

**Memorare**  
by Gene Wolfe

*Fans of the American reality TV show “Survivor” might be amused to know that the winner this past season listed *The Book of the New Sun* among his favorite books. But this information should not surprise any of our readers. Reading Gene Wolfe is a basic survival skill for life in our times.*

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The moment March Wildspring spotted the corpses, he launched himself across the shadowy mortuary chamber. He had aimed for the first, but with suit jets wide open he missed it and caught the third, flattening himself against it and rolling over with it so that it lay upon him.

Bullets would have gotten him; but this was a serrated blade pivoting from a crevice in the wall. Had it hit, it would have shredded his suit somewhere near the waist.

He would have suffocated before he froze. The thought failed to comfort him as he huddled under the freeze-dried corpse and strove not to look into its eyes.

How much had his digicorder gotten? He wanted to rub his jaw, but was frustrated by his helmet. Not enough, surely. He would have to make a dummy good enough to fool the mechanism, return with it, and....

Or use one of these corpses.

*“Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known....”*

The half-recalled words came slowly, limping.

*“That anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession, was left unaided.”*

There was more, but he had forgotten it. He sighed, cleared his throat, and touched the sound switch. “These memorials can be dangerous, like this one. As I’ve told you, this isn’t the big one. The big one we call Number Nineteen is an asteroid ten times the diameter of this, which means it could have a thousand times the interior volume. Frankly, I’m scared of it. We may save it for last.”

He had a harsh, unpleasant speaking voice. He knew it; but it was the only voice he had, and the software that might have smoothed and sweetened it cost more than he could afford. Back on his hopper, he would edit what he had said into a script for Kit. She had a voice....

“There are at least five sects and cults whose members believe the deceased will be served though all eternity by those who lose their lives at his or her memorial. Some claim to be offshoots of major faiths. Some are openly satanic. We haven’t seen enough to identify the bunch that built this one, and frankly I doubt we will.”

If the show sold, if it made one hell of a lot of money, it might—it just might—be possible to buy or build a robotic probe. Of course, if that probe were destroyed....

He began wiggling out from under the corpse and sliding under the next.

Nothing happened.

“*Memorare....*” He had read the Latin twice, perhaps. It was as lost as the English now. No, more lost.

The blade was set to rupture the suit of anyone who came in. That much was plain. What about going out?

When he had the first corpse steady and vertical, a gentle shove sent it across the chamber in a position that looked practically lifelike.

Nothing. No blade, no reaction of any kind as far as he could see.

Possibly, the system (whatever it was) had detected the imposture. He tried to make the second corpse more lifelike even than the first.

Still nothing.

What if a corpse appeared to be entering? A few determined pulls on his lifeline got him plenty of slack. Hooking it to the third corpse, he held the thin orange line with one hand while he launched the corpse with the other. When it had left the memorial, a gentle tug brought it in again.

The blade flashed from its crevice, savaged the corpse’s already-ruined suit, and flung the corpse toward him.

“You’ve got a new servant,” March muttered, “whoever you were.” Playing it safe, he went out the way he had come in—fast and high.

Outside, he switched on his mike. “We just saw how dangerous a small percentage of these memorials are, a danger that poisons all the rest, both for mourners and for harmless tourists who might like to visit them. A program for identifying and destroying the few dangerous ones is badly needed.”

Propelled by his suit jets, he circled the memorial, getting a little more footage he would probably never use. His digicorder had room for more images than he would ever need. Those millions upon millions of images were the one thing with which he could be generous, even profligate.

“Someone perished here,” he told the mike, “far beyond the orbit of Mars. Other someones, employees or followers, family or friends, built his memorial—and built it as a trap, so that their revered dead might be served.... Where? In the spirit world? In Paradise? Nirvana? Heaven?”

“Or Hell. Hell is possible, too.”

Flowing letters, beautiful and alien, danced upon the curving walls. Arabic, perhaps, or Sanskrit. It would be well, March thought, to show enough of it that people would recognize it and stay away. For the present, the corpses floating outside it might be warning enough. His digicorder zoomed in before he switched it off and returned to his scarred olive-drab hopper.

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There was an Ethermail from Kit when he woke. He washed, shaved, and dressed before bringing her onto his screen.

“Hi there, Windy! Gettin’ lonely out there in the graveyard?”

She was being jaunty, but even a jaunty Kit could make his palms sweat.

“Well, listen up. Have I got a deal for you! You get me to em-cee this terminal travelogue you’re makin’. As an added bonus, you get a gal-pal of mine. Her name’s Robin Redd, and she’s a sound tech who can double in makeup.

“What’s more, we come free! Absolutely free, Windy, unless you can peddle your turkey. In which case we’ll expect a tiny little small cut. And residuals.

“So whadda you say? Gimme the nod quick, ‘cause Bad Bill’s pushin’ me to come back. Corner office, park my hopper on the roof with the big boys, and the money ain’t hopscotch ‘n’ hairballs either. So lemme know.”

Abruptly, the jauntiness vanished. “Either way, you’ve got to be quick, Windy. Word is that Pubnet’s shooting something similar out around Mars.”

He said, “Reply,” and took a deep breath. It was always hard to breathe when he tried to talk to Kit. Yes, even when she was three hundred million miles away.

“Kit, darling, you know how much I’d love to have you out here with me, even if it were just one day. I want you and I want to make you a superstar. You know that, too.”

He paused, wishing he dared cough. “I couldn’t help noticing that you didn’t mention what Bad Bill wanted you *for*. Knowing you and knowing that there isn’t a smarter woman in the business, I know you’ve found out. It’s his pet cooking show again, isn’t it? He wouldn’t give you a corner office for those kiddy shows, or I don’t think he would.

“So get yourself one of the new semitransparents, okay? ‘Vaults in the Void’ is just about roughed out, everybody in the world is going to want to see it by the time we’re finished with it, and nobody who sees it will ever forget you, darling.

“God knows I won’t.”

He moved his mouse and the screen went dark, leaving only the faint reflection

of an ugly middle-aged man with a crooked nose and a lantern jaw.

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The on-board had found three interesting blips strung out toward the orbit of Saturn, but Jupiter—specifically the mini-solar system surrounding it—was closer, and every hop took its toll of his wallet. He put the Jovian moons on screen and began speaking, just winging it so as to have something to work over for Kit later.

“Mightiest of all the worlds, Jupiter has drawn travelers ever since hoppers became a consumer necessity. When the first satellite was launched in nineteen fifty-seven, the men and women who put it into orbit could hardly have dreamed that Luna and Mars would be popular tourist destinations in less than a hundred years. Nor could the pioneers who built the first hotels and resorts there have anticipated that as soon as translunar travel became popular, travelers seeking more exotic locales would come here to the monarch’s court.

“You’ve got to throw a lot of money in the hopper. That’s for sure. But that only makes it that much more attractive to those who’ve got that money and want to flaunt it. It’s dangerous, too—transmissions from tourists whose icoms go abruptly silent make that only too clear, and every edition of the *Solar Traveler’s Guide* strives to make the danger a little plainer.

“Unfortunately, the striving doesn’t seem to do much good. People keep coming, alone or in company. Sometimes they even bring children. Every year, five, or ten, or twenty don’t make it back. Do all of them get memorials in space, *memoria in aeterna*? No, of course not. But many do, and such memorials are becoming more popular all the time. Some are simple stones. Others—well, we’ll be showing you a few. In an age in which the hope of a life after death gutters like a candle burned too long, in a century that has seen Arlington National Cemetery bulldozed to make room for more government offices, the desire to be remembered leaps up with a bright new flame.

“If not remembered, at least not totally forgotten. We wish it for our loved ones, too. We’d like some spark of them to remain until the sun grows dim. And who can blame us?”

Now to make the hop. Perhaps he would learn, soon, just what had happened to that poor girl who had tried, for so short a time, to raise her sweetheart and his friends.

\* \* \* \*

The first memorial he checked was a beautiful little thing. Someone with taste had taken a design intended for the desert and reworked it for space, with no up and no down, a lonely little mission shrine not too near Jupiter that reached up for God in every direction.

The bright flames inside belonged to votive candles, candles that burned in vacuum, apparently because their wax had been mixed with a chemical that liberated

oxygen when heated. They made a glorious ring of white wax and fire around the shrine, burning in nothingness with fat little spherical flames.

“A shrine sacred to the memory of Alberto Villaseor, Edita Villaseor, and Simplicia Hernandez,” he told his digicorder, “placed here, deep in space, by the children and grandchildren of the Villaseors and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Simplicia Hernandez.”

How many thousands of hours had Al Villaseor labored under a broiling sun before he could buy the hopper that had carried him, with his wife and the very elderly woman who had probably been his mother-in-law, to a death somewhere near Jupiter? Their 3Ds were in the shrine; and the mark of those hours, of that sun, was on Al’s face.

Turning off the audio, March murmured a prayer for all three.

Back on his hopper, clicking Ethermail got him Kit’s blue eyes and bright smile. “What’s this ‘semitransparent’ bull, Windy? Transparent’s only a couple thou more. I’ve got a good one, and I’ve been posing for the mirror. No picky-picky underclothes underneath. Wait till you see the pix! You’re gonna love ‘em.

“But Windy, you didn’t say a thing about my li’l pal Robin Redd. Can she come, too? I gotta bring her, Windy, or not come myself. She’s on the lam from a ex who beats hell out of her. She’s got an Order of Protection and all that crud, which he doesn’t give a rat’s ass about. I know he doesn’t, Windy. I was with her on Wednesday when he kicked her door down. Scout’s honor! I grabbed the carving knife and screamed my cute li’l head off.

“Windy, honeybear, I can’t leave Robin high and dry. I won’t! Not after what we went through Wednesday night. So can she come? It’s me, Windy. This is Kit, and I’m begging.”

March sighed and leaned back in the control chair, collecting his thoughts before he spoke.

“Gee, Kit, here I thought you were longing for the sight of my manly profile. Okay, I’ve got it now. Bring your friend. I trust she’s too well-mannered to push back the curtain when she hears funny noises from a bunk. Trust me, I’ll wash the sheets this time.

“But Kit, you’re going to have to wear something under that see-through suit. Get used to the idea if you want me to show you below the neck.”

\* \* \* \*

As March edged his hopper just a little nearer Number Nineteen, he turned up a new memorial, an asteroid circling Jupiter well outside the orbit of Sinope. Earlier he had thought it *only* a rock, a piece of pocked debris too small to hold even the chips knocked loose by meteorites.

Now he could see the entrance of the tomb. It was closed, though most such entrances gaped open, and square, though most were rough circles. As he zoomed in on the tumbling asteroid, the neat lettering before that entrance grew clear: Please Wipe Your Feet. This was one he wanted.

His own suit, orange and strictly opaque, was starting to show signs of wear. Nothing dangerous yet, but it would have to be watched. A military suit...

Well, a military suit wore pretty much like armor. A military suit got rid of built-up heat and kept the wearer warm no matter what. The wearer could relieve himself right there in his suit, and eat and drink whenever eating and drinking seemed necessary or advisable. Three kinds of lights, a score of tools, and half a dozen weapons were built into the suit; so was a mini computer with enough capacity for a whole lot of AI. That little on-board could and would offer warnings and advice. It would watch the wearer's back and even stand guard while he slept.

A soldier in a military suit could reach up into his helmet and pick his nose, or even take a suitless comrade—wounded or otherwise—into the suit with him.

A military suit...

Cost more than March Wildspring had been worth before his divorce, and twenty times more than he was worth at the moment. His own space suit, this dull orange suit that was beginning to show wear, provided propulsion, communication, and breathable air for four hours plus. Little more beyond a fishbowl helmet that would darken when hit with a whole lot of ultraviolet light—Twentieth Century tech, and he was lucky to have even that. Shrugging, he closed his suit and buckled on his utility belt.

Spaceboots over the feet of the suit were not strictly necessary, but were (as March reminded himself) a damned good idea. Suits tore. Cheap civilian suits tore pretty easily, and tore most often at the feet. Small permanent magnets in the boots would keep him on the sheet-metal body of his hopper without holding him there so tightly that he would have trouble kicking off.

With the second boot strapped tight, he hooked his lifeline to his belt and put on his helmet. On Earth, his suit weighed fifty-seven pounds. Here it weighed exactly nothing; even so, his irritated struggles against its frequently pigheaded mass provided a good deal of useful exercise. People tended to get soft in space.

Kit would be another source of salutary exercise, he reflected, if things went as well as he hoped.

The airlock was big enough for one person in a pinch, if that one person was mercifully free of claustrophobia. March shut the inner door and spun the wheel, listening to his precious air being pumped back into the hopper, to its whispering, whimpering departure. Then to silence.

Fifteen seconds passed. Half a minute, and the outer door swung back. He kicked off from the inner door and turned on the suit's main jet. Steering jets and seat-of-the-pants flying kept him on course for the asteroid into which some unlucky tourist's tomb had been carved, and enabled him to match the asteroid's rotation.

The inscribed welcome mat before the door was, on closer inspection, wrought iron. His boots stuck to the iron nicely. Was he to knock? He did, but there was no response. Presumably there was no atmosphere inside the tomb, but it would have been possible—even easy—for a mike to pick up sound waves transmitted through the stone walls. Checking a third time to make certain his digicorder was running, he searched the doorframe for a bell button and found one.

The wood-grained steel door opened at once, apparently held by a bald, pleasant-looking man of about sixty. "Come in," the bald man said. He wore an old white shirt and faded jeans supported by red suspenders. "It was darned nice of you to come way out here to see me, son. If you'll just come inside and sit down, we can have a good chat."

March switched on his speaker. "I'll be happy to, sir. I know you're really a holographic projection, but it's very hard not to treat you as living person. So I'll come in and chat, and thank you for your hospitality."

The bald man nodded, still smiling. "You're right, son. I'm dead, and I'd like to tell you about it. About my life and how I came to die. I'd like to, but if you don't want to hear it, I can't keep you. Will you stay and make a poor old dead guy happy?"

"I certainly will," March said, "and half the world with me." He indicated his digicorder.

"Why that's wonderful! Sit down. Sit down, please. I hate to keep my guests standing."

It was just possible that there were knives that would slash his suit concealed in the fluffy pillows of the sofa behind the long coffee table. March chose what appeared to be a high-backed walnut rocker instead, tying its cord so that he floated a few inches above its seat.

The bald man dropped into an easy chair that showed signs of long use. "I'd make you some iced tea if you could drink it, but I know you can't. It doesn't seem right not to offer a guest something, though. I've got some little boxes of candy you could take back to your hopper. Maybe give to the missus, if she's in there? You like one?"

March shook his head. "She's not, sir. It's very kind of you, but what I'd really like is to hear about you. Won't you tell us?"

"Happy to, son. Glad to recite my little adventures, at home and out here in

space. Frank Welton's my name, and I was born in Carbon Hill, Ohio, U.S.A., one of a pair of twin boys. Probably you never heard of Carbon Hill, it's just a little place, but that's where it was. I was a pretty good ball player, so I played ball for eight years after high school. See my picture? The kid with the glove and bat?" The bald man pointed, and March swung his digicorder to get it.

"That was taken when I played for the Saint Louis Cardinals. I played left field, mostly, but I could play all three outfield positions and I generally hit pretty close to three hundred. The money was good, and I meant to stay in baseball as long as I could. That turned out to be eight seasons, but for that last season I was a pinch hitter, mostly. An outfielder has to have a good strong throwing arm, and my shoulder blew out on me."

March said, "I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"Well, I got out of baseball and went home to Carbon Hill. A friend of my dad's was in the sand and gravel business in a small way. He was getting on and wanted a younger partner with some money they could use to expand the business. I threw in with him, and when he died I bought his widow out. Pretty soon I was making more in sand and gravel than I ever had playing ball. I got married...." The bald man took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes.

March cleared his throat. "If this is too painful for you, sir, I'll go."

"You stay, son." The bald man swallowed audibly and wiped his nose. "There's things I got to tell you. Only I got to thinking about Fran. She died, and I didn't have the heart anymore. Business is like baseball, son. If you got nothing but heart, you can still win on heart. Not all the time, mind, but now and then. That's what they say and it's the truth. But if you don't have heart, you're done for."

March nodded. "I understand you, believe me."

"That's good. I turned the business over to our kids. That's Johnny, Jerry, and Joanie, and they're the ones who built this memorial for me. They owed me a lot, and they still do. But they paid off a little part of what they owed with this. Like it?"

"One of the best I've seen, sir, and I've seen quite a few."

"That's good. I bought me a hopper when I retired. I told everybody I wanted to see Mars because of all the sand and gravel they had there. I thought it was true, but what I really wanted was to get away from Earth. Maybe you know how that is."

March nodded.

"So I did. Spent a little time on Mars and a few days on the moon, then I thought I'd have a look at Ganymede, Callisto, Titan, and so forth. The big satellites of the outer worlds, in other words. People don't realize how many there are, or how big they are, either.



“It was Io that did me in. Not the li'l gal herself, but trying to get there. Oh, I knew all about old Jupiter. How far out his atmosphere goes, and the radio bursts. All that stuff. What I hadn't figured on was just what all the gravity meant. Just how quick it grabs you, and how quick a hopper heats up when it hits ol' Jupiter's atmosphere. I guess I've 'bout talked your ears off now.”

March shook his head. “If you've got more to say, sir, I'll listen.”

“Then I'll say this. My dad was a good man and a hard worker, but he was a day laborer all his life, and he died at fifty-four. Go back a few generations, and my folks were slaves. I had a better life than my dad did, and one hell of a lot better life than they did. I'd like a prayer or two, son, and I'd like to be remembered. But I'm not complaining. I got a fair shake, and I had a lot of luck. Want to see how I looked when I was dead, son?”

“I don't understand how that's possible, sir.” March hesitated before adding, “You were pulled down to Jupiter, and your hopper must have been burned away completely before it hit the planetary surface.”

“Well, son, I can show you just the same. This is pretty slick, so have a look.” Leaning forward the bald man touched the top of the coffee table, and it became as transparent as glass.

A dead man lay just below the transparent surface, his eyes shut and his hands folded. His white shirt and casual jacket were well-tailored and looked expensive. After studying his features, March said, “That's you all right, sir. Computer modeling?”

“Nope.” The bald man had turned serious. “It's an actual tridee, son, taken at the funeral. That's my twin brother, Hank. He died forty-six days after I did. That happens a lot with twins. One gets killed and the other dies. Identical twins I mean. Which is what we were. Nobody knows why it happens but it does. Hank turned in for the night like usual. Barbara went to get him up in the morning, and he was dead. You want to be dead, son?”

March shook his head. “No, sir. I don't.”

“Then you take a lesson from me and watch out for that ol' Jupiter.”

\* \* \* \*

Back in his hopper, his on-board signaled Ethermail. He touched the keyboard, and Kit's arresting eyes and perfect complexion filled the screen. “Hi, Windy! If you don't want us, say so. One more should get us there, so this's your last chance.

“But first, stop worrying about what I'm going to have on under the suit. I am going to wear a bra. Guaranteed. Haven't you seen what zero-g does with boobs the size of mine? I have. They go all over, and believe me it's not a pretty sight. So I've

got this wonderful little pink bra. You're gonna love it! The saleswoman got out a needle and pulled the whole, entire thing through the eye."

Kit had a charming laugh, and she used it. "Don't look at me like that, Windy. Put down that fatal eyebrow. Okay, it was a big needle like you might use on denim or leather. So it had a big eye. But she pulled it through, exactly like I said. I'll show it to you—by golly and geewhillikers, I'll model it for you. So if you don't want us you've gotta be quick."

March clicked REPLY. "Kit, darling, you know I want you more than life itself. Please hurry! Now don't get mad, but I'm a little bit curious. Why didn't I see your pal Robin Redd in the background. Is she really that ugly?"

He had hardly resumed his search for memorials when his on-board signaled a fresh Ethermail.

"She's in the can, Windy. That's all. She'll be out in a minute. Not bad-looking, either, if you dig redheads with bruised faces. So if you're all hot to fantasize, go right ahead. Just don't try to make 'em real, 'cause you know damn well there ain't space enough in your hopper for three bare-ass bodies playin' games.

"Speakin' of space, I got a li'l surprise. Have a look out your driver's-side window. Wanna couple?"

It was Kit's hopper, as he knew it would be, a new one gleaming with chrome and unscarred maroon paint and roughly the size of one of the compact pre-fabs older people still called mobile homes. Twice the size of his own hopper, in other words.

Suiting up again, he grabbed his line launcher and went out onto the hull.

A tiny figure emerged from the big maroon hopper, and the icom in his helmet buzzed and clicked. "You got a launcher, Windy? I didn't bring mine, but I can go back in and get one."

"Right here." He aimed his launcher, activated its laser guide, and launched, the solid-fuel rocket trailing a slender but strong Kevlar line.

"You got us, Windy. Want me to pull?"

March started his winch. "We'll just get it tangled. I'll reel you in."

"You gotta wench winch. Ever think of that?"

"Saying things like that cost you 'Building People for Kids.'"

"I didn't care. I'd already done the parts I liked. Got anything to eat in that tin can?"

“Self heats. Stuff like that.”

“We’ve got that beat hands-down. Robin can’t cook worth a damn. I, upon the other well-washed hand, am an internationally famous cheffettej. One who—”

March said, “There’s no such word and you know it.”

“There is now. One who, I was saying, knows there’s nothing for getting the ol’ pencil sharp like a real, authentic Caribbean pepper pot. Be ready in an hour or so, but if you’d like to come over now for a long-time-no-see kiss....”

With their hoppers grappled, it was not necessary to turn on his suit jets to go from his own to hers. He kicked off, somersaulted in space, and landed feet-first next to her airlock.

“Nicely done, Windy,” she said as he was taking off his helmet and just beginning to appreciate her flowery perfume. The long-time-no-see kiss followed, and lasted a good two minutes. When they separated, she added, “If you weren’t wearing all that machinery, I think I might’ve raped you.”

He leered. “Men aren’t supposed to make jokes about rape. You told me that—”

“I’m not a man. You failed to notice.”

“Therefore, madam, I will say quite seriously that if I had not been swaddled in all this gear, I believe I might have ravished you.”

She had put her finger to her lips; he lowered his voice as he said, “You escaped by merest chance.”

“Rape’s a sensitive topic with Robin,” Kit whispered. “I shouldn’t have shot off my mouth. Only when a man does it, it’s ten times worse. I think her ex raped her. Maybe a couple times.”

“I see.”

“Okay, she’ll cramp our style verbally. Not in bed. I’ll see to that.”

“So will I,” March said. “Marry me, Kit. I mean it. How the hell do you kneel without gravity?”

“You meant it last time. I know that.”

“And I mean it this time.”

“I turned you down.” Kit’s face was somber. “Did I say why?”

“No. Just that you weren’t ready.”

“Then I’ll say it now. I love you to pieces, but I’ve got a career and they print

your name on the toilet paper in the executive washroom. You think I'm kidding?"

"Damn right I do." March opened his suit. "You've never set foot in the executive washroom."

"Wrong. When I was talking to Bad Bill about the cooking show I had to powder my nose, and he loaned me his key. It's on the paper."

March scowled, then chuckled. "And you used it."

It got him the sidelong glance and sly smile he loved. "I'm taking the Fifth, Windy."

"It wasn't a question. Speaking of washrooms, when are we going to see what's-her-name?"

"Robin. How would I know? She's been in there forever. Do you understand why I said no, Windy? You don't have to agree with it. Just understand it."

He shrugged. "Does it mean you'll be wearing a fake mustache when you narrate for me?"

"That's not the same thing, and you know it. I'm not with the network right now. Not officially. My contract's run out. It'll probably be renewed, but it might not be. Nobody's going to raise hell because I took a stop-gap job narrating a documentary. Besides...." Her sudden silence betrayed the thought.

"Besides," March rasped, "'Vaults in the Void' may never be broadcast. Go ahead and say it. You'll be saying something I've thought a thousand times."

"There's not much market for documentaries, Windy," Kit was trying to make her voice kind, something she was not particularly good at. "Yours is sure to be a complete downer, even with me in it acting all respectful. So if—"

A latch clicked five steps away, and one of the flimsy doors opened and—very softly—shut. He turned.

And froze.

"Hello, Marchy." The woman with her hand on the latch was a head shorter than Kit. The small face beneath the mop of blazing red hair looked pinched and white. One eye was bruised and swollen nearly shut; there was a second bruise on the cheek below it.

"Sue." March did not realize that he had spoken aloud until he heard his own voice.

"That isn't my name now."

Shrugging was difficult, but he managed it. "You've sued me so often that I

don't see how I can call you anything else."

She drew herself up. "My name is Robin Redd."

"So I've heard."

"Hold it!" Kit edged (most enjoyably) around March to stand between them. "You owe me. Both of you do. Windy, I bought this hopper and came way the hell out here into God-forsaken outermost space just because you needed me. Tell me that's not right, and I'll head back home as soon as you clear the airlock."

"It's right," March said.

"Robin, you had to get away. I'd seen what Jim could do, and I stepped up like a Girl Scout. I never ran your card or asked a favor. I said why don't you come with me, I'll be glad to have the company. If you say that's not how it was, I'm hustling you back to Earth and shoving you out. Wasn't that how it was?"

Robin nodded.

"Okay. It's a mess. Even I, good-hearted dumb li'l Kit, can see that. But I don't know what kind of mess I've made, and I'm going to raise holy hell till you two fill me in. You know each other. How?"

March sighed. "We made the mess, Kit. Sue here did, and I did. Not you."

Robin whispered, "He's my ex, Kit."

"Jim?" Kit goggled at her. "I saw Jim. It was Wednesday night."

"Not Jim. Oh, God! I hate this!"

March said, "It's been years since the final decree, Kit, and the proceedings dragged on for a couple of years before that. I had abused her—verbally. I had said things that injured her delicate feelings. Things that were quoted in court, mostly inaccurately and always out of context. I had persecuted her—"

"Don't! Just don't! Don't say those things."

"Why not?" March was grim. "You said them to a judge."

"I had to!"

Kit threw up her hands. "Hold it. Stop right there. I'm making a new rule. You don't talk to each other. Each of you talks only to me."

She glared at March, then turned to Robin. "How many times have you been married?"

"T-twice." Her eyes were overflowing, their tears detached by minute motions of her head to float in the air of the hopper, tiny spheres of purest crystal.

“Windy was your first husband?”

Studying her without hearing her, March was besieged by memories. How beautiful she had been in the days when she still smiled, the days when her hair was long, soft, and brown. In his mind’s eye, she was poised on the high board, poised for a second or two that had somehow become forever, poised above the clear blue water of some hotel’s swimming pool.

“Windy? Did you hear me?” It was Kit.

He shook his head. “I was remembering, I’m afraid. Thinking how it used to be before it went bad.”

Robin shouted, “Before you stopped paying attention!”

“Shut up!” Kit snapped. “Windy, she said you never hit her, but you abused her verbally and psychologically. Threats and put-downs. All that stuff. True or false?”

“True,” March said.

“Is that all you’ve got to say?”

He nodded.

“Did you ever love her?”

He felt as though his feet had been kicked from under him. “Oh, my God!” He groped for words. “I was crazy about her, Kit. Sometimes she wouldn’t speak to me for weeks and it just about killed me. She left me over and over. I’d come home from work, and instead of being there spoiling for a fight she’d be gone. She’d live with some boyfriend or other for a few days, maybe a week, and then—”

“Jim!” Robin cocked her head, her smile a challenge. “It was always Jim, Marchy.”

“Shut up!” Kit turned to glare at her.

“That isn’t what she said. Do we have to talk about this?”

Kit studied him. “You look like you’ve lost a quart of blood.”

“I feel like it, too.”

“My pepper pot ought to help. And I’ve made Cuban bread. That’s easy. You ever eat stew out here?”

He shook his head.

“Me neither. I’ve got it simmering in hopsacks. Those clear plastic thingies. That’s why you don’t smell it.”

“Sure.” It was wonderful to speak of something else. Of anything else. “I’ve got some, too.”

“So I figure we can drink the liquid, and there’ll be little chunks of crayfish and pork and so forth in there too. When it’s gone, we can open the hopsacks and eat the solids.”

“Should work.”

“Do you still love her, Windy?”

He shook his head.

\* \* \* \*

Kit in her transparent suit was simply incredible, lush curves that changed and changed again as the suit flexed, but in that light were never more than half seen. He shot her from the waist up, not quite always, knowing it would keep five hundred million men watching, waiting, and wondering.

“Hi. It’s me again, Kit Carlsen. When I do a cooking show, I tell you—sometimes—about the chef who developed a recipe, or the person the dish was named after. Peaches Melba for Nellie Melba the opera singer. You know. Well, today we’re going to visit the tomb of a lady who was her town’s best, and best known, cook. I plan to ask her about her cooking as well as her life and death. You may think it’s tasteless, but March Wildspring and I think you’ll find it interesting if you’ll just stick with us. March is our producer, so what he says goes.”

With a wave and a beckoning smile, Kit entered the tomb. March grinned. After a moment he followed her, watching her image in the digicorder screen more closely than Kit herself.

*That’s me, there. The woman in the gray dress on the red chair.*

The voice was without even the semblance of a living speaker, the picture calm, serious, and motionless.

*My name was Sarah-Jane Applefield. I was sixty-three at the time of my demise. My parents were McAlister Rodney Applefield and Elizabeth Warren Weyerhaeuser. I bore three fine children in my time, Clara, Sheryl, and Charles. All were much loved. Would you like to hear about my early life?*

“No, Sarah.” Kit’s voice was soft, coaxing. “We’d like to hear about your cooking. It made you famous all over Southton. Can you tell our audience something about that?”

*Certainly. Would you like recipes, or the secrets of good cooking?*

Kit smiled in her plastic bubble. “Your secrets, please.”

*I call them secrets because so few women seem to know them. They’re*

*secrets I tell freely to anyone, but they stay secret just the same. Do you cook?*

“I do,” Kit said. “I cook a lot, and so do a lot of busy women and men in our audience.”

*Good. The first is to release the inner self. We’re all a little bit psychic, but we’ve been taught to pretend we’re not. Let that go. Feel the dish. Sense what it feels. In the storybook, Alice talks to the food, and the food talks back to her. I read it to my children. Lewis Carroll wrote it, and he was an old bachelor. He cooked for himself, you see, so he knew.*

Kit smiled again. “I need to read that book, and I will.”

*The second is to use your nose. Cooking would be difficult for a woman who was blind, but if she learned, she would be a better cook than a seeing woman who would not use her nose. Food may look very nice when it’s really quite awful, but food that smells good is good, just about always.*

*The third is to taste. Spices lose their flavor. Two pieces of beef may be from different animals, even though both are beef. There are breeds of cattle just like there are breeds of cats, or one animal may be old and the next young. If you buy your beef at the store you have no way of telling. What it comes down to is that recipes can’t be exact. The cook must taste, and taste again.*

“That’s very wise, I’m sure.”

*It is. Your name is Kit. Your husband told me when he was here before.*

“He’s not my husband.” Kit’s smile was warm. “But close enough.”

*If you were wise yourself, Kit, you would ask me what I should tell you. Whether it concerns food or not.*

Kit glanced at March for guidance, and he nodded.

“Then I do, please. What is it I ought to ask? Pretend I did.”

*There is nothing close enough to marriage, Kit. I bore three children to the man who stands behind me in my picture. We were never wed. As time wears on, that will grow easier and easier for the man, Kit, and harder and harder for you. Look closely at my picture, and you’ll see I wear a ring.*

March zoomed in on it.

*I bought that ring for myself, Kit, in a little shop that sold old jewelry. He begged me to take it off once, when we were going to bed. I did, and while we slept he hid it.*

Kit looked stricken, but her voice remained smoothly professional. “I’m glad for your sake, Ms. Applefield, that he didn’t keep it.”



*Don't you see? He would've had to give it to me if he had—would've had to give it back to me. Make the gesture he would never make.*

“I’ve got it.” Kit shook her head as if a blow had left her dizzy.

*I like you. If I didn't, I wouldn't have spoken to you as I did just now. This will be easier for you to hear, but you must not discount it for that reason. There is another flying grave, like my own but larger than my own. It's on the other side of Jupiter today.*

“One you think we ought to visit?” March sensed that Kit was breathing normally again. “Can you tell us what’s there?”

*I can't. Your man asked the same question. That's why I'm mentioning it now. I can look outside this grave. Did you know?*

“No, Ms. Applefield, I certainly didn't.”

*I can. Hoppers park at that grave sometimes. I see them. People—live people like you—go inside. Pay attention now, Kit. They don't come out again, and pretty soon their hoppers drift away.*

\* \* \* \*

Kit was doing deep-space aerobics, throwing herself from floor to ceiling and from ceiling to floor, her lush body enveloped in a fine mist of sweat that her hopper's air system stripped away only sluggishly. “I say we gotta go in,” she gasped. “Round-file that sweet old lady giving us her warning? Over my dead body.”

“If you go in,” Robin said, “I might go in it, too—only I wish you wouldn't.”

“I'm going.” Kit grunted. “If Windy won't go, I'll go in by myself. You can shoot me.”

Watching her, March thought of all the things he would do—or try to—if Robin were not present. Aloud he said, “You'd better stop. You're wearing yourself out.”

“Just landed a little wrong and hit my knee. I do a hundred of these.” Kit sprang from the floor, twisting like a gymnast in air that smelled of shampoo. “I've been counting to myself. This's eighty-seven.”

“Then I'll count the rest for you. Eighty-eight. Eighty-nine. Ninety....”

“You're the only friend I've got,” Robin told Kit. “The only good friend. If you die, it's be just me and Jim, and he'll kill me.”

“Ninety-two. Kit, doesn't that tell you something about your little pal here? She's thirty-five, and she's got exactly one good friend. You. One good friend, and a second husband she thinks may kill her.”

“Thirty-one, dammit!”

Kit snatched at breath. “How many?”

“Ninety-six. And I know how old Sue is. She’s eight years younger than I am, and her birthday’s October thirty-first. That ought to tell you something, too. Ninety-nine.” He watched Kit throw herself, with obvious effort, back to the crimson carpet. “One hundred.”

She straightened up, and Robin handed her a towel. “Thanks for giving me an honest count, Windy. I kind of thought you’d cheat.”

He nodded. “That’s what Robin thought, too. She had me followed for a couple months.”

“Did you?”

He shook his head.

Robin threw a pepper mill at him. “You were too smart for them!” Missing his head by at least a foot, it slammed against the wall.

March’s eyes had never left Kit. “I was under the impression that Sue and I weren’t speaking. Apparently I was wrong. I, however, am not speaking to her. It may spare your hopper a few scars.”

“She can throw my stuff at me,” Kit told him. “Robin, you’re a guest in this hopper. Windy’s another guest in my hopper. I asked him to dinner. If you two want to rip open old wounds, I can’t stop you. No violence, though. I mean real violence, like throwing stuff. Or hitting. Do it again, and you go out.”

“Into *his* hopper?” Robin’s contempt was palpable. “I’d rather die!”

“I doubt that he’d let you in. I’ll just get you suited up and shove you out the airlock. Tourists come to Jupiter pretty often. Somebody will probably pick you up before your air runs out.”

March sighed. “You want me to say I’d take her in. And if I don’t....”

“I’ll think a lot less of you, Windy.”

“All right, I will. I only hope I won’t have to. If I do, I’ll probably kill her before I can get her back to terra firma.”

“I’m not from there, smart-ass.” Robin cocked her head. “Terror whatever you said.”

Kit giggled as she joined Robin at the tiny table. “I’m not going to touch that straight line. Don’t you touch it either, Windy.”

She tied the soft cord that would keep her from floating out of her chair.

“Bulbs are hot. Windy, get over here and sit down. I know you always like coffee with your meals. How about you, Robin? Coffee? Tea?”

“Tea, please.” Robin’s voice was one breath above a whisper.

“Here you go. And here’s your coffee, Windy. Now before you start gobbling my *Truite Farcie aux Epinards*, we’ve got to talk seriously about the next shoot. Do you remember when I said I’d go into that damned mausoleum or whatever it is alone if you wouldn’t come with me? I meant every word of it.”

March sat. “You may change your mind when you’ve had time to think it over. I hope you will.”

Kit looked as grim as a pleasant blonde can look. “I change my mind before I’ve told anybody. Never after. If you won’t go in, I’m going in alone tomorrow.”

So close to March that their elbows touched, Robin raised a beverage bulb to her lips and put it down. “Do either of you actually know where this awful place is?” Her perfume, musky and hinting of cinnamon, crept into his nostrils.

Kit shook her head. “I’ll find it. The dead lady can probably tell me, just to start with.”

“I call it Number Nineteen,” March told her. “I’ve known about it awhile, but I haven’t gone inside.”

“Then I won’t have to ask her—I’ll get it out of you. Shameless prostitution, right? Are you going in, too? Yes or no.”

“Then it’s yes. I’ll go in there with you on one condition.”

Robin said, “I’d go in with Kit if she was going in there alone. Not if you’ll be with us.”

“That would have sounded better,” Kit told her, “if you’d said it before Windy said he’d go. We call that bad timing in show biz.” She turned to March. “What’s your condition? Maybe I won’t agree.”

“You’ll have no reason not to. There’s another one, not as big. I haven’t gone into it either, but I’ve every reason to think it’s dangerous. I want you to go into that one with me first. If I’m right, you’ll get a little seasoning there. When we tackle Number Nineteen you’re going to need some.”

“So you think,” Robin said.

Kit motioned her to silence. “I’m all for seasoning. Have you got any reason for thinking this one’s not quite so hairy? Besides its being smaller?”

March shook his head.

“Then I’ll go. When do we do it?”

Robin said, “I’d like to know what reasons he’s got for thinking it’s dangerous at all.”

“Tomorrow,” March said. The oven buzzed as he spoke.

“Sounds good.” Kit untied her cord. “Everybody ready for food?”

The trout was served in Pyrex-topped dishes with tiny hatches that slid away at the touch of a fork. Kit demonstrated, thrusting her own fork in, and pulling it out laden with fish and spinach. March tried it, and a wisp of spinach floated away before his fork was halfway to his mouth. “Chopsticks might be better,” he suggested.

Robin giggled.

“You’ve got ‘em,” Kit told him. “There’s a trigger at the front of the handle. Feel it? Pull that, and the chow bar flips over to hold your stuff on. Loosen up when it’s in your mouth, and you can get your food out.

“Robin, can you clean up that spinach for me? Make yourself useful?”

“You betcha.”

The *Truite Farcie aux Epinards* was delicious. March took another bite before he said, “Ever hear of the Thugs?”

Kit chewed reverently and swallowed. “Like muggers, Windy?”

“Not quite. There was a cult called Thuggee, and the members were the original Thugs. They worshipped Death and sacrificed people to her.”

Robin muttered, “Why do we always get blamed?”

“Mostly they strangled them, although I believe they also stabbed a few. They offered the deaths of their victims to their goddess, and kept the victims’ possessions to cover operating expenses. The Brits wiped them out two hundred years back.”

“Why are you telling us this, Windy?” Kit’s hand hovered over the clip that would hold her fork when she had no need of it.

“Because it seems like they’re with us again, in a new and improved Westernized form. And I’m not telling you and Sue. Just you.”

“You mean they gave up the goddess business?”

March shook his head. “The West has never abandoned religion, Kit. You just think it has because you and your friends have. Okay, I’m your friend and I’d like to be more. But you know what I mean.”

“We’ll talk about that other thing sometime when we’re alone.” For a moment, Kit looked a trifle stunned. “You—You said they were Westernized, Windy. If you didn’t mean no goddess, what did you mean?”

“Computers, secure lines of electronic communication, and hoppers just to start with. Guns. Poisons. Ever been in an abattoir?”

“A slaughterhouse? No, and I don’t want to go.”

“You’re going.” March sighed. “Or I think you are. You said you’d go into this one—into Number Thirteen—with me if I’d go into Number Nineteen with you. Something like that. That’s what it came down to.”

“This is good.” Robin paused to sniff the fish on her fork. “Has anybody told you so yet? It’s really luscious, and you’d better finish yours before it gets cold.”

Obediently, Kit ate. “Food doesn’t taste as good when you’re scared.”

“Then I wish I weren’t,” March told her, “and you won’t be in Number Thirteen. Or I don’t think so. If you’d been in a modern abattoir, you’d know the cattle aren’t frightened. Fear makes them noisy and hard to control, so it’s been eliminated. They get on a slow belt that doesn’t shake at all, or make any kind of sound. It moves them down a narrow chute, and by that time they’re used to chutes. This one seems less frightening than most. But when they get to the bottom and start back up, they’re dead.”

“You’re not eating,” Kit said.

“I thought you’d have another question.” March took a forkful of trout and chewed it with appreciation. It was still delicious. Firm, fresh trout and tender, young spinach. Onions, shallots, cream, and something else. No, he corrected himself, several somethings else.

“Well, I do,” Robin said. “You told us you hadn’t been in there. Or implied it anyway.”

Seeing that March intended to ignore her, Kit asked, “Is that right, Windy? You’ve never been inside?”

“Correct.”

“Then how did you know I wouldn’t be scared?”

“Because the others weren’t. When I was still poking around the asteroid belt, I picked up the traffic of a party going in there. Or at least, I think that’s where they were going. They weren’t afraid. When the first stopped transmitting, the rest just tried to raise him. The last one thought her icom had gone out. About a minute later, she went silent, too.”

Robin said, “He may fool you, Kit, but he’s not fooling me. I know him too

well. They went into the big one, the one he's so scared of. Not the little one he's been talking about."

"Did they, Windy? Was it really Number Whatchacallit and not the one you want us to shoot next?"

"Number Nineteen," March said. "The one I'm hoping will give you a little experience without killing us is Number Thirteen."

"Thirteen?" Robin grinned. "Oooh! That's scary!"

"Shut up," March told her.

The grin widened. "You betcha. But I thought you weren't talking to me, Marchy darling."

"I wasn't. It didn't work, and I should have known it wouldn't. You always chipped away until I said something you could throw back at me in court. You haven't changed, and neither have I."

He paused to collect his thoughts. When neither woman spoke, he said, "Sue doesn't really care, Kit, but you may. If I'd been assigning numbers to the memorials I found for advertising purposes, Number Nineteen would have gotten thirteen. I wasn't doing that. Number Thirteen was the thirteenth I found. That's all. Number Nineteen was the nineteenth. I could take you to Number Fourteen or Number Twenty. Both those look pretty safe. Just say the word if you'd like to go."

Kit said, "I've finished my trout, Windy. So has Robin. Finish yours, so I can serve dessert."

"No salad? That's not like you."

"You're right. I forgot. Eat your trout."

"In a moment. Sue had—"

"It's Robin, dammit!" She was untying her cord.

"It wasn't Robin when Sue and I were married," March told Kit, "and if she tries to live up to that red dye-job, I'll have to defend myself. I hope you understand."

"I'm bigger and stronger than she is," Kit said levelly. "She may not know it, but I am. If she cuts up rough she'll find out fast."

"I'm a black belt!" Robin screamed.

"Sure you are—a black belt in Bad Sock Hop. You needed me when Jim kicked down your door, remember?"

March cleared his throat. "Right now I want to grab you and kiss you, Kit. I

want it as much as I've ever wanted anything in my life. What do you say?"

"I think it had better wait. You know what we did last time."

"All right." March sighed. "Your friend Sue had a legitimate question. Could the people whose transmissions I caught have been going into Number Nineteen? There were three empty hops near Number Thirteen, so I think that's where they went. I could be wrong."

He took a bite of trout. As he had expected, it was still quite hot. "What's in this, Kit? What's the taste I can't label?"

"Could be the fresh tarragon. Or the cider." Kit grinned. "Or my secret ingredient."

Robin muttered, "Watch for bones."

\* \* \* \*

They met a mile plus from Number Thirteen, he in his worn orange suit, she looking like a lingerie model wrapped in cellophane. "We're alone now," he said, and gestured. "This is interplanetary space, so we're as alone as two people can be. Will you marry me, Kit?"

"Robin's listening, Windy. I told her to listen in, and call the network for help if we stopped transmitting."

"Kit—"

"It's just common sense. After what you'd told me, I thought we ought to take a few precautions. I told her to ask for Bad Bill, or Phil Inglis if she couldn't get hold of Bill. Tell them we're in trouble and ask for help."

March did not know what to say, and if Kit did, she did not say it. Silence closed around them, the menacing silence of the giant planet above them and the cool and watchful silence of the stars.

At last Kit said, "Are you there, Robin? Speak up."

"She probably doesn't know how to work the set."

"I showed her. Robin?"

"Maybe she'd rather listen than talk. That would be a first for her, but it's possible."

"Poor Robin." Kit's face, distorted only slightly by the plastic bubble of her helmet, looked as though she meant it. "You don't want to admit that she might have a single shred of human decency."

"All right, I admit it. She's probably got one, even if I couldn't find it."

“You think she’s listening in.” From her expression, Kit thought it was at least possible.

“I don’t think it or not think it. I don’t care one way or another. But I’ll tell you this. If she is, she’ll let us know when she hears what I’m going to say next.”

He took a deep breath of far-from-odorless suit air. “I know I’m not handsome, Kit, and thanks to your friend Sue, I’m just about broke. You’re a star, and I’m a washed-up producer who was never terribly big anyway. Knowing all that—because I know you know it, too—will you marry me? Please? As soon as we get back to New York?”

Kit listened for a moment. “You’re right. She’d be screaming at me not to do it. She’s not there. Come on, let’s have a look at this mugger tomb.”

“You didn’t say no.” Suddenly March felt at least ten years younger.

“I didn’t say yes, either. The guy who sold me my suit said to lock arms.”

He complied, and she switched on her jets; a moment later he turned on his own as well.

“Looks pretty dark in there, Windy. You got a helmet light?”

“If you’d like to think it over, that’s fine.” For a moment he wrestled with his feelings. “All right, it isn’t really fine but I’ll wait. I’ll wait till tomorrow or next week or next month.”

“Thanks.”

“Or next year. I—I don’t know how to say this, but I’ll wait for as long as you ask me to, just as long as you don’t say no. And if you should change your mind after that, I’ll probably come running. Hell, I know I will. I love you. I love you, and I know I’ll never stop loving you. You’re ... I can’t put it into words, Kit, but I’ll never get over it.”

Her hand tightened on his, and her smile shone through her plastic helmet bubble. “You’ve got a lovely voice, Windy. Anybody ever tell you so?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got a lousy voice and I know it. It sets people’s teeth on edge. No resonance, no overtones.”

“Handsome is as handsome does, Windy, and you’ve got a voice that says beautiful things. You just proved it.”

“Is that why you didn’t say no?”

“That and a whole lot of other reasons.” Kit pointed. “This fake lintel they carved out of the rock—what are those things pretending to hold it up? Is that a bird?”



“You didn’t say yes, either. Is it the money?”

“I’ve got enough for both of us. Tell me about the bird.”

“It’s an adjutant stork. The other animal is a jackal, I think. They’re symbols of death.”

“Don’t storks bring babies?”

“Not this kind. Those are nice storks. Won’t you tell me why you didn’t say yes, Kit?”

“Well, for one thing, you don’t say you love me often enough.”

“I just did.” When she did not reply, March added. “We’d better slow up.”

“Okay, I’m turning ‘em down. Are you good with these controls?”

“Fair. Yours are probably a little different.”

“Then look at this and tell me why it’s not working.” Kit held out her left arm.

For a moment, he studied the buttons and the tiny screen. “You don’t have Jets up.” He pushed three buttons in rapid succession. The looming asteroid still rushed toward them, but it rushed no faster. “You’ve got to hit Control, select Jets, and press the Down key.”

“We’re still going awfully fast, Windy.”

“Of course we are. There’s no air resistance. Why didn’t you say yes? You said there were a lot of reasons. Give me two or three.”

“I gave you one already. I know you said it just now, but you don’t say it often. Bad Bill’s another. I want to get dramatic roles, not just kids shows and cooking shows, all that crap. Marrying you would hurt my career—or it would just now, anyway.”

“If he found out, yes. What are you going to say if Bad Bill asks you to marry him?”

“That he’ll have to dump Loretta.” Kit was grinning.

“And if he does?”

“It’ll take a while. I know her, and she’ll put up a fight. You could give lessons on that stuff, Windy. Why are you asking me?”

“And meanwhile—?”

“Meanwhile, I’ll get some roles I want. Can we slow down? I’m getting scared.”

“Wait till we get inside, Kit. Be scared then.” March spun them both until their reduced jets were braking.

“Can I give you another reason? One more.”

“That’s enough.”

“I want to. I didn’t say yes—yet—because it would hurt you. Bad Bill hates your guts already for showing him up. If we get married and he finds out, he’s going to hate you worse than poop on his birthday cake. It’ll be twenty times rougher than it is now.”

March chuckled. “It couldn’t be.”

“He could hire a hit. He’s got the contacts and the money won’t mean a thing to him. You can hire a good pro to smoke somebody for the price of a really nice hopper. Did you know that?”

“I’d heard.” March nodded.

“So how many nice hoppers could Bad Bill afford? I’d say a hundred. At least that many.”

Kit’s helmet LEDs stabbed invisibly at the entrance, which glared as though under a spotlight. “There! I got it on. Only it’s not as dark in there as it was.”

“Turn it off,” March told her. “Turn it off, and get your digicorder rolling. We want both digicorders for this one.”

They entered cautiously, he keeping them six feet above the stone floor.

“It looks safe enough, Windy.”

He glanced at her; the blue-green light of the tomb had robbed her face of rouge as well as blood. “Did Ms. Applefield say it was?”

*Here lies the founder of our faith and prophet of the goddess. The voice might have been that of the blue-green illumination. Jayashankar the Great here reposes in his house of Eternity, as he wished. We, his disciples, have laid him here. Would you learn Truth, O visitors? Our faith is truth, and truth is joy. Like us, you are the subjects of the goddess. Know it. To know it, to rejoice in it, is paradise. Enter with—*

“Kit!” March grabbed her arm, his fingers flying across her keyboard.

“What’s up, Windy!”

“Air! They’re flooding the place with air. Look behind you.”

She did, and saw what he had known she would see: a steel door blocking the entrance and pinning their lifelines to the floor. “Are ... Are we locked in?”

*You are free. There are switches to left and right, switch pads we have made large for you, so there can be no mistaking them. Black shuts, for black is the color of the goddess. Yellow opens. It will return you to the world of illusion. To open, you need only press the yellow pad to your right.*

“You’re saying there’s air in here, Windy? That we could live in here without the suits?”

“There’s air in here, and you’ll die if you take off your helmet.” He unhooked her lifeline. “It’s poisoned—I don’t know what with.”

A new voice said, “If it were poisoned, we’d be dead.” It was a man’s voice, a resonant baritone.

A woman who was not Kit added, “We’ll die if you break the hermetic seal now. We’ve no suits, so we’ll suffocate. Please don’t.”

A naked man and a naked woman had emerged from hidden entrances on either side of the tomb, he tall and muscled like a bodybuilder, she sleek and big breasted, walking on her toes though she wore neither shoes nor boots. They crossed the stone floor as if subject to gravity, and smiled as they looked up at Kit and March. The man said, “For as long as you’re strangers in the paradise of the goddess, we shall guide you.”

“Holograms, Windy?” Kit looked as if she were about to cry. “I know they aren’t real. Are they holograms?”

The naked man reached up and grasped her boot at the ankle. “Come here, my lovely, lovely friend. Kiss me but once, and you may call me false thereafter.”

“They’re droids!” Kit’s other boot caught the naked man full in the face.

“Get up!” March unhooked his own lifeline. “Get out of reach.”

Scooping up the naked woman, he jetted toward the steel door and flung her at the right-hand switch. The arc that burned and melted her plastic skin half-blinded him.

“Up here, Windy!” Kit waved as a stone flung by the male droid struck his thigh.

He rose to meet her, and she hugged him. “We’re trapped. How can we get out?”

“Pray,” he said, and the Latin of an ancient prayer chanted in deep corridors of his mind.

“That won’t help!”

“It’ll keep us calm and let us think, Kit. Pretty often, that’s all it has to do.”

Another stone whizzed past them, a near miss.

“He’s breaking them loose,” Kit whispered. “My God, but he’s strong!”

“Nuclear powered?”

“Do you really think so, Windy? I—watch out! I didn’t think they could make them that little.”

“They can’t. It could be a fuel cell, but it’s most likely batteries, and they’ll have to be pretty small. The power draw he needs to bust that rock will be pulling him down fast. Have you noticed what happens to the ones he’s thrown?”

“They keep bouncing around. There’s no gravity.”

March nodded. “Just air resistance. It slows them a little, but it will take a long time to stop them. Suppose we catch a couple and—”

The steel door was sliding up, not quite soundlessly now that the interior of the tomb was filled with air. He shot toward it with all jets at one hundred percent and Kit trailing after him like a kite; Kit’s free arm caught Robin as she crossed the threshold.

Back in Kit’s hopper, with beverage bulbs bubbling in the microwave, March took a seat at the little table and tied himself down. “Grab a chair, Sue. I won’t bite.”

“It was dangerous in there, wasn’t it? That’s why you and Kit came out so fast.”

“We just about got killed,” Kit told her. “Windy saved us.”

“Sue saved us,” March said dryly. “She didn’t intend to, but she did.”

“Yes, I did! Not you, March, but Kit. She wanted me to listen on the icom and call for help if you two got in trouble, but I knew it would be too late. So I watched you instead and put on my Star-Chick Number Nine as soon as you had gone inside.”

Kit handed her a steaming beverage bulb. “We’d have been trapped in there and died if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I’d have gotten us out,” March said.

“Sure, Windy. Here’s your coffee.” Kit laid her vacuum tray on the table and sat down, groping for the cords that would hold her in her chair. “Now it’s Answer Time. Know what I mean? The last five minutes of the show, when Mike Wanitsky fiddles with his gun—”

Robin tittered.

“And tells us how he knew the cocker spaniel was the real murderer. You,

Windy, are Mike Wanitsky.”

“Thanks. I’ve always wanted to be a really good-looking cop.”

“You just said you’d have gotten us out. How would you have done it?”

“I don’t know.” March sipped his coffee and jiggled the bulb to stir the sugar. “I just know that it could be done, and I could do it. Did you think there were people in there lying to us through the droids and running things? There weren’t.”

“I never even thought about it.”

“Nobody wants to spend weeks or months sitting around in a tomb waiting for somebody to come in. They build those things—the great majority of them were never meant to be traps for human beings—and go back to America or the E.U. or whatever. So what you’re dealing with when you go into one of the bad ones is a machine. It can be a sophisticated machine, which that one was. But it’s still just a machine, built by someone who didn’t have all the time in the world to plan it or all the money in the world to spend on it.”

Robin said, “So you’d have gotten out.”

“Correct. Maybe I’d have found the circuitry that controlled the door. Maybe something else. But I’d have gotten us out.”

“I want to go back to the beginning, Windy. You told us about overhearing some people’s transmissions from in there. Remember?”

“Sure. I believe I can remember something else, too.” March scratched his head. “Weren’t you the one who began at the end? That’s how I seem to remember it. I don’t think it was Sue, and I know damned well it wasn’t me.”

“Right. It was, and it was a mistake. You said the woman you overheard—it was a woman, wasn’t it?”

“That last one?” March nodded.

“You said she thought her icom had gone out and kept trying to talk to the others until she went dead herself. What happened to her?”

“Strictly speaking, I don’t know. I wasn’t there. I might make a pretty good guess, though, now that I’ve been inside. What happens when you’re wearing a suit and you get into your hopper, where there’s air?”

Kit looked puzzled. “I take it off.”

“I know!” Robin waved both hands. “The salesman told me when I bought mine. It stops using the air in the tank and takes in air from outside.”

“Correct. You can disable that if you know the codes. If you do, you have to

switch the system over manually when you want it switched. When you go into that Thuggee tomb, it shuts the door and fills the tomb with air to turn your suit air off. There's something in that air to kill or disable you, something that has to be pretty dilute because the tomb's big. The woman I heard may have been in an area where the air was relatively pure. Or maybe she wasn't a deep breather or had a slow suit. Whatever."

"Wouldn't she have seen the others fall down?"

"Sure, if they'd fallen." March grinned. "How do you fall without gravity? My guess is that they seemed to be moving around pretty normally. It probably makes you dopey at first. Later it may kill you, or the droids may do it. The idea of their machine offering lives to Death—real throats really cut on an altar—would tickle the kind of people who build things like that." He sipped his coffee.

Kit said, "He grabbed my arm and reprogrammed my suit, Robin. As soon as the air started, he knew what was up."

"Hooray."

"Don't be like that. Windy saved my life, and if he hadn't I wouldn't have been around to save yours. Besides we got some great footage. Only I wish you'd waited until we'd thrown rocks back at the droids."

"We can go in there again," March said.

"After Number Nineteen maybe. Not now. I've got one more question."

"Fine with me, as long as I get to ask one after I've answered yours."

"Yes, if you promise to be nice. Robin won't bother us. Okay, here's my last question. The floor was stone, right? But the droids walked on it, and stayed down there like there was gravity. Only there wasn't any. How did they do it?"

March smiled. "That's a good one, and I hadn't even thought of it. You've got rare-earth magnets in your boots. You probably know that. It's why you stick to the floor of this hopper till you take them off. They let you walk on the outside if you want to, stand on the roof and so on. Those droids had rare-earth magnets in the soles of their feet."

Robin objected. "But it was a *stone* floor."

"That's right, Windy. Cut right out of the asteroid or whatever you call it."

"A lot of asteroids and meteorites contain a lot of iron. Ever heard of Excalibur, King Arthur's sword?"

Kit nodded.

"Now you know where the legend came from." Pausing, March sipped his

coffee. “Here’s my question for you. You knew right away that the droids weren’t real people. How?”

“I looked at the woman, that’s all. So did you. I know you did—she was naked and you’re not gay.”

“All right, I did.”

“She had a perfect figure, didn’t she? No figure flaws. None. Real women always do. Big feet or thick ankles. No calves, like Robin. Bony knees. Thunder thighs. There’s always something wrong. Women on vid can look perfect. So can women in magazines. But they look perfect because the cameramen and directors know just how not to shoot them. Watch the tabloids and you’ll see the other thing, the flaws that some paparazzi shot through the fence.”

\* \* \* \*

There was another hopper not far from their own when March left Kit’s. Curious, he jetted a few miles, tapped the airlock politely with a wrench from his utility belt, and pressed his helmet to the hatch.

After half a minute, there had been no sound from inside. By law, airlocks could not be locked or barred; he was tempted to go inside and take a look around. He contented himself with a tour of the exterior.

It was, he decided, the oldest hopper he had ever seen, one that had actually begun life as an RV. Its pressure-bulged sides and top were bat-tered, and had been holed more than once and patched with epoxy. Peering through its tinted windshield and windows revealed an interior to match—an unmade bunk, worn seats, cigarette butts and trash everywhere.

What it did not reveal was a human being. No one awake, asleep, or dead. When his inspection was complete, he jetted over to his own hopper—to the pre-owned hopper he had considered ready for the scrap heap before he had seen the one he was leaving.

He had taken off his helmet and was pulling off his boots when he smelled cigarette smoke.

“I hope you don’t mind me coming in like this,” the smoker said; he was young, with a face a quarter of an inch too long to be handsome. “Okay if I smoke in here? You’ve got a good air system. It’s taking care of it.”

“Sure.” March opened his suit. “What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you, that’s all. I need a little info, and it seemed like this was the place to get it. You were over in the big hopper you’re grappled to? The new maroon job?”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay. Listen, I just want one little piece of info. Just one, and I don’t think there’s anything secret about it. I could go over and pound on the lock, and somebody would tell me, okay? So who does that big hopper belong to?”

“I want some info, too,” March said, “and the info I want had better not be secret either. Let’s start with an easy one. Is this a friendly visit?”

“Absolutely. I know you must be ticked off because I came in the way I did.” The smoker ran slender fingers through glossy, coal-black hair. “But my jetsuit’s pretty uncomfortable, and to tell the truth I’m not sure how far I can trust it.”

“Besides,” March said, “you couldn’t smoke in there.”

“Right. I realize I’m using up some extra oxy that way, but it doesn’t amount to much.”

“That’s good to know. Here’s question number two. Want some coffee?”

“Sure, if you do.”

“I do.” March climbed out of his suit and stowed it in the locker. “I’m kind of bushed, and I’ve got the feeling you’re not somebody I ought to deal with unless I’m fresh.” He went to his hopper’s tiny microwave.

“You don’t have to deal with me.” The smoker bent to grind out his cigarette on March’s floor. “Tell me what I want to know—that one thing—and I’m out of here. You can go to bed.”

“Wondering whether you’ll come back inside once I’m asleep.”

“Yeah.” The smoker looked thoughtful. “There’s that. I won’t, but you can’t know it. You could hop somewhere else. Take a long hop. I wouldn’t know where you’d gone.”

March shook his head. “I’ve got another question. What’s my name?”

“What’s *your* name? I thought you’d want to know mine.”

“You can ask your own questions. I’ll ask mine. You heard it. Who am I?”

“I’ve got no frigging—I don’t know. You want to tell me?”

“No. I want you to tell me. Tell me who I am, so I’ll know where we stand.”

“I can’t. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know who owns the big red hopper, either.” March reached past the locker to his tool box, flipped it open, and pulled out a two-pound dead-blow hammer.

“You’re not going to need that.”



“I hope not. Think you could take me?”

The smoker shook his head. “Not as long as you’re holding that I couldn’t.”

“Good.” The tool box snapped shut. “If you answer every question I ask, fast, I won’t have to use it. Did you snoop around my hopper?”

“A little bit, yes.”

“Fine.” The microwave beeped, but March ignored it. “What were you looking for?”

“An ashtray and cigarettes. I don’t have many. If I found any, I was going to bum one.”

“There are at least twenty books in this hopper. Maybe more. Did you look at them? Any of them?”

The smoker shook his head. “Just for an ashtray and cigarettes. I told you.”

“I asked you that because my name’s written in the front of most of them. I’m March Wildspring. Ever heard of me?”

The smoker’s grin took March by surprise.

“You have,” March said. “Tell me about it.”

“I’ve just heard you mentioned a couple dozen times. You’re a real dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. That’s what she says. I’ve been wanting to meet you.”

“Congratulations. You have. Who said it?”

“My wife. Her name’s Robin Redd.”

March nodded to himself, recalling Robin’s swollen eye and bruised cheek. “I should have seen that coming, and I didn’t. You’re Jim.”

“Right.” The smoker extended his hand. “Jim Redd. Glad to meet you.”

March ignored it. “You bought that old hopper—the cheapest one you could find—and came out here looking for your ex-wife.”

“Hell, no.” Redd shook a cigarette from a vacpack, crumpled the pack, and stuffed it into his pocket. “I’m looking for my wife, Robin Redd.”

“She says you’re divorced.”

“Bullshit. Me and Robin aren’t divorced till it’s final, and that hasn’t happened. No final decree, capeesh? I’m fighting to save my marriage, and I’m going to keep on fighting as long as there’s a marriage to save.”

March sighed. “You’ve come way the hell out here, millions of miles, looking for her?”

“Right.”

“So you can beat hell out of her and save your marriage.”

Redd lit his cigarette. “I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“How would you put it?”

“I want to talk to her, that’s all. I want to sit her down and make her listen to what I’ve got to say. If she’ll just shut up for a minute and hear my side of it, she’ll come home with me. I know that. The trick is to get her to shut up and listen. Out here, I thought maybe she would.”

“Would you care to tell me what you plan to say to her?”

Redd inhaled and allowed the smoke to trickle from his nostrils before answering. “What I want or don’t want doesn’t matter. I can’t tell you, because you’re not her.”

“I see. Sue and I—I call her Sue. She was Sue Morton when we were married, and Sue Morton afterward, too. She kept her own name.”

“I wouldn’t have let her do that.”

March’s shoulders rose and fell. “I did. I let her do anything she wanted.”

“She dumped you anyhow? That’s what she says—that she dumped you. Maybe you dumped her.”

“No. She dumped me.”

“It makes you crazy, just thinking about it. I can see that.”

March nodded.

“Okay, that’s how it is for you. I don’t want it to be like that for me, capeesh? I’d like to have you on my team. But if you’re on her team, that’s okay, too. I only want what’s good for her, which is staying married and making this one work.”

“She says you hit her.” March struggled to remember. Had anyone really said that Jim had done it? Or had it only been implied?

“A few times. Yeah. She got me so damned mad. Ask me if I’d break her arms to save our marriage.”

“Would you?” March sighed again.

“Hell, yes. Can I tell you about the names? I’ll feel better.”

“If you like.”

“I picked her up for a date one time, and she showed me a paper. A legal paper, you know? It said she’d changed her name. You have to have a lawyer and pay a couple thou, but you can do that. Her new name was Robin Redd. I go what the fuck, we’re not even engaged. And she said when we got married she didn’t want to change her name. It would be putting herself down—she had a fancy word, but that was what it meant. So this way she could tell everybody she was keeping her old name.”

March glanced at his wristwatch. It was twenty-four hundred. Midnight. Aloud, he said, “I guess that meant a lot to her.”

“Then after we were married, she told people we had the same last name because I’d changed mine to match hers. She said my real name was Rosso. That was my grandfather’s name, and I’d told her one time. My dad changed it. You see where I’m coming from, March?”

“Not as well as you do yourself.” How could he be this tired without gravity? “I need sleep. I’m going to offer you a bargain. You can accept it or reject it, but you have to leave this hopper promptly either way. Is that clear?”

“I got it.”

“Fine. You promise not to go to the big maroon hopper tonight. Everybody in there’s asleep anyway, and I don’t want you waking them up. In the morning—let’s say ten o’clock—I’ll go there with you and introduce you.”

“I get to go inside? To see them?”

Wearily, March nodded.

“Then it’s a deal.” Redd extended his hand again; this time March accepted it and they shook.

When Redd had gone, March got some coffee, icommed Kit, and stayed on until she answered. “This better be important, Windy. I was sound asleep.”

“I don’t think it is, but you will. You were the one who hauled Sue out here. Have you been looking out your windows lately?”

“No. Tell me.”

“There’s an old beat-up hopper out there. Blue originally, but showing a lot of gray primer and rust. It’s Jim’s, and he was ready to pay you a little visit tonight.”

“Can he do that?”

“Legally, yes. All he has to do is claim he has some kind of emergency. If he does, you’ve got to let him in. He may not know that, but it’s the law.”

“Or he might.”

“Bingo. I got him calmed down and promised I’d bring him over myself tomorrow at ten. That’s today now. This morning.”

“I see.... Does he know Robin’s here?”

“No. But he suspects it pretty strongly. Strongly enough for him to turn your hopper inside out looking for her.”

“Unless you’re around to stop him.”

“Unless we both are. He’s at least ten years younger than I am, and he may have a gun or a knife—he’s the type. The thing for you to do is hop back to Kennedy, and I mean right now. Shove Sue out of your hopper as soon as you get there and tell her that her trip’s over. In a day or two you can come back here if you want. Or not.”

Slowly, Kit said, “I won’t do it, Windy.” In the screen, her face looked troubled.

“You’d better change your mind. I told Jim I’d bring him over at ten. I like to keep my word.”

“I know you do, Windy. It’s one of the things I love about you. Have I said that?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t go back on mine, either. We’re a couple of old-fashioned people, Windy. We belong together. Don’t worry about Robin or me. We’ll think of something.”

“I hope so.” He felt he was about to choke. “I love you, Kit. The two of us can handle him. I can handle him alone if I have to.”

A sad nod and a blown kiss, and she was gone. He muttered “out,” switching the icom function back to Standby.

\* \* \* \*

Next morning, over coffee and a single-pouch self-heating breakfast, March pondered strategy. Would it be better to arrive promptly, or to give Kit more time to prepare?

Prepare what? What preparations were possible? She might try to coach Robin on ways of dealing with men, but Robin had been as unteachable as anyone he had ever known. Granted, Kit was probably a better teacher, and Kit was certainly better positioned to teach.

If he waited for Redd to come and get him, he could achieve the maximum

possible delay—but only if Redd actually came. What if Redd waited until ten, then jetted over to Kit’s hopper alone? What if Redd didn’t wait, for that matter? It might be best if he went to Kit’s hopper now and waited for Redd there.

He glanced at his watch. It was already nine fifteen; he suited up and jetted to Redd’s hopper. Three raps on Redd’s airlock elicited three answering raps from inside. He opened the airlock, entered the tiny chamber, and shut the hatch behind him. In half a minute, the second hatch opened. “You’re early,” Redd told him.

March nodded. “I thought we ought to talk about what we’re going to do when we get there.”

“If you mean discuss it, there’s nothing to discuss. I can tell you straight out. Want some coffee?”

It would have to be found and microwaved. March said he did.

“Sit down. Espresso? Cappuccino?”

“Just coffee, thanks. Whatever you have.”

“One espresso doppio and one caff Americano. I’m a coffee snob. I bet you’d never have guessed.”

“You’d win.”

“My family’s in ice cream. One of these days I want to open a coffee shop. There’s a hell of a lot of coffee shops, and the coffee stinks.” Redd put two bulbs into a microwave that looked older than he did and shut the door. “Ready before you can fart. I’ll sell coffee and Dad’s ice cream. Con him into putting some money into it. I could make it go.”

“I’m sure you could,” March told him.

“Damn right. Arabica, the real thing, roasted and ground in my kitchen that morning. Made right, in clean equipment. Most guys have never had a decent cup of coffee.”

“What are you doing now? Got a good job?”

“Pretty good. I’m a sound man at UDN. Or I was, before I quit to look for her. Same place Robin works. You used to work there, too.”

The microwave buzzed.

“I’ll get it. Sit tight.”

It was good coffee just as Redd had promised. March sipped and sipped again, finding that the flavor improved with repetition.

“That’s arabica. I filled the bulbs before I left and froze them. Robusta’s what

you've been drinking. Arabica's better, smoother, more complex. Less caffeine, but you can't have everything."

March smiled. "It takes a long time for some of us to learn that."

"Her, you mean. Robin. You're right, she hasn't. Nobody's good enough for her. You weren't and I'm not either."

"But you can bring her around just by talking?"

"You watch. You wanted to know what we'd do when we got there. Only last night you wouldn't say she was there. She is and I know it. You wouldn't be acting like you are if she wasn't."

"I never refused to tell you that." March set his bulb on the wheezing old vacuum table. "I wouldn't tell you who owns the big hopper. You never asked about your wife."

"I'm asking now."

"And I'm answering. Yes. She's in there, staying with the owner."

"You out here trying to get her back?"

"Hell no." March rubbed his big jaw. "I'd spit on your floor, but you'd try to break my nose for it and it's been broken twice already. You can have her. Anybody can have her as far as I'm concerned. And if you'll just take her to a town that I've never heard of on some God-forsaken island, I'll go dancing down the street."

Redd tossed his empty bulb to the table surface. "That's good. I'd fight you for her, and I'd beat you. Only I like you and don't want to. Couple more questions before we go? These might help me."

March glanced at his watch. "Sure."

"Why wouldn't you tell me who owns the big hopper?"

"Because she's a woman and I was afraid you'd go over there and push her around when I wasn't looking."

"But I wouldn't push around a guy? Hey, I've pushed around quite a few."

"I believe you. I thought you might be more careful, just the same. Wait for me to take you over this morning."

Redd grinned. "Okay, I've waited. Finish your coffee and let's go."

March was still in his suit when Redd stepped from Kit's airlock and took off his helmet. "Here he is," March said. "Kit, this is Sue's husband, Jim Redd. Jim, this is Kit Carlsen. You've probably seen her at work."

“Other places, too.” Redd hesitated, then smiled. “The lady with the big knife.”

“That’s me,” Kit told him. “Back then, we hadn’t been properly introduced, Jim. Now we have. Shake?”

“Sure.” He opened his suit and pushed it toward his knees. “Pleased to meet you properly, Kit. Only I want to say Ms. Carlsen, because that’s what we had to call you while you were hosting *Kids’ Classics*.”

“You worked on that?” Kit tilted her head.

“Great body language, Ms. Carlsen. Nobody in the business does it better.”

“Thanks, but I still don’t remember you.”

“I filled in for Don Ayres when he was on vacation or sick, Ms. Carlsen.”

“He’s a sound tech,” March explained.

“Like Robin?”

Redd nodded. “I taught her while we were together. I thought she could get a job at the network and make us a little extra. She waited till she got on there and dumped me. She’s a good dumper. Ask March.”

Kit nodded. “He’s told me already. She dumped you, but you’ve come way out here where people don’t belong to get her and take her back to New York.”

“To talk to her so she’ll come back with me willingly. Right. I’m not a kidnapper, Ms. Carlsen, no matter what Robin’s told you. With a couple of witnesses, I’m sure as shit not a kidnapper.”

“You wouldn’t hit her?”

Redd kicked off his suit and stowed it in a locker with his helmet.

“Would you hit her?” Kit repeated. “I’d like to know.”

“I know you would, and I had to think it over so I could give you an honest answer. I want to be honest with you, Ms. Carlsen. I don’t want to lie to somebody I admire so much. I want her to sit down and listen to me. No jumping up screaming. No yelling about cops or bad things she said I did. Things I really didn’t do, by the way. You won’t believe that, but it’s the truth. They’re lies she made up so she could dump me, and she’s said them over and over to me and everybody she’s ever talked to until she practically believes them herself.”

“I hear you.”

“Only if I had to bat her a couple of times to get her to sit down and shut up, I’d do it. Nothing she wouldn’t get over in a day or two. So will I smack her? I

don't want to, but I will if I have to. You want to tell her to come out, Ms. Carlsen? If you don't, I'm going to go looking for her."

March said, "She's not here. I know you won't believe me, but she's not. Tell him, Kit."

Kit shook her head. "He won't believe me."

"Yes, I will, Ms. Carlsen. Tell me."

March picked up his helmet, replaced it, and began to screw it back on.

"Windy—that's Mr. Wildspring to you—told me you were here looking for Robin and that the two of you would come here this morning. I woke her up and told her about it. I said we wouldn't let you force her to do anything she didn't want to do. She wanted me to go to the tomb Windy calls Number Nineteen with her. She said we could hide in there until you went away. I told her hell no, Robin, you're out of your mind. We talked about it for a while before we went back to bed. When I got up this morning, she was gone."

"*Merda! La fica stupida!*" Redd slammed his fist into his palm. "If that isn't just like her."

March added, "Her suit's gone, too. She may actually have gone into Nineteen. If so, she's probably dead. You'll want to search this hopper before you do anything else. I know the memorials. You and Kit don't. Give me your word you won't hurt Kit, and I'll try to find Robin."

Kit said, "You can look anywhere you want. I already have. Just don't make a mess."

"To hell with that!" Redd jerked open the fiberglass locker door. "I'm going with March."

"You mean you trust me?" Kit looked—and sounded—slightly stunned.

"If she's here, she's safe." Redd was climbing back into his suit. "She's safe, and I'll catch up to her sooner or later. If she's in some crazy graveyard out in space, she could die. She doesn't have sense enough..."

March closed the airlock behind him and heard no more.

\* \* \* \*

Had Number Nineteen been on the farther side of Jupiter, it would have been necessary to hop, making certain that the speed of the hopper was sufficient to keep it in or near its new orbit when the hop was completed. Number Nineteen was not, but close by—threateningly close to someone who suspected it as deeply as March did.

Back on his own hopper, he cast off from Kit's. Once inside, he hooked up



his lifeline, edged the hopper within a hundred feet, and looked down at his utility belt. Its adjustable wrench, its long black flashlight, and its multi-tool had gotten him out of danger...? He tried to count them. Three times? No, five. Five at least.

“One more,” he whispered. “Just once more, please. After this I’ll go home and never come out here again. I swear to God.”

God was everywhere, or so they said. If so, God was on his utility belt just now. Certainly he was praying to his utility belt. He smiled at the thought.

And God was in Number Nineteen. A dark and vengeful God, perhaps.

There were multiple entrances to Number Nineteen. Six that he could recall, although he had never counted them. His orange lifeline would show Jim Redd which he had taken, if it did nothing else.

Would show Redd, that is, if Redd actually came.

No trailing lifeline revealed the way Robin had gone; she had used none, obviously. One entrance was as good as another; and she might have chosen another memorial in preference to this, no matter what she had said to Kit. She might actually be hiding in Kit’s hopper, for that matter.

Passing through his airlock, he stood alone with God in the inhuman desolation of space. Overhead, where he had to crane his neck to see it, spun the huge, semi-spherical rock that might be Hell.

The entrance he chose conformed to no architecture with which he was familiar, a wide, circular port whose smooth black sides might have been metal or polished stone. With his digicorder rolling, he jetted cautiously into it.

“Welcome to paradise.” The voice was female, warm, and friendly; it seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

“Thanks.” March spoke into his mike. “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“You’re here.” The voice giggled. “Well, just about here, anyway. You have to go through our airlock. I’ll bet you never thought paradise would have an airlock.”

“Or an angel to greet me.” March was looking for the airlock and for the source of the female voice.

“It’s got both. I’m a watcher. That’s what we call people like me. My name’s Penny.”

“Shouldn’t it be Angela?”

“Nope. Penny the Angel. Angela’s the blonde. We take turns, us angels. It’s my turn, so you’re mine. What’s your name?”

He told her, and she said, “Well, you’re looking too close, March Wildspring.”

He switched on his helmet light. The airlock was deeper in and several steps up, by far the largest he had ever seen. “That looks like a whole room in there.”

“It is—we’ve got gravity here. Did you notice?”

“I’ve noticed I settled to the floor.”

“Right. And you can walk to our airlock, if you’re careful not to bounce. Part of our gravity really is gravity like you get on Earth. This rock’s real big. It’s bigger than the moons of Mars and dense. There’s lots of iron in the rock, and that makes it heavy. There’s a lot of something else, too, that’s heavier. Come in and I’ll show you.”

March had not moved. “You could tell me now.”

“No, I can’t. It’s against the rules. There’s other things—a whole lot of them—you have to see first. The rest of our gravity’s turning, only it’s not real gravity. It just feels like it. When you were outside you must have seen how fast this rock turns.”

Certain by now that she could see him, March nodded.

“He turns it. So it doesn’t feel exactly like Earth, but there’s enough to keep our bones strong. You know what happens to people who spend too much time in hoppers.”

“Sure.”

“It’s called osteopor’ sis. Your bones lose calcium and break easy. Only it won’t happen here. Won’t you come in? It’s paradise, and you don’t have to stay.”

“That’s good, assuming it’s true.”

“Only everybody does. Everybody wants to stay. I did. You will, too.”

March cleared his throat. “Before I come in, I want to ask one question. Just one. Answer it, and I’ll come in. Did a girl calling herself Robin come in a few hours ago?”

“Ouch.” The young woman sounded genuinely unhappy. “I wish I could tell you, only I can’t. There’s seven gates. Each gate gets a watcher—we take turns. When somebody comes like you just did, the watcher goes around with them to show them, and the new watcher takes over. I’ve been on this gate for three sleeps, so she didn’t come in through Number Four. But she could have come in through one of the others. I wouldn’t know.”

“Is there any way to find out?”

“Of course.” The young woman’s voice was serious. “You can come inside and look. You know what she looks like, don’t you?”

“Yes. Would you like me to describe her?”

“It wouldn’t do any good. I can’t leave this gate till somebody comes, and she’ll look different anyway. Better. Everybody looks better in here.”

“Are you saying I wouldn’t recognize her if I saw her?” March found he was walking toward the airlock. He wondered just when he had begun, but kept going.

“No. No, I’m not. Not really. Only it might be a while before you knew it was her. Everybody looks better. Sometimes a whole bunch better. We still look like us, but older if we’re young and younger if we’re old. Prettier, too. You know.”

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“You will. Come in and you’ll see.”

“So you can leave your gate.” He had stopped in front of the airlock.

“No, not a bit. It’s nice here. You’ll see that, too. Besides, my friends come around to talk and bring me stuff. Nobody minds being watched. Nobody minds anything here.”

“That’s good.”

“Except one thing. I’ll tell you about that later, after you’ve seen. I’ve never done it, but I guess it can be icky.”

“I can leave whenever I want to?”

“You won’t want to. Just climb in, and I’ll shut the big door for you.”

“But I can?”

“Naturally you can. Only the people who leave don’t want to. That’s the thing I said could be bad. Leaving. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

He mounted the few steps, and the hatch swung swiftly shut behind him. This airlock was the size of a small room. There were chairs, pictures on the walls, and a fireplace, complete with fire. He walked toward it for a better look, and discovered that the hatch had severed his lifeline. “Hey!” he said.

Then, “Penny? Are you still there?”

There was no reply.

The fireplace was real and so was the fire. The logs, however, were not. Some flammable gas with a small feed of oxygen, March decided.

He heard his air supply switch over, and thought of returning it to suit air but did not. The new air he breathed smelled better, a clean fresh smell as though it had known a windswept meadow by the sea. Walking around the airlock quickly, he found that he was not dizzy and was not blacking out.

“This,” he told his mike, “is surely the strangest of all the memorials, as well as the biggest. If Penny’s not a real and living person, her voice certainly conveys that impression.”

A wall of the room swung back. “Welcome,” the girl standing a foot beyond its arc told him. She sketched a curtsy, lifting a diaphanous scarlet skirt. “Welcome to paradise, Mr. March Wildspring. May you remain long and return soon.”

“Thank you.” He stepped down from the airlock, and discovered that he was smiling. “Okay if I take off my helmet?”

“Oh, yes! Aren’t you sure there’s air here? If there wasn’t, I’d die.”

“I know there is.” He unscrewed his helmet. “You’d die if you’re real. Are you?”

“You betcha!” She giggled. “Want to touch?”

“Sure. Give me your hand.”

“You can’t feel much through that glove. I know. I used to have a suit like that, only mine was white and not so big. I kept wanting to take the gloves off.”

“Your hand.”

She held it out. “It doesn’t have to be there. You could touch other places. I wouldn’t mind.”

Leaving the airlock, he took her hand. “You’re not a hologram.”

“Of course not. I’m a real live person. Not exactly like you because of the sex thing. Only real close. How do you like me up top?”

“Good.” He nodded thoughtfully. “Nice molding.”

“I’m not molded! I grew up. I’m a real person, too. Kissing would prove it. Want to kiss?”

“Later, maybe. Right now I’d like to see paradise.”

“That’s good. Take off your suit. I’ll put it in one of these box things for you.”

“I’ll keep it on. I’m holding onto my helmet, too.”

“That way everybody will know you’re new, March. It’ll be a lot of trouble.

You'll see."

"But I can keep it if I want to?"

"I guess so." She sounded doubtful. "I've never done this before. Watched a gate. This is my first time and they never said anything about suits. So I guess you can. Or if you can't, somebody will tell us. Only I'll be in trouble."

"I'll explain that it was my fault."

"Thanks." She led him past the wall-mounted lockers and the benches on which newcomers presumably sat to take off their boots, and into a wide and apparently sunlit room. A well-remembered face pontificated about politics on a digivid there, too proud to notice the incomplete jigsaw puzzle on the floor before him. A dozen plates held half-finished food, and dolls and a teddy bear occupied comfortable-looking chairs; on the farther side of the room a wide arch opened out onto what appeared to be a sunlit garden on Earth.

He hurried to it, then stopped to stare.

"Isn't it pretty?"

Slowly he nodded.

"How about me? You can see me better in this light. Aren't I pretty, too?"

Turning, he studied her. "You are. You're really quite beautiful." It was the truth.

She laughed, delighted, and smoothed her lustrous coppery hair with both hands.

"Is it all right if I jump?"

"You better not. People turn around funny sometimes. Come down on their heads."

"I'll risk it." Gathering all his strength, he sprang into the air, rising to a height of twenty feet or more. The garden spread as far as he could see, its low hills dotted with little sunlit lakes, trees, tents, airy cottages, and fountains. A quick sweep of his digicorder took it all in—or so he hoped. Skillful manipulation of his suit jets landed him on his feet.

"You're good at it," The young woman told him.

"Not really." He grinned. "I'm wearing a lot of heavy gear and not as young as I used to be. In a way that was an advantage. I knew I wouldn't come down any faster than I had gone up."

"Want something to eat? Or just walk around?"

“Just walk around. I’d like to talk to some other people.”

“In your orange clothes?” She giggled. “You will.”

They had not gone more than a thousand yards when they were surrounded by a crowd. More than once, he had found himself in crowds of actors at parties, and the feeling was much the same. Not all the men were tall, but most were handsome; those who were not, were attractive without being handsome, with kind, honest faces suggestive of good humor or sparkling wit.

The women were cute. Or pretty. Or beautiful. All of them.

He raised his hands for silence. “I’m looking for a missing woman. Her name’s Robin Redd, and I think she ran in here because she thought a man named Jim was going to kill her. I’m not Jim. I’m a friend....” He let his arms drop.

“Not a friend.” The speaker was a silver-maned man who looked as though he might once have been a judge—or played one on vid. “Who are you, then?”

“I used to be her husband, sir.”

“If she’s in here she’s safe, son. Perfectly safe.”

A score of voices seconded him.

“Why do you want to take her back to a place of danger?”

March drew a deep breath—air so clean and pure it might have come from a mountain top. “I’ll take her back only if she wants to go, sir. If she wants to stay here, that’s fine. But I want to know where she is, because she may need help if she’s not here. Do you know?”

The silver mane was shaken. “I do not, but I’ll try to find out. What’s your name, son?”

“March Wildspring.”

The young woman said, “Marchy hasn’t decided to stay yet, Barney. How can I talk him into it?”

Someone in the crowd asked, “Just talk?” and there was laughter.

The silver-maned man joined it with a throaty chuckle. “When he’s seen a few more like you—”

Quickly, the young woman raised an admonitory hand. “That’s enough of that. Please! He’ll think I’m easy. I’m not, Mr. Wildspring. Don’t let this dress fool you. Nobody wears much in the way of clothes in here.”

A beefy man with a likable grin pointed to March. “Nobody but you, that is.”

It got another laugh.

“Folks!” March raised his voice. “I’m looking for Robin Redd. I don’t want to hurt her.” He scanned the crowd through the viewfinder of his digicorder. “If any of you know her, will you please tell her March is looking for her? She can stay here if she wants to, or I’ll take her back if she’d prefer to go.”

That raised the biggest laugh of all.

\* \* \* \*

A rustic bridge crossed one of several small lakes. The young woman paused halfway across to point out their reflections in the water. “Look there, Mr. Wildspring. See how good-looking you are?”

He did, seeing a grimly handsome man with abundant brown hair and finely chiseled features; this flattering reflection wore what appeared to be a day-glow orange military spacesuit. The young woman beside him was clearly the young woman with him. He raised an arm; the reflection raised an arm as well.

“Aren’t we an attractive couple?”

“Yes,” he said, “we certainly are.”

“If you were to take off all those clothes, would you just throw them away?”

“No. No, Penny, I certainly wouldn’t want to do that. If I were to take them off, I’d want a safe place to put them, a place I could find again without much trouble. I’d want to be able to get them back in a hurry if I needed them.”

“That’s good.” The young woman looked thoughtful. “He might want to send you out. He does that sometimes. They can come back later, I think. But they have to go if he says so.”

“He runs this? What’s his name?”

“I don’t know, but there’s a big statue of him in a park. We could probably find out there. Everybody just says ‘he.’ Everybody knows what it means.”

“I’d like to see that statue and take some pictures.” March indicated his digicorder. “But first I’d like to go on across and get a few of you posing in the middle of this bridge. It should be a lovely shot. Can I do that?”

“It sounds like fun.” She smiled. “Just tell me what poses you’d like.”

“I will. You’re not afraid I’ll run off on my own?”

She cocked her head, looking more charming than ever. “Are you going to?”

“No.”

“That’s good. Strangers need somebody. A guide. That’s why we do it. But

you wouldn't have to trick me. Anytime you want to go, you can do it. I'll go back to the gate and wait for you."

"All right, I'll remember that. But wouldn't he have sent somebody else to watch the gate by now?"

"I suppose. I guess so. How'd you like me to pose?"

"Sitting on the railing, I think."

"So you can get my legs. You're right, I've got good legs. How's this?"

It was fine, her long, smooth legs out over the water, one delicately rounded calf resting on the rail, the foot of the other leg hooked around one of the supports, and her gossamer skirt hiked halfway up her thighs. He backed down the bridge, passing a sleeping man and shooting as he went, stopped his digicorder briefly to note the precise number on its whirling dial, and shot more from the bank.

When he rejoined her, he said, "That was beautiful. I've got a couple of questions now. No, three questions. All right if I ask them?"

Her smile would have melted stone. "If I can't answer, we'll find somebody who can."

"First question. If this were Earth, people would've cut their names into this rail. Hearts, with MW plus KC. All that kind of stuff. Nobody's carved anything in this one. Why is that?"

"On Earth we do it so people will remember." The young woman said slowly, "and so we'll remember ourselves. We think maybe it will never happen, he'll dump me or I'll dump him. But years from now when I've almost forgotten, maybe I'll see this. I'll think, oh yeah, he wasn't good-looking or talented, but he had the best heart. If things had gone a little differently...."

March said, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't. I was just thinking. It's all different now. Different here. That's what I think. We know we're going to remember this place and the people we love here. Remember everything about it forever and ever. What's hard is remembering how it was before we got here. Like, I used to have a little apartment back on Earth. It was just two rooms and a bath, and nothing in it could be very big at all. There was a cabinet I couldn't open that had been built into a corner a long time ago and painted white. The white paint had stuck the doors shut."

"I understand." He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I was pretty sure there was nothing in there, but I always wondered. Now I'm here, and it feels like it happened a long, long time ago to somebody else. Somebody in a show I saw one time, and I wish she'd broken that cabinet open."



The young woman slid from the railing, cocked her head, and smiled. “That wasn’t a good answer, but I don’t think I can answer any better. You said three questions.”

“I did.” March sighed. “Here’s the next. There’s no litter on the lakeshore and no junk floating in the water. There aren’t even any cans for garbage. Why not?”

“Because it’s ours. This whole place is ours. He gave it to us. We’re his, and we own this. It’s where we live. On Earth everything belongs to the government, really. In America it does, anyway. They pretend it’s yours, but do something they don’t like and you’ll find out. This really is ours. We can cut down the trees and pick the flowers, but we don’t want to. Not mostly. If there were more people, it might be different.”

“He sends some away, you said.”

Looking pensive, The young woman nodded. “He might send me away someday. I hope not.”

“They go back to Earth?”

She nodded again.

“What do they do there?”

“I don’t know, and that’s more than three. All right, I do. They do whatever he’s asked them to, and when they get it all done they get to come back.”

“Those weren’t my third question,” March said, “just follow-ups. Here’s the third. When I jumped and looked around, I could see little houses, and when we were up on the bridge I could see two and a tent. Do they have vids in there? Any of them? You had a vid in your room at the gate.”

“I’m not sure, but I think that anybody who wants one gets one. Some people don’t. Is there something you want to watch?”

“Yes. I used to work for UDN, and—well, it’s kind of complicated. But there are things I want to see. Maybe even things I want to show you. There’s no hurry, though. Let’s go look at his statue.”

\* \* \* \*

It was large and imposing, but not at all what March had expected. An elderly man, bald and rather fat, knelt. His enormous bronze hands were held out to those who had followed a narrow and seemingly aimless path through a wilderness of flowers. They seemed to shelter a sleeper at his feet.

“He looks like my father,” March murmured.

“Like my grandfather,” the young woman said. “I’ve never been here. I’m new, and I hadn’t gotten around to it. If I’d known how beautiful it was, I’d have

come sooner.”

March retreated to the path. “I’m going to pan the gardens and stop on you, looking at the statue. Look up at it while you count to ten, normal speed, then turn and look at me and smile.”

She did. When he appeared to have stopped recording, she said, “I’ve found a little notice that tells you about it. The statue’s twelve feet high, and the figure of the Founder would be twenty-three feet high if he were standing up. The bronze is eight inches thick. Most statues like this are thin, it said, but they could make this one almost solid because its base sits right on the solid rock of this asteroid. Is it an asteroid? That’s what they said.”

“I suppose. Does it give his name?”

“Let me see. ‘It is composed of copper, tin, and gold, the proportions being fifty, forty, and ten; all three metals were mined during the excavation of the perfect world in which you stand. The sculptors worked from photographs and digivid recordings made during the last years of the Founder’s life. The ancient lost wax method was employed to create the statue, although it required wax brought from Earth. His body has perished, but his mind lives on and is your god.’ No name. It doesn’t name the artists, either.”

“It would be an interesting thing to know,” March said. “I’m going to keep trying to find out. How many people are there in here?”

The young woman shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“Guess.”

She hesitated. “I’m going to say five hundred. About that.”

“I would have said fewer. Half that, maybe. Even if you’re right, it should be possible to ask all of them.”

“About this girl Robin Redd?”

“No. I know where she is, Penny. The name of the Founder’s going to be harder, I think.”

“I don’t, because I don’t believe you know where that girl is. You couldn’t.”

“I do.” March sounded as tired as he felt. “You—”

The statue spoke, surprising them both. Its voice was deep, resonant, and kind. “I am pleased—oh, wonderfully pleased—to announce that we have been joined by four this wake. That is the highest total since the five of December twentieth and surpasses the three of February third. Our newest lovers are Robin Redd, Katarina ‘Kit’ Carlsen, March Wildspring, and James Frankie Redd. Welcome, all!”

March could only stare.

“My dear children,” the statue continued, “this wake has wound to a pleasing end. The time of rest is upon us. Repose with me in your humble homes, and repose with whom you like. Sleep, and I promise you that all your dreams will be pleasant ones.

“Though nightmares stalk the dark, if you sleep they cannot trouble you.”

“Nightmares?”

The young woman said, “I don’t know about them. I guess I’ve been asleep.”

“If they can’t hurt sleeping people, how bad can they be?” March was conscious of a slight dimming of the light; the meter built into his digicorder confirmed it.

“Just sleeping people who are inside somewhere.” The young woman looked frightened. “That’s what I think. We need to get inside.”

“You don’t know?”

“No! Let’s go. These people are nice. Somebody will take us in.”

The light had dimmed again, very slightly.

“Can you jog, Mr. Wildspring? I can, and I think we ought to jog until we find someplace that will take us in.”

March shook his head. “Not wearing this. No, I can’t jog and won’t try.”

“Well, take it off.” The young woman’s fear was almost palpable.

“I won’t.” March caught her arm. “In a minute I’m going to let you run if you want to, but I need to say something first. If you decide you want out, just look me up. I’ll get you out if I can. Understand?”

The young woman nodded and tried to smile. The smile was a pathetic failure.

“Fine.” March released her. “You jog ahead and find a place to hide.”

His suit felt heavy now even in the slight gravity of Number Nineteen. His wristwatch told him that only six and a half hours of the day had passed for him. The knowledge did nothing to relieve his aching shoulders; he was hot and tired.

“We have seen the founder’s statue,” he told his mike, “and learned that this asteroid contains copper, tin, and gold. Those metals—the last, particularly—no doubt financed much of the building of this memorial. We have learned two other things of considerable interest. I have, at least, in the course of walking over several miles of it.” Some time ago, he had removed his gloves and pushed them under his utility belt. Now he employed a forefinger to wipe his sweating forehead.

“First, this is the only memorial I am aware of that actually enlists visitors to serve its agenda, which we may assume was that of the Founder. As you have heard, some of them are returned to Earth. We can only speculate as to their purpose.

“Second, it seems at least possible that the Founder’s accomplishments included one of the holy grails of physics, the creation of artificial gravity. You may recall that our guide told us the gravity here was a combination of mass and spin. Real gravity—gravity from mass—pulls us inward. Spin forces us outward. The two are antithetical, in other words, and cannot be made to act in concert. I would estimate the gravity I feel here to be about one quarter that of Earth. I doubt that a core of heavy metals could provide that much gravity to an asteroid this small, and this asteroid is certainly not spinning fast enough. If it had been, it would have thrown me back into space when I landed.”

Beyond the flowery border, a rolling green landscape displayed two neat white cottages some distance apart. The light had diminished twice before March reached the first.

His knocks brought a remarkably handsome, angry, and suspicious man who answered all March’s arguments with “We don’t let anybody into our home.”

Total darkness came before March reached the second cottage. It was a night without stars, and without the least attempt to counterfeit them. The day sky had been a passable imitation of Earth’s: a blue dome traversed by a single bright light, wispy clouds that might, perhaps, have been steam. By night, the cavern was plainly that. The air was cool, and soon grew cooler still.

“March? March?” The voice was plaintive, sad, and old.

“That’s me,” he said. “Who are you?”

“You left me to die, March. You left me alone in that hospital so you could go off to some meeting. And I died, March. I died alone, abandoned.”

“Mom?” His free hand was fumbling with the flashlight on his utility belt.

A child’s voice said, “You don’t know me. You’ll never know me, March. You’ll never know me because I was never born. I’m March Wildspring, Jr. I’m the son you never got.”

“Uh huh.” March’s fingers had found the switch. “I’m going to turn this on now, son. You might want to cover your eyes. It’s a lot brighter than a helmet light.”

He did, and there was no one there. For two minutes and more, the glaring beam probed the darkness in search of the other white cottage he had seen; there was no such cottage, and it began to rain.

Sighing, he returned the flashlight to his belt, resumed his helmet, and switched on his helmet light.

“I sat beside you, March. Beside you in home room, and behind you in history. You let me copy your answers once, March, and I thought you liked me. I liked you and tried to show you I was yours for the asking. You were in all my daydreams, March. Other things changed, but you were always there.”

He said nothing, plodding wearily forward. His helmet light showed no one.

“Remember the time I touched your hand? You pulled away. I loved you, and you pulled away.”

“You scared me,” he told the disembodied voice. “I was one of the biggest boys in the class, and you were bigger than I was. You had those hungry eyes.”

The old voice said, “You left me alone, March. You left me alone to die.”

“You weren’t supposed to die.” His helmet light revealed no speaker. “There was a meeting I had to attend, a planning meeting for next year’s schedule. They said you’d be home in a week.”

A dog barked. It was a soft and friendly bark, and though it did not bark again he could hear its panting. “I’m sorry,” he told the dog. “I didn’t know how sick you were.”

By the time he reached the second cottage, he was determined to get in at any cost. “I’m a new arrival,” he told the handsome young man who answered his knock. For a moment he paused, sniffing.

“So are we.” The young man made no attempt to conceal his naked body. “Get your own dump.”

The air March’s suit was utilizing now carried a whiff of tobacco smoke. “I’m out here with the nightmares, and I don’t like it. I need a place to sleep, and something to eat, if you’ve got it.”

The muscular (and very naked) young man tried to close the door, but March had stuck the toe of his boot into it. “I’ll behave myself, and I’ll be eternally grateful.”

“You get the hell out!”

From behind the muscular young man, Kit’s well-remembered voice called, “Let him in, Jim!”

The muscular young man snarled, “Shut the fuck up!”

March’s shoulder forced the door open, throwing Jim backward. A split second later, March’s left took him in the pit of the stomach. It was followed at once (perhaps unnecessarily) by March’s right, which caught the side of Jim’s neck.

He went down, March unhooked the flashlight from his belt, and Kit said,

“Windy! Thank God.” She was wearing the pink brassiere he remembered so well.

He had never tried to kiss anyone through his helmet before. Both laughed, he unscrewed the helmet, they kissed properly, and he picked Kit up and swung her around like a child.

“You shouldn’t do that,” she told him breathlessly. “I’m too fat. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“You’re not fat, and there isn’t much gravity here.”

“I should lose ten pounds and you know it. Twenty would be better.”

“You look great.” It was difficult to keep his eyes on her face.

“Everybody looks great here. You look great, too.”

“How did you know it was me? I didn’t know you were in there until I heard your voice.”

“I didn’t, at first.” She grinned. “I couldn’t see you because Jim was in the way, and I didn’t recognize your voice because you sound better here. It was just that you were a stranger, and maybe you’d protect me from him. He tore my clothes off, and I think I’m going to get a black eye.”

By that time, Jim had picked up the flashlight and was trying to stand. March took it from him and hit him with it. Twice.

“Shove him out the door,” Kit suggested.

March shook his head. “Not yet. I’ve got something to show you. If it’s what I think it’s going to be, I want him to see it, too. Hell, he’s entitled to see it. Turn on that vid, will you? You can keep the sound off.”

She did, and dancers as naked as Jim Redd capered across the projection area.

“I didn’t know it was you,” she told March, “until I saw the orange suit. The lights in here aren’t very good.”

“I’ve noticed, and I think I may understand that. Another thing I’ve noticed is that though whatever the Founder’s got makes everybody else look different—”

“Better,” Kit said.

“You look just the way you always did. You’re still the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“I look different, Windy, and you know it. You just won’t admit it.”

He shook his head. “You look exactly the same. You sound the same, too.”

When you couldn't see me, I couldn't see you, either. I heard your voice, and it was the most beautiful voice in the business. No different."

"I don't think I understand."

"Neither do I. That's how it was, and that's all I know." He was sweeping the room with his digicorder. When he finished, he found the remote and changed channels.

"Vid looks just the same as at home," Kit said. "I don't understand that either. Do you?"

"If you mean how the system here does that, no. If you mean why it does it, it ought to be pretty obvious. The people get reminded of how it really was back home every time they look at it. This place is the carrot. What they see on vid is the stick. It's what they'll be going back to if they try to leave. So they don't. Wait a minute. Is there a hand-mirror around here?"

"Probably. I can look."

"Do that," March told her.

Redd groaned. After a minute or two, he groped the contusions on his head.

"Stay flat on the floor," March told him, "or you'll have another one." He had opened his suit and taken out his wallet.

Kit returned with a mirror. "You know, this is really a pretty place. It's not big, but it's awfully nice. Our watcher explained that the couple that had it before had gone back to Earth. The Founder'd sent them there, she said. They might come back eventually, but we could have it until they did. All this was before Jim jumped me."

March nodded.

"She said she'd go back to her gate and sleep there, but she'd come by for us in the morning. I thought I could handle Jim—that was a big mistake—and this looked nice. It would give us a base to operate out of while I looked for you and Jim looked for Robin. So I said okay, fine."

"You saw my lifeline."

"That's right. So we knew where you'd gone, Windy. Only it had been cut in front of the airlock, and that worried the hell out of me."

"The door did it," he said absently. "The airlock door. When you look into that mirror, do you see a new, improved you?"

"That's right, and I look great."

“Now look at this.” March held up his wallet. “Which you is this?”

There was a long pause before Kit said, “That’s the old me. This isn’t real, is it? I never thought it was.”

“But it was fun to pretend.”

Kit nodded.

“Besides, philosophers have argued for centuries over what we mean by ‘real’ and what we ought to mean. When I look at you, the physical body I see is composed of atoms that form molecules. That’s what it really is, but I see a person. Which one’s real?”

“Both of them,” Kit said promptly.

“I agree, but not everyone does. I used to know a man whose wife cheated on him and bragged about it. He told himself it wasn’t real because it didn’t matter. What was real was the love he had for her, and the love he thought she had for him.”

“I think I know him, too.”

“Nothing mattered but that love, so only that love was real. It wasn’t a lie he was telling himself, because he thought it was the truth. He’d convinced himself.”

With an almost inaudible grunt, Redd sat up. Though still handsome, he looked sick; a few seconds later he spat onto the intricately beautiful Persian carpet.

March switched off his digicorder and took out the disk. “I want to play this. Let’s see what we see.”

What they saw first was a blue screen dotted with instructions and cautions printed in yellow. He pressed fast forward, stopped at a shot of Kit, and turned up the sound.

*“No, Sarah. We’d like to hear about your cooking. It made you famous all over Southton.”*

The real Kit said, “That’s the way, Windy. Hide those hips.”

March hit fast forward again. “If only you knew what I feel every time I see them. Is Jim watching?”

He was, still sitting and looking only a little the worse for wear.

“Let’s see if we can find Sue.”

Robin appeared, simpering. Soon, March’s voice said, *“You are. You’re really quite beautiful.”*

She laughed.



March's voice continued, "*Is it all right if I jump?*"

Kit asked, "Is that how she looked to you then?"

March shook his head and killed the sound. "She was lovely, and looked like nineteen or twenty. Did you notice the dolls behind her?"

"And the mess. There was a teddy bear, too."

"She wanted me to think she was a kid, twelve maybe, who looked older here. She tried to talk like that at first, but after a while she forgot and I noticed. She'd seen me coming, somehow, and gotten to the gate in time to talk the real kid into going out for coffee or something while Sue subbed for her. Presumably there's a place where you can watch like that, and Sue had found out about it fast, because she thought Jim here might come after her. So I came and was met by a gorgeous redhead who told me her name was Penny. Look at the screen."

It showed a vast cavern, with a floor of mud and water. Here and there grass struggled to live, its sallow blades ill-nourished by sunlamps high overhead.

"That isn't what I saw when I jumped," March said wryly. "It isn't even what I saw in the viewfinder. It's what the digicorder saw, just the same."

"You mean...?"

"I mean it's where we are. Right now."

Redd snarled, "You got me into this."

"If you're talking to me," March said, "I agree. I did. If you're talking to Kit, you and I are going to have words again."

"Without the flashlight?"

"Try it and see."

"That's what I want," Kit said. "I want to see. You were shooting when you came in here. I know you were. I want to see Jim and me, and I want to see what this place really looks like."

They did.

\* \* \* \*

The three of them left together the next morning, after eating what they now knew was a paste of ground grain.

"I'm going to make you a deal," Redd told them.

"Think you can outrun me? Either one of you?"

Kit shook her head, but March said, "I'd be willing to try. Want to find out?"

“In that suit?”

“You’re a smoker, and I’m willing to try.”

“You may get the chance. Look, I could just take off and look for Robin. When I found her—and I would—I’d take her to my hopper and we’d be back in New York before you knew we were gone. Capeesh?”

March nodded.

“That’s got one big hole in it.” Redd paused, looking thoughtful. “Are they going to let us go without a fight? Maybe they will. Maybe they won’t.”

“They won’t,” Kit said.

“I don’t think so either,” March told her, “but I’d like to hear your reason.”

“Simple. We’ve seen through this place. They’ll know we have, because nobody who hasn’t would want to leave. If we get out we’ll tell other people. So we don’t get out.”

Redd grinned. “Smart lady. How about you, March? You thinking the same as she is?”

“Close enough. What about you?”

“I’m not as sure as she is.” Redd picked his teeth with a fingernail.

“But you think so, too. Why?”

“Everything’s easier to get into than to get out of, that’s all. You probably think I’m a goodfella.”

March shook his head. “You were working as a sound man, so it didn’t seem likely.”

“That’s right, I’m not. But I could’ve been a dozen times over. I’d be a made man by now. Or maybe dead, or in the slammer.” Redd shrugged. “I know people, okay? Guys from my old neighborhood. Guys I went to school with. It was easy for most of them, and there was a couple who didn’t even know where they were till somebody told them. You get in really easy, like here.”

Kit said, “But you don’t get out.”

“Exactly. So I figure what I figure. They’re sending people back to Earth, capeesh? She told us, and that’s who had our shack before. For their health? I don’t think so. They’ve got an angle.”

“So do you,” Kit told him.

“That’s right. Mine is that we’ve got a better chance getting out together than

doing it separately. I'll help you two, if you'll help Robin and me."

March said, "We will."

Kit looked from one to the other. "What if Robin doesn't want to go with him, Windy?"

"We'll deal with that after we've gotten out," March told her. "If we start fighting among ourselves now...." He shrugged.

Redd opened a battered vacpack of Old Camels, looked into it, and reclosed it. "I'll deal now. Kit, if you'll give your word you'll take her back to the city and turn her loose, I'll give mine that I'll let you do it. That's unless she decides to come back with me and tells you so herself."

"It's a deal." Kit offered her hand.

"I want to know about the footrace," March told him.

"Just this. I'm splitting. Two of us will have a better chance of finding her than one. If you don't like it, you'll have to run me down."

"I like it," March told him. "You won't have to run."

"That's great. We'll meet you at the gate, okay? The gate you came in through. We came in through that one, too."

Kit added, "I saw your lifeline, Windy."

"That was Gate Four," March told Redd. "We'll wait a while there—if we can. You do the same. That doesn't mean we'll wait for days. An hour or two, tops."

Redd nodded and left, walking fast. They saw him stop where the path threaded a picture-perfect little grove to light a cigarette; then he was lost to sight.

Before the path vanished into the grove they turned aside, flanking the grove and a small but lovely lake. At last Kit said, "Don't you care whether Robin gets out?"

"Yes," March told her, "but not very much. They're not going to kill her in here. They'll keep her—drugged or whatever it is—and happy. She may be better off here than she'd be with Jim."

"You said you knew she wasn't really a kid because she forgot to talk like one. But you knew more than that, because you told us she was really Robin. Did she say so?"

"No. She slipped badly once and called me Marchy. That's what she used to call me...."

“I’ve got it.”

“Mostly she called me Mr. Wildspring. You want to do dramatic parts, Kit, and I know you’ll do them well. Do you know what the difference between a bad actor and a good actor is?”

“Charisma. You know it as soon as he comes on.”

“That’s what makes a star, but there are a lot of good actors who aren’t stars and never will be. They’re good just the same, and when you need somebody to play the other cop or the wisecracking gal who runs the deli they’ll do fine. The difference between a bad actor and a good one is that a bad one can look good for five minutes. Give him a good director and a good script and he can handle it. But a good actor can be good for as long as you need him....”

“What is it, Windy?”

He raised his shoulders and, hopelessly, let them fall. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Her embrace surprised him, and their kiss lasted a long time. When they parted, Kit said, “Now tell me about it. What are friends for?”

“Sometimes I wish I didn’t notice so much, that’s all.”

They continued in silence until Kit dropped onto a marble bench. “This is about me and Jim, isn’t it?”

March nodded.

“Okay, out with it.”

“You said he tore your clothes off. They aren’t torn, and there’s not a button missing.”

“Clothes look better here, too.”

March said nothing.

“They do! Most of these people are in rags. You saw that when we played the disk. But those rags look great to us.”

He turned his digicorder toward her and backed away. “We’ll stop at the first house we see and look at this. If there are tears—or missing buttons, any of that—I’ll apologize. What will you do when there aren’t?”

“Windy....”

“Go ahead. I’m getting it.”

“Windy, I love you. I do.” Kit’s tears overflowed as she spoke. “Do you

really think I'd strip for Jim if I wasn't scared to death?"

"Yes. I'd like to be wrong about that. But yes, I do."

"Robin gave you a bad time." Kit fumbled for a handkerchief. "I uh-understand. I'd n-never really understood how b-bad it was till now, W-Windy...."

"Here." Turning off the digicorder, he brought her his.

She dried her eyes and blew her nose. "Don't say anything else, Windy. Okay? This is r-really pretty, even if it's n-not real. Let's just walk along and enjoy it for a while."

They did, strolling down into a miniature valley and up again toward a spruce fieldstone cottage. The low gravity made walking very pleasant, reminding March that in Heaven a man could run and run and never tire. He had read that somewhere, although he could not remember where. As they stepped across a tinkling rill bordered with white and blue wildflowers, he began to whistle softly.

A handsome man of fifty or so was planting shrubs in front of the cottage. Kit asked him whether the path would lead them to the gate, and March added, "Gate Four. We're supposed to meet our friends there."

"I'm Hap Harper." Hap smiled, wiping his hands on the legs of his spotless overalls. "I won't ask you to shake—I'd get you dirty. But that's who I am. Used to work in a bank in Saginaw."

March and Kit introduced themselves.

"Well, this little road you're on won't take you to Gate Four if you follow it straight. You need to follow it up to the next crossroad, then turn left. Follow that one, and you'll come to a footbridge over a lake. Pretty soon after that, it'll fork. Take the left fork, and you'll be there before long. Like to step inside for some tea?"

Kit said, "We're in kind of a hurry."

March nodded. "We'll have to go soon, but I'd enjoy that tea. If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all!"

They were ushered into a spotless home, somewhat larger than they might have guessed from its outward appearance, through living room and dining room and into a cheerful kitchen where rows of polished copper pans reflected onions and sausages dangling from the rafters.

"Mr. Wildspring's an independent digivid producer," Hap told a smiling, white-haired woman. "He and Ms. Carlsen here are shooting a documentary on this place."

“I’d love to see it,” the woman said. She wiped her hand with a dishtowel and offered it to Kit. “You call me Ida, Ms. Carlsen. Didn’t you used to do *Saturday Toy Shop*?”

Kit smiled. “It’s Kit, Ida. Yes, I did. Three live-long seasons playing with puppies and talking to puppets. I’d a lot rather have talked to the puppies.”

March said, “I noticed a vid in your living room, Ida. I’m March, by the way. I know it’s an unusual name, but I was born in March and I’m afraid my parents found March Wildspring amusing.”

Ida smiled. “I could tell you something about Hap’s name. Maybe I will, later. Were you wondering whether we still watch?”

March nodded.

“Yes, we do. Not much, but sometimes.”

“I can’t show you our documentary as it will be shown on the net,” March told her. “It doesn’t exist yet. But I have a disk here that will show some of the images I took. It would be a pleasure to show you a few.”

Hap said, “I’d like to see them.”

“There are a couple things I ought to say first,” March told him. “I suppose it will take five minutes or so.”

Ida smiled again. “That’s good. It will give me time to make tea. Tea must steep, you know.”

“You’ve heard it said that somebody sees the world through rose-colored glasses,” March began. “That can be true in the literal sense, of course. Glasses with a pink tint make just about everyone look prettier and healthier. I won’t talk about the tricks photographers and cameramen use, or the things that can be done to digital images on a computer. I won’t except to remind you of them, as I just did.”

Kit said, “Is this smart, Windy? I’m not trying to be smart myself. I don’t know and I want to.”

March shrugged. “Love can do something like that, too. Self-love does it better than almost anything. I’ve been walking down the street and seen a big angry-looking guy with a beat-up face, and thought *he looks like trouble*. Two more steps, and I realized I was seeing my reflection in a shop window. When I look into a mirror, knowing it’s a mirror, I don’t look like that. Not to me, I don’t.”

Ida said, “Love lets us see the good in a person, the wonderful goodness that we pass over every day.”

“That’s true, and I can give you an interesting instance of it. I love Kit here, and I think she’s beautiful. Absolutely beautiful, and I’ve told her that over and over.

When I got here, everybody looked very, very good. You'll have noticed that yourself."

Hap and Ida nodded.

"When I saw Kit, she looked absolutely beautiful—but so did a woman named Sue, and some other women I'd seen. So I wondered about that. I wondered about her clothes, too, because they hadn't changed either. Kit looks great in everything she wears, and she looked great in these—in certain piece of underwear I saw, in the clothes she's wearing now, in everything. They looked good, too. Very good, but no different. They're a little wrinkled now, but I doubt that you've noticed it."

Hap said, "I certainly haven't."

"Naturally I wondered about that. Kit told me once that every woman has a figure flaw. Maybe more than one, but there's always at least one. They have character flaws, too, though she didn't say that. Kit's too generous and too trusting, for example. I love her for it, but it's a flaw and I know it."

Ida looked at March over the tops of glasses that she no longer had. "Are you saying men don't?"

He shook his head. "Men are the same. We're worse, if anything. You won't have noticed, but I'm as ugly as sin. I've got a lot of character flaws, too. One is that I think too much. Things get into my head and bug me, and I can't stop. I thought about how Kit looked here a whole lot last night and finally I got it."

Kit said, "Let's hear it, Windy."

"It's pretty simple, really. Whatever it is they've got here that tweaks your brain to make things look better couldn't tweak mine where Kit was concerned. It couldn't because it had been tweaked already, by love."

Ida smiled. "Good for you."

"Thanks. That got me to thinking how Kit looked in the digivid I'd shot. She looked just great, but she was the only one who did."

Kit said, "I've been wondering about that, too, Windy. Why doesn't it work when we see vid?"

March rubbed his jaw. "I think I've got that one. The vid I'd shot looked terrific. The framing was great, the colors were all there and all vibrant, and the lighting couldn't have been better. I've shot lots of vid and think I can do it just about as well as most cameramen, but that was the best ever. See what I'm saying?"

"The vid itself looked good, but the things in there—except for me."

"Bingo." March switched off his digicorder and removed the disk. "That was

the preliminary. It may have taken a little longer than five minutes. If so, I apologize. I'll play some of this now."

Swaying a bit because the digicorder had been carried on a man's shoulder, a barren hill of earth and stones appeared before the vid. A shed stood at the top, a crazy affair of leaning metal props and naked particle-board. Before it, a skeletal man in rags labored with a piece of rusted steel, digging holes for shrubs whose burlap wrappings had burst, shrubs that were clearly dying or dead. Kit's voice, and March's, spoke to this starved and tattered figure. He rose with a grin that revealed stained and rotting teeth, and wiped his filthy hands on his muddy thighs. "I'm Hap Harper."

\* \* \* \*

"You ruined their paradise," Kit told March when the cottage was no longer in view.

"You saw how they really looked."

"Yeah. Yeah, I did."

"How long until they die, if they stay here and keep on living the way they've been doing it?"

"A year, maybe. The tea she was making for us...."

"Was stagnant water polluted with human wastes. Sewage."

"She didn't see it that way."

"Neither did we," March said, "but that's what it was."

"Wouldn't they die? There ought to be a lot of dead people around here. Does somebody pick them up?"

"How would I know?" He rubbed his jaw. "I've seen people sleeping on the ground."

"I've seen some of those, too," Kit said a few seconds later.

"I never tried to wake any of them up."

The girl at Gate Number Four was called Nita. She looked younger than "Penny" had, and March suspected that she was really younger still.

"We have to go out and get some things." Kit had found her locker and pulled out her transparent suit. "I imagine we'll be back pretty soon."

Nita looked doubtful. "Nobody said anything about people leaving."

Kit smiled. "Because there's nothing to say, really. We get our suits and go into your airlock. That's all. You can wave good-bye if you feel like it. That would



be nice.”

“I’ll have to work it. There aren’t any controls on the inside. No handles or anything like that. It’s why somebody has to be on the gate to let them in.”

Kit looked puzzled. “That’s a funny airlock.”

“Keeps out the undesirables,” March muttered. He had returned to the arch by which they had entered, and was scanning the sun-drenched landscape. “I know it rains in here at night. Does it ever thunder?”

Nita shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Kit looked at him quizzically.

“I thought I heard thunder, that’s all.” He shut the worn orange suit. “I’d suit up if I were you. Put on your helmet.”

“It won’t rain where we are,” Nita told them.

“It’s people.” Kit had cocked her head to listen. “A crowd. People yelling.”

“I’d suit up, if I were you.”

“Sure.” She moved a doll and sat down to pull the transparent suit over her legs. “They sound mad.”

“Get your helmet on,” March told her. “We’d better go.”

“We told Jim we’d wait.”

“To hell with Jim.”

Two figures—one dark, the other scarlet against the bright green grass—topped the nearest of the low hills. They were running, bounding with long, rather ineffective strides. As March watched, the dark figure stopped to look back at the scarlet one. There was a distant shout—of what, he could not be sure.

He switched on his digicorder. Someone far away was beating a drum—a drum bigger than the biggest he had ever heard.

A dull, dead-sounding drum that could be beaten only by a giant.

“Windy...?”

“Get into the airlock quick.” He spoke to Kit without looking at her.

“That’s trouble, isn’t it?”

“Get in there.”

The scarlet figure had fallen, and the dark one was helping it—her—up.

March's fingers fumbled with the carabiner that fastened his flashlight to his utility belt.

The drum beat louder as the mob crested the hill.

And the dark figure turned to face it. The flashes were invisible, as was the powder smoke. The sounds of the shots reached them only weakly, scattered among drumbeats: six, seven, eight.... March found he was counting them, although he had never chosen to do so.

Eleven, twelve.... Some semi-automatics held fifteen rounds. Some even more.

Beside him Kit said, "That's Jim, isn't it? My God! Look how scared Robin is."

"Get in the airlock!" March shouted.

Then he was running, although he had not consciously chosen to do that, either. The mob had halted, dismayed by its dead.

Fourteen, fifteen....

Robin had fallen and was scrambling to her feet as he reached her. Snatching her wrist, he jerked her up, threw her over his shoulder, and ran for all he was worth.

Her shriek might have stopped him. Kit's certainly did. He whirled—and beheld the impossible.

A giant the color of Ida's copper pots was cresting the hill. The men and women in the mob were as children in comparison, and small children at that. They tried to part before it and failed. Eight or ten died beneath its feet.

March fled and did not stop running until he and Robin had mounted to the false room that was the air lock. Outside, Kit shouted, "That girl! Nita! Windy, she's gone!"

"I'll get it!" Robin darted away. For a half second that was to prove much too long March stood motionless, gasping for breath. When he moved again, the room wall that was in fact the hatch of the airlock was slamming shut and Kit was dashing toward him. He saw it catch her above the knees, saw her fall, and watched her cut in two.

\* \* \* \*

Space seemed warm and welcoming when he jetted away from Number Nineteen; the Sun's tiny candle, five hundred million miles away, spoke of Earth and home.

He matched the speed of his hopper to that of the Asteroid Belt before he stopped hopping. It might be—indeed, it seemed likely—that he would be pursued. If so, the thronging asteroids would make it impossible to locate his hopper by

radar. He would be far safer than in all the empty immensity between the Belt and Mars or that between Mars and Earth.

Only then did he stop to review the disk from his digicorder.

\* \* \* \*

*“Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this—Inspired with this....”*

It was coming back, no question about it. “Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened for you.”

Something like that.

He rubbed his jaw. When Bad Bill turned him down, as Bad Bill presumably would, he would be free to sell to Pubnet or Vidnet—but only if they paid the price UDN had refused or more. That argued for offering it to Bad Bill cheaply, say two million or less.

On the other hand, Bad Bill was entirely capable of buying it and sitting on it if the price were low enough. There would be some threshold at which Bad Bill would not dare, at which it would eat up too much of his budget. The trick would be to offer it just above that.

When he finished it at last—an Ethermail to William W. Williams, VP Programming, UDN, with a brief description of what he had—the price he put on it was five million. He might, he just might, get that much from Pubnet or one of the others. That much or more. He would start with them at six million five.

He pushed the Send button, muttered, “Holy Mother help me,” and began to prepare his lunch. Number Nineteen’s people might have Kit’s hopper by now, with its multitude of cookbooks and obscure spices. Or if not by now, then soon. What would they do with them?

Kit had not gone into the airlock, this although he had told her to repeatedly. Her reason for disobeying was plain: she had wanted to be with him, to share his risks.

“A woman should not share a man’s risks,” he muttered as he shut the door of his microwave. “It’s not what women are for.”

Try telling that to a woman.

Jesus had refused to let his mother in to see him. He had known the fate awaiting him, and had known the risk the apostles ran. He had wanted to spare his mother that risk. Or (March thought as the microwave beeped) to spare her as much of it as could.

When he had finished eating, he found that he had Ethermail.

“Mr. Wildspring. Please icom me asap. Calling from space is expensive, so call collect: USA 1105 8129-4092-6 X7798. Kim Granby, Special Assistant, Programming.” White print on a blue background confirmed that the message was from United Digital Network.

March jotted down the number and called it. Collect.

Kim Granby looked about twenty-five, although he knew she was almost certainly at least ten years older. Sleek black hair framed a smooth oval face. “Thank God!” she said. “I was afraid you wouldn’t call till tomorrow. I’ve looked at your material—some of it, not all of it yet. It’s good. It’s very, very good.”

It sounded like a build-up to a let down. UDN was going to refuse, and he could offer his work elsewhere. An expert poker player, he repressed all traces of a smile. “It’s rough, of course. A few of the voiceovers are Kit Carlsen’s, and I think you’ll want to keep them. The rest are mine. All of those will have to be redone, and you’ll want to edit everything. I think I said that.”

“You did.” Kim Granby gave him a guarded smile. “I haven’t watched all of it yet—less than half in fact. But I told the vice president what it was and what I’d seen, and we want to buy it.”

March cursed inwardly.

“Before we make an offer, I have some questions. You weren’t alone in this. Kit Carlsen did voiceovers for you, and she was in some of the footage I saw. Your Ethermail sounded as if you own all rights. Do you?”

He nodded. “May I explain?”

“Please do.”

“A lot of it was shot solo by me. At the end we had a four-person crew. Kit, Jim and Robin Redd, and me. All of us had worked for UDN at one time or another. Did you know Kit or Robin? Or Jim?”

“I’ve met Ms. Carlsen once or twice.” The guarded smile came again. “Once at least. She’s no longer with you?”

“She’s dead.”

Kim Ganby’s mouth opened, and closed again.

“Kit’s dead, Jim’s dead, and Robin’s probably dead, too. I don’t know for sure about Robin, but you’ll see Jim....”

“See him die?”

“Yes. I didn’t see it myself. I had the digicorder, but I wasn’t watching the viewfinder just then. It’s on the disk though. In the digital copy I sent you. He was squashed. Crushed sounds better, I suppose. Kit’s dead, too.”

There was a long pause. At last Kim Granby said, “I liked her.”

March nodded. “So did I.”

“You said this man Jim’s death was in the footage. Didn’t you? Didn’t I hear that?”

March nodded again.

“What about Ms. Carlsen?”

“It’s there. She was cut in two.”

Another pause. “You’re joking.”

March shook his head. “I wish I was.”

“And it’s there, in ... I—I’m going to have to talk to Mr. Inglis. I’ll call you right back.”

“Wait up!” March raised his hand. “What’s this about Mr. Inglis? I thought I was dealing with Bill Williams. Is this Phil Inglis?”

“Correct. Mr. Williams has left the net to pursue other interests.” Kim Granby’s beautiful face held no expression. “Mr. Inglis is Vice President for Programming now.”

“I know him.”

“I know you do, Mr. Wildspring. He called you an old friend. I have to speak with him just the same.”

“All right. Will you call me back?”

Abruptly, the beautiful face softened. “Pubnet’s at work on a special rather like ‘Vaults in the Void,’ Mister—may I call you March?”

He wanted to rub his jaw, but did not. “Certainly, Ms. Granby.” One second served to collect his thoughts, though he wished he had longer. “I’d like it.”

“Call me Kim, please. Everyone does. And I’ll call you back. You can count on that, March. It won’t be long. Good-bye for now.”

Kit was dead. It was just beginning to sink in. He turned away from the blank screen. He had thought that he had come to terms with that. He had not. His hands were shaking. He thrust them angrily into his pockets, knowing that nothing he could do would make them stop.

Kit was dead and Jim was dead and Sue was probably dead by now; Earth was menaced by something a dead man had turned loose on mankind; but all those were overshadowed by the single, salient, inescapable fact of Kit's death.

If there had been whiskey on his hopper, he would have poured himself a drink—would have been drunk, in all probability, by the time UDN called him back. Not for the first time, he was glad there was none.

Kit was dead.

Her soul was with God, somewhere out there in space. Someday his soul might meet hers there. They would embrace, and laugh at remembered things, and link arms forever.

Someday....

“Remember, O most gracious Virgin....”

\* \* \* \*

“I should preface this,” Kim Granby said, “by telling you that Pubnet's at work on something very similar. Have I said so already? Mr. Inglis said I was to tell you. He felt, in fairness, that you should know.”

March nodded. “Please tell him how much I appreciate it.”

“It's nothing like as sensational as yours,” Kim Granby continued. “He didn't say to tell you that. I'm doing it on my own, but I feel he would approve.”

“It's good of you.”

She smiled. “I'll be good some more. I'll tell you that Mr. Inglis and I have watched everything you sent us now. We watched it together, in fact. We recorded notes as we watch. Both of us did that.”

“I understand.”

“I've returned with an offer. As I said.” She stopped to draw breath, something she did very attractively. “When I realized what you had, March, I knew I had to go back to Mr. Inglis. What if I had given you his offer, and you had refused it? I explained to him, and he indicated that I had acted correctly. There is a new offer now. If you'd like time to think it over, please let me know.”

“I will.” March nodded. “But I'll have to hear it first.”

“Of course. Yes, indeed. Certainly.” Her sudden smile would have melted a heart far harder than his. “You're a gentleman. I've talked with some of the other women here. At—we go for coffee. Together. You know.”

Wondering what was coming, he nodded again.

“They said you were rough, tough and blunt. Then Debbie Knowles said the three musketeers would’ve welcomed you with open arms, and all the rest agreed. So I just wanted to say—this is from me, personally, not from the net. I wanted to say that whether or not you accept our offer, I hope we can be friends. Is that all right?”

“Yes,” March said, “absolutely.”

“I live here in New York...?”

“So do I,” March said.

“That’s good. That’s very good. This is official now. This is what Mr. Inglis said. We’ll pay....”

March had raised his hand. “You’re being very honest with me, Kim, and I appreciate it. I want to be honest with you, too. I told you a lie when we spoke earlier. I didn’t mean to, but I did. May I set the record straight?”

Kim Granby’s nod was scarcely one tenth of an inch, but it was there.

“I said that I liked Kit. The truth is that I loved her. I loved Kit very much. You’re bound to hear it soon from somebody, so I want to tell you. I loved her, and I watched her die. I don’t want you to think, later, that I’ve been hiding it from you.”

“I would never think that, March. Never!” Another deep breath. “You get angry and upset when a woman cries, don’t you?”

“Pretty often, yes.”

“Then let me off quick, because I think I may cry. We’re making two offers. The first is flat, without any conditions. Eight million five hundred thousand. The second is contingent on your coming back to work for UDN. You’d be a senior producer, pay half a mil. Residuals and bonuses. You know. Do that, and the offer’s ten mil. Do you want more time?”

He shook his head. “Tell Phil I’ll take the second.”

\* \* \* \*

Kit, he understood. He thought he understood Jim, too. Jim had loved Sue—no, had loved Robin. Jim had loved Robin and Jim and been a bastard in certain ways. All men were bastards in certain ways, so why not Jim? Jim had understood Robin better than he, March, ever had.

Better than he, March, ever would.

He remembered the small dark figure. The pop-pop-pop of the distant shots. Jim had stood his ground, shooting, until he died, hoping to gain time for Robin.

But what about Robin? What about the woman he had tried so hard to forget?

March rubbed his jaw. It seemed inadequate, so he rubbed it again.

Had Robin wanted to die with Jim?

Or had she been willing to sacrifice herself to save his—March's—life?

Or had she simply wanted to remain in Number Nineteen? She had never seen what the digicorder showed, after all. He went to the window and stared out at the tiny blue spark that was home, so remote and so easy to reach, so blessed with grace and so cursed with evil. Had Robin been willing to sacrifice herself? For him?

There was only one way to find out, and that was go back and find her—assuming she was still alive.

And ask.

## **GONE TO JUPITER**

*The Memories and Menace of  
Memorials in Space*

Produced and Directed by March Wildspring

Starring Kit Carlsen

With voiceovers by Kit Carleson,

Tabbi Merce, and Vincent Palma

Edited by March Wildspring

and Robin Redd Wildspring

Dedicated to Kit Carlsen

and James Frankie Redd,

Who Perished that You Might Watch It

A Philip J. Inglis Presentation