

In 1943, Violet DeVere and her fellow WASPs did their part to help destroy an axis of brutal dictators that threatened the future of the planet Earth.

In 1950, Violet DeVere will be kidnapped across a hundred million miles of space, to an impossible empire on the ancient planet Mars, where she will rise alone to defy an invincible tyranny that dooms fifty million souls...



THE DYNAMIC NEW SERIAL ADVENTURE

QUEEN of the IRON SANDS

A Planetary Romance
Unfolding Weekly

BY

SCOTT LYNCH

QUEEN of the IRON SANDS

**A Serial Adventure in Weekly Installments
by
SCOTT LYNCH**

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This document contains the full text of *Queen of the Iron Sands* as posted so far, compiled for the reading and printing pleasure of those who prefer not to read it in HTML format. A new version will be compiled each week, incorporating the latest chapter.

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Book I

BLUEWORLDER

Heroing is one of the shortest-lived professions there is.

- Will Rogers

*“Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds -- and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of...”*

- From “High Flight,” by John Gillespie Magee

Chapter 1

My Father Brought the Sky Home

I suppose you could say that I left the planet Earth for the first time in 1928, just after my eighth birthday, and for the last time in 1950, just before my thirtieth.

But isn't that one hell of a presumption on my part, dear reader— the notion that there's ever going to be a *you* to say anything at all about me! This isn't even paper I'm writing on, in my little sanctuary half a mile above the red desert, and as far as I know I'm still the only living creature on this planet to whom the English alphabet is anything but a series of nonsense squiggles.

Yet I find myself determined to leave some sort of record of all the terrible and wonderful years I've spent here, hundreds of millions of miles from anyone who can read this. Is that vanity?

I suppose I might as well just lay it all out for you, you comforting hypothesis, and we can both make up our minds as I go along.

My name is Violet Elizabeth DeVere, and I was born in Abilene, Texas at the tail end of a dry, windy September in 1920. When I was a little girl, that town wasn't done settling. It was still a coming-and-going sort of place, and like currents in a river you had cattle men, oil men, farmers in and out of luck, drifters, grifters, preachers, and Great War vets chasing what was left of their hopes in life. And then you had my father, who was above it all.

Now, I mean that literally. He was anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand feet above it all. Howard DeVere built his first airplane from a kit in 1914, when nobody really knew what to do with the things. By 1922, when he bought a sky-worn Curtiss Jenny biplane from Uncle Sam, folks had grown some better notions, and dusting crops became dad's game. The concept was even newer to the world than I was. Back and forth he flew, low enough to wipe his boots on tree-tops, bombing fields and orchards with gray-white streamers of lead arsenate powder. He kept that stuff in a hopper that he half-assed out of some old tin sheets and bolted into his Jenny in place of the front seat.

Dad flew the mail, too, starting in the last couple of years before the Depression came on like a bad dream. When the crops had drunk up all the poison dust they'd need for the year, he'd migrate east to Dallas for a week or two at a time, and work the express route to Chicago as a contract pilot. That route was a half-day by air with seven or eight stops along the way, and it must have been in Chicago, in the fight against boredom during his layovers, that he first picked up our shared vice. The little nudge from fate that foredoomed your humble narrator to a life in the air.

They say Texas breeds big men, but dad was never big. In my eyes, nobody who wore a leather flight jacket *needed* to be big. Dad knew I loved that thing so much that he always wore it when he came home, even if the air was so hot you could see it rippling like a snake just above the ground. Sure, he slipped out of it directly thereafter, but he always wore it until I got my hug.

Now, it wasn't quite that hot, that autumn of 1928 when mom and I met him at the old sod landing strip that passed for the town's air terminal. It was warm and breezy, and dad picked me up and held me against that sun-cracked leather jacket, and it smelled like sweat and engine oil and his pipe smoke. That smell was and always will be the smell of the wind, to me. I don't mind if that doesn't make sense to anyone else. But whenever my dad came down out of the sky, I thought he brought the smell of the wind with him.

That time, he brought something else with him, too.

"Vee," he said, that being his preferred name for me, one mom never

used, "I know I don't need to ask whether you've been behaving for your mother while I've been off fitting blocks into the pyramids with the Pharaoh's other slaves."

"No, you don't," I said.

"Right. I know you've been an ornery little pain in the behind, don't I?"

"Oh, you liar!" I punched him a couple times, the sort of punches that only eight-year-old fists can deliver as tokens of deep affection.

"Well, I thought you and your mother might appreciate it if we gave you something to occupy that busy little head of yours." As he spoke, he reached into his jacket and pulled that *something* out. "Sorry I missed your birthday, Vee."

And that's how I wound up owning a slightly folded, heavily-thumbed copy of the August, 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories*.

Let me tell you about the cover.

Imagine a green lawn, in front of a well-maintained garage and a prosperous-looking house on a wooded hill. A perfectly ordinary lawn, with a perfectly ordinary man and woman on it, waving upward. . . at a man hanging suspended in mid-air by the action of the bizarre electrical devices he wears on his belt and his backpack. And make no mistake, he is *not* falling, nor is he merely hovering cautiously. He is outstretched like an athlete, lying upon the air, *swimming* in it, and his expression is one of pure, easy pleasure.

He is defying gravity almost literally by the seat of his pants.

I might have been inclined, by the accident of my birth, to a life spent *approving* of airplanes. But the cover of that magazine, from the moment I set eyes on it, drove me on without rest toward the pilot's seat. After that, I never spared an instant for second thoughts. That breezy day in 1928, my feet forgot the ground they were standing on, and I swore that as soon as I had legs long enough to reach a pair of rudder pedals, I would own the sky.

I'd been a reader before then, of course, but I tore that magazine nearly to pieces with the number of times I devoured it front to back. The flying man from the cover was the hero of a story called "The Skylark of Space," the work of a certain E.E. Smith and Lee Hawkins Garby. I had my own flying belt and backpack the day after dad came home, and I had a pair of badly sprained

ankles the day after that, earned by leaping from one of the nooks in the gabled roof. It turned out that canvas, baling wire, and cardboard were much less effective at nullifying gravity than the *intra-atomic energy of the unknown metal X!*

“Good Lord, Vee,” said dad as I lay in bed recuperating that night. He turned my disappointing prototype flying belt over and over in his hands. “You never did anything so damn foolish since before you had teeth. Are you gonna make me regret bringing that magazine home for you?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“So no more jumping off the roof?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” I said, as slyly as an eight-year-old could.

“A deal? I ought to pound a peg into the front yard and chain you down! How’s that for a deal?”

“That magazine advertises subscriptions.”

“Does it *really*...” he said, very slowly, a man fully realizing that an extortion attempt was about to come down the pipe.

“Please, daddy, I’ll behave like you wouldn’t *believe!*”

“I’m already having trouble believing your behavior,” he sighed. “You got some cheek, honey. First you try to kill yourself, then you try to wrangle a new library out of it. Let’s you and me have an understanding.”

“What’s that?”

“I know at least a couple genuine ways to fly, and a cloth belt full of imaginary metal ain’t one of them.”

“I got that figured out. I promise.”

“Then you be sensible, once those ankles of yours heal up. You’d better shame the angels, for at least a month or two. Then we’ll see about your subscription. *Maybe.*”

Well, I’m not sure the angels felt the heat of any competition, but I certainly didn’t risk my bones testing home-built super-science devices for at least the next few weeks.

And so it came in the mail, a reward for my forbearance, a second issue of *Amazing Stories*, proudly emblazoned along the spine with the magical word

SCIENTIFICTION. This one featured a cover illustration of a metal man wrestling a bloodthirsty lion, just about to break the poor thing's neck. And the contents! Something about a trip to the moon... a voyage across space... a menace from Mars... and more "Skylark!"

"Hold up, Vee," said dad as I made a beeline for my room, fresh pulp clutched to the front of my dress. I meekly handed over my new fascination. Dad paged through it for a few moments, chewing thoughtfully on his pipe stem, before passing it back.

"Just mind yourself," he said. "If I get word that you're climbing on the neighborhood cats and dogs and trying to tear their heads off, you'll think we named you Violet because of the color of your behind after I get done spanking you."

"Yessir."

"And Vee?"

"Yessir?"

"When you finish that, would you mind leaving it out for a few days so I can get a fair crack at it, too?"

The Depression hit just a year after that, and it knocked a lot of folks around Abilene pretty hard. We weathered it by dumb luck. While there weren't as many crops that needed dusting, a lot of the other local applicators hit their bottom dollar before dad did. He inherited their slices of the shrunken pie, and between that and the Dallas-Chicago route we kept above water. People didn't stop needing to mail things.

Dad actually managed to buy a larger house, a mostly-finished thing up in the hills past the airfield, well outside the city proper. It had asphalt roof shingles and a big round porch. My parents got a deal on it because all the original builder's money had vanished overnight, and the original builder quickly followed suit. *Old Crooked House*, we started calling it privately, on account of the way it creaked in high winds, and because none of dad's repairs were ever going to win any ribbons for beauty at the county fair. Dad was a mechanic, not a carpenter.

I had a good couple of years there. New clothes were a rare thing, and none of us were in any danger of gaining much weight, but dad and I did have our one shared indulgence, that stream of *Amazings* that never stopped coming, plus the occasional *Air Wonder Stories* or *Zeppelin Stories* or *Weird Tales*. About the latter, we actually argued from time to time. Dad was fond of H.P. Lovecraft, while I adamantly was not. I wanted adventures where the heroes won the day

with daring and scientific miracles, not stories where they ran into the night crapping their pants because of monsters that were just too awful to contemplate.

“Well, Violet, that’s probably because you’ve never had to pay income taxes,” said dad sagely, when I tried to explain my grand theories of literature one morning at breakfast.

At least we could both agree that Robert E. Howard was pretty swell. Conan the Cimmerian would pay his income taxes, all right— he’d pay ‘em in crushed skulls. There was no pants-crapping when that fellow was around, unless you were on the wrong team.

Dad and I shared something else, but I would never call *this* an indulgence. No, dear reader, something so absolutely vital was no indulgence for either of us. I went up with him for the very first time in the summer of 1930, in a borrowed plane, since I was too big to share dad’s seat and he would have killed anyone dumb enough to suggest that his little girl tuck herself into the crop-dust bin on his old Jenny.

By 1933 that Jenny was gone. “Airframes are like horses,” dad once told me. “A few years hard riding is all you’re meant to get out of ‘em.” He scored a lucky deal on a New Standard D-25 biplane, a ship built to haul four people rather than the usual two. This meant he could weld in a dusting hopper and still have room for eighty pounds of yours truly (though never while he was actually dusting— I wasn’t allowed anywhere near any of the various arsenates, on or off the ground). I learned the air in that D-25, making wide lazy loops above the green fields, the brown scrublands, and the slate gray of Lake Fort Phantom.

I flew solo for the first time just after I turned fifteen. Dad was a dot, pacing nervously on the grass at the center of the Abilene Air Terminal, which had been expanded to a triangle of sod strips. I orbited that triangle at various heights and speeds for half an hour, always mindful of that beloved dot, but more entranced than ever by the bright blue world around me. This wasn’t SCIENTIFUNCTION; this could be my life, my everyday life. The whole sky could be my office!

In January, 1937, dad and I flew east to Fort Worth, the closest place I could take both the written test and the flight test for my private pilot’s license. My little blue pilot’s log noted “45 hrs 18 mins dual instruction / 16 hrs 45 mins solo time,” and was countersigned by my father.

A little over two weeks later I found a letter in the mailbox, addressed to me from the Department of Commerce, Aeronautics Branch, Washington, D.C.

DEAR MADAM:

You have completed the tests and examinations required

by the Air Commerce Regulations for a Private Pilot's License.

Out of the envelope fell a little white card, proof that I had been awarded Private Pilot's License #24,268.

Two days after I received that little card, my mother went into Abilene for an afternoon of bridge with her circle of close friends. A slobbering drunk behind the wheel of a 1934 Buick Sport Coupe caught her as she was crossing a street; a moment later he slammed into a tree and went through the windshield. They both died more or less instantly.

I haven't said much about my mother, Evelyn Morgan DeVere. I don't mean that as an unkindness to her. It's more of a kindness to myself— some things you just try not to dwell on, even with so many years to insulate you from the live current of your grief.

I loved my mother, but I wasn't in her confidence the same way I was in dad's. She was a strange fit with the pair of us. She was neither enthusiastic nor uneasy about dad's career. Howard could have been a soil chemist or an insurance adjustor or a railroad detective; it was all the same to her as long as the roof didn't leak. She did typing from time to time when there was work available in town, and she kept most of the books for DeVere General Aviation Services, dad's grandiose name for his little empire of the air.

Mom loved her cards and her radio programs; she wasn't a reader and she didn't understand a speck of what dad and I saw in our pulps. She'd sip her coffee at the kitchen table, bemused and neutral, while dad and I would verbally fence over how Solomon Kane might have handled the Fungi from Yuggoth. She was like an anthropologist silently observing a little tribe of Texas madmen, forever unable to decipher their private crazy-talk.

She didn't shape me like dad did, or share what dad and I shared, but what mom did was just as important. She allowed me to happen. She was as mild in judgment as she was in everything else, and it was no great shame to her if her daughter wanted to bury her nose in strange magazines, wear trousers as often as skirts, or spend long days helping her father pull apart a malfunctioning radial engine. She could have tried to bury me in etiquette and parlor games and the labyrinths of delicate fashion, things that might have hung on me and stuck me to the ground as effectively as lead weights.

But she *didn't*.

It was a month after the funeral before dad would take to the air again. I actually started flying for pay in his place, though I hadn't taken the exam for a commercial license yet. Some things were just winked at, back in those days. I wasn't dusting at first, but I did a photography job, and ran some cargo, and an urgent passenger transport. While dad was grounded in mourning, I went into the air to forget, and wished I could stay there, the higher up the better.

Old Crooked House was quiet as hell with just the two of us. It must have been half a year before I even heard dad laugh again. Lines grew on his face and he lost weight that wasn't really meant to be lost. Age caught up with him all at once, like it had jumped him in an alley one night and beat him hard for all of the years he'd been ducking it.

Dad put on a brave act for me, but he never truly recovered from mom's death. It was Evelyn or nothing for him, and just a few years later he had serious problems of his own.

The world got nervous in those last years before the big war. Our pulps reflected it; their pages were thick with atomic explosives and exotic poison gases, war-rockets and mechanized terrors. Readers used the letter columns for tedious arguments over the usefulness of everything from dreadnaughts to bomber aircraft. I had lived just long enough to witness the first sea-change in the fiction I loved. Bob Howard and H. P. Lovecraft were both dead, and Hugo Gernsback was no longer publishing SCIENTIFUNCTION.

SCIENTIFUNCTION, it turned out, was about to be hurled forth from gun barrels and airfields and torpedo tubes all over the world.

I had escaped from high school, and was was constantly doing a two-step with some vague plans to attend the University of Texas. However, DeVere General Aviation Services ate up more and more of my time as dad's heartbreak grew into real physical issues. His hands started to shake, and flaky lesions appeared on the skin of his arms and face. The doctors told us that his devil-may-care early years of aerial application had at last borne poison fruit.

Though we were far more cautious with our chemicals by the time I finally learned the art of dusting, that caution came too late for dad. In 1939, I flew fifty percent of our collective air hours. In 1940, I was up to eighty percent, and dad was no longer handling the really tricky stuff at all.

On December 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan bombed the hell out of the

U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, and in a matter of hours we were up to our necks in the same crap as the rest of the world.

Rationing took a few months to really kick in, but when it did DeVere General Aviation Services had to be hung up in the closet. We had a decent pile of money in the bank, but avgas was suddenly more precious than rubies. The clamp came down hard on civilian flying, “for the duration.”

Every man in the county who didn’t have flat arches or one working lung ran off to enlist in something. Every pilot who could tell the difference between the horizon and his own ass was suddenly a hot commodity, unless that pilot was a she.

I spent most of 1942 in an angry fit. I was mad at the Japanese, mad at the Nazis, mad at the doctors who couldn’t do anything for dad as he sank deeper into his illness. I was maddest of all, full-throttle *pissed off*, at the fact that it seemed like any clod who could work a slide rule without cutting his fingers off was deemed fit for aerial training by the Army Air Forces or the Navy. There I was with six hundred hours in the cockpit, and nobody knew what to do with me. A new Army airfield was being scraped out of the plains with desperate speed just west of town, but I felt like every beau at the dance had suddenly run off, leaving me standing alone in the middle of an empty floor.

It turned out I wasn’t the only one.

There were rumors going around about all sorts of programs for women flyers by mid-1942, plans heavy with capital-A words like “Auxiliary” and “Alternate” in their titles. There were too damn many half-starts and missed opportunities, but niche by niche and flight by flight we started to claw our way into jobs that I felt we had already proven our right to.

The war was on in deadly earnest, and it seemed intolerable to me that I should spend it glued to the ground.

When the Japanese roared in over Oahu, the Brits had already been using women to handle transport and ferry missions for some time. Anything they could do to free their men up for combat flying, they did— the only real barrier England still had against a German invasion was built ten thousand feet in the air.

There was a little team of British and American women delivering aircraft across the Atlantic— I heard about them, but had no strings I could tug to get involved. At first they were barely allowed to handle trainers, but by the middle of the war they were supposedly saddling up anything with wings. Closer to home, there was also a group of women working under private contracts to ferry new

planes, still warm from the assembly lines, to the AAF bases where they would be manned and geared for fighting. Again, though, it was a matter of connections, and I had none that counted.

I finally got my big chance in late 1942, when two distinct new opportunities for female pilots opened up. The first was Nancy Harkness Love's *Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Service*, which dove in and did transport work relatively quickly. It was a hand-picked cadre of about thirty women, and never got any bigger. Stop me if you've heard this refrain before, dear reader, but your Texas girl simply had no cards she could play to get herself through that door.

No, I hitched my wagon to something called the *Women's Flying Training Detachment*, which was the brain-child of another famous aviatrix, Jackie Cochran. I later heard that about 25,000 women applied to the WFTD waiting list, but most of them were bounced immediately for lack of flight hours. Remember what I said earlier about clods barely capable of working a slipstick without causing grievous bodily injury? Well, that was fine for men. Uncle Sam would hold your face against the grindstone until you sprouted a pair of silver wings. Women, on the other hand, had to have our qualifications in hand before we even knocked on the door. Valid commercial licenses and a couple hundred hours in the air— those requirements eased slightly as the war went on, but they were never entirely lifted.

I remember the day I sat in the living room, filling out the paperwork for my application, while dad half-dozed and watched from his favorite armchair. We never admitted it out loud, but his flying days were done. His skin was graying, his hair was coming out, and he needed a cane to keep himself upright on the walk from his bedroom to the water closet. He was forty-eight and looked seventy.

"Are you sure you're all right with this?" I asked.

"Vee," he said, his voice trembling, "I checked you out in things like blind-flying and stall recovery, not god-damned stenography. You know as well as I do this ain't no *choice*."

"I didn't mean my flying," I said, "I meant my leaving you on your own, with your--"

"My what, my delicate condition?" He did a fair impression of a hearty laugh. "Violet Elizabeth, I do *not* need my napkin tucked in for me just yet, or my ass wiped. Anyhow, if you got busy elsewhere, I might have time to square us on that pile of magazines you've been treating as a private reserve."

Just about the only good news in the messy months right after Pearl Harbor was that the pulps kept coming. The brains behind them might have

found jobs in war bureaus and shipyards and munitions factories, but they were as much in thrall to their typewriters as ever. *Amazing* had gone stale, but that was no loss when there was something as juicy as *Astounding Science Fiction* to pick up the slack, and I read every issue.

Dad tried to keep up, but his vision and his decaying concentration were in conspiracy against his pleasure. Mostly he just used the magazines to sort of decorate himself when he fell asleep, as though I might be convinced things were the same as ever. I knew better.

My licenses and my long hours in our family D-25 skipped my application past the first set of obstacles; one of Jackie Cochran's personal assistants came to town for an interview just two weeks after I sent my papers off. I copped early to the fact that the interviewer was looking for an excuse to blackball me as some sort of hellcat or trouble magnet; fortunately, I'd decided to dress and act as though I was applying for a job as a receptionist at a nunnery. "Shame the angels," my dad had once told me, and surely this was a prize as much worth behaving for as that precious subscription all those years before.

Well, they fell for it.

I was too late to be accepted into the very first pack of WFTD girls, who were sent down to Houston for their training. It took a few more weeks to sort out just where I was going, and when. After passing my AAF physical, I ultimately found myself assigned to the fourth wave of WFTD hopefuls, class 43-W-4. My new home would be a place called Avenger Field, near Sweetwater, not fifty miles west of where I sat in Old Crooked House on the day I opened my acceptance letter and final instructions.

Before the war, I could have hopped it in a plane and been there in half an hour, as easily and thoughtlessly as someone else might have made a telephone call. But those days were put away like an old toy. I stood in line for a train ticket like everyone else.

I left home with the sunrise on March 4, 1943. I was on my way to learn the ropes of some of the hottest aircraft in the world, pursuit planes and high-altitude bombers that could take me up to where the blue met the black, like ships in the stories I had always treasured. But I was en route to those wonders on a rusting iron track, behind an engine that had been doing business when Mark Twain was still a going concern, and the brown Texas hills outside my window rolled by so slow, so slow.

Chapter 2

The Red Cloud Over Texas

I hadn't meant to spill so many of those particulars, about my childhood and my parents and all those marvelous magazines, but this thing is sort of out of my control already. Like a plane with a heavy stick and a mind of its own, misbehaving and jerking me all over the sky. I remember too much.

I remember smoking, for example.

It's been fifteen years since I last had a tobacco cigarette, and God Almighty, I could use one now. My body chemistry doesn't *comprenez-vous* the local stuff; I might as well be smoking wool. Hell, I suppose I'm just lucky I never killed myself lighting up my various Martian experiments. For all I knew when I got here, the red planet equivalent to nicotine might have been potassium cyanide.

But now that I'm dredging up these memories the craving is back, unshakeable. The memory burns in my hands and lips and lungs. I used to smoke like a locomotive when I was writing, flicking ashes into the cut-down C-Ration can I kept beside my typewriter.

A typewriter! Another casualty of exile. What a lamentable loss that old machine was, my glossy black 1936 Royal DeLuxe with a rebellious 'w' key. All those post-war days I spent in Old Crooked House, waiting for paying work to ring the telephone, staring at a blank white sheet of paper and trying to dream up science fiction stories that wouldn't use too many 'w' words...

And smoking.

I am going to drive myself mad if I keep dwelling on that last, lost pack of Chesterfields I had tucked inside my jacket that afternoon I vanished from the air over Texas and wound up here.

But back to class 43-W-4.

In 1943, I could smoke all I. . . *Cripes*, Violet. Get ahold of yourself.

WASPs, they called us. Eventually.

Women's Airforce Service Pilots. In late 1943, after I'd graduated, the WAFS and the WFTD were slammed together into one glamorous sandwich,

training and operations procedures standardized. We handed in our competing acronyms and became WASPs, once and for all.

Now, I'm heaping more assumptions on your head, imaginary reader. I'm assuming that you'd even *heard* of us before I started unrolling all of this. When the WASPs were deactivated in 1944, the official records of our service were sealed, classified, and thrown into the deepest dungeon in the government archives, down there in the dark with George Washington's false teeth and the secret formula for Coca-Cola.

Yes, *classified*, even though we'd been recruited with the equivalent of a public ad campaign. We were posted to a hundred different duty bases, and publicized or vilified in the national papers for nearly two years! We weren't parachuting spies into the heart of the Third Reich, we were flying domestic transport missions in aircraft any school kid could identify at a glance. Classifying our work made about as much sense as classifying the fact that cats have fuzzy asses.

But then, there were a lot of things about the WASPs that are difficult to understand.

For starters, we were never an official military service, although we trained to military standards, to fly military aircraft, in the military fashion and in constant partnership with military men, in the middle of the biggest war in history. We were technically civilian contractors, and every one of us that arrived at Avenger Field to begin her WASP career paid her own way to get there, and would go on paying for room and board out of the salary she received.

In fact, if I remember it right, just about the only things we didn't pay for in my first few months of training were our jackets, goggles, and parachutes. In the barracks at night, we joked that our oxygen masks would be coin-operated.

Aviation wasn't a poor woman's game in those days, and an awful lot of us took pay cuts for the sake of doing our part. I don't mean to paint myself with that brush, mind you- with dad's plane in the hangar for the duration, I was more than breaking even on the deal. However, a few of the gals in my class had set aside incomes or inheritances that made me feel dizzy when I found out about them.

Other than the little indignities like room and board, what did it really mean, not having been militarized? It's hard to describe without sounding selfish, since life was damned hard all over during the war— four hundred thousand American men and boys came home in caskets, or not at all.

Every service had its official women's auxiliary, even the Coast Guard, and their entitlements were more or less the same, at least in theory, as any man in the same uniform. A WAC or a WAVE or a SPAR that dropped dead on duty

could receive a flag-draped casket and an honor guard, even if her duty was filing papers at an office in Philadelphia.

A WASP that lost her life in the course of her duties- flying high-speed aircraft across the United States, towing gunnery targets for live fire exercises, safety-testing rebuilt airframes (now *there* was a roll of the old dice!)- got nothing from Uncle Sam. She wasn't merely entitled to nothing, she *got* nothing.

I know, because I was there when we literally passed a hat to collect the money needed to ship a dead WASP back to her family, so they could even *have* the body in hand to bury it on their own dime. That was a member of my class, Jane Champlin, killed in a night-flying accident shortly before graduation.

Jane had quit her job when she'd heard about the WFTD, and desperately crammed in the flight training hours she needed to jump her paperwork over the mountain of rejected applications. Then she blew her entire bank account on corrective sinus surgery so she could manage to pass the Army Air Force physical. She'd done all that with a lightness in her heart, for the sake of her chance to serve. She was the first of thirty-eight WASPs to die in the air.

And for that she got no men in uniform to send her on her way, no flag on the coffin, no benefits to her family, no service markers on her tombstone or notice in the newspaper. That's what not being militarized meant... that little portion of honor which should have been allotted to us at the grave, if nowhere else at *all*, was held back like some piece of flying equipment our instructors had neglected to check us out on.

I never knew that I could scrawl furiously. Bang keys in anger, sure, but I just about *murdered* my Martian scribing table a moment ago, wielding this silver stylus like a scalpel. I *am* still bitter, after all these years. It's back like the ghost of smoke in my mouth.

Terrible things happen in war... and you expect them, from your enemy. You expect lies and treachery and death before the end, because that's just the way it is in a fight. But you never expect terrible things from your friends, from your brothers, from men that you love and look up to.

I remember, at the height of the war, when millions of men were in uniform, millions of women stepped forward to take their places at the jobs they'd left behind. We built the ships and planes, we cleaned the furnaces, we packed the ammunition, we ran the trains, and we were mostly welcomed for it. Those of us flying aircraft were just the tiniest droplet on the leading edge of one hell of a wave.

After the war, that wave receded. Those millions of men wanted to shed their uniforms and get their old jobs back, and God, I don't blame them. I don't know *who* to blame.

In 1948, I was at the Abilene air terminal, unwinding after a flight, paging through some magazines that had blown into the hangar like tumbleweeds. In one of them I found an article offering advice to industrial managers on how to handle female employees, and I didn't know whether to laugh or load a shotgun. There I was, leaning against the fuselage of a plane I'd just brought down from the edge of a thunderstorm, listening to the pop and creak of the still-cooling engine, reading a piece of tripe about my lack of initiative, my inability to handle stress, my need for constant supervision, and my preoccupation with lipstick.

Things hadn't gone back to 'normal' after the war. There'd been a kickback, an ugly, underhanded sort of thing, and it was everywhere. When the guns were booming we were crucial partners, responsible adults, trusted and encouraged. Just a few years later it seemed like we were swept back to the kitchens and cosmetic counters. Competence itself became suspect, if the source of that competence could wear nylons.

Maybe things are better for you, imaginary reader, in your where and when. I can only hope so. But what happened to women in general, after the war, was more or less what happened to the WASPs while the bullets were still flying.

Was it all bad? Was it all bitter? Oh sweet *Jesus*, no. We wanted to risk our lives for our country, and we got a full-service *carnival* of chances. We were desperate to spend as much time as possible flying the planes we loved, using the skills we'd fought so hard to build, and for a short, golden time the Army Air Force worked us like mad.

If I could step into a time machine, and find myself on that train platform in Abilene, on March 4, 1943, knowing what I know now, would I still take the trip? Would I do it all over again?

You'd have to kill me to stop me.

I know any one of the thousand of us that graduated from that program at Avenger Field would say the same. I know the thirty-eight we left behind would say it loudest of all, even if someone told them just how soon they'd be taking their last flights.

So much Violet on Earth... so much Violet in history. "Another damned

thick chapter! Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Ms. DeVere?"

It's time to set aside Avenger Field. You'll hear more about the WASPs. You'll hear more about everything. But let's skip ahead. I picture my eight-year-old self, impatiently flipping through the early dialogue of some of those old stories, hunting for the bits with death-beams and rockets and monsters.

There are death-beams, all right. And rockets.

And monsters.

I came back home to Abilene in November, 1944. I felt entitled to a good, hard sulk, and my dad, as far gone as he was by that point, was still too sharp a student of human nature to risk his limbs by trying to yank my little black rain cloud off my head.

Congress had punched the WASP program good and hard, right across the jaw. A bill sent to the House floor concerning our militarization, incorporation into the AAF, and promised sojourns at Officer Candidate School had been flung down and danced upon. We were deactivated, classified, and shipped home- at our own expense, of course.

I still had my Civil Air Patrol membership, but for the first time in years, I didn't feel like flying. I don't believe I would have touched a rudder pedal for a thousand dollars, even if one had been available to me.

I was morose for weeks. My only physical act was to look into some long-neglected repairs around the house, in the grand DeVere tradition. If dad had been a mediocre carpenter, I was no doubt the worst since Jesus had changed careers.

It took a lot of old friends to finally calm me down. I had no social engagements, few chums in town outside my acquaintances at the air terminal, and very little to do all day except smoke and mope in quiet commiseration with the people that seemed to know me best... A.E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, C.L. Moore, Cliff Simak, Fritz Leiber, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein...

The thing about catharsis is, I don't think anyone can understand it or appreciate it until they've needed it, badly.

When I was a little girl, my magazines had pointed the way to the sky, and their dry smells of paper and glue had been the sweet bouquet of ambition itself.

In my funk as those last few months of the war went by, what they offered was consolation. Not just something to lose myself in for a few hours at a time, but the promise of an entirely new ambition. Those stacks of *Astoundings* pointed the way to a card table in one corner of my room, where I set a typewriter down next to a pile of old notebooks and pulled up a chair.

With flying off the menu for at least a few months, I set out to become a science fiction writer.

"How's my ink-stained wretch?" dad croaked one night as I settled his huge old gray wool blanket around him on the couch. Actually, it wasn't that huge- there was just less of him than ever for it to wrap around. He was always cold, even when the sun was high and bright, and he had that blanket perpetually draped around his shoulders, like a convalescent Superman.

"Not bad at all," I said, and I think I actually meant it, for the first time since my return. There were Marines on Iwo Jima at that point, so it must have been February or March, 1945. We listened to the radio constantly. Without it, I think we both realized, Old Crooked House would have been as silent as a monastery save for the creaking of the walls and the echoing CLACK CLACK CLACK of my mechanical writing partner.

"I may die of shock," said dad, "depriving several local quacks of the satisfaction of seeing their other predictions come true. You've lost some of that vinegar you came home with."

"Maybe," I admitted.

"Oh WASP, where is thy sting?"

"Yanked by act of congress," I said.

"To hell with those idiots," dad wheezed. "Vee, you did more than your duty. Someone's gonna see that, some day. The world doesn't stay stupid forever."

"I dunno," I said. "If you'd had a little Van DeVere, or a Victor DeVere, or a Virgil DeVere, I might still be flying somewhere. I'm pretty sure I'd have made it to OCS, at least."

"Do you really, honestly, feel that way?"

"I just don't know. Haven't you ever wondered-"

"Violet Elizabeth," he said with real venom, "the Lord gave me a daughter for a reason, and any man who got *you* and still wished for a boy, sight unseen, wouldn't deserve a child in the first damn place!"

"I'm sorry, dad, I'm sorry." I put my hand against his clammy cheek and he held it there with his own, mustering about as much strength as I might have, as an eight-year old.

"I oughta slap you so hard you wouldn't find your face again until next Tuesday," he said, sighing. "But I'm afraid that would interfere with the production of the first Violet DeVere masterpiece."

"At the rate I'm improving, dad, that first masterpiece ought to be ready some time around 1995."

"What's half a century?" He closed his eyes and shifted slightly away from me on the couch, where he was sleeping most nights, near the comforting murmur of the big cabinet radio. "I've had my first fifty years. Waiting out the second should be much easier."

"Can I do anything for you before I go to bed?"

"I may have left a slight chemical disaster in the kitchen, wrestling with that blasphemous instant coffee crap. If you could-"

"I'll take care of it before it hardens into a museum exhibit. Anything else?"

"Yes. If you stumble across a cure for cancer, you go right ahead and wake me no matter how late it gets."

"*Dad!* That's not funny!"

"I'm the one all wrapped up in it, beautiful. It's funny if I say it is."

The war ended with a big damn burst of Scientifiction in August, 1945.

Dad and I made tentative plans to get DeVere General Aviation Services out of hibernation. He knew he wouldn't be getting any higher off the ground than a tall set of stairs would take him, but he seemed eager to keep the books.

In September, 1945, I received my first rejection letter from *Astounding Science Fiction*, sent in exchange for a truly awful piece of writing that neatly plagiarized the worst bits of a dozen stories from the magazine's 1944 issues. Dad cackled with glee, as though I'd just been awarded a Nobel Prize on a bed of

hundred-dollar bills. He made me hunt up an old picture frame, and in short order that rejection was hanging above his couch like a battle trophy.

"That's from New York City," he said impishly, when I rolled my eyes at his excitement. "They only tell the very *best* sort of people to go screw themselves, you know!"

In October, I added a second, third, and fourth rejection letter to my collection. In November, I spent a week at the air terminal, taking the heirloom D-25 out of storage, eyeballing every square inch of fuselage and wing and aileron, greasing and oiling and massaging the engine back to smooth-running life. I loved that old thing, but it sure was a quaint ship compared to the aluminum birds I'd flown for the army.

There were rumors floating around that the War Surplus Administration was about to flood the market with cheap service planes and parts. Dad and I agreed that we should restore the D-25 to solid flying condition, then sell it off and try to pick up something newer from the government, preferably something I'd been certified in as a WASP.

on November 17th, 1945, I flew for the first time in a year, under a cool gray sky with a strong wind out of the east. I meant to stay up for half an hour but stretched it to twice that, banking up and up and up, in loose counter-clockwise circles over that triangle of airstrips that turned into a miniature model beneath me. I still needed to use a ration card when I went into town for our groceries, but the choking grip on aviation gas had been loosened a bit, and that afternoon I flew my money's worth out of that tank of fuel.

When I got back home, chilled but excited from the flight, I found my fifth rejection slip waiting in the mailbox. It was just like all of its fellow harbingers of inadequacy, except for five words scrawled in neat black script in the lower right-hand corner:

Shows promise. Please keep submitting.

"Better push your timetable up, Vee," said dad, glowing so brightly that I could have hung a lampshade on him and sold him for decent money at Woolworths. "No radio for me tonight. I want to fall asleep listening to you pounding on that typewriter like it owes you money."

I did as he asked- I hit those keys until exhaustion fogged up my brain, and I stumbled into bed without leaving my room once more to check on him. So I've never been sure just when it happened- but I came down in the morning to find him still and silent on his couch, and already cold.

I had him buried in his old leather flight jacket, in a plot he'd arranged right next to mom. There weren't many people at the funeral- pilots and ex-pilots, some of the farmers he'd done work for, a few old associates from town. His only real close friend, of course- old Mr. Derryberry from the air terminal. A swell guy, quite beside himself. We had no other family. Whatever tree of DeVeres we'd sprung from, the Abilene branch had narrowed down to a very fine tip.

I went home that afternoon, after he was in the ground, and for once, just once, there wasn't a breath of wind outside. That house was the quietest goddamn place on earth. I slumped against the radio cabinet and stared at his couch, at the neatly-folded gray blanket, and I cried until I didn't have any more water to squeeze out.

Then I got up, got my hands on all of dad's recent business paperwork and files, and dumped the mess on the kitchen table. I made instant coffee, and smoked up a fine haze, and sifted that stuff until the moon had climbed halfway up the black sky outside.

The next day I started making phone calls.

Dad left me full title to DeVere General Aviation Services, of course, along with the family plane and a healthy bank account. He hadn't blown much of his money on treatments for his illness, because there were no treatments.

He left me more than that, though. Two things in particular had a value beyond numbers on a bank ledger.

First was Old Crooked House itself. For all the fresh blemishes we'd installed in our attempts at repairs, it was still a fundamentally sturdy place, and paid for. My own hillside fortress, where I could maintain a comfortable anonymity as far as the world beyond Abilene was concerned.

Some gals were writing for the science fiction magazines under their own full names, but there weren't many of them. It was easier (unless you had one of those rare double-duty names like Francis) to go by initials. From the glorious isolation of my big Texas house, I could write as V.E. DeVere, and there was nobody within a thousand miles who could know any better. I filed papers at the county courthouse to do business by those initials, in the air and in front of my typewriter.

The second thing dad left me was a cushion of good will at the Abilene Air Terminal, with its tight-knit little crew of operators. Everyone had known Howard, and even the dusters he'd more or less put out of business in the 30s hadn't

begrudged him his luck. Nor did they really begrudge me my place- they'd known me since I was a little girl, had watched me rack up hundreds of hours in the D-25, had watched me go off to the WFTD with something like real pride. With the earth still fresh over dad's head, nobody offered so much as an unkind word when I took over as pilot-proprietor of dad's shop.

I got lucky with the D-25 and managed to sell it to a fellow down in Dallas who was looking to start some sort of air show. I rolled that cash together with dad's savings and my own, and after a couple months I finally scored a near-mint Taylorcraft L-2 from the War Surplus folks. "Only flown on Sundays," said the guy who handled my paperwork, "by a little old Army pilot who swore he didn't let the Germans take too many shots at him."

Sweet old guy. He didn't give me any trouble at all- turned out one of his nieces had been a WASP about five classes behind mine.

The L-2 was a liaison bird, one of the 'grasshoppers,' a no-fuss little redneck sort of airplane. Grasshoppers were built light and sturdy and simple, designed so that anyone with the brains of a standard-issue 12-year-old could yank one out of its crate, get it flying, and patch it up when it came back full of holes. It could take off in any weather short of Judgment Day. In fact, given a good stiff wind, it could start at home plate on a baseball diamond and be up in the air before most of the outfield was gone. I had checked out on the L-2 in early 1944, and flown about twenty of them to army bases on the West Coast.

I flew my baby home from the surplus depot in Houston. It took us an hour or two to learn each other's quirks, but after that we settled into a fine working relationship. The air was as calm as a warm blue lake all the way to Abilene, with one stop for gas and lunch along the way. That was April 26, 1946.

V.E. DeVere's seventeenth rejection slip was in the mailbox when I got home. I pinned it to the wall in my room and kept typing.

I might as well settle the suspense now and let you know that I did eventually manage to sell something to John Campbell at *Astounding*. I pulled my sixty-third rejection notice out of the mail on August 8, 1948 and found that it wasn't a rejection notice after all. I suspect that I had finally exhausted their supply, and they had no choice but to send an acceptance while they were getting more rejections printed. You can find "A Case of Mid-Space Turbulence" in the January, 1949 issue, right next to a decent offering from Asimov and a *killer* (in more ways than one) story from Lewis Padgett. I can recall that issue almost word-for-word, as vividly as the first few magazines I read as a girl.

Hell, if Old Crooked House is still around, and nobody's gone in and

moved my things (which might be a stretch- I'm pretty sure I've been legally dead since 1950), you could even go to Abilene and grab a copy. They'd be a bit stiff and yellowed by now, but I owned twenty of them. If they're still there, help yourself.

I typed most nights in my big empty house, and I worked most days down at the hangar, trying to put my pre-war connections back together like a mechanic soldering a rusty old piece of electrical gear. Some men didn't want to work with me, or have me working for them, but enough did that I was soon comfortably in the black- crop dusting, surveying, even puddle-jumping the occasional passenger or express cargo.

It sounds lonely, the way I've written it, but I had so many messages in bottles washing up on my remote little island that I really didn't feel at all unsociable. I struck up correspondences by mail with about a dozen fellow sufferers of science fiction-itis, most of them part of a loose confederacy of Texas eccentrics called the Rolling Plains Amateur Press Association. I even got letters from folks in New York, from time to time.

In 1948, the Army Air Force cut the apron strings and became its own sovereign service, and someone decided to throw a meatless bone to the former WASPs. I remember finding that big official envelope in my mailbox. It was an invitation to apply to the new Air Force, offering a chance at OCS and a lieutenant's commission. Flight certification would not be considered, and flying duties were out of the question.

I didn't even bother writing back.

So, I wasn't rich, and I wasn't famous, but I guess you could say I'd achieved a comfortable equilibrium. I got a couple more stories published, I gossiped with my fellow ray-gun nuts, and I spent many, many agreeable hours flitting around the sky.

It was a good enough time, and it lasted until August 19, 1950.

I recall that day, and everything about it, with unnatural clarity. It's there like a box in my memory, with every little item from those last twenty-four hours neatly catalogued. A police evidence file, almost. The contents of the victim's pockets from the day the All-Sovereign murdered her former life.

It was a Saturday, bright and hot and muggy. The sun came up mean, throwing punches at anyone it saw scuttling around below. I stayed inside all morning, drinking real coffee, smoking Chesterfields, listening to my papers flutter in the breeze from my little electric fan. I was staring at a note from John Campbell that might just herald the acceptance of my fourth story for *Astounding*, assuming I was willing to perform the surgery it advised:

"Dear DeVere-

I could please myself immensely by cutting you a check for "Out of the Green Silence," but I think I'd be doing both yourself and the magazine a disservice. It's nearly there, but nearly there doesn't cross the finish line. I talked about my feelings on the subject of your quasi-Spartan fish people in our last game of postal tennis, and no miracle has since shifted my resolve. They're a cheap gimmick resolution for a plot that was otherwise humming along very sweetly; they'd be a cheap gimmick for Asimov and a cheap gimmick for Kuttner and I hope you'll accept it as a token of prestige when I insist that they're a cheap gimmick for DeVere. Let us say the ball is now bouncing on your side of the net- and when are you going to send me that follow-up to "Cold Windings of the Murthalump?"

Regards,

John"

I was having trouble coming to a decision. That dangling paycheck was like a gravitational anomaly, distorting the usual orbits of my thoughts. Furthermore, I was a bit melancholy- my one fellow female in the Rolling Plains APA, bright and funny little Pat Medford, had just departed Texas for California. She was the only correspondent I ever entrusted with the full meaning of my initials. Pat was bound for Santa Barbara, chasing an advanced degree in zoology- myrmecology, to be precise. The study of ants. Her father was famous for it, and she wanted to be the second Dr. Medford in the field. We seemed to have a great deal in common, and she promised to keep reading and writing, but I knew a quest for a PhD would keep anyone busy enough for five people.

I've thought about her a few times in the years I've been here. It'd be nice if she got that doctorate, and if myrmecology turned out to be the adventure she was hoping for. I suppose I'll probably never know.

Anyhow, that brutally hot damp Saturday morning, the loud ring of the phone was a welcome distraction from my fairly congealed thoughts. I stubbed out the smoldering fragment of my cigarette and grabbed the handset.

"Hate to trouble you, Violet." It was Jubal Akers, the part-time manager

down at the air terminal when Mr. Derryberry wasn't in town. "Would you by any chance be averse to going up today?"

"Why Ake, when I don't feel like going up you'll know I've accidentally cut off my own head. What gives?"

"There's a fellow hurt bad up in Paducah, and their doctor's off somewhere. Doc Soames needs to get up there right fast."

"Mercy mission, huh?" My head lost its fuzz in a hurry. "I'll come straight down."

"Thanks, Violet, I knew I could count on you. We'll figure out something for your gas and time-

"Hey, I didn't ask!"

"Just looking out for you, Violet. You know me. See you soon."

Paducah was about a hundred and ten miles northwest as the crow flew, and probably a bit more as the Oldsmobile crawled. I could heave a doctor up there in just over an hour, two or three times as fast as anyone in a car.

I dressed in a hurry- plain old work shirt, gray mechanic's trousers, scuffed loafers. I yanked my hair back and tied it with one of dad's handkerchiefs, and left most of my assorted junk on the kitchen table. All I had when I ran out the door, by way of gear, was my own leather flight jacket, my sunglasses, and my little black wallet with a few bucks and most of my license cards. In the inner pocket of my jacket was a single open pack of Chesterfields and a matchbook. Nobody'd bothered to tell me I was packing to leave the planet.

Ake had my L-2 out of the hangar before I screeched up in dad's 1940 Ford pickup, which had once been a bright beautiful red, before ten years of weather made a mobile Picasso out of it. Dr. Emerson Soames was pacing nervously in the shadowed hangar interior, keeping out of the sun like an ant that's spotted a magnifying glass. As I hopped out of the truck, my mind was whirling with calculations for the flight.

"Hey, Doc," I shouted. Soames was a pleasant old gnome of a man, with piercing dark eyes set in a face seamed and wrinkled like a clay pinch-pot. He was good at what he did, and trusted around the air terminal. "How much do you weigh?"

"What an impertinent question, Miss DeVere." He raised his eyebrows,

and with some of his wrinkles formed a smile. "But for the record, one hundred and forty-three pounds, not counting my shoes. Or my bag."

"What about the bag?"

"Ah, I'd say thirty pounds, maybe." He gestured to a heavy satchel sitting against the hangar wall. "Not sure what I'll need, so I packed the *big* bag. Sulfa, splints, my-"

"What's the emergency?"

"Fella got thrown off a horse. Compound fractures in his right leg, and they're afraid to move him. Rightly so, it sounds like."

"Well," I said, "I'm guessing we'll be about seventy minutes in the air, pushing her for all she's worth. Will that be good enough?"

"It's the best the poor guy's gonna get," said Soames.

Akers helped Soames and his bag into the little cabin of the plane while I did some quick work with my slipstick. One hundred and thirty pounds of Violet, plus one hundred and seventy pounds of Doc and gear. . . we were far within my L-2's weight limits, but I had to figure out how much fuel I could afford to leave behind for the sake of a little extra speed, without letting the tank go dry twenty miles early and a few thousand feet too high.

When I'd done my math homework Akers and I did a pre-flight check, and I hopped into the cockpit. I buckled in, then set my flight jacket on my lap- it might have been hot enough to turn pigs into bacon at ground level, but once you get up a few thousand feet, you can never be sure what sort of conditions you might discover.

"Ever done much flying, Doc?"

"I'm afraid this will constitute my introduction to the wild blue yonder, Miss DeVere."

"Nervous?"

"It's fair to say that poor bastard up in Paducah is lucky I took a solemn physician's oath, yes."

"Well, don't fret. This sweetheart may rock a little on a hot day like this, but the good news is, she can take off or land from the back of a cow, if the cow just stands still for a moment."

"What's the bad news?"

"I didn't say there was any bad news, did I?" I turned and favored Soames with what I hoped was my most wolfish hot-doggin' air-ace grin. "You strapped in tight?"

"Yes. Although, I do hate to ask, but, I didn't have much of a chance to eat or drink before I got the call. Is there-"

"My complete patented emergency sustenance kit is located directly under your seat, Doc. Help yourself."

My complete patented emergency sustenance kit consisted of one bottle of Sun Tang Red Cream Soda. Soames nursed it with surprisingly steady hands as I spun us up to flight speed and sent us into the wind, cranking my baby's four-cylinder engine for every last one of the sixty-five horses it was good for. In moments we were banking over the field, turning northwest at five hundred feet. I gave our wings a gentle waggle for good luck, and then we hauled tail for Paducah, climbing gently as we went.

Wind was out of the southeast, at about ten knots. Temperature at ground level was about a hundred and five. The sky above was thick with wispy cirrus clouds, looking like a field of unravelled asbestos fibers, but that was all well past twenty thousand feet. I leveled us off at sixty-five hundred, in warm clear air with perfect visibility ten miles or more in any direction. We got a good hard bounce every few minutes, but when the sun beats down on the countryside like that you can expect some air pockets to float on up and make your acquaintance.

I was having a fine time- this wasn't just a job, it was a mission, with a wistful tinge of my old WASP days. We'd been in the air about twenty minutes when Soames tapped me on my left shoulder.

"Miss DeVere," he shouted, "I hate to bother you with what might be a silly question, but what am I looking at directly behind us?"

I checked six, and past the dark line of the rudder, against the bright blue sky I saw a thin, rippling red line.

"Doc," I said, mouth wide open, "I can honestly say I have no idea."

I watched for a few moments, directly and in my mirrors, as the rippling strand of crimson grew larger, like a bleeding gash in the sky. I couldn't yet tell whether it was getting closer or simply spreading, back where it was. I decided to get on the horn.

"Abilene Terminal, Taylorcraft six-one-niner Able," I said into my radio headset. I got nothing but static back. "Abilene Terminal, Taylorcraft six-one-niner Able!"

"I could swear it's getting closer," said Soames.

I saw that he was right- the details within the redness were more distinct. The thing had a rippling, gaseous sort of texture- it was almost like a cloud, though it had a tint that no ordinary cloud had any business showing off in the middle of such a healthy blue sky.

"Might be some kind of St. Elmo's Fire," I said. "Spend enough time in the air, you'll see the damndest things. I'm gonna take us up a ways to get over it."

While I hauled back on the stick, I continued my fruitless attempts to make radio contact with anyone that might know more about what was going on. "Abilene traffic, Taylorcraft six-one-niner Able, please respond. Any Abilene traffic, please respond, over."

I did *not* like the static I was getting in return. It meant that either the radio I'd checked on the ground less than half an hour before had suddenly failed, or something was messing with transmission and reception. I leveled us off again at seventy-eight hundred feet.

"Seems to be moving on the same heading we are," I said. "That should give it some room to pass beneath us. Makes me wish I'd brought up a camera."

"Miss DeVere, I hate to complain again, but I'm afraid-"

"Holy *hell*," I said before he was even finished. The scarlet thing climbed, with two or three times the vertical speed I'd just managed, until it was once again directly level with us, and closer than ever. I couldn't be sure, lacking any real frame of reference for the sinister red phenomenon, but I'd say at that point it was no more than four miles away. "Hang on, Doc."

I banked us to the right, a good hard turn that pointed us due east. I watched the thing out the starboard cabin window- flowing like a bloodstain in water, it surged along with us, still closing all the time. Two miles now, at most. I had a fiercely cold lump in my stomach.

"I don't think that's a cloud." I muttered. "*Really* hold on, Doc." I banked left and gave us a hard yaw, which pitched our nose down below the horizon. Brown and green fields whirled below us as we twisted and dove, with the engine roaring and the air screaming around us. I whipped us back up at five thousand feet, and then checked our six and swore.

The cloud was racing straight down upon us, from above and behind and all sides, unfolding and billowing. I could see white flashes of energy, like heat lightning, stabbing the air from within its boiling red depths.

"Mayday mayday mayday," I hollered into the radio, "mayday mayday mayday, Taylorcraft six-one-niner Able, in need of... oh, *shit*, mayday, God, we need-"

The air was filled with a throbbing, pulsing rhythm, and the L-2 shook like a toy in the hands of an irate toddler. My airspeed counter started rolling off nonsense numbers, and my dash compass went mad. The red cloud enfolded us, and the control column started bucking in my hands. I lost track of our orientation- the world outside vanished in the redness, and we tumbled crazily, with white-hot electrical arcs rippling across the wings and spars. I could see fragments of wing skin peeling away into the maelstrom. Doc's bag tumbled around the cabin, along with an empty glass soda bottle.

The air stank of ozone, and the sizzling crackle of the unearthly lightning grew so loud I couldn't even hear myself screaming. The world flew to pieces around me, and I thought for sure that we were dead.

A cotton-candy sensation in my stomach, a tickle. Like the little instant of free-fall you can get plunging back and forth on a playground swing, if you do it *just* right. I drifted in soft darkness, too confused to think. A moment, I had solid weight again, and I hit the dirt so hard my consciousness held up its hand to the waiter and said "Check, please!"

I was only out for a few seconds, I'm sure. The pain saw to that. The plane was gone, along with my chair and my straps, and somehow I was sprawled face-down on loose, cool sand, with my flight jacket stuffed under my left cheek. Most of the impact on my upper body seemed to have been taken by my breasts- and that's *not* what they were meant for. Let me tell you, imaginary reader, that I had a good long howl before I did anything else.

What the hell had happened? I rolled sideways and pulled my legs in toward my stomach, unashamedly going fetal. I ran my fingers through the sand and gravel, the *orange-red* sand and gravel of my resting place, and I tried to gather my wits. Not moments earlier I'd been tumbling out of control, probably moving straight down at about two hundred miles an hour. I'd landed hard, sure, but something had clearly decelerated me with incredible efficiency just before that. Human beings who met the ground with the momentum of a crash dive didn't yowl over their bruises, they turned into spaghetti sauce.

It took me a moment to realize that along with the pain, I felt a strange lightness all over my body. An unnerving sensation, but almost pleasant despite everything. I pushed myself up to take a look around, and received my first two major shocks of a day that would have plenty of shocks to spare.

The first was that my little nudge jack-knifed me backwards and carried me to my knees. I'd exerted about as much force as required for a single meek push-up, and popped upward like a spring.

The second startling thing I noticed was that I was kneeling in the shadow of the most incomprehensibly vast structure I'd ever seen- a tower like a dozen madly-stacked Chrysler Buildings in dull red stone and cold blue metal. Its dark heights soared past the point of visibility under a deep black sky that was on *fire* with stars. They glowed up there like the image of ten thousand grains of radium dust thrown across a sheet of photographic film.

I knew in an instant that if I wasn't dreaming, this wasn't Texas. This wasn't *Earth*.

I heard a choking sob from just behind me. I turned clumsily, and saw Doc Soames curled up there on the red sand, trying to move. His busted glasses were shattered beside his face, and his medical bag was in a little crater of its own, crumpled like road kill.

Doc wasn't alone.

There were twenty or thirty of them standing just beyond him, tall, dangerous-looking figures in dark suits... no. Armor. The impossible starlight gleamed on their steel-gray armor, ribbed and segmented like drawings I'd once seen of Roman legionaries. They wore long cloak-coats the color of dried blood, with the mantles thrown back over their shoulders, and they had gray iron masks that cast their eyes into deepest shadow.

Every one of them carried a long, hard object that had to be some sort of weapon. Moving in unison, they came forward across the sand, armored hands outstretched toward Doc and myself.

Chapter 3

The Representative Sample

I suppose it was a narrow-minded assumption on my part, imaginary reader, that they weren't friendly. Maybe the Rotary Club welcome wagon in this neck of the woods just had a thing for cloaks, and in a few minutes we'd all be

taking a nice flying saucer ride for lemonade and hot dogs. Yet something in my gut was screaming that they meant us no good, and I acted accordingly- I jumped to my feet.

By the time I was five feet off the ground, I realized that I wasn't merely light-headed or confused from the crash- someone had most definitely turned down the gravity. I twirled in mid-air, came down soft as a feather, and then leapt again, soaring straight over the Doc. I didn't mean to directly attack the platoon of cloaked figures, but I guess that's how it looked- one very excited earth woman, arms flailing, coming at them from eight feet in the air.

The armored strangers were ready for me. Several of them were equipped with catch-poles, ten or twelve feet long, ending in mechanical clamps that were slammed shut on my arms and legs with sinister hissing snaps. The clamps were padded, but their grip was painfully firm- I doubt I could have struggled free without losing my clothes and a lot of skin into the bargain. Using the leverage of their poles, my assailants slammed me back down to the sand and held me there like a captive animal.

"Hey," I snarled, "Hey! What the hell do you guys think you're doing?"

"Miss DeVere," shouted Soames, "Are you all right? I can barely- why, what the...!"

They caught the Doc with clamps around his arms. Two of them hauled him up, actually lifting him off the ground, while a third came forward with a device that looked like an atomic-age butterfly net- a glass hemisphere on the end of a long stick. They slapped that thing down over the Doc's head, muffling his protests, and an instant later his features were obscured by a jet of dark purplish vapor that rapidly filled the glass bubble. He kicked spasmodically and went limp.

"Oh, you sons of- oh no, you had better not!" I yelled. The wielder of the vapor dome lifted the device from the Doc's head, and the dark stuff dissipated into the air. Doc was out cold- and now the guy was coming for me. "Can any of you understand what I'm saying? There's no need for whatever you're doing- there's no need!"

I fought back desperately, but the four fellows working the catch-poles had them up at shoulder level and were leaning into them hard. The transparent dome slapped down over my head, and I tried to hold my breath as the purple gas sprayed into my face, but it got up my nose in an instant and tickled fiercely. I sneezed, gagged, and gasped reflexively, and that was it- the stuff slid down my throat, cold and oily and itchy as hell, and I was tumbling into blackness before I even had time to be disgusted.

That was no momentary flutter of consciousness. I was out for a good long time.

And then...

Well, here's an experiment you can try at home, imaginary reader. Mix a pound of old roofing nails with some gravel and a bag of flour. Open the hood of the nearest car, pop the cap on the oil reservoir, and dump it all in. Close her back up, turn the key in the ignition, sit back and observe the results.

That was about how my head felt when I next came to, and found myself (sans jacket) on the cold, hard floor of a new accommodation. It was a cell, and it wasn't pretty- every surface was made of dull blue metal, and there wasn't a bed or a window or even a door to be seen. A soft rattling hiss from a network of dark holes in one corner of the ceiling told me I had ventilation, at least. The air was cool and dry and smelled faintly of machine oil.

"Oh my god," I muttered, and rolled onto my back. I would have been hard-pressed to invent a room with fewer comforts than the one in which I now found myself, but with the shape my head was in, that cold hard alien metal floor felt softer than a baby duck's butt. I resolved to do nothing but lay there for a while and watch the walls wobble.

"Ah, your consciousness returns," said a soft voice from somewhere behind me.

I rolled over and noticed, for the first time, the little fellow sitting in a far corner of the cell, calmly watching me with his legs folded beneath him.

The little red not-human-at-all fellow.

I wish I could tell you, dear reader, that I had some kind of bold John Carter moment, that I leapt to my feet and shrugged off my illness and stood tall and proud as humanity's ambassador to wherever the hell I was. But that's not what happened.

"Holy Jesus, I'm not dreaming," I whispered, clutching my head as I stared at my cellmate. He was humanoid, dressed in a pale brown robe, and sitting there as calm as a garden statue. He had gnarled, leathery skin, the color of old dried blood, and wide dark eyes like wet slices of black olive, and when he blinked it was like elevator doors sliding shut. Even over the faint noise of the ventilator I could hear those membranes sliding together with a little rustle like shuffled paper.

And I was *afraid*.

It hurts to write that, but I was. All my life I had longed for a moment like this, whether I knew it or not. Hadn't I climbed the Tower of the Elephant, taken a starship to Trantor, fought my way across Barsoom? Blown whole solar systems out of existence staring into the three-dimensional displays of the Lensmen? Hadn't I taken those journeys and done those deeds a thousand times in my own mind, longing for strangeness and adventure and contact with things beyond? Well, the real deal, the honest-to-god moment of that contact, was staring me in the face... and all I could do was lie there and feel the tears tickle the edges of my eyes.

"Blueworlder," said the little red man- and when I say little, I mean I had twenty or thirty pounds on him, easily- "your eyes are discharging moisture. This one's duty is to rehydrate you. Further loss prior to completion of this one's task would cause this one consternation."

And then he held out a little bowl of water, polite as you please. Just the sight of it gave me enough strength to slide up on my elbows- I was aided here once again by the milder gravity of my new locale, which compensated for my awful weakness. Had I felt like this after the crash? I'd been in pain, but surely not like this... although my head was a primary culprit, what I had was everywhere. My muscles were rubbery, my back ached, my mouth was dry and sour, and my throat burned- honestly, it felt like I'd caught malaria, and someone had tried to cure me by running me over with a truck.

"Thank you," I whispered, and crawled close enough to take the little bowl. It was clay, smoothly finished but undecorated. The water in it was flat and tepid and tasted like it had been flavored with engine rust, but I drank it down like it was god's private reserve of the really hard stuff.

"This one is entitled to no gratitude," said the red guy.

"Why do you keep calling yourself that? You got a name?" I laid back and felt that wretched warm water sliding down my gullet, and like a parched sidewalk weed I swear that I firmed up a bit with every drop that soaked in.

"Self-acknowledgement is disallowed for this one."

"You can't say your own name?"

"This one is a functionary. This one's designation is Functionary."

"You can't even say 'I' or 'me' or 'my?'"

"Such a liberty would be unthinkable, blueworlder."

"Blueworlder," I mused. "You must mean Earth? The planet with the oceans? Where are we now, if we're not on the, ah, blue world?"

"Ours is the world next farthest from the sun."

"Mars," I whispered. That would sure explain the difference in gravity. "But... Mars! Damn. That's... I can't remember how many millions of miles. How did I get here? And how do you know where I come from? Have you met, ah, blueworlders before?"

"The All-Sovereign commands powers this one is not worthy to comprehend," said the little man, and when he spoke the phrase All-Sovereign he lowered his eyes to the floor in a quick sort of bow. "You have been drawn here to meet his requirements."

"Drawn here to meet someone's requirements?" I didn't like the gist of that at all. "Is this All-Sovereign gonna put us back when we're finished? Because unless I miss my guess, right now the Civil Air Patrol is out buzzing the hills looking for the wreck of my airplane. Right now, some poor guy in Paducah is wondering where the hell he's gonna find another doctor!"

"If you would accept this one's suggestion, for the sake of your peaceful deportment, avoid reflection on your previous existence. Such reflection can only cause you unnecessary distress."

"Peaceful deportment? Look, the last thing on my mind right now is maintaining some sort of peaceful damn deportment! I mean, what is this? Am I in quarantine? Is this how you people treat visitors from other planets? What the hell happened to the man who came here with me?"

"All of your fellow blueworlders are part of the representative sample, and are being held for interrogation."

So, this was no quarantine, no big misunderstanding, no diplomatic snafu, to be followed by dinner and drinks and formal apologies to Congress. I was a prisoner, locked in a cell because someone absolutely wanted me there. Suddenly, a light bulb that had previously been pretty dim sizzled to life above my head, and I finally asked the very first question that should have jumped into my mind.

"Hey, where the hell did you learn English?"

"This one is not speaking your language, blueworlder. Neither are you speaking Thoravedic. You were made to inhale the spores of a pan-linguistic mycomatrix."

"That sounds awfully impressive, little guy. John Campbell'd give me six cents for that. But what the hell does that mean, exactly?"

"The spores have taken root in your nervous system and formed symbiotic nodules. This facilitates effortless communication with other sentients exposed to the matrix. All civilized inhabitants of the All-Sovereign's domain have been given the spores, including this one."

"Symbiotic nodules," I muttered, feeling a shudder of revulsion pass through my body. "Jesus. You people infected me with some sort of telepathic space yeast. Not only am I not dreaming, I'm in a damned Hal Clement story! God, that must be why I feel like I'm getting over a fever."

"Yes. Your physiology reacts unpleasantly to the introduction of the matrix. For that reason, it was administered with an anesthetic vapor, the after-effects of which should now be dissipating."

"That's your story," I groaned. In truth, the water had given me back some strength, and while the general ache was diminishing, it wasn't doing so with anything resembling polite haste.

"Blueworlder," said the red fellow, "if you have recovered sufficient strength, would you care to reabsorb the nutrients you disgorged during your earlier distress?" He produced another clay bowl, and this one contained a pinkish-yellow mess that was just growing a sort of soft crust on top. My stomach did a ballet routine when I realized what it was. No wonder I'd woken up with such a horrendous taste in my mouth.

"Good lord, no. We don't, uh, re-absorb... discarded nutrients... uh, not in that fashion."

"This one apologizes. This one's understanding of your physiology is limited."

"You got anything else to eat around here?"

"No. This one gathered your discarded nutriments merely as a courtesy while you were unconscious. No undigested food will be provided."

"Well, you people make Huntsville look like a bed and breakfast. Can I convince you to slip something in your pocket for me at dinner tonight?"

"This one has not expressed himself clearly. There will be no fresh nutriments for yourself or for this one. Neither of us will require them."

"What? What the hell are you talking about? Unless that pan-fried fungus

matrix fixed it so I've kicked the food habit, I'm gonna need to eat-

"Not within the time frame of your required service to the All-Sovereign."

I was about to say something really obnoxious and un-ladylike, when the lighting in the cell changed. I couldn't actually tell where the new illumination was coming from, but a dull red light flashed three times. The little guy immediately rose to his knees and folded his hands in front of him. Maybe I was meant to do the same, but I think you'll understand, imaginary reader, if I say that my reserve of cooperative spirit had suddenly dwindled to quantities best sought after with a microscope.

There was a rumble and a loud hydraulic hiss, and the wall directly opposite the little guy simply vanished, flung aside in the blink of an eye by a mechanism more powerful and precise than anything I'd ever seen on earth. Startled, I rolled over, wobbled to my feet, and put my back against one of the remaining walls. Outlined in a brighter red exterior light were at least a dozen imposing figures- more of the guards or soldiers that had met Doc Soames and myself when we'd arrived on Mars.

Seeing past their gear and uniforms, I could now spot the Martian-ness of their frames, a kinship with the little fellow who'd given me water, though the guards were taller and far more robust. Their heads were slightly larger than a human's, and their shoulders a touch wider, though my overall impression was otherwise one of narrowness. Their limbs were longer and thinner than ours, and their waists were the sort of hourglasses every girl is supposed to dream of.

They wore tight black and gray uniforms with ribbed cuirasses of metal foil, and I finally got a good look at the masks they wore- thin, heavily stylized iron half-masks that covered their lower faces, but not their gleaming black eyes. Above those they wore black hoods, held in place with slim iron circlets around their foreheads.

All but the one in the lead were carrying carbines of some sort, polished black weapons with tapering barrels and heavy butt-stocks.

"Rise, functionary," said the leader, and the little brown-robed guy did, slowly and meekly. "We have observed the fulfillment of your task."

"Farewell, blueworlder," said the functionary. "This one has found his brief time in your company a most atypical diversion."

"Uh, you're welcome," I said. "Guess I'll see you around."

"No," said the little red guy, very quietly.

The leader of the guards gestured, and one of his men stepped forward, pointing his weapon at the functionary. My guts turned to ice.

"No need to waste a dessicator charge," said the leader.

"Of course, Squadmaster," said the advancing guard, reversing his weapon with one smooth motion.

"Blueworlder," said the little guy hurriedly, "this one... this one's name used to be-

He was silenced by a gun-butt to the skull. Knocked clear off his feet, he fell against the back wall of the cell, where his attacker- his murderer- made sure of the job with three more swift, precise blows. I stood there, shocked stupid, while the killer wiped his gun clean on the brown robe of the crumpled little guy. The stuff he wiped off looked as red as anything I had in me.

And that, imaginary reader, is how I got my first really clear notion of just what sort of Wonderland I'd stumbled into on this side of my own personal rabbit hole.

"You bastards," I whispered, "you bastards, he didn't do anything to you, he was the most harmless god-damn guy I ever-

"Functionaries are not permitted to survive communication with blueworlders," said the Squadmaster in an even, reasonable tone of voice, like a shoe-store attendant explaining to me why my choice of color was out of season.

"Well, Jesus, why put him in my cell, then? Why not warn me? I could've kept quiet if it was so damned important to you-

"He was never important." The Squadmaster gestured again, and several of his men stepped up behind him, facing me. "Now, will you behave reasonably?"

He had my answer when I flew across the cell at him, arms outstretched. Dizzy or not, I was livid, and I did something I thought was clever- I bent low and minimized the arc of my leap. Unfortunately, the Squadmaster was nobody's fool- he caught my arms with his own. My momentum carried us into the wall behind him, where we grappled furiously. I could sense his men moving in behind us.

"Leave her," he said, more calmly than I would have expected. "She clearly requires an education."

"I have one, you piece of crap," I said. "Tells me that I grew up on a planet with twice your gravity. You might not be so pleased with yourself in a moment or two."

Now, that wasn't part of my formal education, mind you. That was from the Edgar Rice Burroughs School of Cards To Play When Desperately Fighting For Your Life On Mars, from which nearly every science fiction reader I knew had taken correspondence courses. The odds were good that whatever advantages of size or sex he might have over me, my strength and sturdiness would be totally disproportionate to my frame, like a Martian who'd spent every moment of their life exercising inside a suit of heavy weights.

"True, the blue world has left you accustomed to a much heavier gravity," said the Squadmaster, grunting with exertion for the first time, "but I think you'll find that Thoravedic muscle tissue... is several times more efficient than your own."

As he spoke, he strained fiercely against me, matching my strength and forcing my arms away from him. I lost my devil-may-care grin.

"I've seen blueworlders dissected," he whispered.

"Happy to return the favor," I said. I feigned weakness for a split-second, then yanked my right arm out of his grip and slammed it hard against his slender neck, curling my thumb and fingers around it and squeezing for all I was worth. "Long as we're exchanging... science lessons... I'd bet good money that you've also got light, hollow bones... fragile... like a bird!"

It was a good bet, and maybe given enough time I could have snapped that neck like a turkey's wishbone, but the Squadmaster possessed something else I didn't- a rigorous education in hand-to-hand combat- and he was through playing with me.

He drove a knee into my stomach, knocking the wind out of me, and while I was still dealing with that surprise, he slipped out of my grip and pivoted like a judo fighter. I flew into a wall and landed badly, banging my head against the cold metal. There was no more forbearance after that. I was hoisted up by four or five of the guards, my hands were wrenched behind my back, and I felt some sort of metal cuff slapped around my wrists and fastened tight.

"There," said the Squadmaster. "We have given you something of an education, blueworlder. Now you will come with us to the Sciences Section, where you will be allowed to return the favor."

It's not easy to stare in awe at the wonders of a society that's just given you a glimpse of its underlying cruelty. When I think back on those first few steps outside my prison cell, I'm reminded of my feelings toward the Germans at the end of World War II. The first human rockets to scrape the edge of space were built by the slave labor of a state that had turned murder into an industrial process- a beautiful and worthy ambition hatched from perverse brutality. Think about something like that long enough and you'll drive yourself crazy.

Dissonance, I think, is the word I might be looking for. Well, imaginary reader, when I got my first few glimpses of the scale of Martian engineering, I had dissonance in spades.

The detention complex was built much like a lock-up back on earth, with rows of cells opening onto railed walkways. I could see closed cell doors to my right and left. The major difference was that the walkways were under open air, not the roof of a prison building. In fact, I was looking out at a smooth orange-red cliff face, across an intervening gap of about two hundred yards.

The sky above was the same jet-black, star-studded wonder I remembered from my arrival- and in the space below the gap was nothing, nothing but empty air, down to a darkened red plain at least a mile below. I swayed with a sense of vertigo that I had never once felt behind the controls of an airplane.

I was marched to the center of the walkway on my cell level, and turned to face the cliff wall. There was a tall fortress-like structure clinging to the rocks across the way, well-lit by a sinister red glare, and I could spot at least two dozen Martians moving around or standing guard beside objects that bore more than a passing resemblance to spotlights and heavy guns.

"We have the last blueworlder," said the Squadmaster, seemingly to thin air. "Bring us over."

From the fortress, a bridge exploded. Twenty feet wide, it shot across the gap with unthinkable speed- the length of two football fields was spanned as fast as I could snap my fingers, without any noise but a smooth whoosh of displaced air. The massive black tongue of metal, which had no visible supports, locked instantly into place beneath our walkway without so much as a bang or a shudder. I flinched in delayed reaction but the guards were already hauling me forward, across the wide gap.

I felt a cool breeze against my cheeks, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I needed to say something smart-assed to relieve my own creeping sense of awe. "Bet this is an uncomfortable duty station when the weather turns ugly, eh, fellas?"

"There's no weather up here," said the Squadmaster with a hint of smugness. "It's not allowed."

Well, hell. To that, I just plain had no response.

I didn't cause any physical mischief on the walk across the bridge- the thought over going over one of those un-railed edges and falling to my death somewhere in the Martian darkness was awful. I did manage to turn my head and catch a wider glimpse of where we'd come from, however.

I'd been in a room on one of the uppermost levels of a big rectangle of cells, about ten levels high and twenty, maybe thirty cells across on each level- I couldn't stop for a precise count, of course. But the most striking fact about the cell block was that it was built atop a smooth metal pylon, leading all the way down to the vast plain below- a relatively little box perched atop a sky-scraping needle.

My god, Alcatraz was as open as a weekend kiddie Bible camp by comparison.

Beyond the spire-top prison was the sweeping arc of a high-walled starlit valley, not just a few miles across but quite plainly an order of magnitude more vast. On earth, I was sure, I would have seen the view fading into mist or clouds, but in this cool, dry air where weather was "not allowed," I could see all the way to the opposite side. There were no other artificial structures visible upon the valley floor, but I could make out dark silhouettes sliding across the stars above us- air vessels of some sort, though how huge or high up, there was just no telling.

Soon enough we were nearly across the chasm, and I saw that my guess about the function of the objects dotting the exterior of the fortress had been correct. Every Martian in view wore some variation of the uniform of my guards, and several teams of them were manning light artillery the rough size and shape of Bofors guns. These weapons were in swivel turrets that had no trouble tracking us as we traversed the bridge. The news for anyone contemplating a skedaddle from that prison just kept getting better and better.

Once inside the fortress, I was led up corridors and stairs, across wide mechanical bays, past barracks and vaults and rooms where dozens of Martians sat concentrating on the gleaming readouts of machines well beyond my powers of identification. Despite their mastery of physical engineering my captors seemed to have no qualms about old-fashioned exercise... or perhaps I was merely being singled out for a bit of softening up before my interrogation. At any rate, we walked for quite a while, and while some of my attention was focused on

simply maintaining a dignified stride and not bouncing in the air with every step, I was able to make a few useful observations.

Wherever I was, it was an armed camp- at every turn there were more guards, more varieties of uniform, more weapons. Furthermore, the whole place struck me as some sort of active operations center. There was no lounging and no laughter. Everyone seemed to have a place, or to be moving with a firm purpose. There was a tension in the air that even my alien senses could pick up.

Also, while I could see lines of angular symbols everywhere, on walls and doors and electronic viewing screens, they meant absolutely nothing to me. The most logical conclusion (and experience eventually proved me sadly correct, imaginary reader) seemed to be that the linguistic spores I'd inhaled only translated the spoken word. Until I got a chance to hit the books the old-fashioned way, anything a Martian wrote down was doomed to be as much gibberish to my eyes as Mandarin Chinese would have been to his.

The most interesting discovery of all was that I was swimming in a sea of masks. At first I'd taken the iron coverings on the lower faces of my guards as some sort of flourish to their uniforms, perhaps for the sake of intimidating prisoners. But as we moved deeper and deeper into the complex, I didn't see a single uncovered Martian face. There were full iron masks, cloth masks, copper masks (some with a greenish patina), and even the occasional gleaming silver mask. The precise meaning of all the various styles and compositions of the masks was beyond me, but I didn't think it was a coincidence that the only other naked features I'd seen had belonged to a fellow occupant of a jail cell.

Unless I missed my guess, style on Mars meant never having to show the world your real face.

The room I was eventually taken to was high up in the fortress, so high that my guards had to relent from their apparent desire to march me into the floor. They shoved me into an elevator that was large enough to hold a garden party. This device, which was glass-fronted with an exterior view, moved almost as swiftly and soundlessly in the vertical plane as the prison bridge had exploded horizontally... though I could detect only the faintest sense of acceleration in my gut, and no change in air-pressure at all.

We were in motion for nearly a minute, and as we rose, I could see once again across the incredible valley, though my prison was now well below us, and it grew much smaller as the moments passed.

This was when I got my first good look at the dark shapes occulting the stars. They were irregular, bulbous cylinders, completely dark below but lit from

above with what I assumed were navigational lights. As we came abreast with them, I spotted superstructures, gun emplacements, and a variety of strange antennae on their upper surfaces. The vessels were easily the size of aircraft carriers, and they drifted in the sky with the majestic grace of Zeppelins, though nothing about them looked as soft or flimsy as a gasbag.

At last, the elevator came smoothly to a halt and a small door opened onto the room that had been set aside for my interrogation.

It was a hemisphere, about a hundred feet in diameter, enclosed from floor to ceiling in blue metal shutters, so the general effect was like being inside an unbudded metal rose. In the middle of the smooth floor was a single reclining seat, heavily padded, much like a dentist's chair- though not even the worst dentist in Abilene had ever needed anything like the heavy steel shackles hanging open for my legs and hands.

I suppose I twitched nervously, or maybe my personal goon squad was just used to their prisoners getting edgy when they saw the accommodations. I was carried bodily to the chair and held down by the weight of a dozen strong arms while the metal clamps were slammed over my ankles and wrists. Once I was secure, the guards spread out in an arc, standing easy but alert, with their weapons ready.

"Oh, yeah, better keep those guns on me, idiots." I muttered. "I bet I could be out of these cuffs in just nine or ten hours if I really felt like it!"

If Martians smirked, that Squadmaster was smirking behind his mask, I just knew it. I settled my head back against the padded chair and sighed- nothing about the situation was good, but at least my post-mycomatrix hangover was still gradually fading.

There was a whirr and a hiss, and a circle of golden light appeared in the metal floor about ten feet to my right. A Martian in a twilight-blue robe and a greenish copper mask rose out of the circle, which closed beneath him without leaving a visible seam.

"Squadmaster Mathrel," said the newcomer, "your guest seems to have lit a fire of curiosity at a rather high altitude."

"Sir?"

"Exarch Thrail wants a word with her. Personally."

"Thrail? Coming here?"

"As we speak."

The blue-robed Martian walked over, placed a hand against my chin, and tilted my head slightly back. The features of his mask were a sterile caricature of the facial structure I'd seen on the murdered functionary- wide dark eye slits, long narrow nose, high cheekbones and a dark slash for a mouth. I thought it looked a bit smug. "Yes," he said, "I can see it really is a her this time. My compliments."

"It's easier to tell when they're younger, sir," said the Squadmaster. "Must I hear about that incident for the rest of my-"

"Until you outrank me, yes," said the newcomer, and he made a rhythmic clicking noise with the back of his throat, a noise that I would eventually find out was the Martian equivalent of a chuckle. He then ran his fingers lightly through my hair, and I flinched. That got me a soft pat on the shoulder.

"Be at ease, blueworlder. I'm Synthesist Avila, Sciences Section. Your time here could pass very smoothly... if you can avoid any outbursts of ill temper."

"I'll see what I can do. You sure you gotta run your damn hands all over me?"

"Forgive me. I'm your medical advocate, here to monitor your physical well-being."

"Really? Well, watch yourself. Your buddy in black likes to beat people to death for doing me favors."

"Ah. I take it you crossed paths with a functionary. What an unfortunate waste of resources."

"Resources? Oh yeah, resources. Like a heart and soul, you piece of-"

The door from the elevator slid open, and I lost my train of vulgarity. Avila and Mathrel spun toward the door, snapping to attention in a very earthly fashion, with their hands folded in front of them. Mathrel's men threw their weapons over their shoulders and composed themselves just as fast.

The first thing through the door was a file of soldiers, and I say that deliberately- my immediate impression was that they were a different sort of bird altogether from Mathrel's bunch. They wore long gray cloak-coats, just like the welcoming committee that had captured myself and Doc Soames. Their masks were still iron, but they were full-face, and their weapons were larger and more powerful-looking, real Buck Rogers numbers. There were eight of them, and they split into two lines, forming a corridor for the big shot that came after them.

His robes were not exactly elaborate, but they were rich and elegantly cut, dark gray bordered with folds of gold, a gold that matched the gleaming perfection of his mask. No patina for this fellow- gold mask, gold circlet, and jeweled pins for the gray hood surrounding his head. He moved with graceful, confident steps, closely followed by two underlings in blue robes and tarnished copper masks like Avila's.

One of them was carrying my flight jacket.

"Exarch," said Avila, bowing from the waist, "welcome to the Sciences Section. Your presence is an unexpected honor."

"Blueworlder DeVere's presence is an unexpected opportunity," said the gold-masked Martian. His voice was deep and smooth and somehow cultured- I suddenly wondered how much power the linguistic spores had to color or even distort my perceptions. Just how impartial was their translation?

"How do you know that name?" I said. "Do I talk in my sleep?"

"Your companion, the blueworlder Soames, was kind enough to name you for us at the conclusion of his interview."

"That a fact? What'd you do, break his kneecaps?"

"Really, Violet, if I may presume to call you that, we seem to have begun this relationship poorly."

"You're a pack of murderers," I said. "You're a bunch of goddamn murdering goons! I didn't ask to come here, and that functionary that got slugged in my cell certainly didn't ask for what he got-"

"Violet," said the Exarch, "if our positions were reversed, I honestly believe I'd be just as disoriented as you are. Our ways must seem utterly strange to you. Might I suggest... might I ask, that you reserve some of your judgment until you've learned more about us?"

"I'm not making any promises."

"Nor do I require them." The Exarch waved a hand at the floor, and about three feet to the right of my chair a wide padded stool popped up into position. He settled himself and his robes into it and drew his legs up beneath him, so that it almost looked as though he were levitating there without support. "Squadmaster, your unit is dismissed. Wait down below with my men until summoned."

"Exarch- ah, Excellency, are you sure that's-"

"Did the words leave my mouth, Squadmaster?"

"Of course. Your will, Exarch."

Mathrel and his boys withdrew to the elevator, followed by the cloaked heavies that had come in with the Exarch. In a moment they were whisked quietly back downward, and were all alone- just Thrail, his two assistants, Avila, and yours truly.

"Mathrel and his cohorts are a necessary tool," said the Exarch. "Unfortunately, some tools are dull. Your earlier treatment was regrettable. Up here we can be more civilized."

"And yet, somehow, I still find myself shackled to my chair," I said.

"In our gravity, an impulsive blueworlder becomes a cause for general concern."

"You might be more polite than Mathrel and his thugs, Exarch, but frankly, you're still trying to hang a party hat on the fact that I'm a prisoner."

"Avila," said the Exarch, after a moment of silence, "bring our blueworlder a new container of water."

"Immediately, Excellency."

"And release the restraints on her wrists."

"I- ah, yes. Very good, Excellency."

Avila fussed with something behind me. In the meantime, the Exarch's blue-robed underlings summoned stools for themselves out of the floor and perched, much as he had, about twenty yards away. One of them set a wide silver slate on their lap- this was my first glimpse of a Martian electric writing table, the same sort of device on which I'm spilling all of this history for you, my pretend audience- while the other sat quietly holding my jacket, along with a metal package about the size of a shoebox.

"Here," said Avila, appearing at my left with a transparent bowl of water. He waved his free hand over my wrist shackles, and they sprang open. I took the bowl in my hands, and finding it cool to the touch, made the decision to sacrifice a bit of dignity and have a gulp. I figured it was wise to seize what I could and get it in me while it was being offered.

"An adequate gesture of good faith?" asked the Exarch.

"Nicely done," I said, and helped myself to another sip. "Since it really doesn't knock your power over me down by one tiny notch. Thanks for the water, though."

"Avila tells me that your hydration needs are more extreme than our own."

"I'm sure Avila's right." I finished the water off, just in case this conversation had a nasty detour in store, and held the empty container in my lap. It was some sort of light plastic, hardly useful as a weapon. "Now, who are you? What does Exarch mean?"

"Intriguing," said Thrail. "Is the wrong person sitting in that chair?"

"If you'd be willing to settle just a few of my questions," I said, "I might be more willing to handle yours."

In truth, I was barely willing to tell these people my shoe size, but I figured that any chance I had to curb my stark ignorance of their world was worth a little white lie.

"Exarchs," said Thrail, "are the chief lieutenants of the All-Sovereign. Each of us is responsible for one significant aspect of the government. Exarch Vorus, for example, commands the Sciences Section, but your presence here on Mars falls more within my purview."

"And you are..."

"Loyalty Section."

"Ahhh," I said. "I think I can read that euphemism a mile away. You're the guys with the long black coats and the secret lists. The night and fog boys."

"The translation spores may be doing neither of us a favor," he said slowly, "but I believe I comprehend your meaning. And yes... I tend to matters of security, public and private."

"You're the Gestapo."

"Be very cautious, Violet, in applying a blueworld context to my duties. That phrase you just used did not strike me as flattery."

"I'm sorry." Like hell I was, but if I wanted to pump Thrail for useful information, it was best not to spit in his face, even if he was wearing that gold mask. "So who or what is the All-Sovereign?"

"Our supreme leader," said Thrail, with what sounded like genuine enthusiasm. "The architect of our salvation. He united the civilized tribes of Mars after generations of pointless warfare. He swept the unworthy onto the sands, and led us in reclaiming our technological birthright."

"Sounds swell." I had visions of a Big Brother figure, a rousing fiction, conjured at the push of a few buttons by executive-suite types like Thrail. "He's a real person, flesh-and-blood?"

"As real as you or I."

"Is he planning on dropping by?"

"You're a special case, Violet, but I'm sure you can understand that the duties of the All-Sovereign are even more pressing than those of his Exarchs. However- would you like to see where he is?"

"Sure, I guess."

"Avila, lower the shields."

"Your will, Exarch."

The lights snapped off. The curving blue metal shutters surrounding our dome slid away and vanished in the space between heartbeats- instantly, silently, shockingly, I found myself under the phosphorescent stars again, on a seemingly open platform. The walls previously enclosed by the metal shutters were transparent, to a degree of perfection I would never have believed possible, even for these people.

An agoraphobic probably would have just keeled over right on the spot, like something out of a cartoon- legs straight up, funeral flowers already conveniently clutched in their hands.

The only visible object higher than our platform was the tower I'd seen in my first few moments on Mars- the insanely vast structure of muted red and blue, looming upward, upward, upward- even from our vantage point, I couldn't see the top. If I'd had to guess, I would have said the closest side was about a mile away. It blotted out a significant portion of the sky directly in front of me.

"High Silence," said Thrail. "The citadel of the All-Sovereign."

"Jesus," I whispered. "I saw it from below... I've never even imagined anything like it."

"There is nothing like it. It's the largest structure ever built by thinking

beings in this solar system. The All-Sovereign's chambers are twenty-five miles above the mean level of the planetary desert." He made a rapid clicking noise in his throat. "But I'm being disingenuous- High Silence is built on the upper rim of a shield volcano roughly sixteen miles above the plains... so the structure itself is only nine miles high."

Only thirty Empire State Buildings, stacked on top of one another. That was my rough estimate. My slide rule had presumably been destroyed along with my L-2, otherwise, I might've had a strong urge to whip it out and be more precise.

"Sixteen miles," I muttered as another thought occurred to me. "Wait a minute, that's where we are? The ground I've seen, that valley, was actually the top of a-

"Yes. Detention block pylons are built roughly five thousand feet above the surface of the caldera, facing the western rim wall. The valley you saw is a cold volcanic crater about, oh, eighty miles wide. The mountain itself is four or five times that in diameter."

"Nix Olympica," I said. "That's what it's called... I read an article. Some sort of surface feature you can spot from Earth- don't even need a really big telescope."

"I've heard other blueworlders use that phrase," said Thrail. "We call it something else, of course." More rapid throat-clicking. "The Sovereign Eye. Our civilization was born at its base. Our greatest cities are built into its outer western rim, in the shadow of High Silence."

"Your goons frog-marched me across an open bridge to get me out of my prison," I said. "How the hell is there air up here? Is the gravity-"

"Avila could better answer your abstract concerns about gravity or air pressure," said Thrail. "Suffice to know, we are indeed well above the life-sustaining region of the Martian atmosphere, and we maintain our balmy little envelope by artificial means."

"How in Christ... how can you hide something like this? You must have radio transmissions, city lights- how have we not spotted a civilization as advanced as yours from Earth?"

"Surely that's no mystery," said Thrail. "If you haven't seen us, it's because we do not wish to be seen."

"But-"

"I think I've been more than amiable, Violet. I think it's past time for you to answer a few questions of mine."

"All right," I said. "I'll be as helpful as I can, but I hope you understand- I won't tell you anything about the defenses of my world."

At that, Thrail laughed- Martians might chuckle differently than you or I, imaginary reader, but when something really tickles them, they sound just like us. Thrail was tickled.

"The defenses of your world," he wheezed. "Oh, that alone was worth the trip up here. Blueworlder, you've seen the level of power we can afford to expend on something as simple as an elevator. You see High Silence, right there before you. The All-Sovereign could, if he so desired, wipe every last speck of life from your planet, sterilizing it down to the blackest depths of its oceans, and it would cost him no more effort than you expended drinking your little saucer of water."

"Now that's gotta be crap," I said. "I can't deny you people build some mighty fine things, but if we're that far beneath your concern, why would you even bother with this interrogation bull-"

"The question isn't whether or not you're insignificant," said Thrail. "The question is, are you still insignificant enough to justify continued postponement of your absolute destruction?"

"Oh," I said. "Well, if you put it that way, I can give you some pretty precise information on our flint arrowheads... and we have some mean horse cavalry. And I heard about this one guy who's building a catapult, but that work's not really out of the testing stage yet..."

"Violet," said Thrail, who had gone as still as a statue, "it's no accident that a functionary was waiting for you in your cell when you awoke. I have twenty blueworlders in custody; a functionary was put into contact with each of you. That required twenty executions, and the reactions to those executions told me what sort of beings I'm dealing with."

"So," I said. "Now the mask comes off, in a manner of speaking."

"You didn't really think I was being polite because you deserved it, did you? I have your reaction on file, and now I've spent enough time with you personally to get to know you very well."

"You don't know a damn thing about me!"

"I know you like I know the weather. I'm absolutely certain that in just a moment you'll put your arms willingly back into those shackles for me."

"Really? Well, you can kiss my ass." I folded my arms across my chest.
"You want a shot, you got it. Hope you're stronger than your boy Mathrel."

"In eighteen of my detention block cells," said Thrail, "I hold blueworlders that are unknown to you. In the nineteenth, however, I have your physician Soames. By varying the atmospheric pressure within his cell, I could easily cause him to be made uncomfortable, or seriously injured, or even-"

"Dammit." I threw the empty plastic container on the ground and slid my hands politely back into the shackles, which snapped tight around them instantly.

"You see? I know people, Violet. The first business of Loyalty Section is people, whether blueworlders or red. And you, I'm afraid, are rather inflexible about your principles."

"So this is your game, huh? You don't like my answers to your questions, you're gonna threaten Soames?"

"No," said Thrail. "Having taken your measure, I'm afraid that I wouldn't trust you even under that duress. I require a firmer guarantee of the value of your intelligence."

He waved his hand at the floor again, and an articulated metal pole shot up, holding a transparent, rectangular plastic box. He adjusted it so that it was about level with my chest, and then beckoned to his attendants.

"Zhanazia, come here. Bring your little pet."

The attendant with the metal container rose to their feet and came forward. The box in their hands was about the size of the transparent plastic container in front of me- I put two and two together and started to break out in a cold sweat.

"Every ten of your years," said Thrail, suddenly casual and conversational again, "the Sciences Section draws a representative sample from the blue world. Assorted members of your civilization, who then receive personal interrogation. Their data is meant to enhance the knowledge gathered from long-range observation, which is not always as complete as one might hope."

"Why, that just breaks my heart," I said, watching nervously as Thrail's attendant placed one end of her metal box against the far side of the plastic box. The two containers were flush, and fit together with a soft click.

"We aim for a meaningful set of candidates- scientists, military officers,

engineers, politicians. However, the apparatus used to seize blueworlders is extremely difficult to calibrate, let alone use. Sometimes, we secure rather worthless samples. On occasion, get get more than we bargained for. You might be such a specimen."

Zhanazia flipped a switch on the metal container, and the near end slid open. The thing that scuttled out into the transparent box was wider than my hand- it was low and reddish-brown and gleaming, with a segmented ovoid body and at least a dozen little legs on each side. It looked like a sort of pissed-off pillbug, but I didn't know just how pissed off until it opened its mouth. It had jaws like two pairs of wire-cutting pliers, dark and sickle-shaped, and each of the four sickles was the size of one of my fingers. I'm not ashamed to admit I swore under my breath.

"Now," said Thrail, "I'd like you to meet another friend brought here from a great distance. In his case, the southern polar deserts. You might notice that he's entirely blind, possessing no visual organs. He does, however, have a very primitive capacity for receptive telepathy. In essence, he sees by sniffing out thoughts."

The creature's jaws pulsed in agitation, and Zhanazia put one of her hands against the plastic box. That seemed to calm it down. Zhanazia removed the metal box and set it out of sight.

"Native tribes call it the blind demon," continued Thrail. "It certainly doesn't hunt anything much larger than itself, but it has absolutely no qualms about biting when provoked. Its venom is just about the most dangerous on Mars, drop for drop."

"Blueworlder DeVere," said Avila, kneeling on my left, "I must inform you that the protein chains in the creature's venom have a very different effect on your physiology than ours. Diminished lethality with enhanced allergic irritation."

"I think I get it," I whispered. "It's not gonna kill me, and it hurts like hell."

"Yes," said Thrail. "Oh, yes. Now, because of the blind demon's telepathic nature, a mental sensitive like Zhanazia can actually tame it- keep it subdued, even teach it to perform useful tricks. The ones we use in Loyalty Section have been given... aversion training. They have been conditioned with an irrational, uncontrollable hatred of one particular stimulus, at which they will lash out violently, regardless of anything Zhanazia does."

Thrail tapped the plastic box gently, and nudged it closer to me.

"Our little friend here," he said, "does not appreciate a liar."

"I take back what I said about you, Exarch." I swallowed to get spit flowing as best I could; my mouth had suddenly gone surprisingly dry. "You're really not any more polite than Mathrel. You've just got yourself a better tailor."

"I want to see that you comprehend your situation," said the Exarch. "The first demonstration will be harmless. Tell a lie."

"Uh," I said, not very cleverly, "Uh, damn, I really enjoy your company, Thrail, and I-"

I didn't even get to finish my sentence. The little creature leapt straight at me, jaws wide, and I flinched so hard I damn near wrenched my neck. The blind demon rebounded off the wall of its plastic box, but it struck with enough force to actually move the container and inch or two toward me on the articulated arm. After that, it scrabbled against the plastic eagerly, jaws pumping. It took a few moments for Zhanazia to do whatever telepaths do and get it calmed back down.

"Okay," I said, "Jesus. Okay. I get it. I tell a fib, you pop the door open. Message received, loud and clear."

"Oh no," said Thrail, clicking softly at me. "No, no. Surely you're sharper than that, Violet. Now that you understand that the character of this interview is entirely under your control, there's no need for a door at all."

He waved one of his hands, and without a sound the front side of the plastic box fell open. The blind demon's gleaming jaws twitched, and suddenly there was nothing between it and my neck but a foot of empty air.

Chapter 4

Triumph of the All-Sovereign

When I was a little girl, maybe six or seven, I discovered a bark scorpion in our backyard wood pile. Not knowing any better, I reached out to play with that weirdly fascinating creature. Well, nature equipped scorpions with a pretty effective anti-attention device, which that sucker personally demonstrated. My hand was red and swollen for three days.

After I got stung, I started having nightmares, in which that scorpion, blown up in my mind to something the size of a cat or a dog, would sit there openly on the wood pile. It would watch me with terrible, single-minded intensity, just waiting for me to stray back within range of that arched stinger.

Nothing but a stupid childhood anxiety, I know. By the time I was twelve or thirteen, I'd learned that you could easily get through life completely ignoring the little bastards, and that they had far more to fear from a booted heel than we had

to fear from a little sting.

But that was on earth.

Shackled to that chair in front of that gold-masked son of a bitch, I felt about six years old again, and that horrid thing out of my all-but-forgotten nightmares really *was* staring me down, just waiting for an excuse to jump.

"Why, Violet, you seem to be losing a great deal of moisture through your skin," said Thrail. "Would you like another cup of water?"

"Just ask your god-damned questions," I muttered. "Please."

"Avila, bring me the garment our blueworlder was clutching when she was drawn here," said Thrail.

Avila fetched my flight jacket from where it lay beside the attendant with the silver scribing table. That Martian had a stylus out and was, I can only presume, taking notes on my interrogation. Avila passed the jacket to Thrail, who turned it over in his hands a few times.

"Is this a personal possession of yours?"

"Yes."

"What's the meaning of this symbol?"

Thrail pointed to the patch over my jacket's right breast, a cartoon representation of a female gremlin, a winged-and-goggled creature leaping into action in a fetching little pilot's outfit.

"That's Fifinella."

"A religious icon of some sort?"

"She was... she was our mascot."

"Ahhh." Thrail folded my jacket neatly and settled it on the lap of his robe. "A superstitious device, meant to bring good fortune."

"Someone at the Disney company drew her for us. We put her on everything- jackets, planes... our, uh, newsletters..."

"You,' meaning a unit? A military unit?"

"I, uh..." God, that scuttling thing shifted its weight and twitched at me!
"Thrail, *please*, what if I don't know the right answer... what if I make a mistake?"

"Calm yourself. Construct your answers very, very carefully. The blind demon isn't omniscient; it detects your *intention* to lie. Nothing more, nothing less. Tell the truth as you best understand it."

"It was- well, it was a unit, yes. Not technically of the military, but serving a military purpose."

"Soames said that you named yourselves after an aggressive, stinging insect. You were a combat formation?"

"Uh... no. We flew... combat aircraft, yes, but not into fights. We were called WASPs because, uh, if you took the first letters of the names of the organization, you got WASP. It was a catchy acronym. Does that, uh, make sense to you?"

"Yes," said Thrail. "Yes, quite. So it was an artistic flourish rather than an expression of purpose?"

"Uh, if you put it that way, yeah."

"Describe the nature of your training."

"Well... we were all previously trained. Civilian pilots, that is. We knew how to handle airplanes before we joined the program. You have airplanes here, right?"

"Your meaning is perfectly clear."

"Once in the program, well, it was called ground school... first we had a few hundred hours of classroom instruction. Maps, navigation, physics. Engines and other mechanical stuff. And then we were taught how to, ah, fly in the manner, of, uh, the male military pilots we were supposed to replace."

"Blueworlder females are not allowed to participate in combat actions?"

"Not where I come from, no."

"So you flew peaceful missions to free your more valuable trained males for the ironic duty of slaughtering one another?"

"You got a mighty cynical way of looking at things, Thrail."

"Any realist who isn't accused of cynicism every now and then isn't being realistic *enough*. Now, describe the air vehicles you flew in your capacity as a WASP."

"Uh, well... we started with trainers. The, uh, BT-13, and then the AT-6." I concentrated hard on the details of those airplanes to keep my mind off the scythes of the blind demon's jaws, which were slowly flexing and contracting.

"The BT-13 was a shaky old bird. The AT-6 was, ah, faster and more powerful, and a lot more demanding." No gentle partner, that ship- more like a jealous suitor. Bad things happened when it didn't have your full attention, which is why, I suppose, it was seen as an ideal prelude to flying high-speed fighters.

"Irrelevant," said Thrail. "Describe the *militarily significant* air vehicles."

"Okay, sure- I was properly, ah, properly checked out on five real combat types... three pursuit models and two bombers. Do you understand what I mean by those terms?"

"Why not explain them to me, Violet, as though dealing with someone from another planet?"

"Ha. Funny. Bombers... uh, well, those are large vehicles, designed to travel... long distances, carrying a load of, ah, munitions, which are meant to be dropped on a ground target. Pursuit planes, well, those are smaller, faster. They go after the bombers, see? And after each other."

"Were any of these vehicles propelled by rockets?"

"N-no. By, uh, turbine-driven propellers. Airscrews, if you want to get really technical."

"Astonishingly quaint," said Thrail. "And yet I see our little friend is still in his box. You flew no vehicles with rocket engines? What about turbojets?"

"Those were brand new at the end of the war," I said. "I never flew any, and as far as I know, no WASPs were checked out on them before we got folded up."

"What was the effective ceiling of the combat vehicles you flew?"

"Well," I said, "uh, the P-51 Mustang, the 'D' model, I could have got one of those up to about 40,000 feet, at least. If I'd tried." I'd been part of a WASP cadre certified for real upper-deck flying, and spent several long sessions in Army Air Force pressure chambers, where we'd removed our oxygen masks one at a time and discovered how hypoxia could turn an attentive adult into something like a

drunk toddler in just a few moments.

The fifty-one was probably the best aircraft I'd ever flown, powerful as its namesake, with a beautiful bubble canopy that let you see the whole sky. Any time you could grab in one of those ships was a joy, if you knew what you were doing.

If I'd had one at my disposal at that instant, with its six fifty-cal wing guns, I'd have gladly zeroed the sights right between Thrail's eyes and pulled the trigger until the hammers were falling on empty chambers.

"And the, uh, the B-17," I continued, trying not to let that attractive fantasy knock me off-course. "A big bomber, with four engines. We would ferry those with a crew of four. They could get way up over 30,000 feet, easily"

"No trans-atmospheric capability?"

"What, you mean... skip past the stratosphere, hit space, come on home? Lord, no."

"Interesting," said Thrail. "This is exactly in line with our remote observations, but Soames dropped some curious hints. Threats about secret programs, and aircraft beyond our means of detection. He said that you might have been involved with that sort of thing during your service."

"Ugh," I said, "Please, Doctor Soames doesn't know the first thing about aviation. Hell, I don't know what he was trying to do. Maybe he's just confused."

"He didn't believe our warnings about the blind demon, I can tell you that much," said Thrail. "He thought it was a ruse. Much to his chagrin, he discovered that our warning was... quite honorable."

"*Damn* you people-"

Thrail put his hand against the back of the transparent box and pushed it six inches closer to me. The blind demon scabbled for balance against the inner surface of the box, shifting its weight, never turning its mandibles away from me for an instant. My guts turned into a ball of ice, my lungs seemed locked in iron bands, and I squirmed helplessly against my restraints.

"Jesus, Thrail, please, please, I'm being honest about everything!"

"Yes," he said in an airy, pleasant tone of voice. "You are. Was your WASP program a cover for any form of secret research or aircraft development?"

"No!"

"Were you secretly trained in combat techniques?"

"No! No, I had... no formal combat training!"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, uh, my country... when our combat pilots had spent a certain amount of time in action, they were withdrawn and sent back home to train new pilots. We bumped into a lot of those guys. We picked things up, here and there, but it was nothing like the training or the experience actual fighter pilots had... uh... please move this thing. *Please move this thing.* I'm being fair with you."

"Answer quickly, and this will be over quickly. Did you fly aircraft capable of delivering atomic weaponry?"

"I... probably. The B-17 I talked about. Our atom bombs are big and heavy, the Flying Fortress would have had trouble with one, but a smaller device, yeah, maybe."

"Blueworlder atomic devices remain in this form? Delivered by aircraft, not by rockets?"

"As... as far as I know, yes. There's ideas, plans, theories, but dropping one from a plane is still the only sure way I know." Back home they were shooting captured German V-2s off, copying them, designing improvements. But as for rockets arcing into space, hopping between continents with atomic payloads, well, that was still firmly in the realm of fiction writers like yours truly.

"To the best of your knowledge, no blueworlder nation possesses any vehicle capable of travel or combat beyond your planet's atmosphere?"

"No," I said. "No. If we don't have 'em, nobody does. And I'm pretty damn sure we don't."

"Disappointing," said Thrail. "It seemed for a short while that you were an intriguing anomaly. A pity that your primitive achievements match our remote observations so precisely after all."

"A pity? Why?"

"Because the All-Sovereign cultivates a studious indifference toward you soft-fleshed, over-hydrated barbarians. Your ongoing failure to reach beyond the cradle of your own gravity has likely bought your fellow blueworlders another ten years of life."

"Fellow blueworlders," I said. "So I'm not going home, then?"

"I'm afraid not," said Thrail, clicking in the back of his throat. "And look, our little friend didn't leap out of his box at me. Alas for you, dear Violet."

"Anything else you want to ask me, you son of a bitch?" My voice had gone hoarse with strain, and I felt hot tears stinging the edges of my eyes again. "Want to know the secret formula for Coca-Cola? Want me to sing Burma-Shave jingles?"

"No, our meaningful business is concluded."

"Then will you please, *please* move this thing?"

"Of course," he said softly. Then he slapped the back of the transparent box just hard enough that the blind demon tumbled out and landed above my right breast.

I've told you some things I'm not so proud of, and I'll tell you a few more before we're through, imaginary reader. But listen, at that moment I felt about as low and miserable and weak as I ever had in my entire life, and I'm *not* ashamed to say it. Not one bit. Frankly, I'd like to see anyone receive the close personal attention of a bastard like Exarch Thrail and come out smelling like a bed of roses.

I screamed, more or less. I flinched, and closed my eyes, and held my breath like the little girl I'd once been, trapped in her nightmare, willing herself to stay perfectly still so the monster on the wood pile wouldn't get her.

The blind demon weighed at least a pound, probably more. I felt its dozens of legs clutching at the fabric of my work shirt, and I heard it hiss- its jaws were open so wide I could have fed it three fingers in one snap. This much I saw before I slammed my eyes shut and flinched, waiting for the pain-

After a few seconds, nothing happened. Except Thrail had another big laugh at my expense.

I opened my eyes to find Zhanazia stroking the blind devil, ever so gently, with one finger. Her hand was as red and leathery as that of the poor murdered functionary, but what really got my attention was that she'd somehow managed to calm the angry critter before it could tear a gaping hole in my chest.

I had no words; I just blew air out of my mouth, half relieved sigh and half unvoiced sob.

Thrail finished laughing, unfolded himself from his chair, and dropped my jacket carelessly on the floor.

"Collect your pet," he said, and Zhanazia complied. The blind demon scuttled up onto her robed forearm and then perched there, submissive as a kitten, while she fetched her original metal container for it.

Thrail produced a glass sphere from within his robes and cupped it in one hand. A swirling blue light came to life within the glass, and he spoke directly to it: "Hail, Dread Eminence. The last of the blueworlders has been interrogated. Loyalty Section fully concurs with the report from Sciences Section. The rumors of secret developments in blue world aerial weaponry are baseless."

"Very good, Thrail." The voice that answered, transmitted by the sphere, was no less cultured than the Exarch's, but softer, somehow milder. My first reaction to hearing the voice of the being that commanded such cruel and far-reaching power was surprise; surely the voice of the devil incarnate should have been more theatrical. "Move the blueworlders to the Forum of Justice. Exarch Kreth will begin the military displays immediately."

"Your will, All-Sovereign." The glass sphere dimmed, and Thrail hid it within his robes once again.

"Now what?" I said.

"Now we can commence the celebration at last. The special arrangements for your interrogation have put it slightly behind schedule."

"Celebration?"

"The drawing of each representative sample culminates in a public pageant, the Grand Triumph of the All-Sovereign, at which he pronounces his verdict on your people." Thrail adjusted his robes and beckoned to his assistant with the scribing table. They put away their stylus and rose to their feet. "Personally, I'd just as soon blast your culture into memory and find some other excuse for a public display. It's not as though we're short of valid excuses, on this planet at least."

"Thrail," I said, "there's an awful lot of things you're short of on this planet, but I don't think you'd understand them, even if I bothered to explain."

"Charming," he said. "You're recovering something of your old familiar fire now that the blind demon is back in its box. But I wonder if you can maintain a

bold demeanor in front of fifty million pairs of eyes?"

"Meaning what?"

"The highlight of any Grand Triumph," said Thrail. "You and all the other blueworlders drawn here for the sample will be escorted to the Forum of Justice, in the City of the Sovereign Eye. There your images will be broadcast to every corner of the All-Sovereign's dominion. Every civilized being on Mars will be attentively watching your public execution."

"Whoah," I said, "How is that necessary? Christ! You just proved it yourself with this sample- we're no threat to Mars. What's the harm in sending us back?"

"Ahhhh. We can't send you back," said Thrail. "The apparatus used to draw you here only works in one direction. For the rest of your life, which will last about an hour, you can consider yourself a Martian. Congratulations."

"But dammit, we can talk about this, it's not necessary, it doesn't make any sense!"

"Oh, it makes perfect sense," said Thrail. "I just isn't *fair*."

He turned and strolled toward the elevator. Zhanazia and his scribe followed quietly at his heels.

"Avila, prepare the blueworlder for escort. The elevator will return with my men."

"Your will, Excellency."

"Farewell. And farewell to you, Violet DeVere. We won't meet again."

The elevator door opened and closed with a soft hiss, and then Thrail was gone. Avila and I were alone. He put a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't *touch* me." I shook myself violently, and he pulled his hand back. "Go screw yourself. You and all your fascist buddies."

"I know you must think very poorly of me." Avila spoke in a whisper while he moved around my chair and picked up my jacket. "When there are members of Loyalty Sector nearby, you have to act in a certain manner or risk drawing notice to yourself. I only wish I could-"

"Hey," I said, suddenly struck by a craving that cut like a knife, "Hey, are my cigarettes still in there?"

"Your... your incendiary drug cylinders?"

"Yeah, that's close enough. There should be a half-pack or so in the inside pocket."

"I'm truly sorry," he said. "Our scan-beam registered the contents of that package as some sort of chemical weapon. We disposed of it."

"Nnnngh," I said, beating my head against the back of my seat. "No last smoke. God almighty, you people can't even do an execution right."

"I assure you that we can," said Avila softly as he moved away. "Violet, you can't escape from this room, and in a few moments armed soldiers will be coming up the elevator. Don't do anything stupid."

An instant later, to my surprise, my wrist and ankle shackles snapped open. I stumbled up off the chair, shaky in a way that had nothing to do with my spore hangover. I was soaked in sweat, and I didn't smell so pretty- I'd been through an awful lot for one set of clothes.

Avila had taken my jacket over to a little podium that had popped out of the floor, and he was fiddling with it.

"Uh, can I have that back, maybe?"

"Of course," he said. "I'm just scanning it once last time for contraband, so it doesn't get taken from you." A moment later, apparently satisfied, he turned toward me and held it out. "Put it on, though. Anything carried will surely be confiscated."

I slipped into that old familiar jacket, grateful for its warmth and coverage. Psychological armor at best, but I think it's fair to say I'd suddenly acquired a pretty deep understanding of that old chestnut about drowning folks and straws.

"Some advice, blueworlder." Avila moved close to me, so close that his patina-covered mask was next to my ear. "This room is monitored. But I wanted you to know... not everyone on this world is a willing abject of the All-Sovereign. Their eyes will be on you. So when you face the execution squad... wear your symbol proudly and take it well. For the sake of those watching, if no one else."

"Uh..." I nearly said something, but realized at the last instant that any verbal acknowledgment that Avila wasn't treating me like absolute dirt could get

picked up. I was sure that even such a little kindness would make him suspect to his masters, so I merely nodded.

A few moments later, the elevator doors slid open again, revealing all of Thrail's gray-cloaked soldiers, waiting for me with their rifles unslung.

After another incredible elevator ride, the wonders of which I was all but numb to, I was marched across the fortress in the opposite of the direction we'd originally come from. The architecture seemed to open up before us as we moved- small corridors became cavernous passages; rooms became vaults. My hands had been cuffed again, but I'd at least been allowed the minor dignity of keeping my arms in front of me.

I was taken down a wide corridor lined with huge metal shutters, like garage doors, which would open from time to time to admit or disgorge small units of Martian soldiers. I assumed these were elevators. One opened directly in front of us, and out came a group of ten guards wearing the same black uniforms and iron masks as Mathrel's boys, the detention block guards.

In their midst, riding on some sort of motorized cart, was Dr. Soames.

"Doc," I shouted, "Doc!" I pushed toward him, and in my excitement forgot my clumsy Mars-gravity walking skills. I bounced two or three feet in the air before half a dozen of the gray-cloaks grabbed me and slammed me back down.

To my surprise, a general mingling of the assorted guards followed, and Soames was let through my cordon. I can only presume that they thought bunching us together would make us easier to handle.

"Miss DeVere," said Soames hoarsely, "I'm mighty glad to see you. Frankly, though, we're up to our necks in something awful here."

"Doc, what happened to you?" He looked *terrible*- his skin was waxy and gray, his eyes were bloodshot, and he sat stiffly atop his motorized cart, a soundless gizmo that looked a bit like a mobile barber's chair. Even his miserable condition hadn't been enough to keep them from shackling one of his hands to the cart.

"I was, uh, I was bitten by some sort of native creature. While I was being questioned. When I was able to move again, I think I had a minor cardiac episode."

"Jesus," I said. "A heart attack... how are you now?"

"Well, in all honesty, Miss DeVere, I don't believe I have much gas left in the tank. I think I might just make it to the, ah, execution, but these sons of bitches had better be punctual if they want to off me before the good Lord cashes my chips."

"Doc, what did you *tell* them? About me, I mean."

"Ah," he said, "I must apologize. My gut told me pretty early on that our, uh, hosts had no real reason to keep us alive. I saw them shoot one of their own down, right in my cell. So I figured, maybe if I dropped some interesting hints about you, they'd find a reason to spare you. For a while, at least."

"Oh. That was a sweet thought, Doc. For what it's worth."

"Well, I won't be sending you a bill for that particular service, Miss DeVere. It doesn't seem to have done you any damn good."

Another one of the huge elevator doors opened, and a third squad of guards joined our growing entourage. They pushed forward a tall, rather handsome Negro fellow, about my age or a little older. He wore an expensive-looking dark suit torn open in several places, and had a black tie hanging loose around his neck.

"Well, well," he said. His gentle voice had some sort of British accent. "This must be where the queue forms up for getting killed. Am I intruding?"

"Not at all," I said. "I'm Violet DeVere. This is Dr. Soames."

"Cheers. Reggie Abbott. You don't look so well, Dr. Soames. Surely they can't mean to-"

"Oh, they mean to," said Soames. "You look like you've been questioned, same as us. You honestly don't expect anything resembling mercy from these people, do you?"

"Can't say that I do. Hell of a thing, all this. Pity we can't get some message back home. Warn them, you know."

Now that was a tantalizing fantasy- seizing a Martian radio, beaming a desperate message back to earth. I wondered how Mathrel and his goons might fare against a regiment of U.S. Marines, bounding around in low gravity, storming the red sands of Mars like they had the black sands of Iwo Jima...

Well, they'd kill them, probably. Rifles and machine-guns against the technology of a culture that could sustain a pocket of picnic-lunch weather in an area three times the height of Mount Everest? It was no use wishing like a little

kid- our world was in second place in a race it didn't even know it was running.

"If it's any consolation," I said, "I think we might have already done our bit to save the earth. By convincing these bastards that we're too primitive to bother about destroying, I mean."

"Rather arse-backwards bit of heroism on our parts," said Reggie. "Not exactly the stuff of legends."

"You got that right," I sighed. This definitely wasn't how the story should have gone- reluctant, confused earthlings saving their world by convincing their alien interrogators that humanity was barely worth laughing at. And then getting murdered for their trouble.

John W. Campbell wouldn't have given me three cents a word for *that*.

A fourth human joined our little party a few minutes later. Barely my height, a wiry Asian guy with close-cropped hair and a dangerous sort of feeling about him, even with handcuffs on. Not the sort of fellow you'd want to corner with a weapon in his hands, if you take my meaning. He wore stained blue coveralls, and the lean lines of his face were marred by several fresh bruises.

"Howdy," I said. "I'm Violet, that's Reggie, this is Dr. Soames, and the Martian goons all around us are, uh, Martian goons."

"Byun Jae-Sun. You're Americans?"

"Well, I'm not," said Reggie with a faint smile. "But these two can't help themselves."

"I see. British and Americans, then. There's no functional difference."

"Oh, I *beg your pardon*," said Reggie.

"We march to death together, it seems. It must have come as quite a shock to you," said Jae-Sun, "being unable to reach an accommodation with your fellow imperialists."

"Oh, Christ," said Doc Soames. "Now we know it's a global affair. Even the commies sent someone to the party."

"I wonder- did you offer our captors money, old man? Or did you try to pledge fidelity to them as brother oppressors?"

"He didn't offer them a damn thing," I said. "They tortured him worse than any of us. Look at him!"

"He does look ill. But then, he has very little to be satisfied with, here or on our home world. When I was kidnapped from the field, my division was fighting on the Naktong Line. Your hold on Korea has collapsed to one feeble bubble around Pusan. As we speak, the final liberation of the Fatherland is likely underway. I can die well pleased."

"You're gonna die with one of my loafers up your ass if you don't put that crap behind you," I said. "Now-"

"I might have approved this 'representative sample,' young man," said Soames, "if only the Martians had had the good sense to kidnap and execute nobody but reds-"

"Now don't you start, either, Doc!" My temper, already well beyond frayed, snapped hard. "Both of you, look around and quit making idiots of yourselves. Commies, Brits, Americans, these guys don't give a damn. Ain't nobody here but us chickens. Not any more."

One of the brighter sides to the translation spores was that they smoothed over any rough edges when you threw a saying like that into a conversation. Everyone listening got whatever their local equivalent was. Reggie nodded thoughtfully, Doc mumbled angrily to himself, and Byun Jae-Sun had the good grace to look away, seemingly abashed.

"I apologize," he said a moment later. "Whatever the crimes of your home nations, they have been well and truly eclipsed by the evil we see around us. I had been focusing on my teachings to give me strength during my interrogation. Perhaps that focus has made me act... uncultured."

"A day like this would make anyone crazy, mate," said Reggie.

At that point the corridor we had been walking through broadened before ending altogether at the edge of a vast open area. At last, we had come to the City of the Sovereign Eye, the center of Martian civilization, and here we caught our first glimpse of the Grand Triumph of the All-Sovereign.

"For some time, I have been hoping to see the power of the earth's imperialists surpassed," whispered Jae-Sun. "I suddenly wonder if that might not have been a very unwise thing to wish for."

The City of the Sovereign Eye covers part of the western slope of the

largest volcano in our solar system; framed on either side by crumbling red ridges, the covered and climate-controlled city extends down the slope, tier upon tier, and each tier is a steel shelf the approximate length and width of Manhattan Island. These are stacked atop one another, moving outward like a gigantic set of steps, describing a gentle downward arc more than sixty miles long. What we saw was the topmost tier, and the middle of a Martian metropolis that made Manhattan look like an East Texas ghost town.

Our platoon of guards marched the four of us onto a gray avenue at least a hundred yards wide, where we were met by hundreds of troopers in gray cloak-coats, their jackets and hoods a verdant green, their armor and eerie masks of well-polished iron. Spinning their gleaming weapons effortlessly from arm to arm, they about-faced as we approached, slamming their heels down on the metal of the alien street in thunderous unison.

In the darkness above us, I could see at least twenty of the aerial leviathans drifting in formation, vast battleships of the sky, each one lit up like a department-store window at Christmas. They sent a dozen golden searchlight beams apiece into the air above them, forming an ever-shifting canopy of lights, a grid with hundreds of bright lines.

Swooping around them, above them, below them, I caught my first sight of smaller Martian aircraft. Jets, from the high-pitched sound of their engines; they seemed to be about the size of our new F-86 Sabres, or perhaps slightly larger, and they were nearly delta-winged, like triangles in flight. They flashed red navigational lights as they soared in full squadrons... perfect formations, artificial constellations of precise, deadly crimson lights beneath the real stars, which were all but blotted from view by the glare of the larger vessels.

We were marched down the avenue toward a huge flat square platform with rails, about five feet high. It turned out the rest of the representative sample was already waiting for us there, along with at least a hundred soldiers and several Very Important Martians in masks of copper and bronze. We were shoved up onto this platform and crowded in by our guards; it was a bit like being on stage during a War Bond drive.

Then the platform began to hum, and rose slowly up into the air, turning as it moved. I heard gasps from several of the other human prisoners. I myself had certainly had my sense of awe pretty forcefully renewed, and felt a little queasy.

We gathered speed, soaring into the air, moving east now through a corridor of black and silver Martian towers. At every window and balcony as we passed I could see rich robes, and masks of precious metals, and ranks of functionaries with their uncovered dark eyes plainly visible. We were rising toward the base of High Silence, where an immense review field had been constructed on metal pylons the size of skyscrapers, above the tier we had just

been standing on.

As we came level with that field I could see there, in neat ranks like a meticulously placed legion of toys, an army of gray-cloaked soldiers standing at attention. They waited in squares of ten by ten, in larger cohorts of ten squares by ten squares. I had plenty of time for simple math as we floated through the air. Beneath us were no fewer than fifteen thousand Martians-at-arms in full dress, still and silent as statues, waiting to greet the All-Sovereign.

"Oh, God help us," said Reggie. Somewhere behind us, a woman started screaming. Then came harsh words from a Martian officer, and the hard slap of a rifle-butt against human flesh.

A gong sounded, a vast metallic crash that echoed across the city; where it came from was a complete mystery to me.

On the red stone surface of High Silence (and this really was just its base; it stretched like a mind-breakingly high wall in either direction for miles), about three hundred feet above the huge metal plain on which the army stood, a door flashed into being with the characteristic speed of Martian machinery. This opening was as wide as an aircraft hangar, and from it a balcony slowly extended, holding a court fit for a dozen Louis XIVs, with enough courtiers to spare for a rainy day. A dozen golden masks gleamed above gold robes, surrounded on all sides by silver masks and robes. Even the guards wore silver masks, and their flanged Buck Rogers blast-rifles were gilded with bright gold. Or perhaps those barrels were actually forged from the stuff- how the hell would I know, really?

Those dozen gold-masked Martians, standing in bad eminence like the highest ranks of Satan's rebel angels, were the Exarchs. I eventually found out that they were the only twelve beings on the planet permitted to cover their faces in gold.

Suddenly, all those robes parted, more quickly than Moses had thrown apart the two halves of the Red Sea, and the gold and silver scions of Martian society formed a corridor right through the heart of their little pageant. Then they dropped to their knees in supplication, bending their heads until their eyes were on the ground before them.

A single figure in black and gray robes emerged from the darkness behind the balcony.

Instantly, his image appeared in the air before us, projected there translucently but with perfect, steady clarity. The projection must have been

seventy-five feet high, and it was from the waist up. The All-Sovereign wore ribbed armor, much like his soldiers, and his breastplate was forged around a single metal disc covered in elaborate Martian symbols. His robes and cloak were partially cut away over that armor- I had the immediate impression that while his garments were not exactly meant for field duty, they wouldn't be entirely useless in a fight, either. His black hood was surmounted by a gold and obsidian crown with several high, sharp spikes. Most striking of all was his mask- an infinitely cruel and beautiful thing, polished and faceted, carved from a single flawless ruby.

At that moment, the voices of the fifteen thousand soldiers rose in a roaring chorus:

"HAIL! HAIL THE ALL-SOVEREIGN! SUPREME SOUL OF MARS!"

Thunder erupted overhead, blasts so deafening that the air shook with them. I just about jumped out of my shoes. The aerial leviathans were firing off their weapons, broadside after broadside of whitish-blue flames that crackled like live arcs from billion-volt electrical cables. Their flares cast a harsh white glare across the whole scene before us; I had to close my eyes after a few seconds. Every time I blinked for moments afterward, I could see white sparks dancing in the darkness behind my eyelids.

The cascade of weapons fire was followed by an incredible chain of booms, like double-barreled shotguns being discharged directly above us, boom-boom-boom-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM! It was the jet aircraft, in arrowhead formations, flashing past high above the aerial leviathans. They were generating sonic booms with their passage, synchronized like the beating of some cosmic drum. I winced, and tried as best I could to use my cuffed hands to cover my ears.

"HAIL! HAIL THE ALL-SOVEREIGN!" As the echoes from the noise overhead crashed and faded into the distance, the fifteen thousand gray-cloaks burst into shouts again. "DELIVERER OF CIVILIZATION!"

"My children," boomed the voice of the All-Sovereign. It was the same mild, rather cultivated voice I had heard from Thrail's communicator sphere, but now it was a thousand times larger than life, echoing from every surface in the impossibly huge city, amplified like the gong that had kicked off the festivities. "Loyal sons and daughters of the All-Sovereign, hear my words, and rejoice. Ten solar orbits have passed for the barbarian blueworlders, and another representative sample has been drawn from their ranks.

"Across the black depths of space, the ancient sciences of our red world reached forth, and found the blueworlders as lost now in the fog of ignorance as they ever have been in the past!"

"HAIL," answered the soldiers, "HAIL THE ALL-SOVEREIGN!"

"Their knowledge- primitive! Their culture- shallow! Their nations- fragmented and chaotic! Their highest ambition- mere survival! Mars rests safe beneath its Veil... safe from the blinkered eyes and stumbling sciences of our less fortunate neighbors. I pronounce my verdict upon them- another ten of their years, to toil in ignorance, in the shadow of our benevolent grandeur!"

"HAIL! HAIL THE ALL-SOVEREIGN!"

"I shall not waste so much as a *speck* of Martian energy to chastise them, until they have risen to a level of civilization which would merit so great an honor! We shall test them again, at the next representative sampling, to see if they can match even the thousandth part of our worthiness!"

"HAIL! HAIL THE ALL-SOVEREIGN!"

"And now, I give you the subjects of the representative sample. Blueworlders, allowed the singular honor of a glimpse of the world we take for granted, my loyal sons and daughters. I pronounce upon them my doom, as useless creatures from a useless planet. I command their deaths for your amusement."

"HAIL! HAIL THE ALL-SOVEREIGN!"

And then, I swear to God, the son of a bitch turned around and walked back into his palace. The gigantic projection flickered and vanished. He wasn't even going to stay to watch us do our part for the entertainment.

Several cohorts of troopers on the field below us moved aside, and a square platform about the size of our own rose into the air atop a thin metal cylinder. Our platform floated forward and locked onto a bridge that extended from the opposite surface. The bridge was about thirty feet long, and there was a single large groove down the middle of it, a groove that extended to the middle of the opposite platform.

Eight gray-cloaks strode forward and walked across the bridge, diving themselves into two teams of four. Each team took up a position on either side of the groove. They began checking their rifles.

I felt a cold hollowness at the bottom of my stomach. I don't know how else to put it- the proximity of death is something you feel in your gut first, because I think the head is a lot slower to grasp the concept.

"Blueworlders," shouted a Martian in a bronze mask and orange robes, stepping forward onto the bridge, "It is the will of the All-Sovereign that you be slain, here upon his Forum of Justice, for the amusement of his people. Prepare yourselves for death in your accustomed fashions."

So, this relatively simple platform was the actual Forum of Justice. I had expected some sort of huge court building or plaza, but I guess it made perfect sense, knowing how the All-Sovereign ran his empire, just how simple "justice" would be around here.

On the opposite platform, at the point where the groove in the metal surface ended, an iris spiraled open, uncovering a circular black hole. Two thick metal brackets, each about seven feet tall, popped up in front of it, facing one another just like the symbols you can find on typewriter keys. Those brackets joined at their bases and locked themselves into the groove. They slid along it, toward our platform.

Our guards seized us and sorted us out, forming a rough line of blueworlders in the middle of our platform. The four of us weren't the very first in line, but we were close. I didn't even bother entertaining any thoughts of resistance or escape- there were a dozen armed guards directly at hand for each human, and those odds would only get worse and worse once they started to kill us.

The first one they selected was a dark-haired woman in a long maroon dress. She kicked and screamed as four guards hoisted her up to the brackets, raising her arms over her head.

"No, please," she cried, "I don't want to die! You can't- I don't-"

But they had everything they wanted from us, and no further reason to be gentle. One of the guards punched her in the stomach, and in just a moment or two his comrades wrestled her into place. The upper brackets contained some mechanism that caught her hands and seized them tight in an instant; there were similar slots for her feet. Trussed up and spread-eagled, she sobbed as the brackets slid along the groove and stopped just above the black hole on the opposite platform. There they tilted back slightly over the pit, perhaps twenty degrees or so.

The orange-robed Martian raised an arm, and the eight rifles of the firing squad came up in one smooth motion. Then down came the arm, and there was a volley of crackling, popping, hissing sounds. I blinked, and could see an after-image of the beams, pale gray things that had bridged the gap between gun-barrels and woman for one terrible instant.

She writhed under their impact, her face and chest distorted by a corona of pale fire. A cloud of steam exploded out of her and melted into the air- it was as though all the moisture in her body was hammered to vapor in the blink of an eye. The mechanical bracket opened its restraints with an audible clack, and the scalded, dessicated corpse tumbled into the black pit. Then the bracket began sliding back along the groove for its next passenger.

"Oh, Jesus," I muttered. "Oh, dad, give me strength."

"I see a plain old firing squad was too simple for you bastards," said Doc Soames, about as loudly as he could.

"Your corpses go straight to the organic reclamation vats," said one of the guards. "It's three miles down that shaft to the first of the mechanical grinders. If I were you, I'd pray the execution squad shoots straight."

That guard unshackled Doc from his cart, and heaved the old man to his feet.

"Take this one next," he said.

"Oh, Doc..." I whispered. I didn't know what else to say.

"Never you worry, Miss DeVere. We'll meet again soon in a better place. God bless you." He slapped fussily at the guard holding him. "Get your hands off me, you cretin. I'll get there on my own two feet."

And so he did- obviously in pain with every step, he managed to stumble to the bracket and hold his own arms up. In a few seconds, he was secured within the frame, and it was on its way.

The arm of the bronze-masked officer rose, then fell.

"I'm truly sorry," said Byun Jae-Sun as the brackets came back toward us. He would be next. "Despite his ignorance, he was a man of quality after all. I hope to do as well."

All I could do was nod numbly.

"I wish you courage and no pain," said Jae-Sun as he stepped forward to be placed within the execution bracket. Then he raised his voice: "One day the people of this world will awaken and avenge our murders a thousand times over! The fall of tyrants is inevitable!"

They beat him for that before they sent the bracket on its way, but he grinned all the while.

After they shot him, the bracket came back for me.

I stepped forward. Two guards held me while a third unfastened my cuffs and took them away. They pushed my arms into the upper brackets, where metal clamps slid tightly shut around my wrists. I set my own two feet on the bottom of the bracket, and thin silvery restraints slipped out over my shoes. I looked up at the nearest guards.

"Jae-Sun was right," I said. "Screw you sons of bitches, and screw your All-Sovereign."

They didn't bother hitting me. Maybe the North Korean's reaction had disappointed them. In a moment, I was sliding backwards toward the pit, away from two hundred masked Martian soldiers and the sixteen human beings who'd be following me.

"One last flight, Fifinella," I whispered. I gulped the dry air and tried to find my spit; it had all gone mysteriously AWOL. "I love you, mom and dad."

The bracket came to a halt. Whirring, it tilted back slightly.

The orange-robed officer raised his arm, and eight silvery gun barrels swung up until they were eight black holes pointed straight at me. I felt a tear sliding down my right cheek, and I took a deep breath.

The arm fell, and the guns went off like camera flashes. A white-hot pain exploded in my chest. Darkness came down like a hammer.

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