say ‘open sesame.’ I guess it weighs about three hundred pounds. It should be light enough to carry, but its mass can still give us a good crunch if we move too quickly.”

The two Starmen carried their project slowly and carefully down the access stairs to the floor of the hangar, then across the deck and into the large corridor that fronted the main entry to the hangar. They set it up a few feet away from the sealed door.

“Suits on,” said Mark. Moments later, when both were sealed in their spacesuits and breathing freely, Mark said, “Here goes.”

“I’m ready,” urged Joe. The two Starmen were a little tense

Mark flipped a switch on the makeshift construction. A crystalline knob at the end of an elongated shaft began to glow bright red, then gradually turn orange. Nothing else happened.

“Oh well,” said Joe, relaxing and standing upright, “I really didn’t think it would—”

At that moment, the orange glow shifted into hot yellow and

a tightly-wrapped heat beam shot across the empty space toward the door. A spot about a foot in diameter immediately lit up and began to ripple and bubble.

Joe recoiled, turning his head aside and throwing his arms up protectively.

The spot flared white-hot and instantly vaporized. Mark leaped to the controls and swept the beam around the edges of the opening, thereby enlarging the aperture and preventing most of the emission from entering the chamber beyond. The gaping hole became wider, until most of the door was gone. Mark quickly turned the machine off. Molten metal dripped from the edges of the breach but quickly cooled.

The gauges on their suits told them that the atmosphere on the other side of the aperture was identical to what was in the rest of the facility.

Joe stood up again, his eyes bugging out. “Wow!” he yelled. “The metal must have been a lot weaker than we thought! One would assume that after a thousand years people would have learned how to build stronger doors than that!”

“Maybe it was part magnesium,” suggested Mark. “Once it took off, it sure ignited like magnesium.”

“Oh well; it’s open!”

After the vapor cleared away from the opening, the Starmen could see a short passage behind the doorway. The end of the passage was hidden in shadow, but the beginning of a metal staircase was visible. It spiraled down into an unlit lower portion of the base.

“Let’s go,” said Mark as he turned on his flashlight and stepped through the hole.

Chapter 6: Through the Crater Wall

THE STAIRCASE spiraled down into darkness. Unlike every other location in the base, no lights came on as the Starmen descended

into the lower level. The bright illumination from the upper deck became weaker and weaker as the Starmen's feet tapped quietly down the metal steps.

"...forty-eight, forty nine, fifty, fifty-one," said Mark as his feet touched down on the floor at last. "Fifty-one steps, Joe. That's about three normal flights of stairs; we're roughly three stories down." He looked at his compad. "The air is still fine. We can remove our helmets."

He and Joe set their helmets on the bottom step, and then turned toward the darkness. Joe shone his light around. "Whatever it is that they didn't want us to find, we've found it." The beam revealed an empty foyer into which several passages opened. All appeared identical, except for unintelligible lettering over each one.

"No English translations here," said Mark. He selected a passage at random and led the way into it. Almost at once it opened into a sizable room. The beams of the two flashlights progressed throughout the chamber.

"I don't think this is the work of Earthmen," opined Mark. "It's amazing!"

Joe stepped over to the console that was closest to him, set his flashlight on its surface, and readjusted it so that it shone like a lantern. Illumination filled the room.

"Whew!" exhaled Mark. "It looks like a laboratory, but *what* a laboratory!"

The room showed items of astounding beauty. There were empty frameworks made of an indigo metallic substance, wheels made of crystal and linked like gears, consoles and panels of superb artistry, and viewscreens.

The side panels and back panels of selected consoles were open, and parts were strewn nearby. One viewscreen was pitted as though it had been struck repeatedly and violently with a hard object.

The Starmen ambled through the room, examining its artifacts. Mark gave his attention to a display case that featured stones of curious shape and color. Some were clearly meteorites, but

others had probably been mined. Next to it was another case that both repelled and fascinated him, for it held vacuum-sealed containers with strange organic items. He was not certain whether they were plant or animal. Some were bulbous growths like funguses; others appeared to be tendrils.

“Look at this,” said Joe. Mark turned away from the display cases and saw that Joe was standing before a rectangle that appeared like an open doorframe. The black-haired Starman stood next to his friend, and then opened his eyes in wonder. Though there was nothing apparent in the empty frame, it reflected like a mirror. Yet, amazingly, it reflected only certain colors. Blacks and dark blues failed to appear in the reflection at all, but reds, yellows, greens, and other colors showed brightly.

“What on Earth...?” began Mark.

“A portal?” conjectured Joe. “You know—set the dials and step through to your grandmother’s house for Thanksgiving?”

Mark gazed about the room. “I can’t begin to tell you what these things do, Joe,” said Mark, “but I have a feeling that even if we did know we wouldn’t believe it. The race that built them was very advanced. I can’t imagine what the purposes of these machines might be.”

“Imagine is about all we *can* do,” said Joe. “An atomic assembler, capable of reducing matter to plasma and then rebuilding it?”

“Or maybe something that makes it possible to cross vast reaches of space simply by stepping through a doorway into another world.”

“That sounds like a really advanced tachyon transporter,” said Joe. “Even better than what the Ahmanyans had. A *lot* better.”

The Starmen returned to the hub and selected another passage. This one was longer and decorated with murals along one side. The paintings depicted a gorgeous but alien landscape. A triple sun hung in the sky over a rolling meadow dotted with outcroppings of scaling rock. Orchards of surpassing beauty had been planted in the lee of the rocks. The trees in the orchards

bore fruit of various colors, and under the boughs were inviting passageways under cool shade.

In other murals there were cities made of crystal and upthrust, polished metal and stonework, with abundant greenery set in their midst. Some were on the shore of a sunbright sea, and one was placed high in a mountain valley surrounded by sharp, snowcapped peaks. A field of slate and ice surrounded still another city, characterized by lofty towers of brilliant gold and scintillating glass or crystal.

In a few of the wall paintings, figures were depicted, but they were too distant to see any details. Suddenly, the Starmen came upon a series of images that showed living beings close up. They stared with rapt admiration at vaguely humanoid creatures. Lamber eyes, larger than human, gazed serenely out of the representations. The creatures' foreheads were higher than human, and contained a cranium larger than human. There were six fingers on each hand, with two opposing thumbs. Their skin was bronze. Most of the men were muscular and appeared confident, and the women exuded health and beauty.

"These are not Ahmanyans," said Mark quietly. "If this is the Moon, who are these people? What planet do these scenes reveal? How did this place get here?"

Joe didn't answer. He just shook his head.

At the end of the corridor there were landscapes, seascapes, and spacescapes of breathtaking grandeur. All the images presented an aura of unspoiled beauty and harmony, as if the world they depicted had never known corruption or sorrow.

"My heart is ravished," said Mark, deeply moved. "I would give just about anything to visit this world and be able to live there." He began to take photographs of the murals using the optical acquisition and storage features of his compad.

After a time, the Starmen reluctantly pulled themselves away from the murals and entered the room at the end of the corridor. Here alone in the deep places of the base there was independent lighting. The chamber was bathed in a deep, warm light. In its center was an apparatus about six feet square. At the bottom was

an energy field that resembled a pool of stirred-up water, for it rippled and percolated with tiny bubbles. From each corner a slender metal strut rose up about ten feet.

Inside the space enclosed by the struts was a sea of floating particles like luminous dust. The particles flowed in a pattern as though they were in a current inside an immense aquarium. At the top, on one side the particles were a rich blue. As they drifted downward they changed into green and then bright yellow. As they flowed back upward they became orange and then deep red. At the top they were a radiant violet.

“They all pass through that filter, or whatever it is, at the top,” pointed out Joe.

“Yeah, I see,” murmured Mark. Suspended from the ceiling was another framework from which two disks hung. The particles passed through the disks, creating a star-shaped design in the plane each time one pierced the surface. In the field between the disks the particles could not be seen.

“The power plant for this entire complex, I suspect,” said the big Starman. “Maybe it taps into zero-point energy, or draws power from the fabric of space itself, but there’s no way I can tell.”

Joe walked up to a panel on the wall and tapped on it. The panel glowed to life and writing appeared, but the language on it was completely incomprehensible. Joe shook his head. The lanky Starman turned toward Mark. “If we are in the future—and mind you, I’m not saying we are—then my guess is that human beings discovered this place and then left it here as a memorial to whatever race was here first.”

Mark looked deeply into the mural closest to the end of the corridor. It showed an aisle between two rows of spreading trees under the light of hundreds of stars. “But who could they have been? The Ahmanyans are a great race but I don’t think they had anything like this. We saw nothing like this in *Imlah Taltahni*. These people are not Ahmanyans, and the planet in these scenes is not Ahmanya. And there were no remnants of an alien race ever found on the Moon.”

Joe grimaced. “Maybe the race came to the Moon after the alleged Xenobot invasion. I just don’t know, Mark. If Colonel Hoskins’ story is true, then a lot has happened in the past nine hundred years and we know nothing about any of it.”

At the back of the chamber was another door. The Starmen passed through it and entered a small room that contained only a table. On it there were five crystals like diamonds, each about the size and shape of an egg. Four of them were placed on one end of the table as if they had been set aside, and a fifth was next to them, set like a jewel in a casing in a machine that had a nozzle like the lens of a laser pointed at the diamond. The holder in which the crystal was braced had a parabolic cup behind it, covered by a highly reflective material on the side toward the diamond.

Joe stared curiously at this setup. “Some sort of data recorder, I would imagine,” he suggested. “These crystals might be three-dimensional data retainers. Colossal amounts of information could be stored along the molecules aligned in a crystal, and light—coming from this aperture here—could read it.”

“I suspect you’re right, Joe,” nodded Mark. “A compact piece of equipment, too.”

All at once there was a loud crash, followed by a hissing noise. Clouds of glowing, sickly green vapor began to seep from all four corners of the room. Its noxious composition was immediately evident. The Starmen’s eyes began to water. Their throats became raw in seconds, and their nasal passages felt as if they had been breathing superhot steam.

“Back to the helmets!” choked Mark. He ran from the room, with Joe just a moment behind him. The Starmen ran through the room with the luminous particles and flew down the corridor with the murals. They sucked in fresh air, trying to soothe their painful air passages.

It had taken them only a few seconds to return to the base of the spiral metal staircase. Mark grabbed his helmet and secured it to his suit. Just behind him, Joe likewise fastened his helmet. Mark charged up the stairs, his feet clattering on the platforms as

he shot upward. He could hear Joe following close behind.

When he got to the top, Mark stepped through the opening that their makeshift heat gun had made, then turned to help Joe come through. Instead of stepping through the gaping hole himself, Joe handed Mark a box. Then he emerged into the outer corridor with which the Starmen were familiar.

“What’s this?” inquired the big Starman.

“The data recorder, if that’s what it is,” answered Joe. “That gas began to belch as soon as we got too close to this contraption. I figured that if we set off some sort of alarm by looking at this machine, it was valuable. And, as you said, it’s compact. And it’s ours now.”

“It won’t work without the crystals. You got them too, of course?”

Joe smiled a lopsided grin through his faceplate, dug into his pockets, and pulled out the five egg-shaped crystals.

Wisps of green gas drifted through the opening the Starmen had ripped in the metal door.

“Let’s get back to the ship!” Mark commanded. “Time to launch!”

The Starmen raced into the hangar. Mark slammed his fist onto the large red button that closed the massive doors. The great panels slid out from the walls and sealed the hangar from the passageway.

“Guess we’re not going back there,” said Joe, as he and Mark hustled across the floor of the hangar. “Who knows how much that green smoke will evaporate before it dilutes?”

“The hangar doors ought to slow it down long enough for us to clear out of here,” answered Mark.

They raced up the entry into the captive Xenobot spacecraft, and Mark worked the controls that drew the stairway up into the body of the vessel. The hatch sealed, and the lights on the keypad glowed green.

“Airtight and spaceworthy,” announced Mark.

“We hope,” said Joe. He set the box down on the floor next to a wall and placed the five crystals in a cupboard nearby. Then

the Starmen hurried to the control cabin. Mark sat down in the navigator's pod and Joe made a fast inventory of the dials, buttons, and toggles in the pilot's position.

"Ready for power?" he asked.

"Ready," said Mark. Joe activated the power drive.

"Opening the airlock," said Mark.

"Go ahead," responded Joe as he maintained his focus on the controls at hand.

Directly ahead of the ship the entire side of the hangar changed. Mammoth sections of the wall slid away and revealed a huge, artificial tunnel, well illuminated by lights recessed into the places where the walls joined the floor and ceiling.

"Ready for launch?" asked Joe.

"Take us out of here!" responded Mark.

The ungainly ship lifted off the floor of the hangar and hovered for a moment. Then Joe maneuvered it forward slightly. With a careful watch on the controls, he maintained a fine hand on the movement of the spacecraft.

"Steady," he whispered to himself as the vessel entered the tunnel. The passage yawned upward into darkness. When the ship was clear, the wall behind them closed up again; almost instantly a second barrier went down, opening the way in front of them.

"We're a long way from the surface," announced Mark without turning from his instruments. "Looks like almost a mile." He risked a quick glance at Joe and saw that his friend was intent upon the view through the window, and his hands were making constant minute corrections to the controls.

Gotta be an automatic way to do this, thought Mark, but we don't have time to find it now. If there are any pilots who can get us safely to the surface, Joe's one of them.

After a time, Joe relaxed slightly. "Well," he said, "we're about to find out whether we're in the future or not. We oughta be able to tell once we reach the surface of the Moon—or wherever we are."

"You still have doubts after seeing all those incredible

machines down there?”

“Could have been stage props, for all I know. We didn’t see any of ’em work.”

“But you brought the box along.”

“It wasn’t heavy, and I don’t mind hedging my bets. But I just don’t feel as if I’ve been asleep for over nine hundred years.”

“Well, I have my doubts too. Just a feeling. I think that if the Earth had been destroyed, somehow I’d feel it inside.”

“Not very scientific.” The ship was moving smoothly through the channel.

“Science, at its best, takes account of all phenomena, and gut feelings are phenomena too.”

“End of the passage in sight now,” informed Joe. “There’s a panel moving aside somewhere ahead, and I can see a rectangle that’s a little lighter than the sides of this tunnel. And the artificial lighting is coming to an end.”

Mark turned back to his instruments. “Just under two hundred yards to go.”

The bulky, box-like craft emerged from the mouth of the tunnel and came through the side of a large, high crater wall into a deep basin on the lunar surface. Long shadows showed that the sun was behind them and out of sight. Joe brought the ship to a stop, and then lowered it to the dark gray dust that covered the crater floor.

For a long time, neither one spoke. Their eyes scanned the terrain outside carefully, taking in every detail. Before them lay a desolate, cratered, gray landscape in lunar twilight, smooth in places but in others, ravaged with torn rocks and signs of unnatural violence. Portions of it looked as if they had undergone some grotesque cauterization. On the horizon was a crater wall with a brutal rent in it, as if a monstrous hammer had struck it. Black, almost starless space was above.

“The Moon?” asked Joe at last. “Feels like it, it has the right colors, but I don’t remember this kind of violence anywhere on the landscape.”

“I have an uneasy feeling,” said Mark, his heart beating fast. “One way to tell for sure. We have to find the Earth. It must be on the other side of this orb. Let’s find it.”

Joe lifted the spacecraft off the gray surface, and cruised slowly in a circle around the crater so that the vessel was facing back in the direction from which it had come. He raised the ship a little more, and then wheeled toward the crater wall. Below them was the gaping orifice from which they had come.

“Look at what’s coming up over the horizon,” gasped Mark, needlessly. He nodded, indicating with his chin the first sign of a globe rising over the edge of the ripped crater wall. “If this were the Moon, that would be Earth! But it can’t be—it can’t be!”

The Starmen watched a planet come into view over the horizon as Joe cruised forward slowly. Unable to turn their eyes away from the scene, they were riveted to the window with growing horror. The planet that was slowly being revealed to their horror-stricken eyes was sullen and devastated, glowing with a sickening faint radiation. The star that illuminated it looked like their own sun, shining from behind the planet and therefore revealing little detail of the sphere rising before them. The planet’s own vile inner glow revealed an evil-looking chaos of foul smoke and shadow, pulsing in a few places with massive geological wounds, as if it had been visited by doomsday.

The sun illuminated a crescent on one side. In the sliver of light, the planet’s surface was mostly bright yellow and orange, like a sea of churning hot lava. The rest of the globe was swathed in mottled violet and brown, with regions that glowed bright white surrounded by aureoles of leprous yellow. It was obvious that the planet had been savagely, violently destroyed by some cataclysm. The vehemence of the planet’s ruination was past, but, in cosmic time, it had been recent—perhaps a few hundred years.

“It’s true,” croaked Joe, his voice sounded as if he had been strangled. “We’re in the future, and the Earth is gone!”

The tortured planet continued to rise over the horizon, revealing horror upon horror to the sickened eyes of the two

Starmen.

Chapter 7: The Worst Disaster Imaginable

WITH A NASEOUS, HOLLOW FEELING in their guts, the Starmen watched wordlessly as the scalded abomination slowly rolled into their sight. Their throats moist with an unpleasant feel as if they were about to vomit.

“Let’s take a closer look,” said Mark after a long time. His voice was a whisper.

Joe gripped the controls of the alien vessel and accelerated toward the poisonous ball that hung in the sky before them. About two hours later, they had come close to the planet. The globe filled the observation window.

The extent of the devastation was astonishing. Vast regions had been blasted and scorched. There were even a few large sections where the crust of the planet had been shattered. Towering cliffs, miles high, dropped into seas of white-hot lava. The scarring was so bad that it was almost impossible for the Starmen to discern any of the planet’s natural features at all. The atmosphere was long gone, except where fumaroles spewed forth a glowing green gas from the savage terrain. The radioactivity level was high. There was clearly nothing left on the surface that resembled the familiar Earth, and it seemed hardly possible that the planet would ever be habitable again.

The muscles of Mark’s arms trembled as he swung around in his seat, activated the instruments, and began to take measurements.

“Magnetic field is haywire, but I’d expect that,” he stated, his voice giving evidence of severe strain. The sound seemed almost like sacrilege. “The planet has a rotation of roughly twenty-four hours per day, but I can’t guarantee accuracy with so short a time to observe. The axis is tilted more than that of Earth—the Earth we know,” here Mark choked for a moment, then continued. “—but not by much. We are hovering about at the equator.”

“Is that Antarctica?” asked Joe. Dully, Mark looked where Joe was pointing. A rough landmass with a long peninsula lay at the bottom of the planet.

“Could be,” answered Mark. “That’s about where the south pole should be.”

“If that *is* Antarctica,” continued Joe, “then right over there is about where Starlight Academy would have been.”

“I don’t want to see where Montana was,” groaned Mark.

The Starmen remained quiet with their own internal thoughts. They imagined the vast savannahs of Africa, the rolling blue oceans with their floating cities, the arctic tundra and polar ice caps, and the mountain ranges that spanned continents. Joe remembered the dense forests of the Canadian far north, and Mark pictured the prairies of the American northwest and the sharp Tetons.

“We’ll have to take some photos,” said Joe at last. “If we’re going back to our own time to warn them of what could be in their future, we’ll need some convincing proof. Pictures of Earth in the thirty-second century will speak volumes about the consequences of failure, and these images are something that SE will definitely want to see.”

“You’re right. Make sure you choose some key sites. Identify them for me and I’ll record them. Use Antarctica as your reference point.”

For a time, Joe circumnavigated the planet while Mark took pictures. Joe selected sites according to their known latitude and longitude.

“The United Kingdom,” said Joe. “Mount Everest. Japan. New Zealand. Peru. The Caribbean.” The ghastly list continued as Mark took photographs of flaming seas, blasted rock, and smoking crevices.

“Okay, Joe,” said Mark at last. “I’ve got enough. Let’s go out to deep space where we can engage the hyperdrive.”

Joe nodded as he shifted the controls. “I wonder if we’ll find Zip when we get back to our own time. Very strange that he’s not here.” The Xenobot ship headed out toward the darkness of

interplanetary space.

Mark pursed his lips. "I hadn't forgotten him, but I just hadn't thought of him for awhile. Looks as if our only hope is to make the jump back in time and try to change things so that this never happens."

"What should we do when we get back?"

"Go directly to Richard Starlight, of course. Since we can't reset the date on the hyperdrive, we'll have to do our best with the few days' warning we can give him."

"The Ahmanyans will have to know, of course. We can't do without them. This affects them, too. If Earth is destroyed, surely Mars will have been blasted first. I wonder how the Xenobots ever found out that Mars is Ahmanya."

"I can't guess. Only a few people knew, and all of them eminently trustworthy. No one was told without the Ahmanyans' permission."

"Except when Zip told Stavri Thalassa."

"Right, but Saadervo confirmed that permission. Besides, Stavri is as trustworthy as we are."

"We're out far enough, don't you think?" Joe had halted the spacecraft beyond the orbit of the Moon.

"Yes. Far enough. Turn the ship around so I can get one more photograph of the Earth from this distance."

Joe swiveled the ship until the ravaged planet appeared directly in front of the control cabin.

"Well, we'll see what happens when I engage the hyperdrive. Maybe we'll just see the Earth change in front of our eyes to the blue and white planet we know and love, and we'll have moved almost a thousand years into the past. Ready for the jump?"

There was no answer. "I said, are you ready for the jump?"

Again, Mark didn't answer. Joe swiveled his head and looked at his partner. Mark was staring goggle-eyed at his compad.

"What is it, Mark?" asked Joe.

Mark wore a look of incredible surprise.

"Joe! Joe! Look at this! Look at this!" He held up the compad and pointed to it wildly.

Joe looked puzzled. “Your compad. I’m the one who found it, remember? We’ve already noticed that the date on it is different. What’s gotten ahold of you?”

Mark tried to calm himself. “Joe, the compad is still working! It’s on! How could the battery have lasted *nine hundred years*?”

Joe shrugged. “They obviously replaced the battery for us, knowing that we’d need the compad.”

Mark shook his head. “Joe, according to Colonel Hoskins, the compad has been left sitting in the base for an entire *year*. You know that the battery wouldn’t last that long! These compads draw so much power that the batteries have got to be replaced regularly.”

Suddenly the force of what Mark was saying hit him. “You’re right! But—but what about that planet up there in the sky? That’d be just about impossible to counterfeit. Could they have replaced the battery with something stronger than what we had before?”

Mark looked crestfallen. Joe returned his gaze to the planetary system in front of them. Then Joe’s eyes widened. “You’ve raised my doubts again, Mark. Is it just me, or has something funny happened to the stars?”

Mark looked up and through the window. “What do you mean, Joe?”

“Well, where are all our constellations? This whole sky is almost completely dark. There’s almost no stars at all!”

“With the kind of damage done to the planet out there, there must be clouds of dark space dust that obscure the aspect.”

Joe shook his head. “Not like this, Mark. We can see a few stars, but none of them is in the place I’d expect ’em to be even if we *could* only see a few of them! Something *is* wrong, Mark. Maybe there’s an explanation for the compad, but *something is wrong!* Wait a moment! Let me—” Joe began working feverishly at the control panel.

Mark looked at the stars as new hope surged through him. “The *stars!* Oh, man! How could we have missed that? How

could we have been so stupid? We were so caught up in emotion that we forgot the obvious, didn't we? Joe, take a reading and find our position."

"Hold on a second—I'm almost..." Joe muttered. The computer made a series of beeps. "Ah, okay. Done. Now for our position..." Joe hesitated a moment... "I've got it now. The computer *claims* that we are just out from the Moon but I'm not buying it anymore! That is the only position the ship is giving me, but I bet it's wrong! I *know* it's wrong!"

Another thought hit Mark with full force. "The *gravity*! Joe, we both thought something was wrong with the gravity: the gravity was like the Moon's but it didn't feel quite right, remember? We felt it was a little more than a sixth that of Earth..." Mark's voice trailed off as a vague remembrance of an overheard argument briefly registered in his memory, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Then he continued, "We concluded that it was because we'd been asleep or were hungry. Joe, take a reading of the gravity!"

Joe bent over the controls. "It says that the gravity is exactly what it's supposed to be at this point in space, but I don't think I believe it anymore. It looks as though someone has tampered with this ship to make us *think* that we're in our own Solar System when we are clearly *not*. I think we've been moved through hyperspace to a counterfeit Moon and Earth." Joe turned to face his friend.

Mark looked very upset. He slumped, and then shuddered. "Oh, we came so close. Do you realize what would have happened if we'd activated the hyperdrive? We'd have gone back to Earth and it wouldn't have taken us long to go straight to the Ahmanyans. Based on our advice, they would have come out into the open, and the Xenobots would have found them right away and attacked both us and them! What we've been *told has already happened*"—here he gestured to the planetary system outside—"is what *we* would have *caused*! Our last hope would have been destroyed!" He stopped and shook his head. "We missed disaster by a hair's breadth."

“Look how easy it was!” Joe exclaimed. “All they had to do was place us in suitably decorated rooms with a ship that fit the part—a ship they already had! They tampered with your compad, left a dramatic message on that holoport, tampered with the controls of the ship, and then left us to discover this scene in the most natural way possible! By placing us in some alien star system that looked like our own, they could almost guarantee that their ruse would work.”

“This ship then,” mused Mark, “must actually *be* of Xenobot make. The Xenobots likely gave it to one of their Earth henchmen, who set everything up. The claim that the hyperdrive would take us through time is most likely phony. The hyperdrive would have taken us right back to Earth and we’d have believed it, but we’re in our own time and we’ve *always* been in our own time!”

Joe spoke up with sudden wariness. “Mark, I just thought of something.” Joe turned back to the controls and began to manipulate several of the dials and adjusted a few settings. He continued to speak as he worked. “Remember the part of this ship that we couldn’t get into? If I were behind this charade, I would want to stick around to make sure that everything went according to plan.”

“That’s very clever of you,” said a voice behind them. “You figured it out completely, but too late, from your point of view!”

The two Starmen whirled and saw a group of heavily armed men standing behind them, weapons charged and ready.

A vicious-looking man in front glared at the Starmen, then smiled evilly. “And now, thanks to you, we know that Mars is the planet that our Superiors have been seeking for so long. Ahmany!” he spat. “And as soon as I get the communicator powered up, the Xenobots will know too!”

Chapter 8: Fire in the Night

STARMAN DAVID FOSTER crouched behind a tumble of rusted barrels that littered the mouth of a narrow alleyway. He had not shaved or bathed for several days. Cockroaches the size of his thumb crawled in the moist soil near where he was hiding, and various small wriggling earthdwellers burrowed in the shadows. He could hear rats, or perhaps it was a gang of wild opossums, scrabbling quietly in the piled up filth a few yards behind him. Without turning his gaze aside, the Starman gripped his laser pistol a little tighter.

Partially visible a few feet in front of the barrels, a metal street sign, long buried in hardened slag, read “SECOND AVE.” Across the street a gutted brick building blocked out a third of the lurid sky. All of its windows were broken. The numbers “815” remained in place over the entry alcove, the paint blistered by high temperatures. Most of the metallic lettering that identified the site had been obliterated by ultraheat, but a few figures still showed. Zip could read **OPAL C** where the metal had not been melted beyond recognition.

The trunks of old dead trees, devoid of any moisture, were stuck in cracked planter boxes on the fragmented sidewalk. A few shoots that likely had sprouted from seeds that had fallen decades earlier struggled upward from fissures that zigzagged across the uptwisted, asphalted street. They were covered with grotesque bulbous growths, and the leaves were a sickly white—mutations caused by former radioactivity.

All around the Starman vacant tall buildings scraped the evening sky, creating deep-shadowed canyons that ran for miles. To the south, buildings that still retained portions of drywall, carpets, and paint gradually gave way to twisted metal skeletal remains, stumps of what had once been structures that reached over 800 feet skyward. Beyond these was merely an infested warren of rusted girders, leached stone, and other debris.

No one had lived here for a century, when the city had been known as New York. In 2049, the American nuclear terrorist

Reuben Ridger had secreted an atomic device inside an android that had impersonated a tourist going to the Statue of Liberty. Security devices had later identified the diabolical machine that had passed for a human being as it paid for its ticket and entered the ferry to Liberty Island where the famed statue had upheld the symbol of liberty and freedom since 1886.

The chilling record had been played countless times in the weeks after the event, and in the twenty-second century was still the stuff of history lessons at Starlight Academy and elsewhere. The android had come in the guise of a frowzy, probably homeless woman, slatternly dressed in two ill-buttoned sweaters and mended shoes and carrying two large bags. A close-up of its face at the ticket window showed a glassy-eyed individual constantly working her lips who, when she spoke, mumbled through brown teeth. People glanced at her curiously and then passed on. After acquiring a ticket, the android had walked with jerky motions along the balustrade that led to the Liberty Island Ferry, which thus became a transport to oblivion.

The detonation had vaporized the island and caused the surface of the ocean to boil. A shock wave, whose temperature, for a moment, approximated the corona of the sun, was followed by fierce, scalding steam that traveled across the bay to the buildings around the harbor. The closest structures fell sideways into ruin with the force of the blast, but for buildings a little farther away, intense heat caused the greatest damage.

Buildings in the middle distance, many of which were made of dark gray stone or were blackened with smoke and soot, were instantly bleached white by the solar-grade heat. At ground level against the white, one could still trace the silhouettes of those who received the immediate brunt of the flare. Their bodies had instantly turned to ash, but their shadows remained on the granite facing a century later.

Hours after the first blast, there was a second detonation in the Bronx to the north, and shortly after that a third to the east on the border between Brooklyn and Queens. They had been placed and timed to cause the maximum amount of casualties among the

panic-driven crowds fleeing the devastation in the harbor. A cloud of radiation settled over the city and brought about even further sickness and death. Though only about one-third of the city's structures had been destroyed, the entire metropolis had been rendered effectively uninhabitable for decades.

The city had never been rebuilt or reinhabited by any legitimate businesses or other human presence. After the Collapse, it was far easier and more practical to build anew elsewhere. Once it had become workably, but not completely, clean from nuclear poison, scientists and researchers had studied the ghost town that had been New York during the early years of the twenty-second century, but for more than a decade the yawning canyons of the city had been home mostly to vagabonds, criminals, and those who foraged in the uncountable rooms and erstwhile major business centers. There were more empty places than the most determined scavenger could investigate in a lifetime.

The city was no longer a harbor. The shore was now more than three miles from where it had been in the middle twenty-first century, for the nuclear winter that had followed the worst years of the Collapse, relatively mild though it had been, had dropped the ocean levels. Several shipwrecks that had been submerged in the harbor for decades, even centuries, now lay open to the sun, partially imbedded in desert-like sand. Only gradually would the enlarged polar ice caps melt and raise the ocean levels to where they had once been.

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The redheaded Starman had woken from drugged slumber while his captors were flying him and his two companions in a compact shuttle into the heart of the ruined city where a clandestine landing field had been created out of what had been Dag Hammarskjold Plaza a hundred years earlier, adjacent to the United Nations Building. Zip had returned to awareness slowly, but by the time the shuttle had landed he was fully alert.

He feigned unconsciousness and remained a dead weight as

six men transferred the Starmen to stretchers so they could carry them to a starship. Joe and Mark, apparently, were still completely under the influence of the drug that had rendered all of them unconscious. As soon as it became evident that the three Starmen were being taken into the spacecraft, Zip knew he had to escape with or without his friends. With lightning speed, he reached up with both hands and grasped the wrists of the man who was carrying the end of the stretcher closest to his head. Simultaneously he wrapped his feet underneath the stretcher to gain leverage. He applied pressure to the man's wrists, pulling him backwards and down. With a gasp of surprise and fright, the man lost his balance and fell onto the stretcher. At the last possible instant, Zip rolled away and let the man fall hard.

The other captor couldn't reach for a weapon without dropping the stretcher, and remained undecided for a second. When his partner fell onto the stretcher, the second man staggered, then released his hands and grabbed for his weapon.

Zip, meanwhile, had rolled onto all fours and then leaped into a low crouch. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the second man leaning forward. The Starman slammed his right hand down hard on the back of his head, propelling him down forehead first between the legs of his partner. Through the canvass of the stretcher the man hit the ground hard and became limp. His dead weight hampered the first man's attempts to get back to his feet. Zip grabbed a laser pistol from his fallen captor and the pack of supplies that he had carried by a strap over one shoulder. Zip stood up, took a lightning fast survey of his surroundings, and sprinted for the closest building.

The escape had been almost soundless, and Zip's stretcher had been the last in the procession. By the time the others noticed that he had disabled his captors, the Starman was almost at the fence on the perimeter of the makeshift landing field. His superior agility put him on the far side before the other captors could lower their stretchers, get their pistols into their hands, and fire. Zip was free.

The empty streets of New York provided limitless places of concealment. Minutes after Zip had hopped the fence he was holed up in the crawlspace between floors four flights up in an office building two blocks from his captors' landing area. He opened the pack he had taken with him and laid out the contents. It contained equipment he had had on his person when he had been drugged: fire igniter, digital binoculars, pen and notepad, sketchpad and watercolors, a book, a pocketknife, compact heater, and, most importantly, his compad. His laser pistol was missing, but he had snagged his captor's. There was nothing to eat or drink, but other than that he wasn't so badly off. He nodded in satisfaction.

At the bottom of the pack, he noticed a small black object inside a sealed plastic tube. He squinted, then gingerly reached into the bag and withdrew it. He held it up close and saw that it contained a small bullet-shaped projectile. A needle half an inch long and thinner than a hair came out from one end, while the other had tiny fins to keep the item stabilized during rapid flight.

Zip gazed at the item curiously, and then reached up and touched the side of his neck where he could feel a small puncture wound. *Below my collar*, he thought. *The three of us were put out with darts, but the one that got me had to go through my collar first. The stuff acted instantly, but I got a smaller dose than Mark or Joe. That must be why I woke up before they did.* The Starman carefully put the capsule into a side pocket on the pack.

Zip inched forward to a blown-out hole in the side of the building. With his analytical mind racing, he watched the starship that carried his friends lift off the concrete apron. When the sound of the ship's exhaust had completely disappeared, the redheaded Starman furrowed his brow and pursed his lips in cold determination.

It was most probable that his captors, whoever they were, didn't have the manpower to search for him effectively. He was dependent on them, however, for they had the only trustworthy food and water within at least a hundred miles. Water was in short supply in the wide environs of old New York and, when

present, often poisonously contaminated with mutated microorganisms. That kept wildlife to a minimum. Even if he attempted to walk to the nearest habitation, it would take him at least five days, and he assumed that his enemies could detect any electronic activity within a radius of many miles—especially if they were watching for it. Zip couldn't flee without risking starvation and thirst, he couldn't use his laser to hunt, and he couldn't use his compad even to tell time without revealing his location. It didn't take him long to conclude that his only way of escape was to steal a ship. It was a dangerous and bold plan, and not too certain of success. If he laid low for a few days, the guard would relax. He'd even wait twenty-four hours to search for food and water.

~

The memory of recent events came urgently to Zip again as he watched the silent building across Second Avenue. The thoughts that plagued him wouldn't leave him alone; their irrepressibility had even made sleep an elusive experience. He'd only been able to sleep when he was exhausted.

Now Zip was hungry and thirsty, but not unbearably so. He had eaten and drunk about fourteen hours before, when he'd emerged from his hiding place in the Eckman Warehouse and taken some bread and water from the supplies that his enemies had stored there for their own use. He'd had a close call. The food had been well guarded since Zip had escaped from his captors a few days earlier. On this particular occasion, he'd had to keep still and silent in a gap between the crates as the morning patrol had searched the site. He hadn't risked a second foray to the stores, but had left his place of concealment and crossed into the maze of alleys two streets over. This was the day he had determined to escape his captors for good.

The need to escape had suddenly become urgent. At all costs, he had to contact Starlight Enterprise. Just last night he had overheard a conversation that shocked and alarmed him. He had moved silently down two flights of stairs from the loft where he

had been holing up, and listened to the words that drifted up to him from the ground floor. When he heard the word “Ahmanya”, he had tensed. What came next had turned his blood to ice water.

“...message came in this morning from Paul McTorney. The other two Starmen finally spilled the beans! Ahmanya is Mars!”

“No kidding! *Mars?*”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it, when you think about it? Now that we know, it all falls into place.”

“So what’s the plan now?”

“We’ll let it leak to Starlight that their secret is out; I expect that they’ll run right to the Ahmanyans. That’ll cause a panic and bring ’em out into the open—then we’ll know for sure just where they’re hiding. The Xenobot spy that’s going to camouflage itself in Starlight’s office will prob’ly be the first to know where they are. Retaliation’ll be swift then, you can bet your last solar!”

“What about the two Starmen?”

“Guess their usefulness is about finished, but what happens to them now isn’t my decision. The others will have to decide what they want done with ’em.”

Not for a second did Zip consider that Mark and Joe had knowingly or willingly revealed the most valuable secret in the Solar System to their enemies, but somehow they had learned it just the same. He doubted that the news would bring the Ahmanyans into the open, but it might. And the information that a Xenobot was planning to hide in Richard Starlight’s office was beyond belief! Zip’s heart was consumed with despair, but the crushing setback turned into the iron of resolve.

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Hearing nothing, seeing no one, sensing no other human presence, Zip crawled out from behind the rusted barrels and scuttled to the end of the alley where it fronted on what had been Second Avenue. The landing field was three blocks north. The Starman turned south and came to 43rd Street. Again seeing no one, he made his way down the block to First Avenue and turned

north. To his right was an empty field, littered with debris and overgrown with grass and weeds several feet high.

As he stepped into the open, preparatory to crossing the avenue into the field, he heard a sudden, fierce growl. Zip whirled. His eyes wide with adrenaline-charged alertness, the Starman saw a feral dog step out from behind a tumble of crates. Its fur stood out stiffly from its neck. It growled again. Three and then four other wild dogs emerged from the gloom. The light of the setting sun flashed spectrally in their eyes. Sensing helpless prey, the first dog padded forward.

Let's hope their monitoring equipment won't notice this, Zip thought as he put his laser pistol on the lowest intensity. It won't be much stronger than their own background noise. Even if they send out a search party, I won't be here when they arrive. He fired a brief burst directly at the leader. With a sharp outcry, the animal leaped backward and howled aloud. Zip fired again, this time hitting the second dog. The pack ran for cover. The Starman turned around, quickly crossed the street, and plunged into the brush.

For the next two hours or more, the determined Starman slinked through the thick growth, crawling when necessary over broken pipes, around the edges of piles of crumpled building frontage, and beneath great rusted girders. Once he disturbed a nest of rats that squealed and scurried away to escape his intrusion into their privacy.

It was well into the early nighttime before Zip had finished traversing the two hundred yards to the southeast corner of the launching field. His days of watching the field had paid off; he had selected his escape craft carefully. A brown five-seater with needle construction and vertical take-off and landing capability was less than fifty yards away. Most of his captors were relaxing after their evening meal, and fewer than a dozen were in evidence on the field. The others were in the Eckman Warehouse more than a full block away.

The Starman moved into the open. The strongest light came from a bank of lights on the northeast. With his laser pistol out,

Zip darted across the concrete, in open illumination for only a few seconds before finding refuge in the small craft's shadow. Keeping low, he dashed across the remaining open ground to the vehicle.

The entry hatch lay in the shadows, opposite the field's bright illumination, where he would be concealed from casual observation as he sought to enter the ship. For the first time since his capture, he powered up his compad and used it to decipher the security code on the spacecraft's access portal. With heart beating fast and his palms clammy, he watched the figures on the small screen flash faster than the human eye could follow.

If anyone's watching—and they must be—they know where I am now, he thought. The portal opened. Zip bounded into the ship.

"Hey!" cried a deep voice from outside, some distance away. He could hear footsteps charging across the cement toward the ship he had commandeered. The Starman grimaced as he shut the door and sealed it, then slipped into the pilot's seat and fired up the ignition.

The mechanism on the door's seal whirred rapidly and the portal opened. A giant of a man leaped through with his bald cranium shining in the spare light. Aggressively swinging huge tattooed arms, he reached forward with beefy hands that looked as if they could crush a coconut. Zip abandoned the ignition process and leaped out of the seat and charged his assailant with a loud, piercingly high shriek. He struck toward the man's solar plexus with full force. His attacker turned at the last second and received only a glancing blow. The big man grunted, and reached his hands forward and clutched Zip's head to twist it.

Realizing that he was suddenly in mortal danger, Zip bit the man's left thumb hard. With a sudden cry of pain, the man stiffened and released his grip. "You bl—!" he cried, but Zip slammed his forehead into the man's chin, shutting his mouth with a sharp snap. Reeling with the shock himself, he saw the huge man stagger backward. Ignoring the blood that began to flow down his face from the impact, Zip reached down with both

hands, grasped his attacker's right leg below the knee, and pulled upward and outward hard. The man fell to the deck, grabbing for leverage and missing it.

"Get out! Now!" hissed Zip fiercely. The laser pistol was pointed directly at the man's face, whose eyes widened in abject fear. "Now!" hissed Zip again, even more urgently than before. Still on his back, the big man crawled speedily toward the door, then turned and rolled out. Zip slammed the door and sealed it a second time.

Driven by acute urgency, he turned to the controls again. The Starman fumed at the delay the attacker had created, and his fingers flew over the board.

All at once, a siren screamed out, and a voice came through an impossibly loud public address system.

"Alert! Intruder on the airfield, in possession of the *Brown Crab*! All hands to the field! Fighter pilots into your spaceships! Don't let the intruder get away! Capture him alive!"

With alarm, Zip noted that the *Brown Crab*, if that was his craft's name, had no emergency start procedure. Well then, he'd just have to outmaneuver his pursuers! His ignition process was nearly completed and the other pilots were still scrambling for their ships. The Starman could see more than a dozen men rushing toward his ship, but they were at least fifty yards away. The big man whom he had forced off the ship was running frantically toward the crowd, apparently urging them to stop Zip from taking off.

Now or never! Zip thought. Six seconds later, the ship lifted off the cement in a blaze of fire. The running men paused for a moment and shielded their eyes. As the *Brown Crab* rose above them, they fired their laser pistols at it. The commandeered craft couldn't be brought down with such light weaponry. In seconds it was more than a hundred feet off the ground.

Almost at once three spacecraft launched, one after the other, and began to chase the fugitive five-seater. Zip piloted the *Crab* through the narrow canyons of the bleak city, hoping to throw the searchers off. He worked his way northward where the

structures were intact, but the spaceships that followed kept pace with him.

With his hands on the controls, Zip opened up communications on Starlight Enterprise's emergency channel. Even as he steered the *Crab* through the labyrinth of streets, keeping it out of the direct view of its pursuers, he blurted out an urgent call for help. The closest SE base was in Seneca; they would now know where he was and what he was facing. He pleaded for immediate assistance.

In the fourth story of the building facing the landing field, the Starman's captors had set up their control tower. A broad, intact plate glass window afforded an expansive view of the entire area. As soon as Zip had completed his broadcast, the chief controller turned toward a tall man with a long face that ended in a lantern jaw. Slightly wavy light brown hair was swept back from his brow on both sides, and curled behind large ears.

"Captain!" gasped the controller. "The Starman has alerted Starlight Enterprise and asked for immediate assistance!"

The captain's mouth turned down in a contemptuous, malicious expression. "The scheme with the other two Starmen has worked to perfection. Shoot this one down. Order him shot down immediately."

"Yes sir." The controller gave the order. The three large vehicles that had only been pursuing the *Brown Crab* and keeping it in sight so that it couldn't gain altitude, now began to fire heavy lasers at the fleeing ship.

Zip redoubled his evasive maneuvers, lifting his craft up over the tops of all but the tallest buildings and increasing his speed. As fast as he could, he changed course. Laser beams passed through empty air as the *Brown Crab* turned and whirled almost as if at random.

Suddenly one beam pierced the left wing, cutting a gaping hole through the metal and causing molten material to drip downward and interrupt the airflow. Viscous liquid began to leak from the wing, and the *Crab's* maneuverability was severely curtailed. With its target now less nimble, a second beam tore

through the body of the craft, followed seconds later by a third beam whose gunner knew just where to aim.

The rear of the *Brown Crab* exploded in a massive fireball, showering flaming parts down onto the vacant streets below it. The pilot's cabin, still intact, shuddered and wobbled out of control until a second explosion engulfed the rest of the ship in superhot flame, and the fiery wreck plunged downward, spinning more than ten stories down into the streets. It struck hard, scattering pieces over an area more than fifty yards in both directions of the avenue. Almost at once, a third and decisive detonation blew the entire ship into a million pieces, none of the fragments larger than a man's hand.

"Got 'im, sir!" exulted the gunner who had fired the fatal shot.

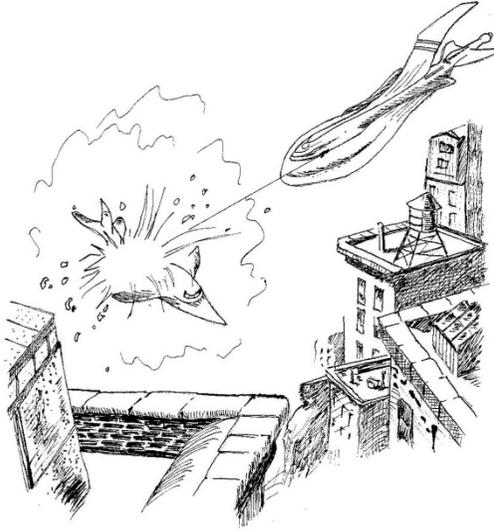
"Good shooting, Elm," said the captain. "Now we'd better prepare to abandon this base. Give the orders, Johnny."

"Yes sir," said the controller, and turned to the microphone once again. The three spaceships came in for a landing and began to take on other members of the crew. The denizens of the base had been preparing for a quick evacuation for some time. Nearly all sensitive records were kept aboard ship rather than in the buildings. The few urgent items that needed to be loaded were easily and quickly moved.

The captain began to cogitate. All his spacecraft could be boarded and lift off in less than ten minutes. It would be a close call whether the forces from Starlight Seneca could intercept them—in fact, he expected that his forces would be caught. He knew that SE had not been sitting idle since the disappearance of the Starmen, and that the company had armed ships ready to leave at a moment's notice in the event they were called upon to effect a rescue. SE Seneca was only twelve minutes away by direct flight. Add a couple of minutes for them to board and launch, and ... Yes, there was no doubt. His base was about to be raided and his crew captured. Well, he wouldn't be among them.

The gratifying information that Ahmanya had been identified as Mars had just come in a day earlier from the ship on the far side of hyperspace. The other two Starmen had finally tripped up

and provided the information they'd been seeking for so long and with such effort. With a snort, the captain realized that when SE landed, they'd secure the base quickly and then make a careful search. They'd miss nothing. They'd find the record of the communication he'd received. Why, this was the best way to leak that information to Starlight! He wouldn't have to do anything!



The rear of the Brown Crab exploded in a massive fireball.

With a subtle lift of his eyebrows, the captain concluded that things couldn't have worked out better if he'd planned them this way. He quietly left the room and descended the four stories to ground level. Less than two minutes later he made his way unobserved to the place where he kept his personal transport vehicle. Wrapped in a black cloak, he approached the enclosed, single-passenger vehicle.

Five minutes later twenty-seven ships bearing the insignia of Starlight Enterprise screamed into the airspace over what had been lower Manhattan. It did not take long to secure all ships,

personnel, equipment, and buildings. The Starlight forces concluded initially that they had a complete mop up, but they soon realized that one figure, the most important of all, had escaped. The best search by Space Command completely failed to turn him up. The leader had vanished. Half a mile away already, a small vehicle was threading its way through the alleyways of old New York.

The forces of Starlight Enterprise were grim as they carried out their task. No one was looking forward to examining the wreckage that burned furiously more than a mile to the north, where a pulsating, vivid orange glow showed up in the dark canyons that ran among the empty skyscrapers. Zip's compad had been silent for too long, and they knew that no one could have survived the crash of the five-seater. A Starman—one of their best—had gone down.

Chapter 9: Shock Upon Shock

RICHARD STARLIGHT WAS DESCENDING in his private elevator in the tower of Starlight Enterprise's main office on the Moon, about forty miles from the South Pole. From before breakfast he had been in his office coordinating the efforts of Starlight Enterprise's considerable resources in a determined search for the missing Starmen. Zip, Mark, and Joe had been out of contact for six days, and there had been no evidence whatever of what had happened to them or where they had gone. Their camp in Montana had been found intact, with all supplies laid out and no signs of a struggle—yet of the Starmen there had been no sign. Wherever they had gone, they had taken with them no more than what they had been wearing.

Now it was past dinnertime, and the exhausted man was looking forward to a late dinner with his wife and Caedmon and Michaela, their two youngest children.

Suddenly an urgent call came to Richard in the elevator car. He pressed the emergency stop switch and then reversed the

direction of the elevator. Without delay he jumped back into his office and sealed it electronically against eavesdroppers.

“Starlight here!” he almost shouted.

“Alison Glass of Starlight Seneca, sir. A message was received from Starman David Foster a moment ago,” said the speaker. Alison gave a concise summary of the report Zip had sent from old New York. “Twenty-seven ships have already scrambled, sir, and are en route to the location. They will arrive in eight minutes.”

“Keep me informed,” ordered Richard.

“Of course, sir.”

~

“Check the wreckage,” commanded Gene Newman, the Assistant to the Director of Operations at SE Seneca. Newman was in charge of the Starlight forces that had responded to Zip’s urgent call from the vicinity of the clandestine site in old New York where renegades had established a base.

“Yes sir,” said the pilot Newman had addressed. He took two of his crewmembers and lifted off in a small shuttle that would take them to the scene where the ship that Zip had commandeered had crashed.

Newman directed the rest of the mop-up with the efficiency for which he was known. A few years earlier he had managed operations under Lurton Zimbardo when that villain had taken over the asteroid that was now known as Tharsos. Newman’s change of heart and the assistance he had rendered when the asteroid was on a collision course with Earth had led to a reduced term when he had been sentenced for his part in the attack. As soon as Newman had finished his time in prison, Richard Starlight had brought him aboard the Starlight team. For two years Gene Newman had been stationed at the Starlight base in Seneca.

In only a few minutes all the reports came in.

“All prisoners secured in the compound, Mr. Newman, disarmed and under heavy guard.”

“There is a section of the base secured with a strong door, sir. None of the prisoners can open it—so they claim.”

“The head of this operation has escaped, sir. No one saw him leave or knows where he may have gone.”

Newman reacted to this report. “Could they be lying?”

“I doubt it, sir. They are pretty upset at his disappearance. They feel that he saved his own skin and left them to pay for it. There’s a lot of hard feeling in the crowd of prisoners right now. One named Johnny is particularly hot and may well answer all our questions without much persuasion.”

“Bring him to me.”

Finally the report Newman dreaded most. “Sorry to report that there is nothing left of the wreckage, sir—no parts of any notable size whatever. The craft is a complete loss. I have never seen so total a wreck, sir. The explosions and the fire have destroyed it utterly. Even the asphalt in the old street was liquefied by the heat for twenty yards around it.”

“Any sign that the Starman escaped? Bailed out, maybe?”

“Impossible, sir. The ship was only a hundred feet above the ground, maybe a little more, when it was struck.”

“Any,” here the former pirate choked and swallowed, “any evidence of human remains in the wreck?”

“Negative, sir, but there is no way yet that we can get close enough to investigate thoroughly. The heat is still too intense even for our suits. But I assure you that nothing whatever could have survived the crash.”

“Thank you. Out.”

Gene Newman looked up and saw a tight-faced individual standing in front of him, flanked by four armed members of Starlight Seneca.

“You’re Johnny.” The man nodded curtly.

“Tell me about this place. Tell me what happened to the Starman. And tell me where the other two Starmen are. Tell me everything.”

Though it seemed an age to the Director of Starlight Enterprise, it was not long before a second message came through to him. The voice was Gene Newman's. He reported that the SE forces had secured the site and captured all outlaws except the leader.

"... and I am grieved to report, Mr. Starlight, that the conclusion appears inescapable that Starman David Foster perished in the crash of the shuttle he had commandeered."

"Repeat that."

"Starman David Foster perished in the crash of the shuttle he had commandeered." Gene spoke in a professional tone, but was clearly speaking the words as if they were made of lead. "The wreckage has been examined carefully and there is no possibility whatever that anyone could have survived the impact and resulting explosion."

Richard's heart dropped within him. "And the other two Starmen?" he asked, controlling his voice with a supreme effort.

"There is no sign of them, sir. The prisoners report that Starman Mark Seaton and Starman Joe Taylor were taken aboard a cruiser that lifted off from this site the same day they disappeared. Starman Foster escaped his captors while they were being transferred to the cruiser, and apparently lay in hiding in the proximity of the base from that time until this evening. He sent his report and request for assistance at the time he endeavored to make his escape, but he was shot down over the streets of the ruined city."

Newman went on to describe the vault that the Starlight forces were unable to open with the equipment on hand. Richard ordered that reinforcements be brought in with the machinery necessary for forcing an entrance.

"I will contact Space Command to get them to begin a thorough investigation into the renegade base and its scope of operations."

"Yes sir. I will secure the site until I am relieved."

"Starlight out."

The aerator in Richard's aquarium bubbled as peacefully as

always in the background, and he could hear his red parakeet Scarlet scrabbling about for sunflower seeds, but the whole world suddenly seemed deadly silent. Richard covered his head with his hands and did nothing for a long time. He listened to himself breathing deeply but seemed utterly detached from it.

~

Two hours later the huge door to the sealed vault was penetrated by the high powered, fine machinery that had been brought in from Starlight Seneca. Through the tiny opening a disabling, paralyzing gas was injected into the room beyond. Then a tiny camera at the end of a hair-thin fibertube was inserted.

“Six personnel inside,” the technician reported, “all armed, in suits, and unaffected by the gas.”

“Very well,” said Newman. “Force the door open. Be prepared for battle.”

The huge door was cut loose and wrenched open by the grips brought in for that purpose. The personnel inside surrendered and relinquished their weapons without resistance.

It did not take long to confirm that the leader of the renegade base was not numbered among the last six prisoners. His escape had been complete.

“Inside the vault, Mr. Starlight,” reported Gene Newman not long after the door had been opened, “was the renegades’ critical communications center. Unfortunately, during the time it took us to bring in the necessary machinery to open the door by force, the renegades were able to destroy all the records inside.”

“*All of them?*”

“Yes sir. They used an electronic disrupter and essentially fried every electronic file and system inside the room. I have already asked Melissa Hadley to assemble a crew of experts in electronics and communications to see if anything can be salvaged.”

“Hadley?”

“Yes sir. She’s head of electronics at Starlight Seneca—a most capable woman, sir. If anything in the renegades’ files can be read, she’ll find a way to do it.”

~

Richard sat pondering for a time. The files had been completely destroyed. The personnel who had done it had sealed themselves inside the vault during the raid to ensure that they would have as much time as possible to complete their work. That made it look as if something of grave significance had been going on at the site. That made it vital to find out what was in their records and communications.

Moreover, the leader had escaped. Most likely he carried with him whatever information had been destroyed. Logic indicated that the fugitive was committed to avoiding capture at all costs so that he could pass it on to Earth’s enemies. Suddenly it became vital to track this unknown individual and prevent him from communicating with anyone else. There was no evidence that any ship had lifted off from old New York. He had to be in hiding somewhere in the near-endless ruins of the city. Well, Starlight had the capability of conducting a search even in such a hopeless situation.

The communicator came on just as Richard reached for it.

“Mr. Starlight?”

“Go ahead.”

“You may want to know, sir, that fifty million solars have just been taken from Starman David Foster’s expense account.”

“Fifty million solars?” Richard was incredulous.

“Yes sir, drawn from the Peekskill terminus. The individual who made the withdrawal was able to manipulate the system, sir, and bypassed the required identifiers: there was no retinal scan, no fingerprint pressure, no perspiration DNA match up. Videorecord showed a large individual swathed in black who was able to disable the camera less than a second after detection, and then made the withdrawal by electronic manipulation and an

override by a nondestructive power surge.”

Richard clamped his teeth down hard and snorted. “Whoever’s taken it has his compad packed with solars now—nothing we can do to get it back. Shut down the account. I should have done that as soon as I knew that Starman Foster was deceased.”

“Yes sir.”

Well, at least now we know the direction the fugitive took, thought Richard. He gave orders that the area immediately north of old New York be searched thoroughly, and impressed upon the searchers that the fugitive be located immediately. But now that individual had enough funds from Starlight’s own treasury to do almost anything he wanted. Richard shook his head in disgust.

The head of Starlight Enterprise then decided to go to the site personally. He could be there in three hours, maybe a little more. He sent a message to his wife Jan that he would be gone for a day or two. Then he gave orders that his personal spacecraft, the *Lux Mundi*, be prepared for liftoff. Finally he requested that a meal be laid out for him in the commissary, and that it be waiting for him in five minutes. Then he left his office.

~

Directly across the huge office from Richard’s desk was an immense meeting table. Not far from the table was a detailed globe of the Earth about four feet in diameter and perfectly balanced. Equally detailed globes of Luna and Mars on the same scale were nearby. In another corner were globes of Mercury and Venus and a few other celestial bodies.

The globe of Mercury had been a gift from Beowulf Denn for Richard’s fifty-fifth birthday. The orb was three feet across, precisely balanced in its frame and well supported on a beautifully polished base of teak. It was a gift that evoked mixed feelings in Richard, for Mercury was the site of his parents’ tragic deaths nearly forty years earlier, but also where some of Starlight Enterprise’s finest and earliest successes had been

achieved. At present, SE's activity on Mercury was minimal, and Richard had little occasion to refer to the globe.

Things might have been far different had he done so; a close inspection of the item would have revealed that it was not an ordinary work of art. Beowulf Denn had given Richard not only a stunning miniature of the planet Mercury, but also—completely unsuspected by its recipient—a secret compartment concealed in the base.

After the head of Starlight Enterprise had left his office and the illumination automatically dimmed, there was silence for a long time. Then a set of ripples appeared in the air in the center of the office, like heat waves rising above a chimney. A sphere made of glass and metal materialized. Then, like a large soap bubble, the sphere floated diagonally across the room, tripping no alarms and showing up on no screens.

Had anyone been there to observe, they would have seen what looked like part of a man inside the sphere—a torso and head without limbs, seemingly made of metal with small sections of crystal. It came into the proximity of the globe of Mercury and hovered for a moment. An unmarked, unsuspected panel on the base slipped open and exposed a hiding place complete with minimal but precise electronic equipment. The metal and glass sphere elongated into a flat capsule shape, fitting the torso more closely, and slipped into the stand. The panel slid shut.

Only a few Earthmen had ever seen a creature like the one that had secreted itself in Richard's office. The encounter had taken place on Nyx, the dwarf planet whose orbit took it farthest from the sun. Those that had seen them would never forget their first sight of a Xenobot. This one had temporarily divested itself of its arms and legs, the better to conceal itself. It was patient, well able to wait in the office of the head of Starlight Enterprise for days at a time if necessary, silent but aware.

Chapter 10: Starman Sabotage

“YOU COULDN’T POSSIBLY tell the Xenobots that Mars is the planet they’ve been looking for!” gasped Mark. “You’re an Earthman yourself! That information would lead to the destruction of both Mars and Earth!”

“Don’t try that appeal on me,” sneered the leader of the thugs who’d captured the two Starmen. “I haven’t ever considered myself an Earthman. I was born in the Asteroid Belt and been looked down on and taken advantage of by ‘Earthmen’ since I was a boy. No one’s gonna take advantage of me or any of us again, see? We’re on the side of power now, ‘Starman,’ and it does my heart real good to see you two all-powerful, respected, super privileged starboys helpless with shock. You don’t see any Starlight ship able to jump through hyperspace at will, but this machine can do it effortlessly. You’re farther from Earth now than you’ve ever been, and we can take you back to your precious home planet before tea time. You don’t see any Earth weapon able to waste an entire planet like that ball of radioactive lava outside the window there, but the Xenobots can do that. There’s no stopping us now!”

“Bando,” he charged, addressing one of the others without turning his attention away from the Starmen, “get the communicator ready so I can send that message off to Gyrðsson.”

A wiry little man rubbed his hands together, sidled his way over to the communication pod, and sat down. Expertly he prepared the apparatus, and then turned toward the leader of the renegades.

“Here you go, McTorney,” he said and tossed a small box to his superior.

The burly man pressed a button on the side of the box, then held it up and began to speak, keeping his eyes fixed on Mark and Joe who were helplessly chafing under the weapons pointed at them by the jeering goons. “McTorney here,” he began. “We have secured the ship and the Starmen are our prisoners. We took

them completely by surprise. Just before we captured them, they revealed that the Xenobots' enemy's planet is Mars. And before you ask, Yes, I'm sure it's true. You should have seen the shock across the faces of these two dupes when they knew we'd heard them spill the Big Secret. I've activated the routing setting with this message, so the Xenobots will learn at the same time you do that their long search is over."

With an evil grin and a wicked glint in his eyes, the man sent the message through hyperspace. Then he tossed the communicator back to Bando and motioned over his shoulder toward another of his crew.

"Razzy, take the helm and get us home. The rest of you, put these pitiful innocents into the magnetic cell."

~

Paul McTorney, Bando, and Razzy remained on the control deck, and the remaining four thugs escorted the Starmen down the central corridor. One led the way, after ordering the captives to stay at least ten feet behind him. The other three walked the same distance behind the captives with laser pistols drawn. They were taking no chances that their prisoners would try to overpower them and take command of the ship.

A panel had been removed from what had appeared to be a smooth portion of the corridor wall, revealing a stairwell that led down into a brightly lit succession of compactly designed rooms. There was storage, but also a second set of living quarters.

"For the crew," explained one of their captors, a short man at least fifty pounds overweight. "What you saw before was for the passengers. There's room here for fourteen people. And here," he said, almost with a flourish, "is the magnetic cell."

He stepped forward so that the Starmen could not see the code he entered into the keypad next to the door. He pulled the door open and gestured to them. "In you go."

Having no choice, the two captives walked into the small room. It was clean but spare, with four pulldown bunks, a

washroom, a table, and four chairs.

“No hardware for locking the door, as you’ve no doubt noticed,” said the pudgy man, indicating the door. It was a featureless metal plate at least two inches thick, hung on three tightly-fitted, solid hinges. “It’s locked by an electromagnet. Once I turn on the juice, this door may as well be part of the wall. Be patient,” he advised; “you won’t be here long. We’ll be back in the Belt before next mealtime.”

He swung the door shut soundlessly on its hinges. It fit with hairline precision into the jamb. Mark immediately pushed on the door. It didn’t budge. He pressed hard, then leaned on it, and then slammed his shoulder against it. There was not the slightest indication that he had caused it to move at all. Suddenly, with enormous force and a monstrous bellow he threw his entire body against the unmoving portal.

Then the big Starman clumped over to one of the bunks, pulled it from the wall, and sat down dejectedly.

“Pitiful innocents’ is right,” he snorted. Then he began to shout. “Can you imagine that? All of Ahmanya for a century keeping itself secret from Earth, and then finally sharing the information of their existence with us—*us*, of all people! —and we blabber it away!”

“Who was to know?” sniffed Joe. “These goons really went to a lot of work to get us to spill the secret. They almost—almost—had us convinced that we were a thousand years in the future, and all just to get us to tip our hand.” He shook his head.

“You seem to be taking this setback pretty well, Joe,” said Mark, a little sternly. “The big shot up there has already sent the message to the Xenobots, and he’ll have us back in our own Solar System before long.”

“If he really sent that message, the situation is desperate,” agreed Joe. “The loss of the secret is catastrophic, but I don’t think we’re going home as soon as they think we are.”

“What do you mean?”

All at once a shudder ran through the ship. There was a wrenching feeling as if the floor had just dropped out from under

them, and they reeled a bit.

“Wow!” exclaimed Joe, losing his balance momentarily and grabbing for support.

“Must be engaging the hyperdrive,” said Mark, holding on to the edge of the bunk he was sitting on.

“Maybe,” said Joe, as a loud whine quickly climbed in intensity. Abruptly the sound changed. There was a series of small distant explosions, then a deafening discharge followed by a brief noise that sounded like metal rain. Two quick rattles sounded, and then there was silence. The lights dimmed and went out altogether.

“Seems as if they’ve run into some trouble,” said Joe, almost nonchalantly.

“What did you do?” asked Mark urgently.

“As soon as we realized that we were not in the future at all,” Joe explained, “I quickly altered some of the ship’s settings. I fixed it so that if a wormhole attempt were made, the drive would overload and short-circuit before it could complete the passage. I also quickly changed it so that the ship would sustain a fair amount of damage—took out one of the vital connectors so that the transfer circuits in the engines would overload and melt. It was a bad risk, but I didn’t have very much time.”

“Blew some of the other circuits, too. No lights.”

“We’ve still got air circulating and the gravity grid’s still on. We’ll be okay, and the backup system should come on any time.”

“Where are we?”

“You know as much as I know, Mark! I just know that we’re not on the way back home. At all costs their information *must* not get back to the Solar System.”

“But you heard McTorney send the message already!”

“I heard him try to convince us that he had. Maybe he did and maybe he didn’t. We’ve already learned that with this group you can’t take things at face value.”

Joe pushed the door. It opened onto blackness. There was the sound of several pairs of boots rushing down the staircase and a light was bobbing, illuminating the end of the corridor.

“Get ready,” said the lanky Starman, retreating back into the room and pulling the door after him. He left it slightly ajar so that he could hear the approach of their captors.

“Still closed,” came a muffled voice. “Those patsies probably don’t know that the door’s unlocked.”

“It doesn’t look quite closed to m—” began another.

Joe pushed powerfully on the door, opening it with a suddenness that caught two men by surprise and flung them hard against the opposite wall. They dropped a light that rolled along the floor. Mark threw his coat over the light and plunged the corridor into darkness. A swift fight exploded, the Starmen taking immediate initiative against four others. Going completely by feel, Joe gripped one man’s wrist and led him in a tight circle and a solid encounter with the metal wall.

Mark grabbed another man by the wrist, whirled, and threw him over his shoulder so that the thug hit the deck flat on his back.

A third man began to squeal with fright at the sound of the fight around him. It was the overweight individual who had sealed them into their cell a few minutes earlier.

“Thanks for making a noise, buddy,” said Joe, spinning on one foot and shooting his other foot out in an effective kick. A loud noise like a baseball bat hitting a side of beef echoed in the dark hallway, followed by the sound of a body bouncing against the wall, and then falling to the floor.

“Right in the rotunda,” muttered Joe with satisfaction. “One of my best kicks, if I do say so myself.”

“Stop where you are,” came a panicky snarl from the darkness somewhere between the cell door and the end of the corridor where the stairs came down, “or I’ll drill you! I’ve got my pistol out.”

Mark lowered into a crouch and dove along the floor with his head tucked in and both arms spread out. He slid along the floor until he collided with the last man. The man’s legs flew out from under him and he went down. Mark was instantly on his feet, reached down and picked the man up, and cracked his head

against the wall. Then the big Starman laid him gently onto the floor.

“You there, Joe?”

“Standing in the darkness listening to the beautiful music.”

Mark found his coat and took it off the light. “Grab their lasers, then let’s drag these fellows into the magnetic cell and find a bar or something that we can use to keep the door closed. Then we’ll see if we can take control of the ship.”

Chapter 11: Escape Into Captivity

ALL AT ONCE the power came back on. The hallway was flooded with light.

“Blast!” muttered Joe. He quickly turned and pulled on the metal door of the magnetic cell. “I didn’t expect that they’d get the backup system up so fast. Now we can’t open the door. It was shut during the fight.” He looked over his shoulder at Mark. “These four oafs’ll be awake in a moment. Can we keep ’em subdued *and* take on the three up there?”

Mark thought for a moment. Then he looked directly at Joe. “There’s only one thing to do. We stroll casually up the stairs and go find the others. We tell them that if they ever want to get home they’ll have to depend on us. You and I can probably get this ship functional again, but I doubt that any of them can. Unless they’re on a suicide mission, we are already in control of the fate of this ship—and its crew. They have the numbers but we have the knowledge. It’s a stalemate.”

“How can we be sure that none of them knows how to repair the ship?” Joe asked dubiously. “This is their spacecraft! Besides, the most important thing right now is to keep them from contacting the Xenobots!”

“The critical message has already been sent,” Mark shrugged. “I know, I know. We heard it but, as you said, we don’t know if it was true or just a ploy to fool us. What we have to make sure of is not revealing any more information. There’s still

a lot the Xenobots don't know. They don't know how many Ahmanyans there are or where they're located. They don't know what resources they have. They don't know whether the Ahmanyans are on their home planet or somewhere else. I doubt that the Xenobots will attack until they have that information."

One of the men on the floor stirred and moaned.

"Let's hide somewhere on the ship," suggested Mark, "and think this through. That'll buy us a little time. We can't afford to make any mistakes."

"I know just the place," Joe said. "Follow me. Toward the engine room, there's a storage closet with a high shelf and an access passage that stretches across the entire top of the chamber." The wiry Starman was already moving toward the stairway. Mark followed.

Silent as shadows they flew down the central passageway and came to the landing where the wide staircase led down to the floor of the engine chamber. Angry voices came from below.

"We're stuck, stuck in this junkyard zone!" flared a furious voice. "Look at all these circuits! Melted into scrap!"

"Can't you fix it, Bando?"

"*Fix* it?! Fix this mess? You're out of your mind, McTorney! I'm a communications technician, in case your Swiss cheese brain has forgotten that! I could call for help to anyone within a billion miles—if there *were* anyone within a billion miles, which there's not! But I can't fix this!"

There was a loud popping sound followed by a series of quieter pops.

"Oww!" howled the little man. "This thing's still hot!" Something clattered down onto the deck. "Get Razy! He's the pilot!"

Joe eased open a door at the top of the landing and nodded sideways to show Mark that they were to enter it. They shut the door behind them and climbed carefully upward, using the shelves as a makeshift ladder. Just above head height was the topmost shelf. Joe slid a few boxes to one side and pressed open a panel. Faint light filtered down. Joe crawled through the

aperture into the passage beyond. Mark was right behind him. Before Mark shut the panel, he slowly slid the boxes back so that they covered the opening.

The crawlspace was about three feet high and was jammed with pipes, cables, clusters of wires tied together, and an occasional box or panel, featuring a dial or gauge, bolted to the wall or a support. Grilled vents in the floor provided air and light. The floor of the crawlspace was the ceiling of the engine room. About ten feet beyond the panel at the top of the storage closet, the space widened out like a huge attic and appeared to cover almost the entire engine chamber. Stanchions and supports made it look like a metal forest. Illumination came into the dusky attic through the widely spaced grills like springs of light. Slowly and carefully so as not to make any noise, the Starmen made their way through the penumbral gloom to a point directly over the speakers.

All seven were huddled together. The pilot, Razy, was speaking.

“We’re nowhere, nowhere at all!”

“Whaddaya mean ‘nowhere at all?’” asked one of the others. “We gotta be someplace! We’re *somewhere!*”

“Dry up, walnut brain!” snarled Bando contemptuously. “We’re in a wormhole, or somethin’.”

“Shut up, Bando!” ordered McTorney. “Let Razy talk.”

“Look, the hyperdrive got us started through the wormhole and then burned out after a second. We’re still in the wormhole. There’s no stars, no nothing outside. For all I know there’s no time passing. I don’t even know if we’re moving or coasting or drifting. We could be dead. We could be in a black hole or something! For all I know, the thing could close in on us at any time.”

“Blast those infernal Xenobots!” shouted another of the men, his voice rising in panic.

McTorney slapped him across the face. “Shut up!” he shouted fiercely. “Just shut up, all of you! We’re not dead, you fool! Did you imagine that slap just now? Did a dead man just

smack your stupid mouth closed? I'm not dead and you're not dead. And it wasn't dead men who gave the four of you those big bruises! Don't try my patience!"

A quiet, metallic noise grew from a subtle twisting sound into a loud banshee-like howl, and then faded into an agonized groan.

"What was that?" whispered one of the men, fear filling his words.

"It was your grandmother complaining that you're late bringing her tea, you dullard!" spat the captain. "It was metal groaning. Haven't you ever heard that before?"

"Is the ship coming apart?"

"Only the part you're gonna be in if you keep up that kinda talk!"

"Maybe..." began Razzy. All eyes turned toward him. "Maybe the Starmen could fix this mess."

McTorney's eyes narrowed.

Razzy continued. "They're as stuck here as we are. They escaped the magnetic cell, but," here he snorted out a laugh, "they can't have gone far. Like it or not, we have to have a truce. We've got the food and the water and if anyone has the knowledge to get us out of wherever we are, it'll be them."

"So what're you suggesting, Razzy?" said Bando. "That we just invite them to come out of whatever dark corner they're in and partner up with us?"

"Basically... yes."

McTorney nodded shrewdly. "He's right." With an unmistakable glare of warning, the man turned on his heel and stomped up the stairs. A minute later, his voice came through the shipwide communicator.

"Attention, Starmen! This is Paul McTorney. Don't think you're gaining anything by smacking my men around and then hiding. You're rats on this sinking ship as much as we are. You're saving nothing because we've already got your big secret and passed it along to those who are most interested in learning it. We don't even care any more about what you might know. You, however, need us. We have the food and water. And as you

may have noticed, the engines are not functioning and we're on the backup power system. If you don't want to drift through eternity, I suggest that you come out from wherever you're hiding and use your knowledge to get this ship running again. It's your only hope of getting home again, as well as ours. Who knows? If you get us back before long, maybe you'll have time enough to warn Earth about the big attack coming their way. It's up to you."

Joe turned to Mark. "Guess you were right, Mark. They came to the same conclusion you did. We have to join forces."

A minute later Starman Mark Seaton and Starman Joe Taylor opened the door of the storage cabinet and walked out into the ship's main corridor. Paul McTorney was returning to the engine room from the control deck. If he was surprised to see them, he didn't show it.

"Down here," he grunted and trod heavily down the wide stairs to the floor of the engine room. Razy had the panel off of one of the engine mountings and was staring into it with open perplexity. Bando stood next to him with his customary look of contempt. The remaining four were huddled together nearby.

"Here's the rescuers," announced McTorney as he approached the group. He turned and faced the Starmen. "Better return the weapons to their proper owners. Nobody'll need 'em on the rest o' this journey."

Showing no expression of any kind, Mark and Joe handed over the lasers. The four thugs took them with ill-concealed wariness.

McTorney nodded to his men in turn, introducing each to the Starmen. "Razy the pilot, Bando the communications technician. These four are assistants: Tony, Jude, Carley, and Doak." The Starmen acknowledged the men with brief nods.

Razy looked from Mark and Joe and back again. "I don't know what's wrong with it and I don't know what caused it. But we're stuck in a wormhole goin' nowhere at the speed of light."

"So I heard," said Mark as he leaned in to see the extent of the damage.

Chapter 12: The DNA Checks Out

THE AFTERNOON OF THE DAY following the raid by SE forces on the renegade base in old New York, Richard Starlight stood inside the former headquarters of the enemy base. He was surveying the communications equipment that the last captives had disrupted. Six Starlight electronics experts were scanning the records one by one. The supervisor was Melissa Hadley.

“Can you piece any of it together, Mrs. Hadley?” asked Richard.

The middle-aged woman turned toward Richard Starlight, her lips pursed together. “No sir. Every bit of information has been thoroughly scrambled. We’re checking their backup system and the records encoded in the mainframe, but frankly, getting anything out of this equipment is hopeless. Their disrupter was completely effective. We’ve also been checking the records aboard their ships and even their personal communicators, and we are getting a lot of useful information from those sources, but it’ll take a long time, sir. So far, nothing we’ve found has been urgent.”

“No mention of the Starmen, nothing about where they might have been taken, or why?”

“Nothing like that, sir.”

“Anything that might be construed as having been part of the planning of their capture, whether the Starmen were mentioned or not?”

“I have instructed all my staff to contact me immediately if any of them runs across anything that could be even remotely connected to the matter. So far, sir, no one has given me anything that might be a lead.”

“I see. Thank you, Mrs. Hadley.”

~

“This is Turp, Mr. Starlight,” said Gene Newman, presenting a bald man nearly seven feet tall and weighing over 280 pounds.

A sleeveless shirt revealed detailed tattoos all over both arms.

“You’re the owner of the *Brown Crab*?” asked Richard.

“I was, before your man stole it.” The big man was stirred by a sense of being treated unjustly.

“Who are you? What are you doing with this outfit? And what did you see last night?”

The man drew himself up a little taller and his chin jutted out slightly. “My name is Randall Turpin—‘Turp’ to my friends. I’m an entrepreneur. I been comin’ out here every coupla weeks with food, water, supplies, what have you. I drop off my goods and pick up my pay, and I go home with a list of what to bring out next trip.”

“What’s your connection with this crew?”

“Like I said—I brought out supplies.”

“You don’t know what they were doing, setting up a base in this graveyard?”

“It’s not my business to inquire into other people’s concerns. I brought ’em the stuff they asked for and scraped by okay, what with that and other deliveries I made to people who live far from population centers. ‘Made’, I said, since I don’t have a ship no more!”

“And what happened to your ship last night?”

“I just finished my delivery and was gettin’ ready to go home when this guy broke into my ship and started its engines. ‘Hey!’ I yelled and got aboard, even though he’d locked my own door against me. Before I’d even got a chance to say a word about it, he jumped me and pulled a weapon on me. Told me to get outta my own ship! My own ship!”

“What happened next?”

“I got out. He was obviously flaming crazy and he had a pistol pointed right between my eyes. Next thing I know the ship’s takin’ to the air and he’s bein’ chased by three of those ships over there.”

“Then what?”

“Then what? My ship didn’t last five minutes against those big gunners, whaddaya think? Now I’m stuck here and under

arrest, or whatever it is that your forces are doing with me. Space Command just tells me I have to wait until they figger out what to do with me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Turpin. I am sorry about your ship. Some arrangements will be made for you. You will not have to suffer any loss.”

“Hmmm, yeah, well, ...” his voice faded away into a mutter.

“Take me to the crash site, Mr. Newman.”

~

Five minutes later a three-passenger hovercraft settled down in a wide intersection. Gene Newman and Richard Starlight stepped out onto the cracked and weedy asphalt. The afternoon sun slanted obliquely down the avenues and sparkled yellow in the few shards that remained in several of the western-facing windows of the nearby hulks that had once been buildings.

For a moment, Richard swayed with a sudden hideous wave of emotion that nearly engulfed him. Of all humans living, fewer than a dozen knew that he was the grandson of the man who had created the spirit-shrieking ruin that was now old New York. More than a century had passed since the city had been thrice incinerated in the worst terrorist incident by far in the world’s history, but the power of death still held sway.

“Are you all right, sir?” Gene Newman’s considerate voice broke through Richard’s uninvited reverie. The red cloud that had obscured his vision cleared away. Starlight Enterprise’s chief executive saw the face of the man whom he had helped to rehabilitate, looking at him with earnest kindness, his hand tentatively reaching out for his shoulder.

“Yes, thank you, Gene. I’m all right now.” Quickly Richard turned away from the caring eyes and gave his attention to the pieces of heat-marred metal that lay at their feet.

A broad, cool shadow fell across the street that was the focus of their concern. About two dozen personnel were involved in a careful analysis of the wreckage that was strewn across the

avenue for at least a hundred yards. For five stories up, the sides of buildings on both sides of the street were heavily pocked with debris that had sprayed outward from the exploding ship as it fell. A crane had constructed a makeshift cage over the wreck site, and green laser light divided the street below into a grid, each section about a yard square.

“Luke!” called Gene Newman to a man in a radiation suit, bent down over debris near the center of the wreckage. “Luke!” The man stood up, turned, and began to step gingerly through the fragments of the *Brown Crab*. When he came near the two men, he took off his headgear and gloves.

“Hello, Gene,” he said.

“Lucas Daugherty, Richard Starlight,” said Gene. The two men shook hands.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Starlight,” said Luke. “I know who you are, o’ course.”

“What have you got?” asked Gene.

Luke was a brown-haired man in his mid-thirties with a friendly face; he looked as if he might have just stepped off of a farm.

“Not good,” he said. “We’ve done the DNA scan on all the pieces, and a general scan of the entire wreckage. Of course, we came up with many thousands of readings. Most of those are from the inhabitants of New York who walked across this street when it was still a city. They’re old and almost completely deteriorated, naturally, and we can filter out most of those—they’re hardly more than background. That still left DNA of several dozen people—most likely anybody who’d ever owned or even been inside the ship.” Luke spoke slowly and ran his hands through his hair. He looked at the ground as he talked.

“Yes?” prodded Richard.

“It’s an old ship—one of ours built prob’ly two dozen years ago or more. I can’t tell much about it yet from these pieces, but the equipment I do recognize comes from about the ’30s, I’d say. Lotta DNA in it.”

“Yes? Go on!” urged Richard impatiently.

“Well, we had samples of the Starman’s DNA, o’ course, and they definitely match up with one of the readings. He was on the ship, all right. No question about that.”

Richard looked away, sighting along the avenue into the distance. A funeral for Starman David Foster had already been planned for a few days later.

Chapter 13: “261 Is Missing”

“WHAT DID YOU DO to wreak this kind of damage?” Mark asked with exasperation. He threw both arms out, and then let them drop. He caught Joe’s eye and noted that Joe’s mouth turned up slightly in the faintest hint of a smile that quickly returned to a blank expression.

“I didn’t do *anything* out o’ the ordinary!” exclaimed Razzy. “I flew the ship from the Belt through hyperspace to get here and didn’t have no problems. This time I got the engines powered up as usual and threw in the hyperdrive, and then Bang! we’re stuck. And now look! The transfer circuits are melted like a grilled cheese sandwich. And for all I know, there’s worse damage in there too!”

“Well...” Mark shook his head, and then went over to the hyperdrive chamber he’d explored when he and Joe had first entered the ship. The others followed. McTorney kept a close watch on the Starman.

For the next half hour, Mark ran through the files in the hyperdrive system. He checked the settings and tested whether the controls were functioning. At the end, he nodded with satisfaction.

“All right,” he announced. “The hyperdrive itself seems to be working fine. It’s the fusion engines that sustained the damage. Let me examine the fusion reactor, and then we’ll know what our situation is.”

The big Starman led the group over to the massive block set off to one side in the engine room. He audited its gauges and

measured its reactions to various settings.

“It’s okay too,” he said. “The problem’s limited to the engines. You men,” he said, standing up and addressing the group, “get some tools and remove all the access panels on all the engines.”

The thugs looked at McTorney. “Do it!” the burly man said. As the others went to work, McTorney leaned into Mark with his arrogant visage pushed close to the Starman’s face. He had to look up about six inches but didn’t seem to be daunted in the slightest.

“You try any tricks,” he said in a guttural whisper, “and you’ll be on the other side of the airlock faster’n you can—”

Mark laid his right hand gently but very firmly on McTorney’s chest. “Mr. McTorney,” he said evenly. “I can fix this ship with or without your help. You may be working for Xenobots, but I’ll wager that I know more about them than you do—and right now, you’re alone in hyperspace. Keep an eye on me all you want but don’t threaten me. I assure you that you don’t have the capability of carrying out any threat you may make. Don’t underestimate a Starman. Watch me work, and we’ll all get back to our home Solar System.” The Starman turned and went to supervise the labor the others were doing.

~

That night over dinner, Mark explained the situation.

“It’s like this. Hyperdrive is not really a propulsive system, like the fusion engines. The hyperdrive creates and opens wormholes so the ship can pass through them. This is why the fusion engines must be powered up before the hyperdrive can be engaged.

“Think of it this way: say you’re walking from the top of a mountain down to a village at the bottom. It’s a ten-mile hike and the path has a lot of switchbacks. The village itself may be only a couple of miles from the top but the slope is too steep for you to go straight down. But if you can find a shortcut, you can

make the trek quickly and safely.

“Now your method of propulsion is your own two feet. Hyperdrive is like finding that shortcut. You can cut your hiking time and distance down considerably. What’s happened to us is like getting a start on that shortcut and then spraining your ankle. The shortcut is still there, but you’re stuck in it and unable to move.”

“So what’s the plan?” asked McTorney.

“When Razyzy engaged the hyperdrive, the transfer circuits overloaded and the heat melted them. The fusion reactor engaged its own safety mechanism and shut down in mid-thrust. That caused most of the ship’s power to disengage—standard emergency procedure, as I’m sure Razyzy knows. After a quick, automatic safety check, the backup system restored all systems needed to sustain life—light, heat, air circulation, and so forth—but it doesn’t start the engines up again. That’s left for diagnosis and repair.

“What we have to do, then, is get one or two of the engines working. When we do that, we’ll be able to drop out of hyperspace. Joe, then, will have to calculate just where we are relative to our own Solar System. Meanwhile, we’ll repair the other four engines. When all six are functional again, then Joe can set the coordinates for home and re-engage the hyperdrive.”

“What caused the problem in the first place?” asked Razyzy.

Mark pursed his lips. “That I can’t tell you exactly,” he said. “But I have an idea. There are more than 940 connectors between the master panel on the control deck and the fusion reactor and the six engines. Number 261 is missing. We’ll have to recreate that connection, besides making new transfer circuits by hand. One of my duties is to trace the connectors with the ignition system to make sure that it won’t happen again.”

“How long will it take to do all this?” asked Bando.

“If nobody makes any mistakes, we can drop out of hyperspace the day after tomorrow. About four or five days after that we’ll be ready to try to get home again.”

~

For the next two days, Mark worked closely with Razy and showed him how to create new circuits made by hand to replace those that had been melted by Joe's sabotage. Mark wired a portion of the new board while Razy watched, and then Razy duplicated Mark's work on another board while Mark checked him.

"Back home, these things can be punched out by the tens of thousands in almost no time," said Razy at the end of the first full day. "Here it's painstaking work. Doing it by hand is mighty laborious."

"Right." agreed Mark, "but it can cost you your life if you don't know how to do it!"

Razy was learning, and was gradually giving the Starman grudging respect.

~

Late in the day following, two engines were ready to be put back into service. All that remained was for Mark to trace the ignition connectors. This took very little time since Mark knew precisely what Joe had done to cause the initial overload; he simply scanned the controls and reversed what Joe had done. Then Mark made a pretense of testing settings, backup systems, emergency procedures, and transfer circuitry.

"We're ready," announced the big Starman. "With your permission, Mr. McTorney, we'll power up the two engines we've repaired, then drop us out of hyperspace."

Paul McTorney nodded. The scowl on his face had become habitual during the previous two days. He didn't like to be dependent on anyone else, or having to trust someone, and he wasn't sure whether Mark's deference to him was a sly mockery. As Mark signaled to Joe to ignite the two engines, the leader of the renegades was wary of some trickery on the part of the Starman. He laid his hand on the butt of his pistol.

Joe brought power to the engines gradually, while Razy

watched over his shoulder.

“No problems yet,” said the lanky Starman. “You two did a good job. Full power now. Okay, Mark. Disengage the hyperdrive.”

Mark, seated in the navigator’s pod, reached out for the controls. Almost at once the floor lurched, and the men felt as if they had been on a descending elevator that had suddenly come to a stop. Out of the immense front windshield, stars suddenly appeared.

“Whew!” breathed Mark, and everyone visibly relaxed.

“Back to normal space!” blurted Carley, the man who had led the Starmen to the magnetic cell. “Where are we?”

“Haven’t any idea,” said Joe. “Nothing looks familiar.”

McTorney glared with open animosity.

“Seaton—get into the star charts and find our location!”

Mark quickly tapped into the navigation system but the screen in his pod remained dark. He grimaced, then tried a second time, and then a third.

“Screen’s staying dark, Mr. McTorney. Something must have burned out.”

The leader of the renegades scowled. “Razzy!” he ordered. “Make sure this redsuit isn’t lying.”

“No reason to lie to you, Mr. McTorney. I want to get home as much as you do—probably more.”

McTorney gestured to Razzy, who took over the seat in the navigator’s pod. After a few moments he looked up with a serious expression.

“Nothing doing, McTorney. The signal’s not getting into the central data file for some reason.”

The stocky man cursed. “Then you’ve got to find our location by hand! Get to it!”

“This is something that Joe can do as well as I, Mr. McTorney,” explained Mark. “I’d be more useful putting the engines back together.”

McTorney looked doubtful and tried not to show it. In the pause, Carley spoke up.

“Can you find out where we are, Mr. Taylor? We could be anywhere!”

Joe sniffed and rubbed one hand across his mouth. “My job in the next few days will be to answer that question while the rest of you repair the other four engines.”

Paul McTorney looked decidedly unconvinced but chose to say nothing.

~

The Starmen were never allowed to be together unguarded. They were forced to sleep in separate rooms, each in the company of three or four of the others. They did not even have any time alone, but were watched continuously by at least one of the thugs. Each of the Starmen had devised his own strategy for frustrating the plans of the renegades and bringing them into custody, but neither was able to share his thoughts with the other.

Joe spent his time consulting star charts and measuring the intensity of the stars that were visible from the Xenobot ship. He reported that it would take him several hours to determine their location in the galaxy. His next task was to learn to calibrate the hyperdrive controls so that he could set the parameters that would enable them to travel through hyperspace from where they were to the precise coordinates where he wanted the ship to emerge. He needed Mark’s knowledge about the hyperdrive, and had to ask the questions that would not only show him how to program the next passage through hyperspace, but also to set the coordinates that would bring them to the proximity of Mars. He had to do this while their captors believed that they were actually going to emerge close to their base in the Asteroid Belt.

Mark, irritated and frustrated by the scrutiny under which he was laboring, created minor diversions that caused one or more of their captors to leave him alone. Under the pretense of tracing the connectors between the control deck and the engine room, Mark caused short circuits and other failures in the standard operating systems of the spacecraft. Two or three times a day, a bank of lights failed, the atmosphere system shut down, or a

stasis chamber in the galley fizzled.

With every failure, Mark fumed at the renegades. "I can't tell whether you men are foolish or courageous, to take a ship in this state of disrepair through hyperspace! No wonder we almost got lost in a wormhole! I wouldn't trust this spacecraft to travel between the Moon and the Earth! The hyperdrive is about the only mechanism on this tug that's working right and that's obviously the only system you haven't messed with!"

The tension in the ship gradually increased, and much of the time Mark had two or three of the Starmen's captors checking wiring systems and making minor repairs while he and Razyzy worked on the engines. In spite of the diversions, however, Mark was never able to work unattended or find a time to communicate with Joe without being overheard.

~

A deep, moaning sound came up the stairway into the galley. Joe, who was making dinner that evening, stopped chopping carrots for the stew and asked, "Which of you men smuggled a cow aboard this ship?"

Razyzy said, "That's not a cow, Joe, that's Tony's didgeridoo."

Joe turned and looked at Razyzy quizzically. "Digital what?"

"Not 'digital'; didgeridoo. It's an Australian musical instrument. Tony doesn't go anywhere without it."

"Musical instrument, eh?" Joe shrugged. "Sounds almost as euphonious as bagpipes. I would never have guessed that Tony had such dulcet taste. I'm impressed!"

"What?" queried Razyzy, his brow wrinkled with puzzlement.

"Never mind Joe," said Mark. "You have to get used to him."

"I'll have to tell Tony that I'd rather he played a didgeridon't," said Joe, back to slicing carrots.

When they all sat down for the stew and biscuits that Joe had prepared, Mark announced that the repairs would be completed the next day.

"We'll be ready to make the jump in the early afternoon, Mr.

McTorney. Joe will need the coordinates for the destination you have in mind and we'll make the attempt."

"Joe's not getting the coordinates," asserted the leader. "I'm taking no chances that we'll end up somewhere I don't want to go. You show me how to enter the coordinates into the hyperdrive system, and I'll enter them personally!"

Joe tried not to show the frustration that he felt. "Sure," he said. He didn't even look in Mark's direction. He'd have to recalculate in his head. It was risky, very risky. His plan had been to alter their destination so that they'd come out near Mars. Now if McTorney were determined to enter the coordinates of the terminus, then he, Joe, would have to alter the coordinates of the origin to achieve the same end. He had three numbers of at least ten digits to recalculate in his head overnight and then memorize. His heart was beating fast. He reached out for his tea and tried not to let the others know that his hand was shaking.

~

The middle of the following morning, Mark and Razy were in the engine room, replacing the access plates on the last two engines. Three others were checking the connections from the fusion reactor.

"We're about ready for the last check," Mark said to Razy, straightening up and wiping his brow. The Starman turned to McTorney, who was standing nearby with his arms crossed.

"We're finished," Mark announced. "The engines are repaired. We just need to secure the last access plates on these two engines, run a final confirmation of the transfer circuits, and we'll be ready to engage the hyperdrive."

Paul McTorney grunted. "Get on it!"

Just then an alarm began to sound throughout the ship. The wailing siren caused every heart to leap. Joe's voice came through the shipwide communicator.

"Xenobot ships have materialized in nearby space! They're moving into a battle formation!"

Seconds later the ship rocked, causing men to totter where they stood.

“They’re firing on us! What’s going on, McTorney? These are your ‘friends’! I’m taking evasive maneuvers immediately!” Sudden acceleration threw the men in the engine room to the deck.

~

A silent, sullen figure skulked through a backwalk in Aquapolis. He carried a secret of inestimable importance and had to get it to his superiors as quickly as possible. From near Peekskill in New York he had purchased a ticket on the undersea monorail whose terminus was the vast domed city on the seabed south of the Florida peninsula.

Clad mostly in black, he had spoken to no one unless out of necessity. For hours he had traveled on the monorail as it made stops at three teardrop cities suspended in the waters off the Atlantic seaboard. The dark figure was a subject of mild curiosity, especially at Bishop City, the easternmost point of the journey, just five miles northwest of Bermuda. Many passengers made the transfer at this popular port, but the silent figure did not even take advantage of the layover to stretch his legs.

Immediately upon arrival at Aquapolis, the solitary individual pushed through the crowd and chose the least traveled path. In moments he was strolling through a water park, illuminated only by lines of tiny lights laced through trees and along flower beds. A well-manicured pathway meandered through plots of colorful blooms, though they were hard to see in the dark. It was night in Aquapolis.

The clear wall that separated the city from the sea formed the far boundary of the water park. Lights artfully placed outside in the deep brought out the violets and deep blues of the seabed. Those farthest away gleamed like stars.

I should sleep, thought the fugitive, but I can't afford to take the time. Got to get to Flamingo City where I can buy a spacecraft with the fifty million solars. When I get back to home

base, things will have to start popping!

Chapter 14: The Gathering of the Starmen

THE CROWDS had begun entering Armstrong Forest hours before the funeral was scheduled to begin. For three days, preparations had been under way in Five Acre Meadow where Starman David Foster's funeral was to take place. The meadow was the largest open space within close proximity to the main entrance of the Forest. The field was level and crossed by numerous pathways. Children often came there to fly kites or operate model spacecraft. Families came every day for picnics. On one side the meadow was bordered by Logan Creek, a gentle waterway where David had often spent leisurely hours with his family.

Now Five Acre Meadow had been transformed in preparation for one of the most significant events in the history of Amundsen City. A Starman's funeral was to take place at noon. Seats for more than five thousand people had been set up, and a dais had been erected on one side, with a pavilion over it. Media stations with news cameras had been placed under canopies where they could obtain a good view without obscuring the vision of anyone in the audience or obtruding into the events that were soon to take place. An orchestra was situated in front of the dais.

Dignitaries who had been invited by Richard Starlight had reserved seating, but well over four thousand seats were made available on a first-come, first-served basis. Central to the occasion was to be the solemn entrance of 150 Starmen—all of them in civilization except for six. Three were on missions in deep space, but their participation would take place via realtime transmission. Kathryn Mullaney would appear from her station on Nyx. Eleanor Decker would appear from her spacecraft in transit from Triton, a moon of Neptune. Neal Dyar would transmit from his station on Mercury.

Three were unaccounted for: Mark Seaton and Joe Taylor

who had been taken captive, and the long-missing Starman Larry Pajkowski, whose disappearance eleven years earlier was still a wound in the ranks of the Starmen. He had vanished on a short voyage from the Moon to Venus, and no evidence of his fate had ever turned up. These three Starmen would be represented by still photographs that would place them among the assembly.

Precisely at noon, the orchestra began to play a hymn. Five thousand voices joined in as the procession began. Dignitaries led the way, walking solemnly down the central aisle that had been left open when the seats had been put in place. Toward the end of the first procession walked Robert Nolan, John Rwakatare, Steve Cliff, Oritz Konig, Jesus Madera-Cruz, and others of the Starmen's acquaintance.

Following the first group, the families of the three Starmen walked together. Keith and Barbara Seaton and Charlie and Laura Taylor led the way, followed by Allen and Elizabeth Foster with thirteen-year-old Kathy between and slightly ahead of her parents. Kathy wore a green dress, and a green ribbon set off her maroon hair beautifully. She carried a bouquet of white roses. She held her head high as she walked at a stately pace. Behind the families, Richard and Jan Starlight, accompanied by their four children, brought up the rear.

As the hymn came to an end and the dignitaries had taken their places in the front, the music changed. As the orchestra played "Dawn of a New Century" by Lovland, the solemn procession of the Starmen began. Entering two by two, the Starmen came through the meadow, each red suit meticulously clean and bright. When the front of the procession came to the empty place before the orchestra, the lines broke to right and left and the Starmen took their places on both sides of the dais. When all were in place, the field of red suits flanking the center area was breathtaking.

The music came to a conclusion, and there was silence.

Richard Starlight ascended to the podium and asked the people to be seated. He welcomed the people, and spoke briefly of the work of a Starman. Then he recounted the remarkable

successes that David Foster had accomplished during his brief time as a Starman. He concluded with a moving account of David's courageous actions in old New York, and vowed that those who were responsible for his death would be tried according to the law. His last words were addressed to the families of the three Starmen, assuring the Seatons and Taylors that every effort was being made to locate their sons, and condoling with the Fosters over their terrible loss.

Kathy Foster ascended the dais after Richard had sat down, and took her place at the podium. She had been asked to read a lesson from the Bible for her brother's funeral.

"A lesson from the Book of Psalms," she began. Her voice was firm and confident. "O Lord our Governor, how exalted is your Name in all the world! Out of the mouths of infants and children your majesty is praised above the heavens. You have set up a stronghold against your adversaries, to quell the enemy and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, what is man that you should be mindful of him, the son of man that you should seek him out? You have made him but little lower than the angels; you adorn him with glory and honor. You give him mastery over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet."

When she was finished, she took her place between her parents and began to cry. She suddenly appeared small and vulnerable. The little girl leaned against her mother, who put her arm around her daughter's shoulders and kissed the top of her head. The cameras broadcast the scene throughout civilization.

In Starlight Seneca, Gene Newman felt his own eyes become moist. In West Virginia, Zip's Uncle Francis and Aunt Clare had the same thought. *What a wonderful young lady. Zip would be proud.* In Yellow City on Ceres, Sim Sala Bim thought to himself, *We have suffered a great loss with the death of Zip Foster, but there is another Foster who will come along soon and achieve greatness.*

In Eagle City, the streets were nearly empty as more than

ninety per cent of the population watched the funeral on their videoscreens. Donal and Doris McTaggart, Stavri Thalassa, and Uneven Stephen sat in the McTaggarts' lodgings above *The Lizard's Watering Hole*. Far out in the wild lands of Mars, many of the Wind People had hurriedly assembled antique videoscreens to catch the event. Unsuspected by nearly every member of civilization, in a site five miles underground some of David Foster's closest friends had brought the signal into their assembly room. Though most viewers could not understand the words, they watched with rapt attention.

Far out in space, on a supercold moon of Saturn, one sat grieving more than anyone else in all civilization, except perhaps David's own family. Kristina Bethany remembered with poignant longing the warm and innocent kisses David had lavished on her in their few times of meeting. Her anguish was particularly acute, for she was alone in her personal quarters and had no one with whom she could share her grief.

A sermon followed Kathy's reading of the lesson from the Book of Psalms, and then selected individuals spoke movingly of their acquaintance with the fallen Starman. Those who spoke were widely known to the people. Starman Yancy Dufaure recounted eloquently the courage of David Foster's leadership on the mission to Europa. George St. George praised David's humility and willingness to spend all in service to others. Steve Cliff made people laugh with his stories of David's foibles and trying to keep his partners, Mark and Joe, in line.

None but a few, however, knew the last speaker. A tall, slender, noble man with white hair crossed over to the podium. When he began to speak, he held the listeners spellbound.

"My name is Richard Prester," he began. "My wife Marjie and I live in the tunnels under Eagle City. Not many know me, and most of those who once did have probably forgotten me. My wife and I and our friends in Eagle City first met Starman Foster five years ago when he and his colleagues helped us repulse the pirates who had taken over civilization on Mars. We've been friends ever since; that makes it possible for me to speak now of

a side of David Foster that perhaps few have seen and yet will be no surprise to any who knew him.

“We have already heard of the courage of this fallen Starman and his willingness to serve others. In only a few years he achieved more for a greater number of people than nearly anyone in history. He was famous across civilization before he was twenty years old.

“Others more qualified to tell you than I have told you that David Leland Foster was one of the few people to hold the records of closest approach to the sun and farthest journey from it. He was the second to discover intelligent, non-human life in our Solar System—Rebecca Jewell under David’s own father’s command being the first. Rebecca is here today for this sad and glorious occasion.

“There is no need to remind everyone that David was instrumental in preserving Mars from two major threats, and Earth itself from certain catastrophe just a few years ago. My point is that these achievements for which we rightly honor a remarkable young man were not foremost to David Foster himself. He was at his best in his private moments, out of the public eye. For that very reason, few have seen them—yet for me they show the depth of who David Foster truly was. Though he loved the adventure that was part and parcel of the life of a Starman, and could no more forsake his duty than sing ‘Happy Birthday’...” There was a ripple of laughter through the crowd, since David’s inability to hold a tune was notorious. Richard Prester then continued.

“David was most at home with people that nearly anyone else would overlook. He had deep respect for a certain reclusive asteroid dweller whom everyone else considered odd and of little account. He knew by name most of the regular customers of our little café on the bad side of Eagle City—and I’m here to tell you that there’s not much that can give more dignity to a plain and maybe poorly-educated person than to be known and respected by one of the most famous of the Starmen. David Foster was tough, mighty tough, with his adversaries when he had to be, but

he treated even them fairly and never with vindictiveness.

“Well, there’s no need for me to rattle on, but I can give you a lot more instances than these few. I guess I can sum it up by saying that the David Foster I knew was one of the most humble and honorable men I’ve ever known, and I’m willing to come out of my little hidey-hole and tell the universe. Thank you for listening to me.”

The entire crowd came to its feet and erupted into applause. Richard Prester turned and bowed to Richard Starlight, who walked over to the old man and embraced him.

Far out in the Belt, in a banana-shaped asteroid called Montezuma’s Castle, a reclusive, dignified individual pressed his lips together and nodded. In an apartment in Flamingo City, Florida, a young waitress named Heather turned to her friends and said, “That’s right! I’m glad somebody said that! That’s just what he was like!”

~

As Richard Prester was delivering his remarks, a two-seater gray spacecraft came within the warning zone around the asteroid secretly known as Tharsos. The asteroid that had once been dominated by Lurton Zimbardo was now in orbit around the Earth. It was under the control of Space Command, but about two-thirds of the personnel aboard were associated with Starlight Enterprise.

Tharsos, usually guarded very well, was now protected only by a light security crew due to the focus on David Foster’s funeral. All the key individuals stationed on Tharsos were in Amundsen City, and most of those who remained on the asteroid were intent upon the telecast.

Suddenly an alarm siren sounded and aroused a hasty response.

“What is it?” cried Tanya Muallem, officer-in-charge of Tharsos, leaping to her feet. A radar technician immediately reported.

“Unidentified spacecraft approaching the asteroid, ma’am! It

is ignoring the warnings to keep away!”

“Give me the communicator!” The woman took the communicator and ordered the spacecraft to leave the asteroid’s airspace immediately or face defensive fire. There was no response.

“Scramble four firewasps and prepare the defense lasers for immediate use!”

“Yes ma’am,” replied the communications technician. A moment later he turned to her with his face white. “The unknown ship is familiar with our security codes, ma’am! It has countered the launch sequence and cancelled the orders to prepare the lasers! It’s approaching the asteroid!”

“What?” exclaimed Muallem. Her face drawn with concern, she leaned over the screen and saw the blip that marked the spacecraft’s position drawing near to the asteroid. She changed the setting on the communicator and spoke into it again. Her voice rang throughout all the inhabited areas of the asteroid.

“Attention! This is Tanya Muallem. Unknown spacecraft is approaching the asteroid! Firewasps one through four take off immediately and intercept. Shoot to destroy!”

A flurry of activity in the immense hangar at the south end of the asteroid showed that the crews of four spacecraft were dashing to their ships.

“Open the airlock, immediately!” commanded the officer-in-charge as soon as she saw that the crews had boarded their ships.

“Yes ma’am!” A few seconds later the operator turned to Tanya Muallem again. “The airlock won’t open! The invader has countered that order!”

With a stunned expression, Muallem watched the blip merge with the asteroid and then disappear.

“It’s landed on the surface,” she whispered.

“The airlock’s opening, Officer Muallem!” cried the operator. Seconds later they watched the four firewasps blast through the cavernous throat that joined the hangar with outer space. The operator provided the coordinates that indicated where the invading ship had landed.

In less than a minute, the first of the four ships reported back.

“There is no spacecraft on the surface, operator. Repeat: there is nothing out of the ordinary on the surface of the asteroid.”

“Keep searching!” ordered the officer-in-charge. “Something landed on the surface of the asteroid!”

The four firewasps scoured the entire surface of Tharsos, but found no sign whatever of the mystery ship.

Chapter 15: A Good Kidnapping

IT WAS ONLY TWO HOURS after David Foster’s funeral had concluded, but Richard Starlight had called an emergency meeting of several of his top advisors and Commander Shaw of Space Command. A half dozen people sat around the conference table in Richard’s office. The great globes of Earth, the Moon, and Mars were close by, those of Mercury and Venus were in the nearest corner.

Ceinwen Gruffydd, manager of Starlight’s operations aboard Tharsos, wrinkled her broad brow and looked down with red-rimmed eyes at the polished tabletop. “There is perplexity, it is,” she said. When she was distressed, she spoke English using the Welsh idiom with which she had grown up. “It cannot be any lapse in Officer Muallem’s guard. She is capable, her. Followed all the prescribed procedures, she did. I will examine further when I return to the asteroid, but no doubt there can be that vigilance was unbroken.”

Richard sighed. He had been holding his head in his hands, but now he looked up. His eyes were dark and the skin under them was slack. The head of Starlight Enterprise had not slept much for three days—perhaps only an hour or two at most, snatched from a restlessness and mental anguish that were unwilling to grant any respite from the intensity of his suffering.

“I do not blame Tanya, Ceinwen. I am sure that you are correct. I have examined the records myself and it is evident that the invader, whoever he was and wherever he has gone,

manipulated all the electronics in the security system on the asteroid. It is unheard of. It is impossible—yet, there it is. Someone not only knows our access codes but how to override them.”

Ceinwen looked back to Richard with gratitude and sympathy in her eyes.

“I have asked you here to see if anyone has any thoughts, any insights, into the disastrous occurrences of recent days,” said Richard. “We have suffered one blow after another. Three Starmen abducted. One of them killed and two still missing with not the slightest indication of where they may have been taken, or why. A base of renegades operating in old New York, and its leader vanished without a trace. And now a successful incursion made upon the asteroid and no sign whatever of who entered our space, or why, or where he is now.”

The discussion lasted only a few minutes. No one had anything more than mere speculation to offer. There was simply no hard data to work from.

“All we can do, Richard,” concluded John Rwakatare, “is tighten our security and maintain our watchfulness. Meanwhile, the questioning of the prisoners from old New York is going on and a thorough search is being made of the facilities on the asteroid.”

“And the sifting of the debris of the *Brown Crab* is continuing,” added Oritz Konig. “We are also trying to track down the movements of Gyrddson.”

Richard threw up his hands. “I know you’re all doing your best. We just don’t have enough data. We’re at a loss here. It’s not a position I’m used to.” He made an attempt at a wry smile. “Let’s all go home.”

~

Richard eased his vehicle into its customary place in the parking area for the residences in his district. He was dead tired and looked forward to a long rest. Tonight he thought he could fall asleep without any effort at all. His body was surrendering to

the strain that was ripping him apart, but the major demands on his time had eased. The funeral was over and others were carrying on the urgent investigations. They were all highly capable people, and he would not be needed personally for some time. Maybe he and Jan could take a week off, visit that small village in Peru that had attracted them ever since they'd heard about it.

He walked out of the parking area and began to amble along the path that led to his home. The trees were heavy with summer foliage and the shadows beneath the spreading branches were deep. Richard was numb inside with the shock of grief for the death of his young Starman, but he could hear the evening breeze rustle through the leaves. The timeless sound inspired a sudden heartfelt longing for the days of his youth.

Curious, he thought. *There's someone there.* He could see a dark figure coming toward him on the path from the direction of his house, backlit by the illumination at the entrance. *That's not Caedmon. Who could it be?* He didn't feel dread—only curiosity. Now that he saw the silhouette, he realized that it hadn't been there a moment before. The view along the path had been clear. *He must have been hiding behind one of the trees*, he thought. A slight prickle of caution rose up inside him.

Ten feet away, the figure stopped and raised a hand. The man was dressed in black and the shadow of a large branch concealed his face.

"Richard," he said, "please come with me." The man stepped forward again. The mottled light under the trees fell on his face. It was David Foster!

Richard felt the ground roll under his feet and the familiar surroundings wavered and disappeared. He lifted both arms up in a warding off gesture. He felt dizzy and a little nauseous. He closed his eyes and stumbled. A firm hand took hold of his and kept him from falling. Through his closed eyelids there was light.

Richard opened his eyes and blinked. Before him stood Starman David Foster, smiling.

“At last I have reached you!” said David. “I have been traveling for days without respite.”

“What...?” began Richard, and then he began to choke with emotion.

“Sit down, here,” said David gently, and guided Richard to a chair. Other hands helped him. Richard looked around and saw that several Ahmanyans were with him. He was in a magnificent chamber about forty feet on a side. Tall, thin windows with small, beveled panes of glass admitted abundant light, and the roof arched up in flutes and columns into panels separated decoratively by ridges. Nearby was a gleaming apparatus of metal and crystal, with disks, tubing, and slowly rotating cylinders.

“You’re safe, Richard,” said David. “You’re on Tharsos, in the section that is sealed off from human entry. You were brought here by wormhole transfer. This is a workstation in the city of Olovanda.”

Richard still could not speak. He was overwhelmed.

Zip explained further. “In the past three years, the Ahmanyans here in Olovanda have learned how to use the personal wormhole transporter that Saadervo discovered in Domoli. Tonight they used it to send me after you and bring you back here. You must still be a little shaken by the transfer you just experienced. It’s a bit disconcerting the first time! It disoriented me the first time they used me as a test subject, and I knew it was coming!”

Richard blinked and then smiled weakly.

“*Pennaio mellifla, Sotik, banna*,”³ said Zip. One of the Ahmanyans quickly brought Richard a cup containing a warm drink.

“It’s like a cider,” explained the Starman. “Made from the juice of some of the Ahmanyman fruit that grows here. Refreshing and strengthening.” He nodded, encouraging Richard to take a sip.

³ Bring some hot cider, Sotik, please.

Richard nodded his thanks to the Ahmanyans and drank deeply.

“Zip,” he said after he put the cup aside, “we had your funeral today.”

“I know,” said the Starman. “I am so sorry to have put you through it, to have put everyone through it. I took advantage of the distraction it caused to land on Tharsos and enter Olovanda through one of the camouflaged portals. I used the access codes that the Ahmanyans gave me to override our own security systems and gain direct access to Olovanda. I have information so sensitive and of such importance that it could only be delivered in person. The survival of the Ahmanyans and all of civilization is at stake, and time is of utmost importance!” The Starman swayed a little on his feet and passed a hand over his face. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I haven’t slept for so long, and I’ve eaten poorly, and I’m not feeling well. I’ve got a fever, and the strain is about breaking me.” An Ahmanyman quickly brought a chair for Zip and he collapsed into it.

“Richard!” Zip exclaimed, sitting up straight with the fire of anxiety in his eyes. “The Xenobots have learned that Mars is Ahmanyana! They can attack at any time, attack both Ahmanyana and Earth!”

Richard sat up straight with shock written all over his face. “David! How do you know? You’ve known this for days and had to tell me in person? Why not send me the message in encrypted format?”

A look of abject fear crossed the Starman’s face for an instant. “Richard,” he whispered, leaning forward intently. “There is a Xenobot in your office. Nothing you say or do or hear, nothing that takes place in your office, is safe! Our enemies can penetrate our sanctums, no matter how well we protect them!”

“How is this possible?” Richard could do barely more than mouth the words.

Zip sat back. “Wormhole transfer, the same way you were brought here,” he said, indicating the room with a sweep of his

arm. "The enemy has the same capability. The Ahmanyans have told me that the Xenobots have established a sizable base in the Asteroid Belt and have set up a personal wormhole transporter of their own."

A look of panic crossed Richard's features.

"There's hope, though, Richard," said Zip in almost a normal tone of voice. "There is a defense against it. Olovanda is now shielded against wormhole incursion, and within a matter of days, key human sites will be too, including all Starlight facilities."

"But how did you learn that there is a Xenobot in my office?"

The Starman told him what had happened to the three Starmen from the time of their camping trip in Montana to the conversation he had overheard in the Eckman Warehouse several days earlier.

"Then Mark and Joe are captives, but still alive?" asked Richard.

"They were alive at the time I heard the conversation in the warehouse. How long ago was that?" Zip calculated for a moment. "A whole week ago." He shook his head. "More than that I don't know."

"But how did you survive? All the evidence, all the eyewitness accounts, all the investigation indicated that you were aboard the shuttle when it was shot down!"

David smiled with chagrin. "I had every intention of making my escape in the *Brown Crab*, but I was slowed down by someone who tried to stop me. When I got back in the pilot's seat, I saw a crowd running toward me across the concrete and heard the order for three fighters to give chase, I knew that escape by that ship was hopeless. I caused a bright light to flare up and blind the people running toward me, jumped off the ship and ran for cover under its shadow. I headed for the closest bunker where there were electronics in use to mask my own electronics, and flew the *Crab* by compad. I did have some experience with that technique, you know."

Richard chuckled. “On Mars, when you flew the *Star Ranger* away from the Banjoman.”

“Yes. Fortunately the *Brown Crab* was one of our old ships with a simple control system. It wasn’t difficult to take command of it with a Starman’s compad, but it was much more difficult to fly by remote control this time since I didn’t have a helmet. I had to fly the ship through the screen on my compad. And then in the confusion after the ship was shot down, I went to the ground level of the renegades’ headquarters to commandeer a small rover I’d seen there before. That level had always been a hive of activity before and I couldn’t get close, but I figured that in the commotion of the moment I could get away this time.

“But just as I was ready to hop in, the vehicle’s owner appeared, apparently with the same plan. We, uh, had a difference of opinion over which of us would take possession of the rover, and I won. I also took his cloak. Then I drove north until I got to Peekskill, took fifty megasolars from my account, and headed for the closest port. It took a few days before I could catch a seatrain for Aquapolis and then a shuttle to Flamingo City. That trip took a couple more days. I knew I could buy a small spacecraft there with no questions asked. I reached Tharsos earlier today.”

The Starman slumped and his eyes closed. “I’m so sorry, Richard. Things are critical, unbelievably critical, but I couldn’t think of any better way to handle it. I was the only one who knew about the imminent threat of the Xenobots and about the spy in your office. I *had* to survive, and I had to get to you in person. There was just no other way.”

Richard leaned forward and laid a hand on Zip’s shoulder.

Almost mumbling, Zip continued. “But there is a plan, Richard, a terribly risky plan. I’ve worked something out with the Ahmanyans—at least the beginning of something. We want to tell you about it. I’ll...” The Starman fell asleep in his chair.

Chapter 16: Evasive Maneuvers Twice

MANY LIGHT YEARS AWAY, Starman Joe Taylor clamped his lips together tightly in absolute determination. He gave full attention to the controls of the Xenobot ship.

“Every man for himself!” he shouted into the shipwide communication system. “Brace yourselves!”

Jude and Carley had been checking the connections in the main control panel against various functions in the engine room. As Joe plunged the spacecraft suddenly downward and then whipped it into a spiral, the two men floated off the deck and then flew swiftly into the right bulkhead. Their eyes opened wide and they wailed in fright.

“Sorry!” cried Joe without looking over his shoulder. He was intent upon the controls that guided the large ship through space. He caused the spacecraft to spin along its long axis, even as it raced forward in a serpentine trajectory. The two renegades were held in place by centrifugal force, gasping for breath and moaning whenever they got enough air inside them to make noise.

On the engine deck, as the Starman pilot began his maneuvers McTorney and his thugs were swept off their feet, and then slid along the smooth deck to one side of the chamber. A chorus of protest rose from the men.

Mark had wrapped his legs around the closest stanchion the instant he felt the deck drop from under him. Lying horizontally, the big Starman managed to grasp several of the tools before they rolled out of reach. As the ship went into its gyrations, he clutched them to his chest and held them fast. The access panels swung wildly on the tethers that connected them to the engines.

“Mark!” shouted Joe into the shipwide communicator. “I need you to fire back at the attackers! In a few seconds, I’ll hold the ship on a straight course! Be ready to run for the laser pod and get charged!”

Mark, still holding fast with his legs to the stanchion, raised himself to his hands and knees and waited for the ship to settle

its course.

“Razzy!” he yelled. “When the ship straightens out, I’ll toss these tools to you! You run to where I am now and put the access panels back on! Then we can get into hyperspace! The rest of you just stay put and hang on!”

The spinning ship suddenly leveled out and held steady.

“Now!” shouted Mark at the top of his lungs. He tossed a handful of tools in Razzy’s direction and then sped toward the laser pod at the back wall of the engine chamber. Just as both men reached their goal, the ship shuddered under a laser blast. Their teeth rattled. Joe launched into an evasive pattern again.

Razzy wrapped one leg around the stanchion and braced himself with the other. He reached out to the closest engine and, stretching his arms out, began to seal the opening with the proper panel.

Mark ensconced himself into a laser pod and strapped himself in. Just as he began to charge up the laser cannon, another figure leaped into the pod next to him and began to secure himself into a second seat. It was Paul McTorney.

“McTorney,” began Mark as he brought the laser into operational status. “Why in the world are your friends shooting at us?”

The heavily built man pursed his lips for a moment. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow.

“I don’t know!” yelled the man. “But here they come!”

The detectors in the laser pod pointed up six enemy ships in battle formation about a quarter of a million miles away and trying to close the distance. As Joe swung the ship around, the Xenobots’ laser blasts went wild, but the two men in the pod couldn’t get a lock on any of their pursuers, either.

“Joe!” said Mark through the communicator. “We’re in the laser pod and charged up. Level off on my count so we can draw a bead on the Xenobots. After we fire, I’ll give you the signal and you can start the twisting again.”

“Ready, Mark!” came the answer.

“McTorney, you take one of the ships on the right, and I’ll take

one on the left. On the count of three—one, two, three!”

Joe suddenly leveled the ship out. The two men instantly took aim, locked onto their pursuers, and fired.

“Go, Joe!” cried Mark. Their ship swung upward, driving the two men hard into their seats, but not before their instruments indicated that both laser blasts had struck their targets. They couldn’t tell whether they had done any substantial damage.

“One panel down solid, Starman!” hollered Razzy. At a lull in the evasive maneuvers, he quickly slid over to the second engine and fit its access panel over the opening. There was no stanchion where he could secure himself, so he used his legs to wedge himself into the narrow space between two engines. As Joe caused the ship to change direction again, Razzy leaned over and began to seal the panel.

While they waited for another opportunity to fire on their pursuers, Mark turned to Paul McTorney.

“I’m not buying your explanation, McTorney!” he said harshly. “Try another answer: why are there Xenobots firing at us?”

“The Xenobots provided this ship for us, Starman Seaton,” muttered the stocky man, “in exchange for information about Ahmanya.” He kept his eyes on the controls of the immense laser cannon. “We, uh... we promised them that we could get the information they wanted if they’d let us have this ship.”

Mark contained the anger he felt at McTorney’s appalling lack of conscience.

“And?”

“They’d fixed the ship up for human habitation, like you found it, see? They had to’ve had some help to do it. They’ve been working with some group on Earth, and we were just smugglers. We threw in our lot with this group so we could get this ship. It’d make our operation a lot more profitable, but it was too much for us to handle alone. So this group on Earth came up with the plan to capture you three Starmen and told us what to do. They said that if we succeeded, we could keep this ship for ourselves.” McTorney shrugged. “So we did it. And this is the

payoff we get!”

Just then a spear of light came through the back end of the ship and lit up one of the six engines. A colossal cascade of sparks and a series of bursts of intense white light filled the chamber with blinding flashes. The opening in the wall of the ship was automatically sealed, but the engine hummed loudly with the sound of internal components spinning out of control, and the shielding glowed in places with an angry red hue.

“Second panel sealed!” shouted Razy. “We can go to hyperspace now!”

“Joe!” cried out Mark. “We’re down to five engines, but if you can take us into hyperspace with that few, do it now!”

Almost at once, they all felt the gut-wrenching sensation they had experienced before.

~

“Zip,” said Richard gently. “Zip?” Gently the head of Starlight Enterprise shook the Starman’s shoulder.

“Mmmph?” Zip mumbled, then opened his eyes and sat up straight. “Whew,” he exhaled, and ran his hands over his face. “Now that I’ve delivered my message, I guess I’ll get cleaned up.”

He turned to the anxious Ahmanyans and spoke a few words. Two of them accompanied the Starman out of the room.

“By the way,” Zip said, turning back to face Richard as he passed through the door, “this is Sotik. You’ve met him before—in a manner of speaking.”

“Greetings, Mr. Starlight,” said the Ahmnyan. Thick brown hair was swept back from his face. Large square white teeth showed in a broad smile. “It is good to meet you in person at last.”

Richard suddenly realized that Sotik was the first Ahmnyan he had seen, when he had appeared to Richard in an impressive holographic projection in Mars Base. More than three years earlier it was this Ahmnyan, then a resident of *Imlah Taltahni*,

who had urged Richard to attack the Xenobots that had landed nearby. A small invasion force of the cyborgian aggressors had landed on the red planet in pursuit of Mark and Zip, who were helpless in the face of their enemy.

“Greetings, Sotik,” smiled Richard. “Or should I say, ‘*emmaino*’?”

“‘*Emmaino*’ indeed, Mr. Starlight!” The Ahmanyman beamed at the use of the traditional greeting in his own language. “I regret that I was unable to be present in *Imlah Taltahni* during your extended stay with my people three years ago. I am one of the few wave technicians among the waking Ahmanyans, and my services are in great demand among our refuges—especially in these portentous days.”

“Wave technician? I assume this means an expert with the holographic science in which the Ahmanyans excel?”

“Yes—and also with wormhole transfer. These technologies are distantly related, so that a skilled operator may work in a similar fashion with both photons and gravitons. There are other Ahmanyans, however, who are much more skilled in these matters than I. All, however, are in hypersleep—though several are currently undergoing the process of revitalization.

“The device that Saadervo found in Domoli on Europa three years ago creates a wormhole between two locations. Only a ‘small’ wormhole is created—one that individuals can step through. It’s just a modification of a wormhole generator used by spacecraft. We used this technique to great advantage when we resisted the Xenobots. The Xenobots have this capability as well, but they do not understand how it works.”

Richard nodded his head and then smiled wryly. “We have much to learn from you.”

“Do not let me give you the impression that this apparatus is completely reliable, Mr. Starlight, or cannot be defended against. Like anything else in technology, there are flaws and uncertainties. Moreover, there is a defense that we—and the Xenobots—can employ.”

The conversation continued until the Starman reappeared.

He had bathed and shaved, though the signs of extreme exhaustion remained on his face.

Richard spoke first. "I believe that we should return to Amundsen City, Zip. You may stay in my home where Jan will take care of you."

"My family must be told that I am alive."

"Of course. But I think it is essential that no one but a few know the facts of your survival and that you have successfully delivered your message. We do not know who our enemies are—not all of them—nor do we know where the Xenobot spy is located in my office. It will be to our benefit if they all believe that you are indeed dead and that we do not have the information that you have brought us. I will have to think about it for a while and then take counsel with others. In the meantime, let's get you home."

"I am ready." The redheaded Starman smiled. He wrapped himself up in the black cloak he had used to travel from old New York. "I am looking forward to it!" He folded the cowl over his head.

The two humans bade farewell to the Ahmanyans, and then took their place on the platform that was a part of the apparatus for the wormhole transfer. Sotik initiated the transfer process and, seconds later, Richard and David were standing under the shadow-hung trees a short walk from the front door of the Starlights' home.

"Here," said Richard, and led the way to the entrance. Without preamble he opened the door and hustled David through it, his black cloak still covering him from head to toe, its cowl overshadowing his face.

Jan Starlight greeted Richard with a great hug. "Oh, Richard," she said. "You're late. What a day you've had! I'm so sorry—but the funeral was wonderful! So moving!" She stepped back and looked at her husband. Tears sparkled in her eyes. All at once she turned toward their guest. "Oh," she said, deeply flustered. "Please forgive my rudeness." She looked inquiringly to Richard.

“Jan,” he began. “The funeral...” Richard paused awkwardly and looked away for a moment, and then spoke again. “I just found out that David isn’t dead.”

“Not dead?” she said, stepping back a pace and looking puzzled. “Not dead?” she repeated.

David laid the cowl back. Jan leaped back and inhaled sharply. Her eyes opened wide in shock and she lifted her left arm up, the back of her wrist placed against her mouth.

“I’m sorry, Jan,” said David weakly.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” said Richard. “Right now he needs sleep. No one knows he is here. No one must know he is alive—not until we’re ready to announce it. It is vital.”

“But his poor family...?”

“We’ll tell them, of course. Where are Caedmon and Michaela?”

“Staying with friends tonight.”

“Good. We can’t even let them know yet. Take David to the guest room, please, and I’ll call Allen and Elizabeth.”

“Oh, David,” said Jan, beginning to weep profusely. She could see that he had been under enormous strain and was at the end of his strength. She took him into her arms and held him tightly. Then she released him and became the gracious hostess. “You’re warm,” she said. “You have a fever. Come, follow me. I’ll give you a fever reducer and make you comfortable. In a moment you’ll be asleep.” She bustled down the hall and the weary Starman stumbled after her.

Richard stepped over to the communications center. “Allen Foster—urgent, please, with maximum encryption,” he said. A moment later David’s father’s face appeared on the communicator.

“Yes, Richard?” Allen’s voice was brusque.

“Allen, I need you and Elizabeth—and Kathy, too—to come over right away.”

“Now?”

“Yes, Allen. Please.” Richard’s expression was earnest with appeal.

“Richard—” Allen’s irritation showed through a veneer of courtesy. “Today I attended my son’s funeral. Are you sure this can’t wait until tomorrow, or even later?”

“It can’t wait, Allen, I assure you. Please come, now. Bring Elizabeth and Kathy. I must see you all.”

Allen grimaced and looked away, shaking his head. Richard began to make another appeal, but Allen looked back directly into the screen. “We’ll be there,” he snapped. The screen went dark.

Eleven minutes later Jan and Richard Starlight admitted the three Fosters to their entry.

“Come in,” said Jan anxiously, ushering them forward. Her hands were shaking.

“What is this about, Richard?” demanded Allen as he stepped through the portal. “What is it that can’t wait even for a family to grieve together?” Elizabeth and Kathy were red-eyed, somber, and silent. The mother had her hand on her daughter’s shoulder as if she couldn’t bear to break the physical contact between them.

“Come, and you will see,” said Richard, and led the way down the hall. He paused before a closed door, and then slowly opened it. He peeked in, then turned and gestured to the group. All of them came quietly into the room.

“Allen? Elizabeth?” said Richard gently. Then he approached the bed and turned down the covers. Sleeping soundly and deeply lay their son.

His parents gasped. “David!” cried Elizabeth.

Kathy glided very slowly over to the bed, her dark eyes open wide, one hand reaching out. “It’s David,” she murmured. “He’s alive!”

Chapter 17: Turns for the Better

WITH AN ENORMOUS GROAN, the captured Xenobot spacecraft vanished into a wormhole.

Mark grunted with satisfaction and leaped out of the laser pod. Outside the immense back window was the absolute blackness that was not the absence of light but the absence of everything. He hoped desperately that the Xenobots had no capability to follow the ship into the wormhole.

“Where are we, Mark?” cried Doak querulously from where he lay bedraggled on the deck. When the Starman saw the fear in the man’s eyes, he felt sorry for him.

“Back in hyperspace, Doak,” he answered as he strode over to the engines. “The Xenobots are gone.” Quickly Mark examined the five engines. There were sounds of creaking and groaning throughout the chamber but the ship appeared to be holding on. Then he ran to the hyperspace chamber and scanned the gauges.

Pretty high, he thought to himself. Higher than I’d like but there’s nothing I can do. Nothing to do anyway as long as we’re on course.

“How long does it take to go through hyperspace, Razy?” he shouted through the door. Just at that moment Razy came into the chamber, followed closely by McTorney. The others hung back just outside.

“Just a few minutes.”

“Where’s he taking us?” snarled McTorney. “I didn’t give ’im any coordinates!”

Mark looked up and spoke evenly. “You’ll have to ask Joe that question, Mr. McTorney. With six Xenobots firing at us, he didn’t really have time to ask you where you wanted us to go.”

The big Starman didn’t wait for a response, but pushed through the men and took the stairs to the upper deck two at a time.

“Hey!” growled McTorney, then set out in pursuit. Mark didn’t slow down. When he arrived at the control deck, he saw Joe gripping the primary controls and staring forward into the cosmic absence. Occasionally his eyes flashed downward at the control panel. Jude and Carley were standing at a distance, watching him.

McTorney stormed in, shouting and waving his arms.

“Where in blazes are you taking us, you foul little cheat? I didn’t give you any coordinates!”

Joe didn’t answer. Mark moved, quietly but authoritatively, and stood protectively behind the Starman pilot.

“Answer me!” screamed McTorney, stepping toward the pilot’s seat and putting his hand on his laser pistol. Mark turned toward the attacker and placed his left hand over McTorney’s right so that he couldn’t draw his weapon. He put his right forefinger directly under the stocky man’s chin and lifted it up high. The man’s eyes opened wide. He made a frantic attempt to draw his pistol, but Mark had trapped his hand underneath his own.

With his chin pointed upward he could only splutter. His eyes were flaming and he stepped back a pace and opened his mouth to say something, but Mark slapped him across the cheek. In the surprise that followed, Mark drew McTorney’s right hand forward, which still gripped the laser pistol. Then Mark took the weapon.

“Step away,” said the Starman quietly but with firmness that tolerated no opposition. McTorney stepped back, fury written across every feature.

“The rest of you, don’t move—not at all,” commanded Mark. “When I call out your name, take out your pistol slowly and put it in that box over there.” Mark nodded to one side without taking his eyes off the group. “Then go back to your position.

“McTorney, I told you before not to threaten me and not to underestimate a Starman. Permit me to repeat that advice now. We’ve all worked together pretty well these past few days, considering all the circumstances. Our journey’s almost over. Let’s not ruin things at the last minute. Razy, you go first.”

The renegade pilot placed his pistol in the box Mark had indicated, then returned to his position. The others all followed in turn as Mark called their names.

“Now lie flat on your backs, arms and legs spread out like starfish. Stay that way.”

Mark took one of the seats and turned it so that it faced toward

the back of the control chamber where the spread-eagled men lay. He strapped himself in and waited.

“*Yis me-ahtna*⁴?” asked Mark.

“*E ntef katelu, tiono!*⁵,” answered Joe calmly. “I had to do it in my head, but I’ve been doing the calculations for days, changing the numbers every time we moved.”

All at once, the heavens appeared in the window as the ship dropped out of hyperspace. Directly in front of them was the planet Mars. Joe’s hands flew over the controls.

“Oh man!” he exclaimed. “We’re coming in at more than 40,000 miles an hour and we’re just under 5,000 miles away!”

“Not bad at all, considering you did it in your head,” said Mark. Joe cut off the huge rear thruster and fired up the forward jets to brake the speeding spacecraft.

“Where are we?” shouted Carley.

“Almost home,” Mark answered. “Mars, first and only stop. Don’t get up. We’re in for a rough ride.” The Xenobot ship began to decelerate strongly and the prisoners began to slide forward on the deck.

“I suppose you can’t get on the communicator,” said Joe, his hands gripping the controls firmly, “and alert Mars Base that we’re a friendly ship and not a Xenobot scout?”

Mark stood up and began to inch his way over to the navigator’s pod. When he was halfway across the deck, McTorney rolled over quickly and tried to leap to his feet. Mark fired the laser and scored the shoulder of his would-be attacker.

“Next one goes through your upper arm, McTorney, and takes out bone and muscle. Lie flat.” The man made no noise, but lay flat on his back.

At the navigator’s pod, Mark activated the communicator without taking his eyes off the renegades for more than a split second at a time.

“Mars Base, this is Starman Mark Seaton, coming into your

⁴ Where are we going?

⁵ To the red planet, I hope.

airspace in a captured Xenobot vessel. Do you read me?"

"Mars Base reads you, Starman Seaton, and is tracking your ship. Firewasps are scrambling. You are coming in too fast for a safe landing. What are your plans?"

"Hold on, Mars Base," said Mark, then he turned to Joe. "Joe?"

"If we knew that we weren't being pursued, we could take time to orbit and come in safely, but we don't have that guarantee. I'm going to take us in at this speed and crash in the desert. I'll use the atmosphere as much as I can to slow us down. It'll be rough but we'll survive."

Mark gave that information to the controller at Mars Base, and advised them to be prepared for an incursion of four, perhaps six, Xenobot ships.

"Very well, Starman Seaton. I suppose you know what you're doing."

Mark stayed in the navigator's pod and strapped himself in securely.

"We'll hit the atmosphere in about a minute," said Joe distractedly. He turned to Mark. "It's going to be very rough. Better let these men protect themselves."

Without taking his eyes off the men on the floor, Mark stepped quickly over to the closest storage cabinet, pulled out several blankets, and tossed them to the prisoners. "Roll these up and put them under your heads. Then link arms. Quickly." He watched as the men complied, then took his own place back in the navigator's pod.

The sounds of metal creaking and twisting became louder. There was a feeling of intensifying pressure throughout the ship. Joe's knuckles on the controls turned white. Over the next few minutes, the ship swayed from port to starboard and back again as Joe used the atmosphere to slow the spacecraft down.

At one point he muttered through clenched teeth, "We'll make it."

A moment later, "Prepare for hard landing."

There was a brief but impossibly loud "chooof" sound as the

ship made its first contact with the desert sand, then lifted up into the air again. A second time and then a third time Joe skimmed the surface and bounced the ship like a flat stone on water. The men on the floor writhed painfully in place, but remained stoically silent. At last Joe dropped the Xenobot spacecraft onto the sand for the landing. Desperately the Starman pilot fought to keep the ship level so that the pods on either side would not be broken off or send the craft into a spin that would surely destroy it in a spectacular display of rolling wreckage.

A fearsome scraping sound became louder and louder. Before long they all perceived that the ship was slowing. With a last protest of gritty reverberation, the spacecraft ground to a stop.

Mark activated the communicator again.

“Mars Base, this is Starman Mark Seaton. We have landed safely, but we’ll wait to debark until you arrive. We have seven prisoners on the floor here in the control chamber. The full weight of the ship is resting on the primary airlock, so we’ll use the starboard cargo port to exit.”

“Very well, Starman Seaton. We have tracked you and Starlight craft should be arriving momentarily.”

~

“It’s David! He’s alive!” Kathy’s eyes glistened as she turned toward her parents. Allen and Elizabeth approached the bed and fell to their knees so they could embrace their son.

“David, my son,” said Allen, his voice heavy with emotion.

David struggled out of deep sleep and blinked. “Dad,” he croaked groggily. “Mom. Kathy.” He smiled widely and pushed himself up onto his elbows. Tears poured down the faces of everyone in the room. Richard and Jan stayed discreetly in the background, saying nothing as the family members found a reunion beyond death, beyond hope.

“What happened?” asked Allen at last, rising and turning toward his host. “How can this be?”

“I’ll let David tell you himself, Allen,” said Richard. “But I

will tell you that I didn't know myself until just a short time ago."

At that moment the communicator indicated that a top priority message was coming in.

"Please excuse me," said Richard, and left the room.

He shut the door as he entered his study and sat down at the communicator. "Richard Starlight," he said, freeing up the encrypted message.

The countenance of the head of Starlight security on Mars appeared on the communicator screen. "Mika Watanabe, Mr. Starlight. I have wonderful news for you." Her voice was clear and confident.

"Yes?"

"Starmen Mark Seaton and Joe Taylor crash-landed safely on Mars moments ago. They appeared in a captured Xenobot spacecraft with the capability of passing through hyperspace." She went on to report all that had happened and concluded, "The Starmen will of course make their own report as soon as they are able. At the moment they are still aboard the ship holding seven prisoners in custody and awaiting our arrival. They should be at Mars Base in approximately one hour."

"Wonderful news!" exulted the head of Starlight Enterprise. "I will inform their families at once! Have the Starmen contact me at my home as soon as they are able. Thank you, Mika!" The connection was terminated.

Even before he left the room, another message came through the communicator, this time transferred from the headquarters of Starlight Enterprise.

"Mr. Starlight? I have a message for you from Gene Newman at Starlight Seneca. He says it is urgent."

"Thank you. Please put him through."

"Yes sir."

The face of Gene Newman appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Starlight, I am happy to report that we've captured Gyrð Gyrðsson, the captain of the renegades in old New York. Our searchers found him in the woods west of the city, without food

or water. I think he was glad to be picked up.”

“Good news, Gene. What are you learning about that organization?”

“The prisoners contradict themselves a lot, sir, but we are assembling a picture that is beginning to make some sense. Our most cooperative informant is one called ‘Johnny’. He is not being fully frank, but the reliability of his information seems to be verified thus far.” Gene went on to provide a summary of what Starlight Seneca had pieced together from their interrogations.

“Fine work, Gene,” complimented Richard. “Of course, you will keep me informed of further development.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Starlight out.”

Richard addressed the communicator. “Keith and Barbara Seaton and Charlie and Laura Taylor, please. Urgent and encrypted.”

Chapter 18: Putting the Stories Together

“THERE WAS NO SIGN of any pursuing Xenobots,” reported Mika Watanabe to Starman Mark Seaton and Starman Joe Taylor. “Nothing came through hyperspace after you did. Perhaps, for the moment, we are safe.”

Mark and Joe’s anxiety was only slightly eased. After the team from Mars Base had freed them from the Xenobot ship, they’d washed and eaten hastily and gone into private conference with the head of security at Starlight Mars Base. At the Starmen’s insistence, the seven prisoners had not only been jailed by Space Command but also placed in suspended animation. It was a highly unusual course of action to take, especially for men who were accused only of kidnapping, but the Starmen’s influence convinced the authorities that doing so was crucial.

Space Command was clearly unhappy about the insistence

on keeping the prisoners not only incommunicado but also unable to speak at all—after all, they were merely run-of-the-mill smugglers and thugs, without any distinguishing characteristics of any kind. Without having to explain why, Richard Starlight had added his authority to the Starmen's request, insisting only that the information that the renegades had was of such sensitivity that, should anyone at all learn it, all of human civilization would be at risk.

Mika Watanabe was thoughtful.

"That's good news, Miss Watanabe," said Mark at last.

"You do not sound convinced, Starman Seaton," she replied. Her gaze was shrewd and penetrating. Very few human beings daunted the Starmen, but Mika Watanabe was one of them. Only twenty-eight years old, she was a master in several styles of martial arts and an expert in the use of eight weapons, both modern and ancient. From childhood she had been undefeated in any competition she'd entered in her native Japan. Although she was just under five feet three inches tall and barely weighed 109 pounds, she was lithe and immensely powerful. Her analytical mind was exceptionally well organized. She was the ideal successor to Oritz Konig as head of security for Starlight Enterprise on the fourth planet.

"Perhaps you are still in shock after learning of the death of your colleague," Watanabe added after neither Mark nor Joe made any response to her observation. "Understandable," she said. "You return to your home through hyperspace with a captured Xenobot ship that carries the secret of hyperdrive and holding seven prisoners whom you, unarmed, had defeated with your bare hands. Impressive."

The Starmen swallowed, knowing that for Mika Watanabe alone it would have been no effort whatever to do what they had done.

"Piloting the ship and bringing it safely to a landing without any serious damage to it or its contents was a commendable feat. You were," she lifted her eyebrows and tilted her head a little, "justly pleased with the outcome of your adventure. You were

unprepared for such dismal news. I am sorry.”

The Starmen believed that Watanabe was sincere, but there was such precision in her words that she seemed detached, perhaps even cold. They were uncomfortable in their chairs and didn't know quite what to do with their hands or where to look.

“Moreover, the artifact that you, Starman Taylor, brought back from the place of your captivity is amazing, quite startling. Our researchers have dropped all other projects to examine the five crystals and the apparatus that accompanied them.”

“A data recorder, I thought,” Joe suggested humbly.

“Indeed, you may well be correct,” said Watanabe. “A marvelous find. You have returned home with prizes of incomparable value.”

The Starmen acknowledged the compliment with wordless nods.

“Well,” said the head of security, leaning back a little in her own chair behind her desk, “Mr. Starlight will be contacting us shortly on realtime transmission using the highest security beam possible. That conference will undoubtedly be informative for us all.” Mika Watanabe glanced at the timepiece on her desk. “Just a few seconds now,” she said.

The communicator screen at one end of her desk lit up and Richard's face appeared. The three people turned their chairs toward the apparatus.

“Mark! Joe!” Richard greeted them with a broad smile. “I am delighted to see you again! Mika, greetings from Luna!”

The woman inclined her head slightly, her short black hair with its brown highlights falling forward as she did so. Richard continued without delay.

“It's past 2:00 a.m. in Amundsen City and I'm just dead tired, but the excitement here in the past few hours has been too much to permit sleep yet. No doubt Mika has told you that Zip Foster was killed in old New York. Only a few hours ago I learned that in fact he did not die! He is in good health, and is currently staying in my home. This information has been shared with very few people, and must be kept *absolutely secret* until I

release the information personally!”

The pleasure that surged through the minds and hearts of the two Starmen overtopped even their gratification at seeing the imperturbable Mika Watanabe sit up fast, her eyes popping open wide, her mouth gaping like a puffer fish’s. Richard laughed.

“You Starmen may entrust Mika with all your information. I have the permission of the Ahmanyans aboard Tharsos to include her in all deliberations, effective immediately. They have also been in contact with their fellows in *Imlah Taltahni*. Saadervo and the others have been brought up to date. Now—give me your report.”

“Yes sir!” exclaimed Joe, almost crowing at the sudden turn of fortune. He and Mark gave a complete recitation of events from the time they returned to consciousness after their abduction. Richard then directed Mika Watanabe to make a report of what had happened since the Starmen had emerged from hyperspace.

“The captured ship is in amazingly good repair, Mr. Starlight, thanks to the expert piloting of Starman Joe Taylor; it has been transported to the most secure hangar on our base. The alien spacecraft is so large that it nearly fills the room. Our technicians are examining it. Not only does the ship have hypertravel capability, but it also contains the drive the Xenobots use when they draw power from a solar station.”

“Wonderful!” rejoiced Richard. “I am especially fascinated by these five crystals and the apparatus that comes with them. I think that perhaps they ought to be in the possession of the Ahmanyans; they are more likely to be able to read them than we can. When we conclude this transmission, I will inform Saadervo of your discovery and ask him to contact you if he wishes.”

“Very good, Mr. Starlight,” assented Watanabe.

“Now let me tell you what we have learned in the past few hours,” Richard continued. He went on to tell how Starman David Foster had made his way to Olovanda and eventually achieved face-to-face contact with him. He summarized the urgent message that Zip had brought.

“Further,” Richard continued, “Gene Newman has made good progress in determining who the renegades in old New York are. They do seem pretty well connected with some outside source of funds; it is unclear who or what that source is, but most of us suspect that it is the Xenobots themselves. Most of these renegades are Asteroid dwellers, born there without a particle of loyalty to the rest of civilization. They were among the first to be contacted by the Xenobots. The aliens seem to favor the Belt for their base of operations.

“The Belt, of course, is not subject to much oversight, and the issue of whether Earth even has the right to oversee it might be questionable. The Belt is where Troy Putnam and Lurton Zimbaro met the Xenobots, and Beowulf Denn also. Native-born Belters who are hungry for power or money are natural allies for Xenobots. Most of them are just smugglers of the wealth that’s so abundant in the Asteroid Belt, and even that just means that they merely bypass the import taxes exacted by the governments of their customers. They’re really people without a country or even a planet.

“Those that have contempt for the rest of us and have some intelligence, perhaps, or some connections maybe through smuggling, could become a formidable but unsuspected force for great evil—especially if they have some Xenobot-provided resources. And naturally, being human, they can pass easily for Earthmen.”

“Then it is most likely true that Paul McTorney reported to the Xenobots that Mars is Ahmánya,” said Mark somberly.

“I’m afraid so,” confirmed Richard. “The message came in to the renegade base in old New York, where Zip overheard it. That proves that the men who captured you were able to transmit across galactic distances in realtime transmission. If they could transfer to Earth, we must assume that they communicated the information to the Xenobots.” Richard’s face was grave.

“But still,” Mark said, “What I said to Joe before still makes sense. There’s a lot the Xenobots don’t know. If you look at Mars, you can only see a devastated planet with a few unimportant

human settlements. It's not hard to guess that Mars is really Ahmanya. They must have suspected that. The real question is not 'Where is Ahmanya?' It's 'Where are the Ahmanyans?' The Xenobots don't know that! They don't know how many Ahmanyans there are or where they're living. They don't know what resources they have, including weapons. I doubt that the Xenobots will attack until they know these things."

"Maybe," said Richard. "And for that reason your prisoners had to be put into suspended animation."

"There's still something that doesn't add up," cut in Mika Watanabe. She had been silent for some time, so her interjection was almost surprising. The others all looked at her.

"Does no one else find it odd that there were no technical experts among the prisoners? These seven men are little more than incompetents. Whoever their superiors were they must have known that two Starmen would be able to overcome them eventually and bring them—and the ship—back to their own Solar System." Her nostrils flared for a moment, and her brow was creased. "I suspect something."

The woman looked away intently. Her facial muscles became taut. Then she glared back at the two Starmen.

"Someone went through great lengths to capture the two of you, bring you to an alien world, and make you think that you were in the future. It took quite an organization to put all that together, and yet look at the mistakes they made! The compad with a working battery is an egregious blunder—a little too obvious. The problem with matching the stellar constellations is also obvious. They must have known that you'd see through the ruse, yet they seem to have made no backup plans—no *obvious* plans, that is. They didn't have any experts on board, and the Xenobot fleet appeared at exactly the right moment to give you the chance you needed to escape. It doesn't add up."

Mark's brow furrowed. "What are you suggesting, Miss Watanabe?"

"I'm suggesting that they *let* you escape—they *expected* that you would escape! They had hoped that you would fall into their

trap and reveal the identity of Ahmanya, but that was not their primary plan! They guessed—rightly—that you would be so upset at breaking the confidence that you would fail to see the deeper plan that underlay their intrigue. They had a deeper plan that involved letting you two go—and it would work whether you had identified Ahmanya or not. You were meant to think that you had escaped on your own, but I believe that that was intended from the moment you saw through their charade. The goons you overcame were not in charge of this venture—that’s evident!” The woman snorted. “Nor were they even aware of the plan for which they were stooges. But whoever *was* in charge was hoping that you would do just what you have done: return to your own Solar System with the captive ship.”

“But why?” protested Joe. “Why would they do that? It doesn’t make the least bit of sense! Is there something on the ship that shouldn’t be here? Did we bring something in without knowing it?”

Watanabe shook her head. “I don’t know, but there is a key piece to this puzzle that we’re missing. We haven’t seen everything yet. I am sure, though, that our enemy has something deeper in mind than we first thought—something more sinister that we have not guessed yet.”

Chapter 19: Engagement On Two Fronts

THE *VALERIE*, one of Starlight Enterprise’s fastest five-seater spacecraft raced across the bleak Martian desert at high speed. Starman Joe Taylor was in the pilot’s seat, with Starman Mark Seaton next to him. Rare outcroppings in the barren sand provided the only relief in the wasteland between Starlight’s Mars Base and Eagle City. The slanting light of the newly risen sun exaggerated the texture of the dimpled desert below; minor changes in elevation cast long shadows across the terrain.

“Hard to believe that those guys still aren’t finished with the *Star Ranger* after more than three years’ work on it,” grunted

Joe.

“Hmmp,” assented Mark, with a nod. “It sure looked impressive, though. Just like a new ship.”

“It *is* a new ship, for all practical purposes. I’ll bet there’s not much of the original baby left except for some of the furnishings. It might have been faster if they’d just built us a new ship from scratch.”

“Maybe. I guess we can wait until the end of the year to get it back. Starlight’s really doing good work with it.” Mark smiled. “I can’t wait to navigate with an antimatter drive.”

“Yeah, that’ll really open up possibilities—maybe even allow us to travel beyond the Solar System.”

A few minutes passed with neither of them speaking. Joe kept the *Valerie* at only a quarter mile or so above the smoothly undulating desert floor. In places the desert sparkled as sunlight glinted off the facet of a stone at just the right angle.

“Saadervo sure seemed excited about the crystals,” said Mark at last. “Looks as if you may have brought back something of real value, Joe!”

“Yeah,” agreed the gangling Starman, momentarily running his right hand through his hair. “He sure couldn’t get back to us fast enough after we signed off from Richard. I wasn’t so sure that that Ahmanyen could get excited much about anything. ‘Don’t wait a day,’ he said. Whew!”

“At least he let us spend the night at Mars Base before we took off this morning.”

“Had to be early, though! He’s eager! I think I’ll land on the west side of town,” said Joe, changing the subject, “rather than at the spaceport. It’s closer to the *Watering Hole*, and it’ll save time and maybe stave off the curious for a while. We can’t afford to waste a moment.”

“Landing out there will make people *more* curious, Joe.”

“Yeah, but they won’t be able to slow us down by making us fill out forms and asking questions. I’d rather land first, do what we need to do, and answer questions later.”

“Okay, Joe,” Mark said. “We need to get to *Imlah Taltahni* as

fast as we can. We don't know where the Xenobots are now, we don't know how to resist them, and they know that Mars is their enemy's home planet. We're in a state of serious first-class alarm. Maybe the Ahmanyans will be able to come up with a plan."

"If not," said Joe, "then we could all be dead by nightfall."

"Cheery. I'm not looking forward to seeing Saadervo and the others. I feel that we have let our friends down."

"Well... we did." Joe compressed his lips and shook his head. He blinked his eyes as if to keep back tears. "We were tricked, but good. Eagle Crater coming up in a few minutes. Get ready to jump out."

~

A grim-faced Richard Starlight presided at a top security meeting in his office in the Starlight Tower. He rested his chin on clasped hands, his elbows on the table. Three other persons were present: John Rwakatare, Richard's primary assistant; Commander Alvin Shaw of Space Command; and Agena Collins, Space Command's liaison to Starlight Enterprise in matters of military strategy.

"So you're saying that the best we can do is hope that the Xenobots don't attack soon? —that we have no effective defense of any kind?" Agena spoke with desperation and disbelief. Her voice was taut with tension. "How could the Starmen have revealed such vital information?" Her near panic made her speak in anger. "That slip's going to bring about the destruction of both our planets!"

Commander Shaw spoke firmly. "Control yourself, Lieutenant Collins."

The woman lowered her eyes. "I apologize, Mr. Starlight."

"I understand your reaction," Richard said, his voice tinged with sadness. "The situation is grave, but we will just have to mobilize such forces as we have as best we can. The Ahmanyans have nothing they can offer us, even to defend themselves." After a little further subdued discussion, Richard assigned each

person a task, and concluded the meeting by calling the participants to return the following day.

Everyone rose and left the table.

“Where’s Scarlet?” asked Commander Shaw, referring to Richard’s famous red parakeet. The large birdcage near Richard’s desk was empty.

“She’s a little sick,” Richard explained. “I’ve taken her to a veterinarian.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope it’s not serious.”

“Shouldn’t be,” said Richard.

All of them made their way to Richard’s private elevator and entered it together. Before Richard himself stepped into the elevator car, the elevator adjacent to Richard’s opened and a tall, slender man entered the office, wearing the garb of an employee of Starlight Enterprise. He carried a kit with some cleaning equipment in it. On his back he wore a vacuum pack that had a long tube with a nozzle at the end.

“Greetings, Reuel,” said Richard. “We’re finished in here for the day, so you can have the office to yourself. It needs a thorough cleaning.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Starlight,” said the man.

Richard joined the others in the private elevator and pressed a button that sent them down only five floors.

“We’re not going to the bottom?” asked Agena.

“No, Agena,” said Richard. He turned to her with a big smile. When the elevator stopped he invited everyone to follow him to another room. “We’ll wait here for a few minutes,” he said. “It is I who must apologize to you, Agena, and to you, Alvin. Only Rock was aware of the true purpose of our meeting.” The tall Tanzanian nodded briefly with a slight smile on his face.

“What’s going on?” the woman asked.

Richard activated a large viewscreen on the wall. Immediately a panorama of Richard’s office appeared. “We’re taking a gamble here,” he explained, “but, I think, without too much risk.”

In the center of the screen, the four of them could see the man whom Richard had addressed as Reuel. He had laid out some of the cleaning equipment on a worktable. While they watched, among the brushes and bottles he laid several tools and a small silver and green box. Then he walked over to Richard's desk and began dusting it.

"What is he doing?" asked Agena. "Cleaning? Just cleaning?"

"Keep watching," advised Richard. "You'll see something you'll never forget."

After a moment the man returned to the worktable and rummaged among his tools. He glanced at the silver and green box and paused a moment. Then he placed a white mask over his face, moved over to the far windows, and activated the vacuum pack. For a few minutes he gave his attention to the floor, over which he passed the nozzle of the tube he was wearing.

Gradually he came close to the magnificent globes in the corner of the expansive office. He cleaned around the globe of Venus. Next he cleaned around the globe of Mercury. Then he withdrew the tube, made an adjustment to the apparatus, and placed the nozzle against the base that held the model of Mercury.

Suddenly the base turned white, with gray streaks through it, and vapor arose from the dramatically altered piece of furniture.

The man stepped back, removed his mask, and called out, "Finished, Mr. Starlight. I have succeeded. The room is clean now."

Richard clapped his hands, and then said, "Let's go back to the office."

"What just happened?" asked Commander Shaw. "Who is that man?"

"Follow me," said Richard. "I'll introduce you to him."

A moment later the group stepped out of the elevator into the office they had left shortly before. The tall man was waiting beside the globe of Mercury, where they had seen him on the viewscreen.

“Good work, Sotik!” exclaimed the head of Starlight Enterprise. The tall man bowed slightly.

“Commander Shaw, Lieutenant Collins, may I present to you Sotik of Ahmanya.”

The shocked expressions on the faces of those from Space Command showed that this revelation was completely unexpected. Once the introductions were complete, Sotik explained.

“There are only a few places where it could have been hidden, Mr. Starlight, but as we discussed earlier, it was vital that I locate its position precisely before acting. If I were wrong, the results could have been disastrous. The tachyon detector I concealed among the cleaning instruments showed that there was nearby activity in hyperspace at the time I was observing. From this tachyonic disturbance I was able to locate the source—the spy inside the base of this globe. I do not know what the spy was communicating or to whom, but that it was doing so was evident. Then, as you no doubt saw, I approached in a non-threatening fashion and activated the cryoacoustic chiller with the results you no doubt observed. I am certain that it was entirely successful. The base of this model and everything inside it were instantly chilled to more than 200° below zero.”

“Let me explain,” said Richard to his guests. “I received information that a Xenobot spy had entered my office.”

“What!” the others exclaimed.

“Via wormhole travel.” Richard turned to Sotik. “Can we open the base and see the results of your work?”

The Ahmanyan picked up the globe of Mercury and set it aside. Then he selected a long heavy metal tool from his kit and brought it over to the frozen base. Sotik raised the rod and brought it down sharply on the top. A huge chunk broke off. Several more blows shattered the block into large pieces.

“Here,” said the Ahmanyan. Among the shards was an oblong tube, pure white and thoroughly frosted. They all peered at it closely but could see very little detail inside the quick-frozen block—just the bare outline of a head and torso.

“A Xenobot,” murmured Agena. “It doesn’t look like what I had anticipated.”

“Normally they are man-shaped,” said Richard, “about four feet tall, so I’ve been told by those who’ve seen them. This one has divested itself of its mechanical arms and legs so that it could secrete itself in my office. It was a brilliant ploy. I would never have suspected it if we hadn’t had inside information.”

They all stared at the results of Sotik’s work, but the intense cold radiating from the wreckage made them step away after a brief time.

“We must assume that the spy was communicating with other Xenobots,” explained Richard, “probably those that have a base in the Asteroid Belt. This meeting was to provide false information to our enemy. I hope that the spy made contact with the others after our meeting. Sotik’s tachyon detector may lead us to that conclusion. Then we had to act fast to eliminate him. It was a gamble, but as you just saw, it worked!

“The spy had to be destroyed instantly, without warning, so that he could not communicate with others or defend himself. When I led the attack against Xenobots on Mars three years ago, I learned that they cannot survive in low temperatures. After consulting with Sotik, we devised the plan whose success you have just witnessed. The Ahmanyans have a technique they call cryoacoustics; they can create intense cold with sound waves.”

“But,” protested Commander Shaw, “the information you provided was intended to *hasten* a Xenobot attack on us! Why?”

“The Ahmanyans will be ready for an attack this time. And within the hour, Sotik will protect this entire complex from any further wormhole incursions. The Ahmanyans will do the same for every major Starlight operation as well as other key human installations. This can be done without their having to reveal the secret of their existence.”

“You’d better fill us in now, with accurate information this time.”

“Indeed, that’s the second reason why I called us together today. Please have a seat at the table, and we’ll start our meeting

again—this time, Sotik will join us.”

~

Allen Foster pulled the moonbus to a stop and turned off the engine. He had made the lonely drive from Amundsen City to the place of solitude he visited on occasion, usually in his times of emotional overload. It was hard for him to express emotion, even to his wife and children, but he was a deeply emotional man. At times, it seemed to him that his emotions were constricted inside him, but when he came to this special site, it was easier for him to feel whole.

For a while he sat in the ’bus without moving. At length he opened the door and stepped out onto the regolith and began the short walk. The basaltic dust showed many other footprints and tire tracks; some of them had been made over a hundred years before.

Allen’s Earthshadow stretched out before him as he approached the special site. He glanced over his left shoulder and saw the bright globe of humanity’s home planet behind him. Though there was no human being within many miles, he didn’t feel alone.

He crossed the last low ridge and came to the site. A lunar probe sent from Earth had impacted here almost 160 years before. A railing made a circuit around the impact site. A sign asked visitors not to cross the railing. In the nearly century and a half that human beings had lived on the Moon, not one footprint showed on the inside of the railing.

A bronze plaque was placed on a stand where the path made its final approach to the railing. Allen could almost recite the lines by heart, but he always paused here to read them:

**THE MOON'S FIRST CEMETERY
HERE ARE INTERRED ASHES OF
GENE SHOEMAKER
1928-1997
ASTROGEOLOGIST
TRAINER OF APOLLO ASTRONAUTS
IMPACT AT THIS SITE JULY 31, 1999**

Allen swallowed as he read the message. He recalled once again how Gene Shoemaker had desired to be an astronaut in the days of the preparation for the first Moon landings, but had been grounded in the early 1960s due to a health problem. Harrison Schmitt had replaced him on Apollo 17. When Gene had died many years later in a car accident, his wife had asked NASA to place his ashes on the Moon upon which he had longed to wield his geologist's hammer. A capsule containing an ounce of his ashes had been carried aboard NASA's Lunar Prospector spacecraft that orbited the Moon for a year and a half, and then was deliberately crashed near the Moon's south pole.

"Two of a kind, Gene," Allen whispered quietly. "Flyboys grounded, careers cut short. Brothers across time and stars." He sighed, and lifted his gaze to the horizon. A spangle of stars filled the velvet darkness beyond the jumble of charcoal black rocks and ridges.

"Let me tell you about my son, Gene," began the grounded space explorer.

~

Joe brought the *Valerie* to a landing on the outskirts of Eagle City on the west end. When it had become evident that he was not going to land at the spaceport, the space traffic controller in Eagle Tower had asked him what he was doing. Joe had answered tersely that he was landing "on the west side of town."

He had subsequently ignored other messages.

Once the ship was secure, the two Starmen ran from the landing site into the outlying parts of Eagle City. They didn't slow down once they were inside the city limits. People moved out of their way as they sped down the sidewalks. The two Starmen were oblivious to the stares they received.

Slightly out of breath, they pressed through the doors of the *Lizard's Watering Hole* into the dining area.

"Joe! Mark!" exclaimed Donal McTaggart as they hurled themselves into his establishment. "What's yourr hurry?" His Scottish burr was especially thick when he was excited.

"Tell you later!" puffed Joe as he hurried by his friend into the back room with Mark hard on his heels.

Sensing that something important and urgent was at hand, Donal didn't press the matter. He stepped out to block the way in case anyone tried to follow the Starmen, and began to wipe down an empty table. Diners who had paused in mid-meal resumed eating.

Joe and Mark found the McTaggarts' entrance to the tunnels underneath Eagle City and quickly entered, carefully shutting the panel behind them. They ignited the illumination on their suits and descended the narrow staircase until they came to the main level. Not far away to the left was the primary residence the Tunnel People used, but the Starmen turned to the right.

Walking quickly now they made their way through the passage.

~

"They're going toward the confluence," said a grizzled man in a warehouse above them. "Very convenient. I guess we've got the job, since they're in our neighborhood. Get down there. Stay out of sight. I'll keep you informed of what they do and where they go."

With eager glints in their eyes, five men dressed in battle gear picked up massive, high-powered weapons and headed down the hallway. Stavri Thalassa, leader of the Tunnel People,

would have recognized the warehouse with distaste. It was where he had been captured by pirates five years earlier, and where a laser blast had opened up a wall and exposed the entrance to the heretofore hidden tunnel system.

Other enemies were in possession of that building now. In their own turn they had concealed that entrance. They had had little reason to use it, but now it would serve them well. The five armed men passed through it and descended quickly to the main level of the tunnels.

“They’re coming to the confluence now,” reported the grizzled man as he watched a screen in the warehouse above. “Stay in tunnel M, out of sight of the junction, and be ready to move quickly.”

The five men positioned themselves near the Starmen, across the chamber where five tunnels came together but hidden by a turn near the mouth of the tunnel that ran toward downtown. They would be ready to follow the Starmen regardless of which tunnel they selected. One of the men quietly switched on a directional sound detector so that he could overhear the Starmen’s conversation.

~

“Here,” said Mark once the Starmen had reached the place where several tunnels came together. “It was right here.”

“Go ahead,” urged Joe.

“*Sapin*”, said Mark. A panel on the wall of the tunnel receded and slid upward. Behind it a wide passageway lined with volcanic glass delved into the stony foundation of the crater floor. The Starmen entered it, and Mark said, “*donor*”. Behind them, the panel dropped down into place.

~

“It looks as if they went through the wall of the tunnel!” shouted the man in the warehouse, excitement showing in his tones. “There must be a panel there and they’ve gone through it

and it's shut behind them! Get there now! Hurry!"

"I know it," said one of the five men. "I heard 'em. We're almost there now." The five pursuers assembled at the place their leader indicated.

"Okay," the leader said to the others, "I heard one of 'em say 'sahpeen'. That's probably what opened the panel. 'Sahpeen', he said loudly and clearly. Nothing happened. 'Sahpeen!' he belted out, without any result.

"No door's opening here, boss!" swore one of the men.

"Look for controls, or some kind of seam," muttered one of them. For several minutes they scoured the wall. They ran an ultraviolet light over the side of the passage, but found nothing out of the ordinary.

"What's happening down there, Moze?" came the voice of the man who had been tracking the Starmen. "The Starmen are a couple of hundred yards away by now and moving all the time!"

"I know it, Pan!" growled the leader. "We can't find a thing on this wall."

"How did the Starmen open the panel?"

"One of 'em said something, sounded like 'sahpeen'. I tried it, but nothing happened."

"Did you record his voice? Try it with the recording."

The man called Moze grunted, and turned to his equipment.

"*Sapin*". The voice of Starman Mark Seaton came through the speaker. The panel slid open a second time.

"Smart," said Moze admiringly. "We're in!"

The pursuers entered the passage that Ahmanyans had built millennia earlier and into which no one, until now, had ever entered unbidden.

~

A few hundred yards ahead of them, the Starmen came to the hollow where Ahmanyans spacecraft docked. The room was brightly lit, but the slips were empty. A still pool filled most of the bottom of the chamber.

"Nobody here," said Joe.

“You didn’t really expect anyone to be here now, did you?” asked Mark.

“Naw. It’ll take ’em about half an hour to get here. I just hope that opening up that portal tips somebody off back in *Imlah Taltahni*. It must. We’ll just wait. Nothing else we can do.”

Mark caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head and saw five men charging through the passage into the chamber. Joe saw them a split second later.

Instantly Mark’s brain registered the whole plot. Somehow they, the Starmen, had led their enemies to this hidden place. As Mika Watanabe had said, they *had* been allowed to escape on purpose, so that they might lead their enemy to the Ahmanyans’ refuge. How could it have happened? How could they have been followed? How could their pursuers have opened the portal? Just when it seemed as if things couldn’t have gotten worse, the Starmen had let the Ahmanyans down again, and spectacularly this time!

The Starmen closed with their pursuers.

Chapter 20: The Enemy’s Plan

MARK LEAPED FORWARD with a vigorous yell and released a driving straight punch toward the solar plexus of the thug who was leading the attack. To the Starman’s surprise, the man jumped into a deep, balanced fighting stance, swept Mark’s punch aside with a skillful block, and countered with a series of penetrating punches of his own. Mark suddenly found himself moving backward, blocking the man’s furious attack.

Joe was faring no better. He had led off with a flying front kick, but his target had moved aside and swept his arm upward, catching the Starman’s kicking leg on his lower calf. Joe slammed down hard onto the smooth floor, the breath knocked out of him. His assailant slammed a powerful punch toward him that Joe was only able to avoid by a quick roll to one side.

These men are skilled fighters, thought Mark. *We’re*

overmatched!

An incongruous thought came to Joe. *I hope Mika Watanabe never hears about this.*

Their assailants laughed aloud and all five of them tossed their weapons to one side, eager to prove themselves in hand-to-hand fighting against the Starmen. The fight was too fast for the eye to follow, but it was short. Both Starmen lay on the ground, bruised, bleeding, and panting.

“Man, I enjoyed that!” laughed one of the men, a powerfully built individual with closely cropped blond hair and oversized teeth. He flexed his fingers into fists.

“I thought you said these guys were supposed to be good, Moze,” said another.

“Well, I guess we’re just better,” boasted a solidly built man.

“Now that we’ve shown you who’s in charge, chumps,” that individual went on, “let’s get down to business.” The five thugs stood in a circle, looking down on the fallen Starmen. Mark and Joe rolled up to sitting positions.

“And what might that business be?” said Joe, wiping a trail of blood from the left corner of his mouth.

“You’re on your way to the Ahmanyans,” stated the man called Moze. “This,” he lifted his hands and looked around, “isn’t it yet. We want to know where they are. You were leading us on a good chase, but I think maybe the five of us jumped you too soon. Where were you going, now, hey?”

“Well, I suppose it won’t do any good to hide it from you men,” said Joe with a hangdog look. Mark’s head shot up as he regarded his friend. Joe looked up into Moze’s eyes. “We were going to my mother’s house to get her recipe for peanut butter and tuna sandwiches. She makes the bes—” The man behind Joe walloped him on the side of his head with an open palm. Joe had sensed the blow coming and rolled with it a little bit, but still caught a lot of the power behind it. He sprawled on the floor.

The man who hit him grabbed Joe by the collar behind his neck, pulled it tight, and dragged him backward so that his throat was caught in the fabric. Joe began to choke.

“Listen, you beanpole pipsqueak,” the thug said through clenched teeth, “when Moze asks you a question, you answer it straight and fast!”

Joe turned his head to the right and rolled his eyes up toward the man who held him. With a suddenness that surprised even Mark, Joe swept his right hand hard and low and caught the man behind his right ankle, simultaneously grasping the man’s wrist with his left hand. He pulled and twisted hard. The man yelped once as he flew off his feet. Since Joe held onto his wrist he couldn’t break his fall. Joe timed a hard backfist punch with his right hand so that he connected with the man’s temple at the instant the bully crashed to the hard polished floor, landing cheek first.

The other thugs began to step toward Joe but Moze motioned them back.

Joe turned back to Moze. “Sorry,” he said apologetically. “He tripped. Now what was the question?”

Moze shook his head derisively. “Lemme tell you two smart-alecks something. Listen hard. You got a lesson to learn. You’ve lost this time—you, Starlight, the Martians, all of you—you lost. The Xenobots are on their way. A big force is going to show up in your airspace soon. A matter of days at the most. The people in charge are plenty smart. Since we picked you up on Earth two weeks ago, you’ve been doing exactly what we wanted you to do, just like we had you dangling from strings. You told us where Ahmanya is, and now you’ve led us to their front door. Your partner, Foster, escaped from us, but even his escape was arranged. We didn’t give him as much of the paralyzing juice that we gave you two. We expected that he would escape. We hoped for it. He was our backup plan, to lead us to the Ahmanyans. But he’s dead now. We had to shoot ’im down when he got too independent. But you two did just fine.

“There was only one thing that happened that we hadn’t anticipated, but the Xenobots themselves were able to handle that one. When you disappeared in hyperspace for two days, we thought you might have been lost for good. And when you

reappeared somewhere else, the locator beacon aboard the humanized Xenobot ship cried out where you were. The Xenobots went after you with a vengeance. As it turned out, when you escaped from them you put yourselves right back on the plan—you came to Mars, where we were waiting for you.

“All we needed to know, all we really weren’t sure about, was where the Ahmanyans lived. After your encounter with the Banjoman, we even suspected that this planet was Ahmanya. All the evidence pointed to it—but we just weren’t sure, and we didn’t want to gamble on it until we knew. So when you two blabbered it out to McTorney, it didn’t tell us anything we weren’t already pretty convinced of. We just didn’t know where the Ahmanyans lived.

“The Xenobots know that the Ahmanyans are helpless before their superior might, and can’t defend themselves. They’re sitting ducks, waiting for oblivion. Us five here with our tunnel blasters can probably put them away!

“And now you’ve led us to their front door. Obviously,” he gestured toward the empty slips in the chamber, “the way leads through the water. They must live underground or underwater somewhere. I don’t think it’ll be hard for us to find ’em with or without your cooperation!”

“Moze,” said Mark. “How did we lead you here?”

The man smirked, and then shook his head deprecatingly. “We put a locator chip under your skin, right where the darts struck you. You expected to find a wound there, and you did. But we had you unconscious for three days before you woke up in that abandoned base. Plenty of time for us to implant a chip no more’n a millimeter in diameter. Once you got back into the Solar System, we knew where you were at all times. We had forces arranged in several places where you might travel, most of them on Mars. You just happened to come to Eagle City where Moze and his team got the job of putting the final touches on the plan. And here we are.”

The man Joe had brought down began to groan. Blood had flowed briefly from his nostrils and left small moist tracks on his

face. Slowly he raised his hands to his head.

“I think when Jam’s up, you’ll be in a tough spot, Starman,” said Moze. “He’ll want a rematch, and I gotta warn you, he’s fierce and unforgiving.”

At that moment, a sound like an oncoming train grew quickly from a whisper to an unmistakable roar. Suddenly the water in the pool at the bottom of the chamber began to churn, and then a large spacecraft broke the surface. Silver water rolled off its forest green hull in streams and sheets.

“Hey!” cried out one of the thugs. He ran for the weapon he had discarded when the fight had begun. The others were not far behind him, Jam stumbling to keep up. Quickly the five made a phalanx, leveled their weapons at the craft that was pulling in to one of the slips, and fired. Mark and Joe hugged the floor. High power laser beams caused the air to sizzle.

The beams struck the hull of the Ahmanyans craft and were diffused and absorbed.

“Let’s get out of here!” cried Jam, his excitement causing his nose to bleed once again. He ran for the mouth of the passage.

A counterattacking beam from the ship struck him, its pale green light faintly visible in the diaphanous vapor that hung in the atmosphere. The man dropped, unconscious.

Staying low, Mark and Joe rolled their heads toward the ship and saw several helmeted Ahmanyans debarking and carrying slender weapons in the shape of rifles. Each wore a uniform of uncertain color, as if the substance from which it was made absorbed rather than reflected light. The four remaining thugs fired their laser weapons again, now aiming for the Ahmanyans, but a second time the beams were diffused and absorbed. The Ahmanyans in turn fired back and the four men slumped to the ground.

Cautiously, Mark and Joe sat up and then pulled themselves to their feet.

“*Emmaino, melissan!*” said Mark. The greeting nearly died in his throat as the big Starman saw who was emerging from the Ahmanyans ship after the others.

“‘Greetings, friends’, indeed!” said Starman Zip Foster briskly.

Chapter 21: First Blood

THE FOREMOST AHMANYAN flipped his smoke-colored helmet upward.

“Together again, the friends from Earth and Ahmanya!” he exclaimed.

“Jogren!” cried Mark and Joe together.

A second Ahmanyan flipped up his helmet. “Saadervo, too,” he said. “Welcome back to our planet. Things will move in our favor now—at least for a time.” The governor of *Imlah Taltahni* directed the Ahmanyans to carry the prisoners into the ship.

“We have disrupted some of their neural connectors. They will be unconscious for several hours,” Jogren explained. “We will leave these louts in the care of Daniel Teagarden.”

Mark and Joe laughed.

“What is funny?” asked Jogren.

“Your growing command of English continues to surprise me,” said Mark. “Where did you learn the word ‘lout’?”

“Is it not correct?” Jogren seemed puzzled and a little chagrined.

“It is correct,” Mark assured him. “It is a slang term.”

“Ah, slang. I am enjoying learning slang. We have almost none in Ahmanyan. I learned the word ‘lout’ when I monitored a conversation you had with Mr. Steve Cliff when he was in the Asteroid Belt complaining about louts who were troubling him in some fashion. I can learn much slang by monitoring Mr. Steve Cliff.”

Saadervo continued the previous conversation. “We will deliver the prisoners to Daniel Teagarden. His colony of Wind People, as you will recall, is not far off our line of journey. Unlike those you brought back in the Xenobot ship, these prisoners may know something of value. The Wind People will

be able to hold these five until the immediate crisis is past.”

A look of intensity suddenly crossed the Ahmanyen’s face. “Did you bring the crystals? Are they safe?”

“They’re safe,” Joe assured him. “Right here in my bag, wrapped up carefully.”

“You would find it extremely difficult to damage them.”

“What are they, Saadervo?” queried Mark as Saadervo took possession of Joe’s bag.

“I am hesitant to speak of them until our experts examine them and confirm my suspicions, Mark, but if I am correct, these items will be crucial to the defense of our planets.”

Without delay, the Ahmanyen ship began the return journey to the Refuge of Twilight. Zip, Mark, and Joe sat together in a wide seat in the passenger section of the spacecraft. The three friends took great comfort in being together again, with all of them safe. Through the watery passage the sleek ship journeyed, and then launched into the air from the depths of the Martian Sea.

Moments after the forest green ship had become airborne, Saadervo joined the three Starmen and began to brief Mark and Joe.

“The enemy was working two plans to discover our whereabouts,” began Saadervo, “—one with you two and one with Zip. It was a good plan, but its weakness was that it also gave us two possibilities of learning their intentions if either plan failed. Fortunately for us, both *did* fail. Zip reached us before you did, but even if he hadn’t we’d have been able to counteract the strike these five men were prepared to launch against us.

“By their failure, we have learned something of inestimable value: the enemy underestimates us. It is impossible that anyone would have been able to enter any of the Ahmanyen refuges undetected. But if, by any chance whatever, you had led the enemy to *Imlah Taltahni*, they would not have escaped to reveal any secret they could have learned. Had you come alone, our defenses would have detected and neutralized the locator beacons they implanted in your necks long before they could

have revealed your destination. We neutralized them as soon as we pulled into the slip back there, and we will remove them when we return to the refuge.

“Your best scientists have learned on Tharsos that, if Ahmanyans do not want to be discovered, they will not be discovered. Renegade humans certainly cannot find us, and the Xenobots are even less capable of doing so in their current condition.”

Mark and Joe were immensely relieved to hear Saadervo’s words. He exuded confidence, and it was contagious.

“You comfort me, Saadervo,” laughed Mark.

“I am glad to hear it, but this is no time for overconfidence, Mark,” said the Ahmanyman. “We are by no means in a safe place. On the contrary, I assure you that the plight we face is desperate. But we are far more prepared for the Xenobots’ attack than the enemy suspects. And be sure that they will attack. We do not know how large their force will be, and the people we have available to us are not our most skilled in warfare, for most of these still sleep.

“After our fortuitous meeting three years ago, our leaders began to restore several of our crucial technicians, tacticians, and warriors from hypersleep. It is they who will lead the defense of our planets. However, most of us are utterly inexperienced in these matters. Nevertheless, I am convinced that, for the coming trial, we will prevail. Our great weapon is primed.

“Thankfully,” he laughed for a moment, “the late David Foster reached us in time to help us put our resources in order. And the enemy not only has no inkling that he has reached us, but believes that he is dead. From the enemy’s point of view, only you have arrived to give us warning, and up until today they have believed that you were their unwitting agents. And they believe that we are powerless. We encouraged that false impression.”

Saadervo told Mark and Joe about the Xenobot spy in Richard Starlight’s office and how Richard had given it misleading information to encourage a premature attack by the enemy. Zip

then related how Sotik had eliminated the spy and how the Ahmanyans had subsequently shielded the strategic human installations from further wormhole incursion.

“But if you are able to conquer the Xenobots when they attack,” contributed Mark thoughtfully, “the enemy will learn something about your strength, and you can remain in hiding no longer.”

Saadervo looked sober for a moment. “You are partially correct, Starman Seaton. Our schedule of self-revelation is pushed forward far too fast for our comfort, and some of us, at least, must become known to the civilization in which we live. But we can still hold much of the truth in reserve while we are still able. Our hope, our strategy in the coming battle, is to cause the enemy to *overestimate* our capability. Until now we have led them to *underestimate* our strength. As you will see in the battle to come, we will appear to be stronger and more numerous to the Xenobots—and their human allies—than we really are. We trust that we will be successful in that deception, and that that will buy us more time.”

At that moment, there was a warning that a landing was imminent. The Ahmanyans ship settled gently onto the sand somewhere in the Martian desert southeast of Brandow. Saadervo paused in his narrative and went to supervise the transfer of the five prisoners to the custody of Daniel Teagarden. The Starmen followed him and greeted their ally from the days of the battle against the Banjoman. Their visit was short since Saadervo was eager to return to *Imlah Taltahni*. Once the ship had returned to the air, Saadervo continued his briefing.

“Through the ruse enacted by your Richard Starlight, we trust that we will cause the Xenobots to attack earlier than they would have planned at first. We are gambling that they will come with a smaller force than they would have if they were to take longer to prepare. We have given them the impression that we Ahmanyans are few in number and virtually helpless. And the Xenobots know that Earth cannot stand against them alone. And believe me, they are eager to avenge the defeat that Richard

Starlight wrought upon them three years ago. Ahmanya has good reason to know that the Xenobots do not forget and do not forgive. They are determined to wreak vengeance ten-fold, and more. The barren terrain you see below you is proof enough of that. It is the Xenobots' eagerness for vengeance that we are counting on in this case. The best defense is almost always to turn the enemy's weaknesses against him rather than merely to overpower him.

"Ah! Here we are at the portal of *Imlah Taltahni*." The ship entered the hangar concealed in the mountains five miles above the Ahmanyan harbor that the Starmen had come to know well.

"Stenafi is eager to see you," Saadervo concluded. "We will rest tonight and enjoy our friendship. In the morning we will join those who are working without pause to prepare the defense."

~

Three days later a fleet of seventy-seven Ahmanyan warships was spread across the Asteroid Belt. Each ship was sheathed against the methods of detection that the Xenobots were known to use, and each was in contact with the entire fleet through a communications network.

Starmen David Foster, Mark Seaton, and Joe Taylor were together aboard the flagship, where Saadervo was one of several tacticians. With the permission of Richard Starlight, a few other Starmen were aboard other Ahmanyan vessels; however, the humans were observers only—this battle was the Ahmanyans'.

Careful and clandestine watch was kept on the known Xenobot outpost in the Belt, and the most powerful Ahmanyan ships were equipped with apparatus that could detect the bending of space that presaged an incursion through a wormhole. These detectors were constantly monitored. Although all indications were that the invaders would appear not far from their base in the Asteroid Belt, the Ahmanyans were taking no unnecessary chances. A few Ahmanyan ships with highly developed detectors had been located on either side of the solar ecliptic.

For twenty-seven hours the fleet had been in position, waiting for the first sign of a Xenobot invasion.

“Nervous?” Joe asked Saadervo.

The Ahmanyman looked up with a thoughtful expression. “I suppose I am, but mostly I feel honored to be among this generation of Ahmanyman defenders. In this battle we will strike the first blow in the new Xenobot Wars. For long we Ahmanyans have been caretakers and historians. Now, at last, we can be warriors again. It does not come easily to us who are the children of ninety generations who are descended from the few survivors of the attack on our planet. Not one of us has any battle experience.”

The Ahmanyman’s long dark hair swept back from his head, and he looked at each of the Starmen in turn. His dark eyes were rich and deep. “So, friends, I am somewhat nervous, and I expect that all of us are.”

All at once, a cry went up from three detectors at once. “*Yekmor dalan*⁶!”

“Now we will set aside our nervousness and we will defend our planet—and yours!” Saadervo’s eyes glittered with determination. He wheeled and took his position with the Ahmanyman commander and four other tacticians at a partially sunken tank about ten feet square. Inside were points of light that made up a three-dimensional map of a portion of the Asteroid Belt. The locations of the Ahmanyman ships were shown in green lights, the larger showing up a little brighter than the others. The Xenobot ships would appear in red. The Xenobot installation in the Asteroid Belt was indicated by a dull orange light. Pale yellow sparks showed the locations of the largest of the Asteroids.

The Starmen watched closely. Saadervo had already explained the workings of the tank and the strategy of the Ahmanyman defensive fleet. Now they would see how effective the plans were. They observed that a wavy blue glimmer was throbbing at

⁶ The enemy is coming!

a point on the edge of the Belt several hundred miles from the Xenobot base.

Even as the Ahmanyen fleet commander and tacticians and the Starmen moved into place around the tank, coordinates were being communicated to the entire Ahmanyen fleet. The Starmen felt the accustomed gut-dropping sensation of wormhole travel as the flagship moved through hyperspace to a point opposite the Xenobots' point of entry. Its green light became manifest just as the first of the enemy ships completed the journey through hyperspace.

Inside the tank, a flashing ruby light suddenly appeared in close proximity to the blue pulse, followed by an outpouring of red lights that spewed through the blue ripples into the open tank. Within seconds, all other Ahmanyen warships had crossed through hyperspace and assumed a prearranged battle-ready position around the flagship. The Xenobot warfleet that had expected to arrive undetected and uncontested and then go forth to scour Mars, Earth, and the Moon, suddenly found itself facing a large Ahmanyen fleet in battle array.

Though there were seventy-seven Ahmanyen warcraft, it looked as if there were more than three hundred. The masters of light had created phantom warships to swell their apparent number; the phantoms glowed with a chartreuse radiance. The fleet commander gave the order. Almost as one, the Ahmanyen warships released their immense firepower against the enemy. The battle was joined. Red lights began to wink out.

If the Xenobots were taken by surprise, it was hard to tell. Wave upon wave came through the wormhole, and their numbers swelled into the hundreds. Faced with their ancient enemy in battle, they counterattacked viciously.

Their eyes wide open in fascination, the Starmen stared into the tank at the display of lights. The battle formation the Ahmanyens had established was a half sphere about fifty miles in diameter and slightly offset from the Xenobots' point of entry. In that formation, the Ahmanyens could direct their weapons at the invaders without any of their own ships being in the line of

fire.

For a time, the half sphere contained all the Xenobot ships as soon as the enemy emerged from the wormhole, but the defenders could not annihilate every one of the invading ships. As the Xenobot warcraft appeared in ever-greater numbers, many of them zipped through the array and began to attack the Ahmanyans from the rear. Saadervo conversed rapidly with his fellow tacticians. The commander of the defending fleet listened carefully to the exchange. The Ahmanyman formation slipped and faltered as one ship after another began to maneuver to escape an attacker.

At last the commander cried out, “*Romthaia*⁷!” By prearranged command, the surviving Ahmanyman ships retreated through hyperspace from the center of their original position by two hundred miles. The Starmen saw that the half sphere had suddenly quadrupled in size. There were a few gaps where Ahmanyman ships had been destroyed.

A second later, before the Xenobot invaders could engage their own hyperdrive, a massive violet light materialized in the map of the battle zone.

“Tharsos!” cried Zip excitedly, leaning over the wall of the tank.

“Tharsos it is!” cried Saadervo.

The master battlecraft devised by the Ahmanyans more than twelve millennia earlier once again took on the defense of the Solar System against a Xenobot invasion!

With its sudden appearance, several speeding Xenobot warcraft that were unable to change course crashed upon its surface, creating small bursts of fire. A dozen laser firelances flashed at once from the surface of the planetoid and in quick succession destroyed a vast number of Xenobot ships. Then the Ahmanyman battlecraft emitted a powerful pulse that disrupted every spacecraft within a fifty-mile radius, shaking their very atomic structure into instability. Inside the tank, the Starmen saw

⁷ Fall back!

concentric lavender spheres flow speedily outward from the great light that marked the position of Tharsos, then fade before they reached the surrounding Ahmanyen spacecraft. The Xenobot ships closest to the battle asteroid imploded, others a little farther away fell into pieces, and those farthest from the effect of the weapon were hard put to it merely to hold together.

“Sulphur and salt!” exclaimed Joe. “I’ve never seen anything so, so final, so devastating! I’d never imagined such a weapon!”

A great cry went up inside the Ahmanyen flagship. “*Allamah!*” It was repeated by a few especially excited Ahmanyens. Before long, however, it became an energized chorus. The sound of it stirred the Starmen’s blood.

Joe turned to Mark with a big, triumphant smile. “You were not so far off when you fought off the Xenobots on Nyx with your holograms! The memory of the sound your phantom warriors made then still gives me the willies when I think about it!”

“But now it’s good!” said Zip. “Very good!”

Mark smiled and nodded.

Seeing that they were hopelessly outclassed, the few surviving Xenobot warcraft disappeared through hyperspace. The sky was free of the enemy.

“Did any of the Xenobot craft move to a location within the inner planetary system?” asked the commander tensely and urgently.

One of the technicians answered after a delay of only one or two seconds. “There are no Xenobot craft between the sun and the Asteroid Belt.”

“We won!” declared Saadervo. “It is as we hoped!” he exulted after he checked his records. “Six hundred and four invaded, but only forty-three returned home to report that Ahmanya is strong and can defeat the Xenobots still!”

The celebration throughout the fleet, though intense and heartfelt, was brief. Ahmanyen ships were designated to continue to patrol the Asteroid Belt, and several larger ships were called upon to monitor space throughout the inner planets and far on

both sides of the solar ecliptic.

“And we,” Jogren said to the Starmen, “will accompany the squad that will capture the Xenobot base in the remnants of Azemir—if you’d like to come.”

“Yippee!” said Joe, back to his customary ebullient self. “Lead us to it.”

Before long, a squadron of eight Ahmanyman warcraft appeared in the proximity of the Xenobot stronghold in the Asteroid Belt. A survey of the facility showed that it was deserted.

“Take the helm, Joe,” Saadervo offered, “and land.”

“Thanks, Saadervo,” said the Starman as he eagerly took control of the Ahmanyman spacecraft. Joe had been allowed to fly an Ahmanyman ship two or three times in the previous years, but this brief flight was the most exciting he had experienced.

The asteroid was roughly spherical, a little more than four miles in diameter at its longest axis.

“We’ll need smart-grip boots here,” announced Joe as he brought the ship to a soft landing on the pad outside the compound. There were no Xenobot ships in evidence.

“Could the enemy have set traps for us?” queried Zip.

“Not likely, but possible,” said Saadervo. “They certainly did not expect to meet any resistance; it is reasonable to assume that they did not plan to abandon this installation as quickly as they needed to. However, we will assuredly scan the entire facility thoroughly and carefully before we enter it.”

Four Ahmanyman ships remained on patrol in the vicinity of the abandoned outpost, and three others joined the Starmen’s ship on the asteroid. Moments later, Saadervo, Jogren, the Starmen, and several others approached the structures the Xenobots had erected. Though they didn’t expect to meet any opposition, each carried a weapon, and the troop moved vigilantly.

For nearly half an hour, Ahmanyman technicians probed the squat, thickly walled structures. They made several electronic scans, and then sent robotic explorers into the warren of passages. No signs of danger were reported. A small band of inspectors toured the installation before the general assessment

team entered.

It did not take long to explore the facilities. There were storage areas, most still well stocked with supplies. Several caches of weapons were discovered.

“The communications center should be most rewarding,” conjectured Zip. “I doubt they had much time to destroy their data before they fled.”

“Yes,” agreed Saadervo. “This can be a trove of immense importance. We must get our experts out here immediately and take possession.”

“Maybe there’ll be records here of their human contacts. That would be more help than anything else we could discover here.”

“Let us hope you are right, Zip,” agreed Jogren.

Mark joined the group in the company of two Ahmanyans technicians who had explored another part of the facility. The Starman wore a sober expression.

“We found a mechanism that may well be a solar power tap, or the beginnings of one.” The Ahmanyans were grave. They led Saadervo and the other Starmen to the apparatus, where Mark pointed out various parts of the machinery and conjectured about their functions.

“Well,” concluded Saadervo, “if this is indeed the beginning of their solar energy tap, then we have set back their plans by some time. Our experts will make sure, but this may very well be good news.”

After a cursory examination of the rest of the facility, Saadervo left four ships on site with a wormhole shield to guard against a foray by the Xenobots to recover or destroy what they had abandoned in their haste. Then he and the Starmen and the crews of the other ships re-embarked and prepared to return to Ahmanya.

Chapter 22: Victory Without Triumph

INCIPIENT ROSEATE DAWN began to spread over the Martian sky. Clouds stretched across the eastern hemisphere like fingers, ruddy with light from the hidden sun that was still at least an hour before rising. Pockets of darkness remained in the deep places of the terrain, but over all was a dull red patina.

Starman Joe Taylor lifted his head off the pillow and gazed for a long time through the clear walls of the roomy tent. He felt deeply peaceful. He glanced at where the others were sleeping and saw that one of them was also awake.

“Good idea to come here,” he said quietly. “We all needed it.”

“Yes,” agreed Jogren.

“Stark and empty,” contributed Zip who had also awakened but had kept his eyes closed. Then he sat up; “maybe like our future.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” asked Mark, rolling over to face his friends.

Zip smiled. “No, I don’t.” He twisted around so that he could see the panorama. “This place is full of potential—like our future.” A moment later, he said, “Let’s get the others up. I’m ready for a big breakfast and then some exploration.”

~

Two days had passed since the triumphant Ahmanyen warfleet had returned from their generation’s first battle with Xenobots. The heady victory was tempered by the knowledge that the major Xenobot invasion was yet to come, and inevitable. While the Ahmanyen leaders pored through the information they had gleaned from the first encounter, the Starmen and their three Ahmanyen friends had decided to take a few days’ vacation together before the humans returned to their families.

After a moving memorial to the Ahmanyens who had fallen in the defense of their planets, Stenafi had suggested that they fly

to an empty and beautiful land northwest of *Imlah Taltahni*. There were no human inhabitants for hundreds of miles, and the closest Ahmanyen refuge was even farther away. Further, the formidable winds so common in the lower latitudes were gentler here.

The others had agreed to her proposal with alacrity. Now they had come to the first morning of their excursion.

Over breakfast, Zip asked, "Saadervo, why did Tharsos join the battle later than the warships? Had you begun with Tharsos, there would possibly have been no Ahmanyen casualties."

Saadervo pushed a toasted piece of Marjie Prester's bread into his mouth and chewed for a moment.

"Tharsos is one of our great weapons, Zip. We did not know what the enemy would bring through the hypertube, and we did not want to risk our asteroid in case they arrived with the capability of destroying it. Further, by allowing them to enter in great numbers but holding our own major defensive weapon in reserve, it created a false sense of security in them and inspired overconfidence. The surprise appearance of the weapon they dreaded the most must have caused immense shock to the entire Xenobot fleet. Further, if Tharsos had appeared first, it was possible that the Xenobots in the forefront of their invasion might have been able to communicate with their fellows who were behind them and prevented them from appearing at all. Mostly guesswork on our part, but guesses thoughtfully considered and acted upon."

"I see," nodded Zip. "Good strategy. Draw them out in large numbers, then destroy as many as possible as fast as possible."

"True," said Saadervo, "and leave a few to return to their home planet with the message that their 'ancient enemy' is strong and powerful. I believe that we have given them much to fear."

"There is no doubt whatever that they will return," said Stenafi. "When they do, it will be in full force."

"Sadly, there is some evidence that a few may have withdrawn to one of the moons of Neptune," said Saadervo. "It

is a ploy that they used most effectively in the first of the Xenobot Wars. This time, however, we are aware, and will watch.”

“But they have no more presence in the Asteroid Belt—isn’t that true?” asked Mark.

“It is true. The entire inner planetary system is free of the Xenobot menace—for the time being.”

Jogren lifted up a coffee cup and took a sip.

“How can you drink that liquid, Jogren? I think it tastes like mud!” said Stenafi, her lips slightly curled with a look of disgust.

“It helps me wake up in the morning.”

The Starmen laughed aloud, and Stenafi slapped Jogren’s shoulder, her eyes sparkling with vexation.

“Eleh!” cried Jogren, lifting his arms with alarm. “You’re spilling my coffee!”

After breakfast, the six friends exited their tent and began to explore the land in which they had set up camp in the failing light of the evening before. Hard sand stretched toward the north, with ridges of stone and piles of tumbled boulders providing some relief from the smoothness of the desert. Two rivulets ran down a rocky slope that rose behind them to the south. Under the new-risen sun, the fresh water glistened bright orange.

“The critical issue is time,” said Saadervo, continuing the conversation that Zip had started at breakfast. “It takes time to restore those who are in hypersleep. It is crucial that we awaken more of our key personnel before the Xenobots launch their mighty attack. Many of those who sleep have knowledge essential to our defense. Within a few days, our leaders will select those who will be restored, and the process of their awakening will begin at once. I grieve for them.”

“You grieve? Why?” asked Joe as he stepped over a square boulder to reach lower ground beyond.

“Because, Joe,” began Jogren, “when they went into hypersleep more than twelve millennia ago, they knew that the devastation of their planet was imminent. When we awaken them, they will see for the first time the results of the Xenobots’

ferocity. Their last memories of Ahmanya were of its incomparable beauty, with ancient cities and a population more than a hundred times larger than today.”

“And they will awake,” continued Stenafi, “only to be told that the Xenobots are about to attack again, with unmeasured might and uncertain outcome. Those few whom we have already awakened bear a fervor for battle which is foreign to the rest of us, yet they are also in a state of shock. They are displaced in time and feel uncertain of their position among the Ahmanyans of this era.”

No one spoke for a time as the company crossed the hard-packed sands, moving without haste through the untraveled terrain.

“What hope do we have?” asked Zip at length. His eyes were reaching to the far horizon of the red planet. Beside him one of the rivulets had become a little stronger and deeper.

“The old plan is now unworkable,” answered Jogren. “We cannot count on having the time to rebuild our cities and awaken our entire population, or even sufficient numbers of them to provide a defense with confidence. That would take years. We have few battleships and no capability of building more in the quantity we shall need.”

“The challenge,” added Stenafi, “cannot be met by superior force, as it was before. We must depend upon wisdom. The Xenobots have weaknesses—their vitality is in an irreversible downward spiral, and their prime power source is solar energy—dependable and inexhaustible, but only as long as they can draw on it.”

“There will be a new plan,” said Saadervo. “Besides the might of Tharsos, we had also a weapon that could disrupt the Xenobots’ solar power technology. It was experimental; we never had the opportunity to use it, and now must develop that capability once again. Our researchers will study the Xenobot base in the ruins of Azemir and the design of the energy disrupter that comes from the previous age of our splendor. Our own technicians and the scientists of Earth will cooperate to devise an

effective defense as soon as may be possible. Our enemy is not only the Xenobots—it is time. We have had the first victory with few casualties, and we have learned that we are stronger than we had estimated at first. But we believe it likely that the Xenobots, in full strength, are still far more powerful than we are.”

An hour later the six friends came to a clifftop. Below them the land dropped steeply for about fifty yards before leveling out. A few scraggly trees and low scrub lined the top of the ridge where they stood. The gnaw of time had rounded the original sharpness of the contours of the land. Behind the hikers, the two streams had joined and become at this point a swiftly moving river that poured over the cliff to their right in a fantastic horsetail of a waterfall. Rainbow lights moved and shimmered in the spray.

“Look at that lake!” exclaimed Mark. He did not have to point. Less than a mile from the base of the waterfall was a pewter-colored lake almost perfectly round. He began to climb down the cliff. The others followed, and before long all six came up to the lakeshore. Wind-feathered water spread before them. The opposite shore was visible only as a dark line on the horizon.



Less than a mile from the base of the waterfall was a pewter-colored lake.

“Do any of you know where Paul McTorney and his crew took us?” asked Mark. “Where was that burning planet and the moon where we woke up?”

For some time, none of the Ahmanyans spoke. Then Jogren answered.

“I have seen the photographs you brought back, Mark. We cannot be certain, but it appears that you were taken to one of the planets that the Xenobots ravaged in the days when their power was unchecked.”

“Who were the people whose images we saw on that planet’s moon? Were they the race that inhabited the planet?” As soon as Mark asked these questions he began to tremble. He knew he would not be able to contain his emotions if he learned that the Xenobots had destroyed such an angelic people and their unspoiled planet, and turned it into the obscenity he and Joe had seen.

“Ah, no,” said Jogren with a faraway look. “What you saw were images of the Lucian people in the grandeur of their unspoiled planet Luxa. Our histories recount that the Lucians were one of the First Races. The greegles provided this information to us many thousands of years ago. It is likely that that moon was one of the Lucian bases. It must have been they who destroyed the planet you saw.”

“That handsome race destroyed the planet? Whatever for? Were the inhabitants evil?”

“We do not know what race inhabited it.”

“What happened to the Lucians?”

Jogren paused. “Their history is the most tragic in the Universe.”

“More tragic than having your planet destroyed? Good grief, what happened to these Lucians?”

A deep sadness overwhelmed Jogren, and the other Ahmanyans remained quiet. At last he said, “They still exist. My friend, you have met their descendants. Today we call them the Xenobots.”

The conclusion of the Starman saga will be found in the third volume of the Starman trilogy, **THE WAR OF THE LIGHT**.