

FORTRESS *on the* SUN

PAUL COOK

PHOENIX PICK

an imprint of



Rockville, Maryland

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—FOR PATRICK MCGOOHAN
NUMBER SIX
greatest prisoner of them all

Drenched in sunlight they are blind travelers...
—NORMAN DUBIE
“New England, Springtime”

1

Emerging from a thicket of birch trees that flanked a narrow meadow, a man appeared in the quiet of the night. He was a large individual, yet he moved across the brittle grass with an athlete's grace. His was an intentional carefulness, not wanting his presence there to disturb the peacefulness they had worked so hard to achieve. In fact, he did not want his presence to disturb anything at all, ever again.

Ian McFarland Hutchings, Ph.D., renowned biotech chemist and history's greatest killer of men, made his way slowly across the meadow as he did every night at that hour. Hutchings was not prone to bouts of his community's mysterious new quick-sleep—or any kind of sleep for that matter—but making this final circuit of their little corner in Hell before turning in did seem to relax him somewhat. During the daylight hours, Hutchings' mind concerned itself with the stewardship of the one hundred and three men and women of their community whose exile he shared. At night, however, his mind would fill with the banshee voices of a guilty conscience: *Murderer!* those voices would whisper. *Annihilist! Suffer in Hell for the rest*

of your days! Solace from those voices seemed to come only when he took his final tour through the meadow.

Illuminated by brilliant constellations overhead, Hutchings walked across the glade, mindful that his 250 pounds—forty of it contained in bracelets of solid gold at his ankles and wrists, his “shackles,” as he referred to them—didn’t further damage the hybrid grass of the meadow floor.

The meadow, however, could never offer him the genuine consolation he knew his conscience needed. Ultimately, the only acceptable expiation for his crimes would be his death, a demise that would more than likely come in the form of a few billion tons of super-heated hydrogen plasma imploding down around him. His life would be over in a trillionth of a second, well before his brain would even register the fact. One moment he would be alive, worrying about the welfare of his friends; the next, he—and those very same friends—would be atomic mist.

At the opposite end of the meadow, about forty yards away, lay Hutchings’ pride and joy: a gazebo made of real, handcrafted wood. While the manufacture of the meadow had necessarily been a group effort, Hutchings himself had built the gazebo. It was based on one of the few childhood memories he had. His Uncle Buck owned a small farm on the outskirts of Lowell, Massachusetts. Adjacent to the farm *were* five acres of unmown pasturage surrounded by elderly birches. The meadow upon which Hutchings now stood had been modeled after it. Though a much smaller meadow—it was approximately fifty yards wide and about eighty yards long—theirs was just as real as his uncle’s spread. The grass and the trees most certainly were.

Hutchings was very proud of his creation.

Standing in the lower half of the meadow next to the mirror surface of their fake pond, Hutchings happened to glance at his feet. There was no real reason for it, really. Just instinct.

There in the fragile grass adjacent to the pond he discovered several long gouges, dark moist earth against the white of the sage. They were clearly divots, clumps of torn-up soil. He scanned the area around him, squinting in the darkness, and noticed several other ragged holes.

“Christ on a stick,” he growled. The gouges were hash marks, goal lines. That meant that several little Boys, against orders, had been up there earlier playing football. To his further dismay, he found that

a large section of the meadow had been scrimmaged upon. A *lot* of little Boys had been up there, it seemed.

“Damn it! Com, open. Boys’ dorm!” he snapped.

A faint chime went off beside his right ear as their communications system opened a channel to the dormitory which housed their little Boys.

“Wake up, you little bastards! This is Hutchings and I’m in the meadow. I want to know who was up here this afternoon. Answer me or I’ll tell the Spanker for sure this time!”

A dozen little Boys roused from sleep started yammering into the com at once, the cacophony of their replies filling Hutchings’ right ear. It was the threat of the Spanker that got their attention. The Children feared the Spanker as much as the adults feared the Vapor. And while the Spanker was a fiction, the Vapor most assuredly was not.

Hutchings did not wait for a confession. He had a good idea of who might have organized a football game. “Matthew White, wake up! You’re responsible for this.

“*What? I didn’t do anything!*” piped a voice foggy from sleep.

“Don’t give me that. You guys were up here this afternoon playing football. The place is wrecked now!”

“*It’s not wrecked, you big fat liar,*” the Boy protested.

“You ruined what took us months to cultivate!”

“*Bobby made all the holes!*” White contended.

“Bobby Nakamura is only five years old and he’d never disobey me. Besides, Lorraine said she *saw* you making a football in the Fiddler’s den the other day. She told me.”

“She did not, you liar!”

Hutchings shook his head in disgust. “Christ, I knew you’d do something like this. It was just a matter of time.”

Several of the little Boys down in their dorm rooms started talking and hooting into their corns at once. “*Leave him alone, Ian!*” “*You’re just a bully!*” “*You’re a big fat bully!*” Several juicy raspberries followed from the little Boys’ dorm.

“I’m going to tell you this one time,” Hutchings said. “It took us a year to generate viable topsoil, and it’s not for you to ruin. This place is off-limits from now on. Do you hear me?”

“*Then where are we gonna play?*” Matt White protested. “*The ball always bounces off the roof of the Rough-house and you can’t tackle anybody there ‘cause you slide and hit the wall*”

“The meadow was designed for general use. It’s a *park*, not a football field.”

“It’s more like a cemetery, if you ask me.”

“Watch it, Matt.”

Matthew White, a twenty-eight-year-old shuttle pilot, had one of their worst cases in retrograde amnesia. His entire adult life had been erased from his mind, leaving him with the mental abilities—to say nothing of the concomitant maturity—of a seven-year-old boy. Hutchings should have known better than to leave any of the Children unsupervised, especially the little Boys.

Matt White then said, “*Hey, are you up there with your shackles on? I’ll bet you are! I’ll bet you’re up there right now walking all over the place making holes with those big shackles on!*”

“Their weight is negligible,” Hutchings retorted.

“I’ll bet you’re mashing all kinds of holes up there! I’ll bet you a million bucks!”

Hutchings said, “Hey, I designed this place. I’m very careful where I go.”

“You’re such a liar, Ian! You’re a liar and a bully! I hate you a million times! I hate you, I hate you!”

Hutchings heard the closing chime as the twenty-eight-year-old little Boy went off-line. The closing chimes of the other little Boys followed like tinny sprites vanishing into thin air.

He rubbed his eyes. The strain of the last three years was beginning to get to him. Lately, he seemed too quick to anger, too eager to lash out and vent his pent-up feelings.

Recalling his own mother’s tirades, he knew that having a household of children was in truth Hell itself. Chaos ran amok, with Pandemonium right behind snapping at its heels. However... Hutchings had to remind himself that life with real children was only one kind of Hell. There was a much, *much* greater Hell still.

And he was living in it.



Hell was Sunstation Ra, a giant metals production factory floating on the surface of the sun where escape was impossible and death but an eye-blink away. The meadow upon which he stood had been built in what once was a spacious arboretum that occupied the two upper floors of the facility. Only recently had they got its ecosystem up and running, having taken nearly a year to cultivate the soil, breed the right kind of grass, then accelerate the growth of the dozens of bon-

sai trees which the former science crew of Ra had left behind when the System Assembly pulled them off.

Since its completion, Hutchings had been spending quite a lot of time in the meadow, particularly late at night. As present Administrator, his duties should have kept him so busy during the day that some form of rest at night was inevitable. But Hutchings rarely slept, thanks in part to certain biotech enhancements in his brain, as well as a haunting sense of moral obligation to make up for his criminal past.

No one else on the Hot Rock bore the weight of the crime he had committed, even if everyone there, including the severely memory-wiped Children, were also supposed to be the worst civilization had ever seen. In another life, they would have been executed. Yet, from the perspective of the System Assembly, the governing body that lorded over two planets, twelve inhabited moons, and two giant LaGrange colonies, it did make sense to locate them where they could do no harm, someplace, even, where they might be of some practical use. And that place was a battleship-sized fusion facility on the surface of the sun.

To Hutchings, it made sense in a very poetic—and quite ironic—way. Ra could not be operated efficiently by robots, yet it had been deemed far too dangerous for a crew of volunteers. So they were elected. Those Raians who were able, fused metal alloys in the Suncup—the gold in his shackles came from there—distilled from the 6,000-degree plasma that raged just beyond the Renner force-shield that protected them all. Other inmates tended to the station's basic maintenance; still others tended to those who could not tend to themselves: the Children and the bindlestiffs, inmates so devastated by the horror of their incarceration that they could not function at all. The 'stiffs spent their time wandering the free zones, sleeping in the halls when quick-sleep overtook them, eating whenever they could get near a food processor. But Children they were not.

To Hutchings, the memory-cleansing process was their most cruel and unusual punishment. And it made no sense to him that he, the greatest scourge mankind had ever seen, could remember up to his postdoctoral days in college—but *not* his specific crimes—while some inmates were reduced to the mental states of three-year-olds. If the punishment fit the crime, then he should have been regressed to an embryo, if not executed outright. Instead, he was a twenty-eight-year-old postdoctoral student stuck in a middle-aged man's body.

Hutchings tamped down the divots as best he could. In the morning he would put a few eager Fiddlers, once-engineers barely at the level of college, to repair the damage. The Fiddlers were always looking for something to fiddle with.

Hutchings turned his attention to the gazebo. The wooden edifice actually served a dual purpose. Its stage concealed the Shunt platform upon which they had arrived three years ago. It was a moment Hutchings remembered well—for he had been the first to set foot on that fantastic island on the sun. He was the first to be told who they were and why they were there; he was the first to be told what they could do to redeem themselves: send the System Assembly newly fused metals and the SA would mark their effort. As such, for some, parole off the Hot Rock was possible.

But not for the butcher of a billion people.

Hutchings searched the stars of their planetarium sky. Once a week their Suncup engineers sent up ingots of precious metals forged in the Suncup's fusion chamber. An unmanned ore scow, protected by a Renner shield of its very own, would dip into the sun's twenty-million-degree corona, lock onto Ra's Renner-protected matter-transmission corridor, and take back Ra's plasma-fused booty in one big teleported gulp. So they did their good deeds, some of them. They maintained the sunstation, some of them. They maintained each other, some of them. And Hutchings did what he could, though none of his efforts counted for anything in the eyes of the System Assembly.

Hutchings ran a hand through his bristly white hair. He guessed that he was about forty-five years old, but he felt as if he were a thousand. He shouldn't have barked at Matt. After all, the Boy was only seven years old, just a kid.

Hutchings looked up one final time into their glittering star-scape, feeling the winds of October drift across their ersatz meadow. He sighed.

Then stumbled backwards.

A bright star had suddenly appeared overhead, a star that wasn't there a few moments ago... a star that didn't belong in any constellation of their artificial night sky.

"Yes!" Hutchings shouted. "Yes!"

Their main computer had been programmed to project onto the planetarium dome any ship that aligned itself with the monopole transmission corridor above the sunstation. But by the size and shape of the "star" overhead, Hutchings knew that this ship was different.

Glowing a brilliant green, it meant that the ship was *Bold Charon*, the System Assembly's personnel transfer shuttle.

It was not an ore scow: People were coming down!

Hutchings stared at the gazebo's stage. The green "star" rolled across Ursa Major's generous ladle as it aligned itself within the monopole corridor a million miles above the sunstation, the only place, and a dangerous one at that, where any kind of teleportation could be done.

They had waited three years for this moment.

Hutchings ran toward the gazebo where a gossamer haze had begun to manifest on the stage. There, he counted the human forms now appearing. One, two... three, four... five, six.

Six new inmates!

The star representing *Bold Charon* overhead then vanished as the ship dashed away from the dangerous solar atmosphere, its purpose fulfilled.

"Meadow!" Hutchings shouted. "Lights up, twelve noon!"

The planetarium night vanished with astonishing suddenness as a brilliant blue sky speckled with clouds took its place.

On the stage six startled human beings stared with amazement at the world about them—the meadow, the forest of stately white birches, and the huge man with the massive golden wrist- and ankle-bracelets standing next to the mirror of a fake pond.

"Welcome to Hell," Ian Hutchings said breathlessly. "Welcome!"

2

Six more astonished individuals could not have been sent from above. Hutchings could see that they had not believed that the System Assembly's nasty little secret in the sky—a rumored prison facility on the sun—actually existed. Each had obviously assumed they were being teleported to their deaths, much the way Hutchings and his friends had believed at the time of their Shunt three years earlier.

"This is interesting," said a very tall man who wore a name patch that read: N. KLANE. He stood close to seven feet tall and his platinum-blond hair nearly brushed the rafters of the ceiling. "Certainly not what we were expecting."

“Don’t get your hopes up. It’s still Hell,” Hutchings said. He pointed beyond the gazebo. “Go one mile that way, or—” He indicated the opposite direction. “One mile *that* way and you’d find out quick enough.”

“You mean this goes on for miles?” the tall Mr. Klane asked.

“No. This is just an arboretum,” Hutchings reported. “From here it extends about two hundred and fifty feet to the inner bulkheads. Beyond that are a million layers of Renner shielding and *then* it’s the surface of the sun.”

Klane stepped down the short flight of steps to the meadow. “Quite an illusion,” he remarked. “And a forest as well. Very impressive.”

Of the others, one man had collapsed backward against several transfer crates which had also ridden the Shunt with the new prisoners. The stencilled name on his duffle read: E. PLAINFIELD.

The third man, D. OAKS, had quick, brown eyes, dark, unruly hair and practically no forehead. He was short, almost the size of a child. He blinked a few times as if to clear his head from the effects of the Shunt. He then slipped under the railing, jumping to the meadow. “Wow!” he said. “Look at this place!”

Of the women, one had jet-black hair with flecks of silver gray at her temples; she might have been in her late thirties. The other was a redhead with a face harsh and tough that indicated a difficult life had been hers. The name patch of the former read: A. ADAMSON; the name patch of the latter read: C. PICKERALL. The third woman, a blonde, seemed the most distraught of the three as she appeared to be weeping. Her duffle bag read: R. BARRIE.

The childlike Oaks came around to Hutchings. “Are we really on the surface of the sun? I mean, it’s out there, isn’t it?”

Hutchings nodded. “Actually, the sun doesn’t have a normal surface. It’s mostly hydrogen plasma clouds that get denser the farther down you go. We’re about fifty thousand miles above the first striations of palpable surface in the photosphere where it’s cooler than the corona by a factor of ten.”

“Wow,” Oaks repeated. He turned to the tall Mr. Klane. “So we made it, Klane. We’re alive!”

Klane didn’t appear to be all that impressed.

“Enjoy it while you can,” Hutchings said. “We could implode at any time. The Renner shield is extremely powerful, but nothing lasts forever. Second law of thermodynamics and all that.”

“Will we know it if the end comes?” Klane asked.

“Not really,” Hutchings said.

Klane snorted in fatalistic disgust.

At that point, the com-chime sounded in Hutchings right ear. A resonant voice followed it. “*You’re not in your quarters. So where are you?*”

The women crowded at the gazebo rail. The black-haired Adamson asked, “Who is that? Who’s talking to you?”

“One moment, Hugh. Pause,” Hutchings said. To the group on the gazebo, he said: “I’m speaking with Hugh Bladestone, our physician. I need to see what he wants. Com, continue. I’m up in the meadow, Hugh, making the rounds. What’s happening at your end?”

“*I’m with Kate,*” the doctor said. “*She’s had another one of her nightmares. She came out of it screaming this time.*”

“That sounds bad.”

“It’s the worst one yet. I had to give her a mild sedative. Aren’t you two bedding each other these days?”

“On occasion. I was a little restless tonight.”

“You know it’s the best medicine for her. I think she should be sleeping with you for the next several nights so you can keep an eye on her. I don’t want to lose her.”

“Neither do I,” Hutchings said. “Is there anything else?”

“Larry called from the Brains. He says the Man logged a handshake signal to the gazebo. That the Shunt platform’s been activated. Has it?”

“I was about to call you,” Hutchings responded. “It has. We’ve got some new people.”

“That’s fantastic! That’s absolutely fantastic! How many did we get?”

“Six.”

“Just six?”

“Six for now. You’d better come up. And bring a few parrys with you, while you’re at it.”

“I’m on my way! Com, out.”

The tall Klane hovered over Hutchings, which was no mean feat, given Hutchings’ own height of six feet three. “You have a doctor down here?”

“Yes. Fortunately for us. He’s a good man.”

“Is he a prisoner like we are?” asked Oaks.

“Do you mean is he a *criminal* like we are?” Hutchings said. He nodded grimly. “That’s what the Screws tell us.”

“So who’s the boss down here?” Klane asked. “You?”

Hutchings again nodded. “I’m our Administrator. For the period of this term, anyway.”

Klane seemed to be making note of Hutchings’ compelling size. “Of course,” he said. “You would be.”

“How did you do that?” Oaks asked, scurrying up to Hutchings. “How did you talk that way to that man?”

“It’s our shipwide corn-system, something we dreamed up. You’ll be fully briefed on it when you’re ready to receive your implants.”

Oaks gazed at the forest. “Hey, are those *real* trees?”

Hutchings nodded. “Yes. They’re from bonsai plants left by the original crew. They also left behind seeds for several different kinds of plants as well as the grass you’re standing on.”

“What about bugs? You got any bugs and spiders?” Oaks inquired. “Hate spiders.”

“Not unless they’re hitching a ride on you,” Hutchings said. “All our fauna is microscopic and limited to the soil here in the meadow. Everything else we grow or manufacture—”

“Pardon me,” Klane announced, gazing past Hutchings. “But what is happening right there?”

Klane was pointing to what was designed to appear like the flat surface of a small pond in the meadow. It was actually the polished metal door of their main lift. Now it was retracting beneath the shaggy grass of its banks.

Rising up into the meadow appeared a black man dressed in the bright white of a physician’s tunic. He was roughly sixty years old and had close-cropped white hair that dipped in a slight widow’s peak on a high, intelligent forehead. He carried a small black bag.

The women on the stage huddled close together.

“Easy,” Hutchings said. “This is our doctor, Hugh Bladestone. He won’t hurt you.”

“How do you do, people?” the doctor said with a smile. “Welcome to our little community.”

“Be careful of that bag,” Klane said threateningly.

“There’s nothing in here but parrys,” the doctor said.

“‘Parrys’? What’s a ‘parry’?” Klane demanded.

The doctor placed the bag at his feet. From it, he removed several bracelets, each with an oblong face scrawled with computer circuitry. He then gave one to Klane, then Oaks, who were nearest. He then passed one each up to the women on the stage. “These are for you,” he said. “If you want them.”

“What are they?” Oaks asked. “What do they do?”

“They generate a personal protection shield,” Hutchings said. “We call them parrys. You might want to wear them until you feel safe here.”

None of the new people knew what to make of the strange bracelets.

“Go ahead,” the doctor urged. “Put them on. You initialize them with your thumbprint. As long as you wear your parry, no one can physically assault you.”

Oaks clamped his on immediately and activated it. Klane clamped his on as well but with much less enthusiasm.

Oaks looked up at Hutchings. “Why do you call them parrys? What do they do?”

“They’ll ward off anyone who attacks you or any object thrown your way. A knife, a bullet, a fist. Just about anything.”

“This is *neat*,” said Oaks, admiring his bracelet.

“Now do you feel safe, little man?” Klane asked Oaks mockingly.

“So how do they work?” Oaks asked Hutchings.

“Take a swing at Mr. Klane and see what happens.”

“I wouldn’t do that—” Klane started.

Oaks went ahead anyway. He reared back to take a swing at Klane, but Klane thrust out a hand, intending to push Oaks’s small head away from him.

Klane’s hand, however, encountered a spider of black energy that blossomed suddenly around Oaks, shielding him. Klane pulled his hand back and Hutchings knew that it was tingling with dissipating energies. Oaks’s shield lifted and Klane gripped his hand. He looked disgusted but no less worse for wear.

“Wow,” Oaks breathed.

“Our engineers designed them,” Hutchings said. “They’re based on Algernon Renner’s equations for his force-field technology, the same thing that protects us here on the sun.”

“Why don’t *you* have one?” Klane asked.

“Probably because I don’t need one.”

Oaks’s eyes widened with sudden recognition. “Hey, are you that Eradicator guy?”

“The term is ‘Annihilist.’ But I’d rather you call me by my name. Ian Hutchings. That’s all I go by down here.”

“Major Ian MacFarland Hutchings?” the tall man asked.

“That’s me.”

The three women on the stage slipped their parry bracelets on and activated them.

"They told us you might be dead," the dark-haired Adamson said in a rather husky voice.

"Nope. Still here."

Meanwhile, the doctor had stepped onto the gazebo to examine E. Plainfeid, the man who lay curled up next to the transfer crates. The doctor gently rolled Plainfeid over and looked into the man's eyes which blinked uncomprehendingly.

"I go Baba's home?" Plainfeid asked softly.

"I'm afraid you're going to be with us for a while," the physician said. "Are you in any kind of pain?"

"Want my bankie," Plainfeid said. He stuck his thumb into his mouth and began to suck. As he did, his forefinger caressed his slightly curved nose.

"Oh, brother," Klane said, rolling his eyes.

The redheaded woman, Pickerall, glared contemptuously at the tall man. "Leave him alone, Klane. This isn't easy for any of us. They said this might happen."

"Ian," the doctor signaled. "You might want to look at this."

"What's wrong with him?" Hutchings asked.

"It looks like he's been powerfully regressed," Bladestone said. "Perhaps as far back as infancy."

"What do you mean 'infancy'?" Adamson asked darkly. "He's sixty years old, if he's a day."

Bladestone stood up, knees cracking from the effort. "How old are you, Miss—" He looked at her name patch—"Adamson?"

The dark-haired woman suddenly had to think about it. "I don't remember." She seemed surprised. She turned to the other two women. "I don't remember."

"What's the last thing you do remember?" the doctor asked. "I mean of your life before they sent you here."

Adamson's brow knitted. "I remember a canal race. Yes, that's it! They were going to flood one of the southern plains and all the Mars middle schools were allowed to float pod-teams down the main channel. I was... I was a cheerleader! That's what I was! I was a cheerleader for the Mad Mesa pod! We were going to race the Jiu San Industrials pod and... and—"

She stopped. She suddenly realized that an enormous hunk of her life had been scalloped from her mind.

"I think you're probably sixteen, maybe seventeen years old—mentally," the doctor told her. "Given how old you look now, I'd say they removed twenty years from your memory. But it looks like this man has lost more than that."

Only then did the new people seem to fathom what had been done to their minds.

"We'd better get all of you down to the infirmary," the doctor said. "Com, open, Diane."

"*I'm here,*" a woman's voice broke inches from the doctor's right ear.

"Wake Kristen and bring a gurney up to the meadow. We've just had a Shunt."

"*A Shunt? A people Shunt? Really? How many did we get?*" Diane Beckwith asked excitedly.

"Six," Bladestone told her. "Three men and three women."

"Just six? I mean, weren't we supposed to get twenty or twenty-five new people?"

"Well, it's just these for now. Go ahead, wake Kristen."

Klane reached a long arm through the gazebo railing and retrieved his duffle bag. "I take it you thought more would be coming."

"They told us to expect Shunts of twenty-five new prisoners every three years," Hutchings said. "Three years our time."

"Looks like they changed their minds," Klane said.

"So you're all that're coming?" Hutchings asked.

Adamson followed Klane onto the meadow. "It's just us," she said. "There's no one else."

Oaks grabbed his duffle and slung it over his shoulder. "Hey, we heard that you guys eat your dead down here. Is that true?"

"It hasn't come to that yet," Hutchings said.

"What *do* you people do down here?" Klane asked.

"You'll see."

3

The past was beginning to catch up with Katherine Ariella DeWitt. During the day she might elude her guilt by keeping busy. But at night, in her dreams, such evasions were not possible. The past thundered toward her, just over the far range of hills: stampeding

horses, horses in the thousands—all of them just out of sight and heading her way in the dream.

But why horses? And why now after all these years?

Whatever the reason, they were coming for her and there wasn't anything she could do about it, except perhaps kill herself. That would definitely end the terror of their approach.

Kate was thirty-eight or thirty-nine years old, but like much else in her life, she wasn't certain about it. The Wall of her amnesia blocked memories of her life after her twenty-sixth birthday.

Growing up, she had never once thought of the fury of the sun or that she would end up in a prison tethered to its surface. Now she thought of the sun always; that, and the statistical inevitability that some day the Renner shield would collapse. Oh, sure, their Fiddlers had made a redundancy back-up field around the sunstation just beyond the hull. But entropy always humbled the best efforts of Man. Just ask King Ozymandias. But unlike Shelley's narcissistic king, she would have no statue half-covered by desert sand to speak of her existence. When the end came, she would ride the solar winds in a billion blown atoms. Her epitaph would be written in the luminescent scrawl of the aurora borealis.

Lately, however, Kate had grown tired of thinking such thoughts. She had grown tired of thinking any thoughts whatsoever.

Her emotional deterioration, however, had not gone unnoticed by either Ian, her bedmate, or by Hugh Bladestone, their doctor. On Hugh's advice she had taken up temporary residence near the infirmary so she could be monitored. This meant time away from Ian, even if Ian rarely spent a full night with her. He had his own Eumenides. The unsettling ghosts of a billion human beings would keep anybody awake. Kate had trouble enough with the 191 people she was accused of slaughtering.

Now they were coming back to haunt her in her dreams—stampering horses, just out of sight, beyond a nearby ridge. And lately, the animals seemed to be getting closer.

This was a shame because she loved horses. She had grown up with them in Wyoming. Her father had given her a bay gelding for her twelfth birthday named Nietzsche. Nietzsche was an intelligent animal, full of spunk. She showed Nietzsche at 4-H fairs, barrel-raced him at rodeos. She thought of him as just another member of the family, a person disguised as a horse.

Her dream-horses, however, were nothing at all like Nietzsche.

It is a crazy dream, always the same. In it she finds herself running out across a snow-dappled pasture toward the force-fences behind their ranch. The sky is pink, the clouds are yellow. She hears the calls of the frightened horses. She does not see them yet, but she knows they are just beyond a ridge which has just appeared. Their heads—she can see them!—barely crest the hill, rising and falling as their hooves rumble across the cheatgrass and sod.

Though the horses are saddled, no one rides them. The saddles are almost alive with beauty. They are made of embossed silver and pearl, riveted with rubies and gold—spectacular!

But what's happened to the *riders* of the horses? Where are they? The cries of the animals make her feel as if some pure evil is following close behind them, after anything it can sink its teeth into.

Kate's dream has always stopped there. For whatever reason, though, that night her dream went just a bit further. She had managed to climb the crest of the hill. She wanted to reach the horses before they disappeared again. She wanted to ride off in one of those beautiful saddles, never to be seen.

Hugh Bladestone, however, had stopped her—again. The monitor above Kate's bed had picked up her frantic REM and had notified the doctor. He came armed with a mild dosage of diazepam which should have allowed her to sleep, bypassing her dreams altogether.

But now she was too exhausted to sleep.

Everyone on Ra had strange dreams, a side effect of their amnesia. Remarkably, the memory-specific mind-scouring process did not affect the skills and abilities they needed to operate the sunstation. Those abilities they kept, though they did not know how the mind-wipe process allowed such a thing to happen.

Kate did know that she had grown up in Juliene, Wyoming, but left to attend the University of Texas at Austin where she majored in nuclear-fusion technology. Later, she lived in Galveston and interned at one of the wildcat fusion companies that plumbed the waters of the Gulf for its hydrogen. In that time she had flown to Luna on several occasions. *Had she committed her awful crime there? If so, why?*

Kate did know that she had had at least one child. Her lower abdomen bore a white caesarean-section scar. She also had the tell-tale wrinkles of suckling around the nipples of her breasts. But had the child been a boy or a girl? And who had been her husband? Did she even *have* a husband?

The Wall of her amnesia held all of that information like a dam holding back the waters of a flood. In her case, however, that dam was not likely to burst any time soon.

Kate got up from her bed not too long after Hugh had left her and donned her bathrobe. In the small bathroom she applied cold water to her face and stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked—and felt—like rusted ball bearings. Were there any others on the Hot Rock ready to cash it in?

Kate stepped out into the deserted corridor and walked the short distance to the infirmary. The corridor wasn't quite deserted, however. At the far end of the curved hallway a small cylindrical tent lay off to one side. A pair of feet stuck out and snores could be heard coming from within. *Yes, there were others. The bindlestiffs.* They were the victims of the mysterious quick-sleep, a kind of vicious narcolepsy which had only months ago beset them. The worst affected became bindlestiffs and they had to carry flops around with them, tents that unfolded automatically whenever quick-sleep struck.

Perhaps it was time for her to start carrying a flop.

The lights were low inside the infirmary lobby. It seemed as quiet as a mausoleum. Several computer monitors were on and that meant that Hugh was still up. But he was nowhere about.

A nearby wall held their pharmaceutical cupboard. Kate walked up to the monitoring plate and tried several commands to get it to open. The cupboard, however, remained locked. Hugh always locked it when he retired for the night. He was not a careless man. He knew the dark places to which a human soul could plummet. And suicide was no stranger to Ra.

Kate leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. "Well, then," she said to no one in particular, "I guess a rope will have to do. A rope and a stepladder. Maybe a chair."

That wouldn't work either. Nor would a razor across the back of her wrist. Since Marlissa Madrigal and Kerry Harland had killed themselves, the Meadow Council got the Fiddlers to develop "eyes" for the station, to watch everyone. A pair of those eyes approached Kate just then. It came in the form of a bright yellow toy dump truck. It had apparently heard her muttering to herself and sensed the note of despondency in her voice. The Tonkas were unusually intelligent and ever alert.

"Go away," she said to the yellow toy.

The dump truck did not move. Whether Lorraine Sperry or one of her deputies was watching her through the toy's eyes, she did not

know. It could have been acting autonomously. That certainly was within the parameters of its AI circuits.

“Ian,” she whispered in her dejection. “Where are you?”

‘I’m in the pond lift coming down to the infirmary,’ Ian’s voice suddenly barked in her right ear. *“Why? Where are you?”*

She jerked her head up. “What?”

“I said I’m in the main lift. Where are you?”

Damn! The Tonka, following one of its busybody programs, had automatically engaged Kate’s corn-link when it had sensed that something was amiss.

Outside the infirmary she heard a commotion in the corridor. Hugh Bladestone then burst into the lobby, followed by his two assistants, Kristen Barron and Diane Beckwith. Kristen and Diane, in turn, commandeered a floating gurney upon which lay an elderly man—a man who was sucking his thumb.

Behind them appeared several more individuals, none of whom Kate had ever seen before. The new people each wore Shunt mufti.

Ian reached a hand down to assist her to her feet.

“There you are,” he said. “We could use your help.”

He made no mention of the fact that she was sitting at the pharmacy cupboard where Death lay waiting.

Kate asked, “Who are—?”

A very tall man, the tallest Kate had ever seen, stepped into the room. His thin smile was without any humor whatsoever. “I believe we are ‘new meat,’” he said.

The haze that contained the memory of the riderless horses vanished from Kate’s mind. The situation before her was entirely unprecedented. And unexpected. A miracle all its own.

She would save her death for another day.

4

Hutchings tried to conceal his surprise at finding Kate sitting on the floor next to the pharmacy cupboard. He didn’t need his adrenalized left-brain biotech boosters to help him figure out what Kate might have been seeking.

Kate was usually a miniature dynamo, full of life and enthusiasm. Though just five feet two, she commanded the respect of the other Suncup engineers, and the Children loved her dearly. She certainly

had salvaged him from many a depressive episode. Lately, however, Kate's reserves of morale appeared to be running low. Finding her this way wasn't a good sign.

"This is Katherine DeWitt," Hutchings told the new people. "Kate's our chief Suncup engineer. She'll help you get settled."

Kate was on her feet and straightening out her bathrobe. She tucked back a strand of brown hair. "This is rather sudden. I'm glad to meet you," she said somewhat embarrassed.

"Com, open, Ramirez," Hutchings said. "Pablo. Wake up."

Jesus-what's-his-name! What time is it? piped a mouselike voice beside Hutchings' ear.

"Oh three-hundred," Hutchings said. "Rise and shine."

"Call me tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow. Wake up. We've had a Shunt and we've got six new people in the infirmary."

"Huh?"

"Get down here and bring your Gleaner. We only walked across the meadow and took the pond lift down."

"Say what?"

"Quiet. I don't want your bedmate to hear."

"You don't have to worry about that. Claren's sleeping with Constantine now. I'll be there in three minutes. Out."

"Who was that?" the dark-haired Adamson asked.

"Pablo Ramirez, our chief Fiddler. He's perfectly harmless."

"You mentioned something called a 'Gleaner,'" Klane said. "That didn't sound perfectly harmless."

Hugh Bladestone had just emerged from the adjacent room where Plainfield had been taken. "There's nothing for any of you to worry about. You'll see in a minute."

Klane smirked, but said nothing to that.

The infirmary had several side rooms that could be expanded or partitioned off to suit the doctor's needs. Diane Beckwith, a woman with very short light-brown hair and a no-nonsense attitude, had placed Plainfield on a waiting bed in one of those wards. Kristen Barron, a tall, leggy woman of Scandinavian descent, engaged the modest monitoring computer above the headboard to keep a medical eye on the old man.

"Nice place you've got here," Klane said. "Do you have occasion to use it much?"

The doctor seemed only slightly miffed at the insinuation. “We aren’t barbarians, Mr. Klane. We try to take care of each other. We’re a fairly close-knit community down here.”

“What if we don’t wish to be part of your ‘close-knit’ community down here?” Klane asked.

Hutchings stood before Klane. “Look, once Hugh determines that you made the Shunt in one piece, you can go your separate ways. We’ll show you where you can eat, where you can sleep and where you can shit. What you do beyond that is up to you.”

The doctor’s two angels of mercy reconfigured the ward into two separate sections, one for the men, one for the women.

“Kate,” the doctor said, “you can help the women get settled in the next room.”

Kate pulled the collar of her bathrobe tighter around her throat. “Follow me,” she said.

The blonde woman, R. Barrie, hugged her duffel. “What are you going to do to us?” she asked.

“We’re not going to do anything to you,” Kate said. “No one’s ridden the monopole corridor down to the sunstation in three years. We need to see if you’re reasonably intact.”

Barrie seemed to accept this, but Adamson’s eyes flashed. “The first person who touches me gets his arms pulled out.”

Adamson, Hutchings noticed, had large, capable hands. He wondered what sort of damage those hands had done in-system.

“Look,” Hutchings said. “This’ll just take a few minutes.”

The doctor, who had a more practiced bedside manner, intervened. He said, “Ms. Adamson, we’re just following protocol. We don’t want to incur a Vapor Injunction. This is for everyone’s benefit, not just yours.”

Oaks looked up. “A Vapor Injunction? What’s that?”

The doctor said, “Our computer is programmed to destroy us if any of the major station rules are violated. Two Vapor Injunctions and the computer will shut down the Renner shield and we’ll be vaporized. Mr. Hutchings will provide you with a list of the violations that the System Assembly Penal Committee left us with. You’ll want to memorize them.”

Klane frowned. “You mean that if we don’t go in there—” He nodded at the men’s ward—“that we’ll be incinerated?”

“It’s possible.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Klane said.

“Nonetheless,” Hutchings said, “we go by the rules here. The doctor has to examine you and you’re not leaving until he does.”

Klane then shrugged. “Why not? We’ve got nothing to hide.”

“You never know!” announced a short, yet clearly *athletic* man of bronze skin and jet-black hair standing in the doorway behind them. He walked in wearing a bright yellow jumpsuit and an olive-green tank connected to a hose strapped to his back. The snout of the hose looked as if it once belonged to a vacuum cleaner.

“Don’t point that thing at anybody just yet, Pablo,” Hutchings said to their chief Fiddler. “We’re still a bit jumpy.”

“Jumpy’s not the word,” Klane said. “Point that thing at me at any time and I’ll break you in half.”

Pablo Ramirez blanched at the tall man’s words.

“This is Mr. Klane, Pablo,” Hutchings said. “He thinks we’re out to get him.”

“Is he kidding?” Pablo asked.

“Apparently not,” Hutchings responded. To the new people, he said, “This is Pablo Ramirez, our chief engineer. That thing on his back is called a Gleaner.”

Oaks scurried up to Ramirez and, in a childlike voice, asked: “What’s it do? How does it work? Can I try it? Let me see!”

“I’ll show you,” Ramirez said. He stepped back, aiming the Gleaner’s black nozzle at the small man’s boots. The device then began humming softly.

“I don’t feel anything,” Oaks said, staring at his feet. “Is it working? How come I don’t feel it?”

“It’s a matter-absorber. But you shouldn’t feel anything,” Ramirez said. “My guys back-engineered it from Shunt schemata we found in an unprotected computer file.”

“You did?” Oaks asked with apparent incredulity.

Ramirez nodded. “The Gleaner absorbs all kinds of microscopic biodebris. Bacteria, virus fragments. Even loose, biotech components or nanobots you might be carrying.”

“I see you’ve accomplished quite a lot down here,” Klane said.

Hutchings scrutinized Klane. It was too early to know what to make of him other than he was a very bitter and cynical man.

Ramirez, however, had yet to be put off by Klane’s condescending manner. Instead, he swept the nozzle across the floor of the infirmary. Pablo then said, “Anything we glean, we turn around and compound it in the Sally.” He pointed to a cubbyhole set into the

wall nearby. "The Sally can make mulch as well as food. Tons of it, in fact."

"The Sally?" Oaks said.

"That's short for 'Salvation Army,'" Hutchings said. "We get our meals free from the Sally."

"Why not call it a 'food processor'?" Klane said. "Which is what it is."

"Because 'Sally' ties us to our past," Hutchings told him. "It ties us to the worst period in American history, the Great Depression where all Americans were bonded by a crisis."

"That was over a hundred and eighty years ago. Ancient history," Klane said.

"That doesn't matter. It's for *our* memory. You can call it a food processor, if you want," Hutchings said.

Ramirez walked into the men's ward and stood before Mr. Plainfield. Kristen Barron was smoothing the new man's brow with a motherly hand. Plainfield seemed to be asleep.

"What's wrong with him?" Pablo asked.

"We don't know yet," Kristen said.

"Can I Glean him?" he asked Hutchings.

Kristen looked at Hutchings who nodded his approval. Ramirez then proceeded to scan the old man where he lay.

"Find anything interesting?" Hutchings asked when the Fiddler switched the Gleaner off.

Ramirez consulted a data card to which the Gleaner had transmitted its preliminary assessment. "Umm... just planetary dust. Could be lunar or cometary. And some of the usual organic debris. Bits of skin, hair, and stuff like that."

Pablo glanced past Hutchings to where Kate and the doctor had gone with the new women. "How many women did we get?"

"Three," Hutchings said and Ramirez grinned.

Klane saw the grin. He looked down at the diminutive engineer. "Do not go near them," he said threateningly. "If you want to see another day."

Ramirez looked at Hutchings.

"It's not what you think," Hutchings said. "He's just interested in their hair."

"What?"

"Hair is like a big net," Ramirez said. "There's no telling what sorts of things they've picked up."

"That's all that interests you?" Klane asked.

Ramirez turned to Hutchings. "What's with him?"

"I'll let you know when I find out," said Hutchings. "Go on and glean the women, but keep your distance. We don't want to set off Mr. Klane here."

Ramirez left the room.

"What's that man in for?" Klane asked Hutchings.

"Thirty-three counts of first-degree murder and conspiracy to undermine the System Assembly."

"Him?"

"That's what the Roster said. We think Pablo might have done something to an assembly of Quorum Elders. There are usually thirty-three elders in a plenary session. But that's only a guess. Speaking of which, did they give you a Roster?"

Klane fished a hand into a tunic pocket. He pulled out a domino-shaped iridium-titanium tile which he gave to Hutchings. "The Screws gave it to me just before they threw me into the Shunt."

Hutchings took the tile and pocketed it for safekeeping. "We'll download it when the whole station is assembled at oh nine-hundred. Right now, we have enough on our plate."

"You have such an interesting way of putting things," Klane remarked.

"That's me."

Hugh Bladestone returned to the men's ward. "Please, Mr. Klane." He beckoned to one of the beds. "This will take just a few minutes of your time."

"All I've got is time."

"Then let's make the best use of it. This way please."

Klane reluctantly followed the doctor. Hutchings noticed how every move the man made was informed by deep and seething resentment, perhaps even a murderous one.

Klane, he decided, would bear watching.

5

Across an immeasurable sea of darkness, the plaintive voice of a woman calls out to Dr. Bladestone: "*Hugh! Hugh, darling, please!*" He does not know what to do. His thoughts are sluggish. He can barely move. He seems to be dreaming. *Yes, that's it. I'm dreaming.* A

bout of mysterious quick-sleep has sucked him down from the bright surface of the waking world. *The bright surface of the sun...*

The voice changes to that of another woman: "*Dr. Bladestone, please report to Emergency Dock Alpha as soon as possible. Dr. Bladestone, please report to Emergency Dock Alpha!*"

Inexplicably, he's back at Chicago Mercy. There, in the real world, he had interned immediately after graduating from medical school, working eighteen-hour days as an ER physician. Mercy was one of the best hospitals on the planet, but now it was being pushed beyond its limits. Everything around it is turning to a landscape of silver and ice.

In the dream, Bladestone is staring out of a third-floor lounge window where he has been contemplating the fury of the snowstorm. Snowflakes the size of silver dollars are falling. Experts are calling this another "Little Ice Age," similar to the one in the fourteenth century that turned Greenland white and Europe into a frozen wilderness that set the stage for the Black Plague. Above him, ambulances descend to the landing pads of Chicago Mercy, their antigravity plates glowing neon-blue. Once down, their bays open and gurneys are whisked through the emergency entrance by harried landing-pad attendants. The snow is deep and getting deeper. Entire sections of Chicago have no power. People are freezing to death in their homes, their cars, their offices. Newscasters are now calling the dead of Chicago "Ice Men."

And some of these Ice men are women.



Hutchings clamped a firm hand on the doctor's shoulder where Hugh had been sleeping at his desk. Clearly the doctor had collapsed out of sheer exhaustion.

"Are you still with us?" Hutchings asked.

The doctor jerked. "I think so. Yes."

"Don't tell me you're coming down with quick-sleep," Hutchings said. "That's all we need right now."

Bladestone looked around blearily. "I'm just beat, that's all. What time is it?"

"Oh-eight-fifty. Not quite the crack of dawn."

"God, what a night," Bladestone muttered, rubbing his eyes.

Hutchings himself had gotten thirty minutes of compressed sleep, the usual for him since his mind rarely, if ever, shut down. He had been experimenting on himself lately in an attempt to repair his

memory damage by employing a navy of metamphetamine facilitators and endorphin packets produced by protozoa-sized nanofactories he had recently devised. Those factories built machines whose task it was to rebuild the neural tissue of his amnesia-damaged brain—if such a process were possible. To do that, his brain cells needed stimulation, hence the need for the amphetamine boosters. Hence, his constant insomnia.

What little sleep He did get that night he got with Kate in her temporary room down the hall from the infirmary. He made sure that she slept between himself and the wall so she wouldn't wander off this time and find some other, more efficient means to kill herself.

Hutchings and the doctor found the new people, minus Mr. Plainfield, having breakfast in the infirmary lounge. Lorraine Sperry, their African-British security chief, stood watch, sipping her usual morning cup of Earl Grey.

"Good," the doctor said. "Everyone's up."

The three new women seemed to have resigned themselves to their fate, but each exhibited that resignation differently. Barrie seemed the most hopeless. Pickerall, if anything, was nervous and alert. Adam-son merely smoldered. She seemed to snarl, if wordlessly, at Hutchings when he entered the room.

As for Klane and Oaks, the one ate his breakfast with the elegance of a heron dipping its long neck down into a swamp to spear food; the other gobbled his eggs and bacon and pancakes as if they were his last meal.

"I see we've learned to work the Sally," Hutchings said.

"I told them not to waste food," Lorraine added. "Our first rule. What they can't eat I'll take upstairs to the little Boys."

"Is this one of your 'Vapor Injunctions'?" Klane asked.

"Not quite," Hutchings said. "We just don't like to waste food. It's a little voice in our heads."

"We feel it in our bones," the doctor said.

"With your access to pure hydrogen," Klane observed, "you could fill this room with food, from now until forever and still never run out. Sounds like a superstition to me."

"Nevertheless," Hutchings said solemnly. "We don't waste food here. We either eat it or recycle it. After a while, you'll feel it down to your bones, as the doctor just said."

Behind them a new man walked in from the main infirmary lobby. He wore a teal-blue jumpsuit and he carried six thin-leafed booklets.

“Elliot,” Hutchings said.

“I’ve got your guidebooks, as promised,” Elliot Shoemaker said. He stood five feet eight inches and had graying black hair packed in small curls on his head. His hazel-green eyes shone with intelligence. “Is our sixth man still down?” he asked the doctor.

“He is,” Bladestone responded.

Shoemaker looked around. “So where’s Kate? We should have the entire Meadow Council present for this.”

“She’s with the little Girls,” Hutchings said. “We’re trying to keep all of the Children out of the loop for the time being. She’ll view all this later.”

“What about the little Boys?”

“I think they’re in the Roughhouse,” Hutchings said. “Maybe they can stay occupied until the assembly is over.”

At the opposite end of the lounge was a blank wall. Hutchings walked over to it and said, “Computer, on.” The wall came alive with a display menu that advertised a number of functions. He then said, “Open access from here to all common rooms and all other on-line monitors.”

Hutchings turned to the new people. “As Administrator, I am required to play the Roster and introduce you to various sunstation functions. You will otherwise not be interrogated at any time beyond this meeting. Any information you want to give us yourselves is entirely up to you. Otherwise, no one will bother you from here on out.”

“We have your word on that?” Klane asked.

“I personally guarantee it,” Hutchings stated. “I’ll enforce it, in fact.”

Klane made a characteristic smirk.

Hutchings went on. “Despite what the SA might have told you, you haven’t lost any of your human rights by being sent here. Any behavior on our part which you consider to be harassment report directly to Lorraine here or you can let me know. We don’t take any shit down here, especially from ourselves.”

Lorraine Sperry nodded as she leaned against the back wall, her concussor pistol, their only real weapon, holstered and ready at her hip.

Hutchings engaged the Roster. “Open directory,” Hutchings said. “Access Readme file, with full visuals.”

On the blank wall of the lounge, the visage of a hooded Ward Judge appeared, a veritable tzar of fear. The Hood, cloak and mask were a dark green and on the man’s chest was an obscure symbol, perhaps that of a bell or a beehive. *The newest in fascist evening wear*, Hutchings thought acidly.

“*On this day, April 18, 2095, Common Era, we, the Elders of the System Assembly Quorum, sentence the following humans to Ra,*” the Ward Judge announced.

Elliot Shoemaker whispered, “Hey, it’s 2095! That means a whole decade’s gone by on the outside! It’s just three years to us—”

“Shh!” Lorraine Sperry hissed.

The screen then divided in two. Beside the Judge appeared the booking photograph of a horrified old man who looked as if he were standing before a firing squad. The Judge said, “*Edward Plainfield for crimes of subversion, sabotage, and felony insurrection. Lifetime sentence. No possibility of parole.*”

Next appeared the 2-D image of Oaks. “That’s me!” cried Oaks.

“*Dylan Oaks,*” the Judge intoned, “*for theft and illegal transport of weapons-grade materials; unauthorized detonation of a nuclear device; four-thousand-eight-hundred-and-six counts of felony murder. Lifetime sentence. No possibility of parole.*”

“I did that?” Oaks asked wondrously.

“Be quiet, little man,” hissed Klane.

The image of a defiant Klane appeared next. The Judge said: “*Newsome Rhajo Klane, for conspiracy against the System Assembly; illegal orbital alteration of a planetary body; destruction of Martian habitat; forty-thousand-one-hundred-and-sixty-three counts of felony murder. Lifetime sentence. No possibility of parole.*”

Nobody said anything to that, not even Klane.

The image of Klane was replaced by that of the dark-haired and belligerent Adamson. The Judge said, “*Arliss Caroline Adamson for crimes against the System Assembly; prostitution; blackmail. Fifteen years. Possibility of parole in six.*”

Adamson seemed unfazed by the Judge’s pronouncement.

Pickerall’s image appeared next. Her red hair had been cut brutally short in the booking photograph. “*Clarissa Marilyn Pickerall for crimes against the System Assembly; unlawful manufacture of controlled substances; conspiracy to distribute controlled substances; pandering; prostitution; attempted murder. Sentence: twelve years. Possibility of parole in six.*”

Barrie appeared next. *“Rhonda Alison Barrie for the crime of treason. Sentence: ten years. Possibility of parole in three.”*

The image of Rhonda Barrie blanked out. The woman sat aghast, not quite believing what she had just heard.

The Judge resumed. *“Sunstation rules and basic functions should now be discussed. These should include those procedures which allow a prisoner to earn credit toward parole. Resume on your command.”*

Hutchings prompted the computer to manifest a 2-D cutaway of the sunstation next to the frozen image of the Ward Judge. The sunstation itself resembled a squat mushroom with a strange bell-like structure hanging at a considerable distance beneath the narrow “stem” of the mushroom. Everyone could see that the “cap” of the mushroom—the living and working areas of Ra—had eleven levels, the top two of which comprised the meadow.

Hutchings took out a laser pointer and needled a red beam at the diagram. “This is Ra,” he said. “The main living facilities are in the ‘cap’ and the ship’s vital functions—the main engines, the Renner-shield generators and the main computer housing which we call ‘the Man’, are locked away, down here in the ‘stem’. This structure dangling below the stem is the Anchor, which is probably some sort of tug or shuttle. Its principal function is to hold us in place. We assume that the Renner shield pinches off somewhere below the Anchor, but the monopole alignment signal is grounded all the way to the Van Flandern Discontinuity at the center of the sun. It’s what keeps us locked in place so that alloy shipments and prisoner exchanges can come and go via the top part of the monopole corridor, here.”

Hutchings then drew a red laser-line of light to the midpoint of the sunstation where the cap rested upon the stem pedestal. “Much of Level Seven and all of the ‘stem’ are inaccessible to us. We call these areas the Forbidden Zones. The Vapor probably lives somewhere on Level Seven. When he appears, *if* he appears, you’ll know someone’s invoked an Injunction and that we’re close to being fried.”

“I take it this Vapor person is your bogeyman,” Newsome Klane said.

“*Our* bogeyman,” Hutchings clarified. “Yours and mine. Trust me. You don’t want to see him.”

“What is he?” Rhonda Barrie asked at the other end of the table. “I mean, is he human?”

Hutchings shook his head. “It’s a very sophisticated robot, a kind I’d never seen before. When I arrived, he told me all the things we weren’t supposed to do here. One of them was that we weren’t to

go looking for him in the Forbidden Zones. In fact, even attempting to enter the Zones is an Injunction itself. The second violation beyond that—any violation at all—brings out the Vapor, and he will pronounce his judgment.”

“Then what?” Klane asked.

“Poof,” Hutchings said.

Elliot Shoemaker handed out the booklets he had brought to the meeting. “You’ll find listed in the first chapter the twenty main activities that evoke a Vapor Injunction. Memorize them and make damn sure you don’t commit any of them.”

The new prisoners leafed through their booklets.

Hutchings added, “Vapor Injunctions also include attempts at sabotage—the environmental systems, the Sally, the secondary fusion generator which runs the free zones. The Suncup and the main internal gravity systems are included in these as well. And, of course, you are forbidden to kill anybody.”

“The book says that?” Klane asked, looking up.

“No,” Hutchings said. “That’s *my* injunction.”

Oaks held up his left wrist with its glittering *parry*. “I thought that’s what these things were for.”

“They are. We’re just covering our bases,” Hutchings said.

Clarissa Pickerall pointed to the 2-D cutaway of Ra. “What’s that area at the top of the ‘stem’, right there in the middle of the station?”

A lozenge-shaped cavity, glowing a bright yellow, hung in the center region of the sunstation. Hutchings said, “That’s the Suncup facility where we earn points toward parole. At least those of us who are allowed to earn points toward parole.”

“Your Suncup is not in the Forbidden Zone?” Klane asked.

Hutchings shook his head. “No. We have complete access to it, inside and out. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be able to maintain the Suncup properly.”

“As it is,” Shoemaker added, “we’ve already had one major accident in the ‘cup. We were fortunate that we didn’t incur a Vapor Injunction.”

“What happened?” Arliss Adamson asked.

“We had an escape attempt a year ago,” Hutchings said. “One of our technicians tried to use the Suncup matter-transmitter to escape the station during a standard alloy Shunt.”

“I take it he failed,” Klane said.

“*She* failed,” Hutchings said grimly.

“She?” This came from Rhonda Barrie.

Hutchings nodded. “The ‘cup is hardwired to send only single elements or simple alloys, depending on what the System Assembly requests that month. It won’t send anything as chemically complex as a person.”

“Someone tried to use the Suncup to escape?” Rhonda Barrie asked.

Hutchings nodded. This was really Kate’s bailiwick, but he answered in her stead. “One of our best engineers, Marlissa Madrigal. At the time we were preparing to send up several tons of pure iron which had been recently fused from solar plasma. Marlissa accessed the chamber without anybody knowing about it.”

“What happened?” Barrie asked. “Did she go up?”

“Yes. Part of her, anyway.”

“Which part?” Klane asked.

“The iron part. The rest of her stayed behind because that’s all we were Shunting at the time. It was rather grisly.”

The new prisoners glanced at each other. The reality of their incarceration seemed to be sinking in.

Hutchings went on. “Because there are so many Vapor Injunctions, we would appreciate it that when you try to escape you run your plans past the Getaway Team and see what they have to say.”

“Getaway Team?” Klane asked. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s a committee run by two of our inmates, William Woodfield and Alan Baiter,” Hutchings said. “They’ve compiled a book that lists our escape attempts and a few we haven’t tried yet.”

“I take it you think we’re going to escape,” Klane said.

“You will, if you’re like the rest of us,” Hutchings said. “We just want to make sure that you don’t do anything stupid.”

“Anything that might make us go pop?”

“Exactly.”

Klane folded his mantis-like hands. “Well, nobody tells me what I can or cannot do and I certainly don’t need anybody’s permission to escape from this place.”

Hutchings leaned over the table. “Let me be clear about this, Klane. Screw up and you stand a good chance of killing us all. It’s *my* job to see that you don’t do that.”

Klane’s ice-eyes locked onto Hutchings.

Hutchings stood and faced the monitor wall. “Resume program,” he commanded.

The Judge continued. *“The following individuals have been granted parole and will be removed in a standard parole Shunt in forty-eight hours. Anyone other than these nine humans attempting to board the parole Shunt will be destroyed upon arrival. Parole has been granted to Staff Sergeant Armando P. Chavarin, Corporal Steven Welch, Corporal James Harrington, Corporal Wanda Pease, Corporal Suzanne Alcott, Private Thomas Geyer, Dr. Janice Kozzle, Captain Lyle MacKenzie, and Lieutenant Katherine Ariella DeWitt. End communication.”*

Silence fell about them. Hutchings blinked. He was utterly flabbergasted and so were his friends in the room. To the five new prisoners, though, the parole announcement meant nothing at all.

Hutchings looked at Hugh Bladestone, stunned. “My God. Did you hear that? They want Kate.”

The doctor countered: “Kate? Ian, they want *Lyle*. What are we going to do about Lyle?”

Hutchings had no immediate answer to that. This was a development he hadn’t expected. Parole. For Kate *and* Lyle.

And what *were* they going to do about Lyle?



While Ian had been preparing for the morning assembly, Kate had gone to the dorms where the little Girls slept. Two vast beds usually allowed three physically adult Girls to sleep together like real four- and five-year-olds at a slumber party. Occasionally, they’d push their beds together and they’d run back and forth in their jammies and make a mess of things.

When Ian sneaked away at 07:30 to prepare for the assembly, Kate, still groggy from the tranquilizers Hugh had given her, went to sleep with the little Girls. They were glad to have her. It didn’t take long before they were all back in slumberland fast asleep curled amid their bankies and dollies with everyone but Kate sucking their thumbs in blissful oblivion. Kate would view the assembly tape later. For now, she wanted merely to be in the company *of* the innocent—the members of her adopted family.

Kate remembered her brother, Kingston. It was her first cattle drive just south of Sheridan, Wyoming. She was fourteen. Several head of cattle had wandered up a narrow canyon the night before and hadn’t come back out. Nietzsche maundered along with a gen-

tle rocking motion as Kate and her brother, on his horse Django, tracked the heifers up a cold-creek canyon of succulent spurge. Blue jewels of water burst around the hooves of their horses as Kate and Kingston followed the crescent moons of cattle hooves like fossil trilobites on the muddy shore.

As the morning wore on they found the animals, one by one. However, the last animal, when they found it, had fallen onto its side. The beast had gorged itself on the burdock and spurge and its stomach, full of fermenting debris, had bloated hugely. The creature couldn't move and moaned mournfully.

From a saddlebag Kingston removed a tubular contraption. He then jumped from his horse and crashed across the creek to where the wretched animal lay. Over his shoulder, Kingston said, "I'd get upwind, if I were you, kid. You won't like it."

Kate didn't move. She was fascinated. She hadn't the slightest idea what the thin silver tube was for. If anything, it resembled a long hypodermic needle with a valve at one end.

Her brother sank one knee in the creek, chaps and all, and gingerly began probing the animal's belly with a gloved hand. The poor beast lowed at the pressure of Kingston's hand.

When Kingston found the spot that he was searching for, he thrust the tubular device directly into the beast's stomach. The animal let out a terrible cry. Kingston quickly opened the petcock at the rear end of the tube and fetid air suddenly came whistling out. Kingston then pushed his shoulder into the creature's gut, hastening the egress of the sulphurous mulch.

The gas from the animal's stomach gathered itself in the still air above the creek. Its scintillating silver particles then fell about Kingston like a vengeful genie released from its bottled prison.

"Don't breathe it, Katie!" Kingston shouted to her. *"Don't breathe the traces! Don't let them in!"*

Kate jerked awake coughing and gasping for air. A silver glitter seemed to have coated her throat. She fell back onto her pillow. It had been a dream! But this dream had a new wrinkle. The traces. Kingston never used that expression before. What did it mean?

"I want French toasts and *lots* of syrup," said a small voice beside her. *"Big toasts. Real big toasts and lots of syrup."*

Sitting on the floor beside the bed was a pretty blonde woman of about thirty-five. She held a blanket to her cheek and sucked her thumb. She had removed her thumb to make her pronouncement. Once the announcement was made, the thumb went back in.

From the opposite side of the bed another little Girl's voice broke in. "You had French toasts yesterday. You don't get any toasts today. *I* get French toasts."

Kate fought her way from the dream's seductive clutch. "Bebe, Junie—quit arguing."

Bebe Wasson, on the floor with her bankie, scowled at the little Girl lying on the other side of Kate on the immense bed. Junie Russell, clutching her stuffed tiger, stuck her tongue out at Bebe. The Girls were five and six, respectively. Bebe Wasson, their youngest Girl, had platinum blonde hair done up in pigtails. Junie, a rather buxom woman of thirty-eight, had rich brown hair which had only recently begun turning gray. Of the fourteen female Children on the station, only Junie looked her age.

"I get toasts," insisted Bebe.

"You don't either."

"Girls," Kate said.

"Then I get to sing my birdy-nose song," Bebe announced.

"No birdy-nose song!" Junie shouted, jumping up on the bed.

"*Birdy-nose, birdy-nose... knock, knock, knock!*" sang Bebe.

"*Stop it!*" shouted Junie. She clamped her hands over her ears. "I don't like the birdy-nose song! No birdy-nose song!"

"—knock, knock, KNOCK!" Bebe said louder.

Kate sat up. Another Girl walked into the large bedroom. Following her on the floor was a red toy fire-truck, a sturdy observant Tonka. Lisa Anderson was a slightly built woman of about forty with short brown hair and elfin features. She had an impish gleam in her eyes.

"You get to go *home*," Lisa said to Kate. "You're *proled*."

"I get to go home, too!" Bebe said.

"You don't, either," said Junie. "You're staying here 'cause you've been bad."

Kate blinked. "What are you talking about?"

Little Lisa Anderson, still in her jammies, walked over to one of their many toy boxes and came up with a small container of crayons and a coloring book. "You're *proled*. Somebody said."

"Who told you that?"

She shrugged. Drawing pictures was more important now.

"Com, open, Ian," Kate said.

"*Right here*," he returned. "*What's going on at your end?*"

"I've just been told I've been '*proled*'. Does that have anything to do with being *paroled*?"

"Probably. You and eight others have been paroled. It's on the Roster that came down with the new people."

"When... when do we go?" Her heart was now beating so rapidly, she hardly knew what to think.

"Subtracting a few hours, about two days."

"Who are the others?" she asked.

Ian rattled off the names.

"Lyle got paroled? But, Ian, he's—"

"I know, I know. We're still trying to figure out what we're going to do. Are you still with the Girls?"

"Yes."

"We'll discuss this later. Have the Girls gotten breakfast yet?"

"No," Kate said. "That was next on our list."

"Yay!" said Junie, jumping up. Her adult mass made the bed roll like a Hatteras sea swell.

"Take your time. We'll get together as soon as you feed the kids. Buzz me when you're clear. Com, close."

"You're! Going! Home!" Junie Russell chanted as she jumped about the rumpled landscape of the bed.

"And I'm having French toasts!" said Bebe Wasson, rising to her feet and heading for the clothes closet to select the day's apparel.

Lisa Anderson, meanwhile, was drawing pictures of two fat little Girls, one blonde, the other brunette, singing to herself. She hadn't a clue as to what was going on.

Neither had Kate.



Level Four of the sunstation was given over to inmate quarters. The floor, however, was only one-third occupied; as such, several inmates often took possession of a nearby room or two. Ian was one of these. Ian's second room was actually a private laboratory he'd constructed which Kate rarely visited. When she wasn't at the Suncup, her duties often centered around the Children.

On the same floor was common room number six where everyone met to share their meals. When Kate and her Girls arrived at the common room dressed for the day, they found several Children in the midst of their own brunch. Actually, they were in the midst of a food fight, buoyed by the excitement of having new people arrive.

"Help!" huge Bobby Nakamura shouted from behind an overturned table. "He's attacking me! Help!"

"Hey! Hey!" Kate said. "Who started this?"

The place was a colossal mess.

Matthew White, lanky and towheaded, stood with a fistful of gooey oatmeal which he was about to fling at Bobby Nakamura. “Bobby started it!” Matt said accusingly.

“I did not!” Bobby shouted back.

“Well, it’s over now. Straighten this place up,” Kate demanded.

The little Girls marched in and stuck their tongues out at the stupid little Boys. They walked over to the Sally like perfect little protopersons and began dialing their favorite morning foods.

“But it’s Bobby’s fault!” Matt whined.

“You know we don’t like to waste food, Matt. Wait until Ian hears that you guys were having a food fight.”

“But this *isn’t* food,” Matt said.

Kate pondered a bowl of oatmeal on a table that had not been capized during the skirmish. It looked perfectly normal to her.

“It’s yucky,” Matt pronounced.

Quite a lot of the oatmeal had been flung about. Bobby Nakamura, being the largest target in the room, was covered with it. So, too, were the other little Boys, most notably Terry Hummer, Danny Stryk, and Brucie Weigl—adults with a mental age of six, seven, and eight, respectively. At ages eight, nine, and ten were Minnie Marcroft and Lissa Van Fleet and Cory Hales. Even though the Boys had started the fight, the three little Girls had obviously also participated. They were spattered with their own badges of oatmeal.

“It was new, so I tasted it,” said Minnie Marcroft, a perky, forty-ish woman with a healthy head of wavy brown hair.

“I tried it first,” announced Melissa Van Fleet, a stunning, soft-featured blonde who, because of her comeliness, was always the target of pranks by the little Boys.

Danny Stryk, a timid little Boy, came over to Kate. “Do we have to eat it? Matt made Sally give us *gobs* of it.”

Kate considered the bowl of gruel in Danny Stryk’s hands. Oatmeal was usually one of their favorite breakfast foods.

“It tastes *awful!*” said Brucie Weigl. “I don’t like it.”

Kate took up a spoon and sampled the oatmeal. It *was* awful. More than that, it had a faint metallic residue that didn’t seem natural at all.

“Christ,” she whispered. No wonder they’d had a food fight.

Kate put the bowl in the waste cubby where it quickly dissolved and its molecular compounds were returned to the Sally’s element stock.

Danny Stryk pouted. "Will the Spanker come out and spank us?"

"I don't know," Kate said. "He might."

"Eddie Brickman said that the Spanker would get us if we did anything bad," insisted Brucie Weigl. "Will he?"

"I'll bet he won't come out if we can clean this place up," Kate suggested.

The little Boys found this agreeable and started picking up after themselves.

At the Sally, Kate punched up her usual batch of eggs over easy, toast with marmalade, grapefruit juice, and coffee, then returned to the little Girls at their end of the table when the Sally delivered its fare. The Girls, as she knew they would, had loaded up on syrupy goodies.

Everyone but Kate proceeded to gobble their goodies while the little Boys did their cleaning. The peace lasted only five minutes.

Bebe and Lisa, who were sitting next to one another opposite Kate, looked up from their French toast. The other Children froze where they sat. Matt, on his way to the recycler, held a bowl of unused oatmeal. A fresh spoon angled in it.

The very tall and very scary Newsome Klane had entered the room, wearing a nylon white jumpsuit with silver trim that ran down the arms and legs. The Boys and Girls hadn't seen any of the new people before this moment.

"Ah, the monsters at breakfast," he said with a tilted smile.

"It's the Spanker," Bobby Nakamura said loudly.

"It's okay, Children," Kate said quickly. "This is Mr. Klane. He's one of the new people. He came to us last night."

But the Children were wide-eyed with terror as Klane walked into their midst. He paused before a stunned Matt White and looked down at the little Boy.

"Ah," Klane said, taking the bowl of unabused oatmeal from Matt's hands. "You have anticipated my very desire. A hearty bowl of oatmeal."

Matt's eyes were as wide as a pair of breakfast eggs.

"Let us not waste good food, now shall we?" Klane said. He took a large spoonful of the oatmeal, levered it into his wide mouth and swallowed with hardly a pause to chew.

"Mmm," Klane said. "Mighty good."

The Children saw the man's smile, dropped everything, and ran screaming from the room.



So how *do* you kill a billion human beings? How do you kill that many people without the impact causing the absolute collapse of civilization?

The enormity of his crime was never far from Hutchings' thoughts. The arrival earlier that day of the new prisoners only served to remind him of the horror of his deed and the extremes to which the System Assembly went to insure that he would never again pose a threat to humankind.

As he lumbered slowly around the gravity-amplified track in the deserted Roughhouse, he thought about his earlier life, the life he led before the Wall. He remembered his graduate studies at the Media Lab at MIT in nanorobotics and biotechnology. He even recalled his dissertation: *Thermoelastic and Phonon Viscosity Loss in Nonisothermal Processes*.

As he plodded around the Roughhouse track at three Earth gravities he tried to conceive how a bio-tech application might have led to his crime. Even in grade school he knew that biotechnology had revolutionized medicine. Biotech machines could function as waldo-like attachments to white blood cells or act as a set of propellers to plasma-borne enzymes. Also used were chemical-warhead delivery systems with protein sensors for use in cancer therapies. There were even "pox boxes," large polymer molecules that surrounded malignant cells and collapsed about them, rendering them ineffectual.

What were the applications for murder from such a technology? Perhaps he had wiped out all the plankton in the sea. Perhaps he had killed off a species of vital insect. Bees, perhaps. Or perhaps he had caused the bonding elements of pollen molecules to unravel. The death of pollen alone would cause a *lot* of damage.

And what about the deed's aftermath? Bodies of the dead would have clogged rivers. Islands of them would be floating in every ocean of the world. The stench alone would be unprecedented. Putrescent clouds of it would choke whole continents.

Yet neither he nor his friends could remember anything approaching the magnitude of such a deed. What information he had of his crime came with the Roster the Vapor had given him upon his arrival. However, when Hutchings asked the robot why the System Assembly simply didn't execute him for what he had done, the Vapor

said the Quorum valued every human life. Capital punishment was no longer an option for the enlightened State.

Hutchings managed four laps around the rubberized track in his shackles, which was about usual for him. He leaned over, drenched in sweat, gulping huge lungfulls of air. During the Middle Ages they would have called this self-immolation or flagellation, a self-imposed punishment to expiate his sins.

One billion counts of felony murder.

Perhaps a heavier set of shackles would do. Eighty pounds instead of forty. Kate could easily make him a new set of alloyed shackles in the Suncup...

Yet, *how* he had killed so many people mattered less to him than *why*. What sort of karmic curse from a former life would lead him to kill so many people in this life? Taken in its reverse: What specific punishment did someone living in, say, Sunnyvale, California, or Sao Paulo, Brazil, require that they be put to death by *him*? His father, a descendent of New England Puritans, had become a devout Vajrayana Buddhist (to spite those Puritans); his mother, Presbyterian, became a Sufi. In fact, when he was eighteen, he and his mother had made a religious pilgrimage to India, to the tomb of Meher Baba. It had been one of the seminal events of his life. The avatar's shrine had been like a spiritual generator, powering so much of what was to come in his life after that. That he could *remember*.

Despite his physical size, he wasn't a particularly violent man. He had been in the usual adolescent scrapes when he was a kid. He played football in high school, rugby in college. But he had no recollection of ever having clobbered anyone out of sheer meanness at any time in his life. As the current Administrator of the sunstation he often had to deal with recalcitrant little Boys or bratty little Girls *as well as* the occasional bindlestiff who wouldn't stay put (or who wouldn't even eat). It was only in the Roughhouse where he, Eddie Brickman, and Lyle MacKenzie would often beat the shit out of each other in games of Zero Ball. But that's what the Roughhouse was for—sport.

Had he killed a billion human beings out of some sort of *sporting* impulse? Had it simply been a mere whim?

Bent over on his hands and knees, gulping air, he said, "Com, open, Elliot."

"*I'm right here*," Shoemaker returned.

"Where are you, exactly?"

“Up in the Fiddlers’ lair. Lorraine and I are showing the new women through the sunstation. We’ve done the meadow and the Underworld. We’re working our way down. What’s on your mind?”

“I need a favor,” Hutchings said.

“Shoot.”

“Do you think you and Lorraine could bring the women down to the Roughhouse? I’d like to speak with them, if I could.”

“Let me consult our guests. Pause,” Shoemaker said.

Seconds later, Shoemaker was back on-line. *“If there’s nobody else down there, they said it would be all right. We were going to tour it anyway.”*

“Well, it’s just me.”

“We’ll be down in a few minutes. Out.”

Hutchings sat back, feeling the brutal crush of three gravities upon him. The Roughhouse had originally been set aside to be a dormitory for female inmates. But the floor above was able to hold all the people on Ra and then some. So the Fiddlers knocked out the walls and installed gravity plates in the floor and ceiling and turned it into a multipurpose gymnasium. The Roughhouse could accommodate a basketball court and two tennis courts. A running track, an eighth of a mile long, circled the whole affair. At either end of the oval track were observation decks and bleachers behind a wall of shatterproof glass.

Elliot and Lorraine soon appeared in the primary observation deck where the gravity was always Earth-normal. Hutchings reclined on the empty track in his sweats, about ten yards from them trying to look as nonthreatening as possible. The new women came in behind Lorraine and Elliot in their white jump suits. They seemed alert but suspicious.

“Here we are,” Shoemaker said. “The Roughhouse. You might be spending some of your rec time here. That booth up there”—he pointed to an elevated chamber just above and to the right of the entrance to the room—“controls the gravity environment. And *this* is the running track—”

They turned their attention to the track beyond the protective glass wall. “And Mr. Hutchings, as we can see,” said Arliss Adamson in a dour voice.

“Ian would like a word with you,” Shoemaker stated.

Lorraine Sperry leaned against a far wall, watching like a referee.

“Hey. I thought you said we wouldn’t be interrogated by you or anybody else,” Adamson began.

“I’d like to ask you a few semi-personal questions. It’s not an interrogation at all.”

“Do we have to answer your questions?” Adamson asked.

“No. Of course not.”

Rhonda Barrie stepped forward. “What do you want to know?” she volunteered. “I’ll tell you anything I can.”

Adamson stared hostilely at her.

“Okay. I was wondering if any of you have any idea of the crime I was supposed to have committed. Oaks knew that I was called something like the Annihilist. I thought one of you might know more.”

“You don’t *know* what you did?” Adamson asked. She managed a bitter laugh, not quite believing that Hutchings had asked the question in the first place.

“Not really,” Hutchings admitted. “The Vapor said I had a billion counts of felony murder charged against me. He didn’t say what I did. I just wanted to know if it had happened on the Earth or out among the System Assembly settlements.”

Barrie said, “I remember something about New York.”

“Don’t cooperate with him,” Adamson hissed. “You’ll only make it worse for the rest of us!”

Adamson, Hutchings realized, was starting to get on his nerves.

“Make it worse?” he asked. “Make what worse?”

“It’s a wonder you haven’t killed us already,” Adamson said. “All this is just a setup.”

“What *are* you talking about?”

“What the hell do you think?” Adamson said. “You’re trying to make us think that we’re safe here. But we know what’s going on. You’ll get us sooner or later.”

Hutchings was taken by the woman’s energetic strain of apparently unbridled paranoia.

Lorraine Sperry said, “Nobody’s going to ‘get’ anybody down here, not while I’m around.”

“Oh, right,” Adamson mocked. “Like you and that popgun of yours can do a lot of damage.”

Lorraine frowned and said, “You’ve got your parrys. Your private rooms have coded locks on the doors and your corns will put you in touch instantly with anyone on the sunstation. And you know about the Tonkas. I or one of my deputies can be at your side in less

than forty seconds from the moment you call. Nobody's going to 'get' you."

"Ha," Adamson said. She obviously didn't believe a word of it.

"And this isn't a popgun," Sperry told her. "It's modeled after the Mills concussors. It'll blow anybody apart with a direct hit."

Hutchings looked at Rhonda Barrie. "Did you see or hear anything from the crew of the Shunt vessel before you were sent down here?"

The short-haired blonde shook her head. "I... have this vague recollection of asking one of the guards at the Shunt chamber where I was going. He said I was going to Hell."

"Did he say any more than that?" Hutchings asked.

Barrie seemed to struggle through the fog of her transfer shock. The Wall, they knew, did not become entirely solid for about forty-eight hours. "Well, there was one thing one of the guards said—"

Barrie thought about this for a moment, but ended up shaking her head with frustration. "I'm sorry," she said. "It had to do with you. I know it did. I'm sorry. I *know* it's there!"

Adamson turned to Sperry. "So are we done here? Is that it? Can we go now?"

Lorraine consulted Hutchings. "Ian?"

"Well, I suppose—" Hutchings slowly started climbing to his feet as he spoke.

He then jumped at them. Or so it seemed.

His body shot across the few yards between them and the glass partition of the observation deck in a powerful expression of his muscled legs.

"*Whoa!*" Hutchings shouted, crashing against the indestructible glass wall.

The three women screamed and jumped backwards. The leap had even startled Lorraine, who flinched and instinctively drew out her concussor pistol.

Hutchings careened back away from the glass wall, his nose bloodied and globules of crimson floating around like red snow.

Someone had changed the gravity settings. It had gone from plus-3 Gs to a flat zero in an instant.

Then into the observation deck thundered half a dozen little Boys. One of them—Bobby Nakamura or Matt White—had commanded the Roughhouse to reduce the gravity without checking to see if the place was currently occupied. Laughing and shouting, they

dove into the gravityless arena, swimming through space. Hutchings, by then, was tumbling away cupping his nose.

The three women, though, had fled the room in absolute terror. Ian didn't blame them. It looked as if he were springing at them, perhaps having lulled them into thinking that he was harmless. A spider with three yummy flies just waiting to be caught.

Lorraine went after the three panicked women.

"Now what?" Elliot called after Hutchings through the door of the observation room.

"Beats the hell out of me," Hutchings said, floating upside down. "I guess I won't be talking to any of them anytime soon."

"Maybe it was the zero gravity," Elliot told him. "I mean, did you see the way they spooked?"

"I think my nose might be broken," Hutchings said, moving his nose from one side to another. "Damn."

The little Boys were hovering in a clot several yards away, busy choosing sides for a game of Zero Ball.

"Elliot, find out what sort of damage I inflicted," Hutchings requested of his vice-Administrator. "Try to convince them I'm not an ogre."

"Sure."

Shoemaker left the room. He didn't want to see what Hutchings was about to do to the little Boys who, this time, deserved everything Hutchings had to throw at them.



Hugh Bladestone's dream came back to him almost the instant he closed his eyes....

He is again at Chicago Mercy and the situation seems to have worsened. All across Chicago people are freezing to death. The machines of industry everywhere are failing. Snowflakes the size of saucer plates whirl on the wind. They seem almost alive, driven by their need to strike down humanity. And in the dreams, this seems to be the greater menace.

Bladestone stands exposed to the night on the hospital's E deck. The multiplex of Chicago Mercy rises behind him, a city unto itself. Bordered on the east by ice-locked Lake Shore Drive and on the south by what used to be Lincoln Park, Chicago Mercy stands as a

bastion against the forces of Mother Nature. But how long can this last? It seems as if the very cold of outer space has fallen upon the Earth itself.

EXPERTS CONFIRM IT'S AN ICE AGE, that morning's *Chicago Tribune* on-line service read. FAIRBANKS UNDER MILE OF SNOW another headline proclaimed. Still another: ASTRONOMERS BLAME TRACES ACROSS THE SUN.

Chicago Mercy's fusion generator is working around the clock now. City planners, meanwhile, are doing what they can to link up nearby buildings. The famous Steinhoff Foods processing facility, three-quarters of a mile to the west, is now joined to Chicago Mercy via underground tunnels. Glass-enclosed walkways and tram systems link it to the half-mile-high Dylie residential complex to the southwest. Soon, Chicago Mercy will be a lost oasis in the snow, home to about ten thousand people.

An emergency vehicle appears overhead. Its anti-gravity plates glow a furious blue as it lands. There is so much that Hugh has forgotten. As it is, he barely remembers medical school. He can barely call up the sems he had taken which were supposed to bolster his abilities as a physician. But the biotech installed memory packets—miniature “semesters” the same as one might take in college—were known to dissolve if the knowledge wasn't used soon after the implant.

The cold has lined his ears with rime and the breath in his lungs seemed to fill a large frozen cavern in his body. *The traces*, he thinks. *This is the fault of the traces.*

The rear door of the ambulance pops open and several EMS personnel jump out like commandos hitting the beach. They guide a floating gurney between them bearing some very important person. It has to be. The resources of an ambulance service and half a dozen EMS personnel would otherwise not be squandered in this way. It is not efficient. It wastes calories, burns vital heat.

But the snow seems to be winning. Eventually the cold will slow down the progression of the entire universe.

Perhaps, he thinks, *this is where entropy starts... and humans begin to lose...*



By the morning of the second day after the arrival of the new people, the excitement seemed to have died down. Though the gawkers and busybodies among the crew—most of them at least—had gotten

their fill of the new people, the incident in the Roughhouse indicated to Hutchings that the three new women were still skittish. He asked if Lorraine Sperry's Tonka corps could keep a special eye out. She then placed the diligent toys at various locations throughout the free zones to watch for unusual behavior, particularly among the little Boys. They were the most likely to get themselves into trouble and Hutchings didn't want any more surprises—*especially* if one of those surprises might bring the Vapor out of hiding.

When Hutchings wasn't thinking about the welfare of the new people, he was thinking about Kate. Matters weren't made any better when they received an unprecedented communication from *Bold Charon* later that morning.

Larry Voorhees, a slender, sandy-haired late Adolescent who looked as pale as the soil of his native Oklahoma, had just logged onto his usual shift in the Brains when the Man suddenly announced that a message had arrived. A delivery vehicle had appeared, fired off the message, then shot back out, barely waiting to get an acknowledgment from Ra that the message had been received. By the time he had summoned Hutchings, *Bold Charon* was already millions of miles away, where there was no possibility of a dialogue exchange between them.

The Brains was actually a secondary command facility. The primary command facility was somewhere down in the Forbidden Zones, but they didn't know precisely where. Matt White, whom they suspected might have been a pilot in his former life, was the only one of them who harbored a desire to take control of the sun-station and fly away. Matt had made several attempts to find the flight center of Ra, but the Forbidden Zone's mysterious repelling forces always kept him away. Perhaps to make up for this, the Boy had made a mock-up of a pilot's chair and controls all from memory in his room and spent many an hour there taking Ra into the cold reaches of interplanetary space, as far from the sun as his imagination could take him.

At the time he received Voorhees's summons, Hutchings had been checking into the condition of a bindlestiff sleeping in the hallway outside the Brains. He was thus able to reach the secondary command center with no loss of time.

"Did you see the doctor out there?" Voorhees asked. "I left him the message I sent you."

"I didn't run into him."

Three yellow Tonkas were at Voorhees's feet in various states of repair. As a balm to the boredom of sitting at the Big Board, Voorhees occasionally repaired the toys for Lorraine.

"You look a little ragged," Voorhees then said. "I hear you don't sleep anymore. Is that true?"

"I get some sleep. Every now and then."

"What has happened to your nose?"

"I've just returned from Rome."

"What?"

"Forget it."

Voorhees shrugged. "So, did you see my new 'stiff out in the hall?"

"Yes, I did. It's Susan Britton," Hutchings said. "I didn't know she'd been experiencing bouts of quick-sleep."

"I think it just crept up on her," Voorhees said. "Like it's probably going to do to the rest of us sooner or later."

"Are you getting it?"

"Not that I can tell so far," Voorhees said.

"Well," Hutchings began, "I'm sending up a report on it when the parolees ride their Shunt tomorrow. I don't think the System Assembly knows anything about quick-sleep. Hugh doesn't remember it from his college sems and there's nothing in his med computer. And I don't have it in any of my sems either."

"I had an ancestor once, a great aunt who was narcoleptic," Voorhees said. "She'd fall asleep anywhere, anytime. Then again, she also weighed three-hundred pounds and smoked like a fiend. In fact, she moved to Louisville when every state but Kentucky banned tobacco in 2018. She fell asleep and her house burned down around her. What a way to go. Ah, here's the doctor now!"

Hugh Bladestone walked in, cradling a steaming cup of coffee and looked as if he needed its physical contact to warm his soul. Hutchings thought he recognized the residue of quick-sleep in his friend's eyes.

And what would they do if their physician became a bindlestiff? Could they get by without his expertise?

Hutchings knew the answer to that. He himself had gotten very ill once a year ago and almost died from it. He couldn't imagine what their lives would be like with Hugh down and out.

"We got some sort of message?" the doctor asked.

"Sort of. They sent us a duty roster for the new people," Voorhees told him. "Take a look."

A message scrawled across the Big Board's main screen. It read:
NEW DUTY ROSTER: ARLISS ADAMSON—

INFIRMARY—CLASSIFICATION: FIRST ASSISTANT. RHONDA BARRIE—
STATION MONITORING—CLASSIFICATION: SECOND ASSISTANT. NEWSOME
KLANE—STATION MONITORING— CLASSIFICATION: FIRST ASSISTANT.
DYLAN OAKS— SUNCUP—CLASSIFICATION: SECOND ASSISTANT. CLAR-
ISSA PICKERALL—ENVIRONMENTALS—CLASSIFICATION. SECOND ASSIS-
TANT. THIS IS NONNEGOTIABLE. NONADHERENCE WILL BE CONSIDERED
A VAPOR INJUNCTION. TRAINING AND LOGIN TO BEGIN TWENTY-FOUR
HOURS AFTER PAROLE SHUNT.

Voorhees leaned back and said, "So I'm thinking: they risked a shuttle vessel to send us this? They could've waited until tomorrow, until we made the parole Shunt. What's twenty-four hours to those people?"

Hutchings was thinking the same thing.

"I'm supposed to put Arliss Adamson in Diane's place as first assistant?" the doctor said. "Does Ms. Adamson have any medical training? What do we know about her background?"

"You'll have to ask her yourself," Hutchings said. "I don't think she'll be talking to me any time soon."

"She might have had some college-level sems implanted when she was still in high school. Lower divisional requirements, basic anatomy, that sort of thing," Voorhees said. "Chemistry sems are the easiest to plant and to access once they're in."

Bladestone brooded over his coffee. "Diane went to Johns Hopkins, which she remembers quite well. She's got five hundred seminar hours that she knows of, all of which appear to still be intact."

"What about Plainfield?" Hutchings asked. "They forgot about him. Is there any more to the message?"

"Nope," Voorhees said. "This is it."

Hutchings didn't need a flotilla of mentation-enhancing nanobots in his brain to help him figure out this one. "Looks like they've written him off."

"That means they knew the condition he was in when they sent him to us," the doctor said. "Bastards. He needs qualified people to look after him. He doesn't belong here."

"Nobody belongs here," Hutchings said.

"What do you think about Dylan Oaks as a Suncup?" Voorhees asked. "From what I hear, he's the last person I'd assign to the Suncup."

"Same here," Hutchings said.

The three men were silent for a moment. The glowing letters of the message on the Big Board's main screen seemed carved in stone: DO IT OUR WAY OR DIE.

If Eddie Brickman was there, Hutchings thought, he'd probably drop his pants and moon the Big Board....

At that point, a chime went off in Hutchings' right ear and Lorraine Sperry's voice appeared. "*Ian, are you up?*"

"I've been up a while. What's going on?"

"A Tonka watching a bindlestiff in corridor S6 just registered a trespass into the Forbidden Zone. I'm getting a visual feed from it. I think you should see this. Are you near a screen?"

"I'm down in the Brains," he responded quickly. "Patch it to Larry's board here."

On one of the secondary screens an image appeared. It was the view from the tiny eyes of a yellow Tonka road grader. The "trespasser" walked out ahead of it like a giant on the Earth, so tall did he seem.

"Oh, no," the doctor breathed.

It was Plainfield and he appeared to be sleepwalking. Hair askew, thumb in mouth, he padded down the empty hallway, "bankie" at his cheek.

However, he was sleepwalking in a *very* dangerous place, just a few yards from the invisible boundary to the Forbidden Zone.

Hutchings turned to Hugh. "Wake Diane and Kristen. Get them down there with a gurney. One with straps. I'll get Plainfield."

"Right," Bladestone said.

To Voorhees, Hutchings added, "If you see the Vapor, stall him."

"*Stall him?*" Voorhees yelled out as the two ran from the room. "How the hell do you stall the Vapor?"

Voorhees sat back in his chair, alone with the message on the wall before him. "Jesus," he whispered. "And I just came on shift..."



Despite his size and the weight of his shackles, Hutchings was rather quick on his feet, the product of months of bone-crushing exercise in the Rough-house. He raced from the Brains, sprinting down the corridor toward the lifts.