

# **The Devil and Omorti's Circle**

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## Prolog

The stasis pod smelled of age and disuse, like the inside of an ancient tomb. Captain Roy Condon's eyes watered in the unaccustomed glare. He struggled to free himself from the soft gray pads that had worked and maintained his body throughout the 51-year voyage. With some effort, he managed to get both feet on the floor. While he rested, he considered the task of standing up. Gathering his inner reserves, he leaned forward and grabbed the frame of the open door. His fingers sank into the soft pressure seal and he pulled himself onto wobbly feet. A heavy thud to his left told him someone else had tried and failed. He closed his eyes and willed his head clear. He had trained for this moment, trained hard. He was supposed to . . . his legs rebelled, and he sat back down.

A plastic panel behind him hissed open; the sound triggered distant memories of food. Behind the panel, a small compartment contained numbered silvery pouches. Roy opened a pouch simply labeled, "#1," and munched the tasteless bar inside. Pouch #2 proved to be a drink pack. Slowly, a measure of strength returned to his limbs; largely a function of the chemical cocktail the pod had delivered just before withdrawing its umbilicals.

An hour later, the crew of the United Nations Space Agency ship, *Orion*, had showered, dressed in crewmember's orange jumpsuits, and assembled on the bridge. Roy surveyed his five companions. They had aged, of course, but no more than what had been expected. They were looking haggard, and moving a little slowly.

Joanne King had once been a striking blond whose cover-girl face had, at first, seemed out of place amongst the working stiffs on his bridge. Fortunately, the choice of first officer had been Katzmier's, and not his. Over the course of two years of crew training, she had proved to be the most capable first officer he had ever encountered. In retrospect, his initial bias seemed childish—beneath him. She was still a fine looking woman.

Roy said, "You guys look like you died at least forty-nine years ago."

Joanne flashed him a tired little smile. "You're looking great yourself, Roy."

"At least we still have some sense of humor. Mark, where are we?"

Navigator and helmsman Mark Hubble's skin had changed from near black to a washed-out, muddy brown. Save for the Old Man, at 39, he was the oldest of the crew selected for this one-way mission. His bony fingers danced across the smooth surface of the navigation control panel while the skin on his forearm wattled like that of an old woman. Brightly colored lights winked on, long dormant equipment sprang to life, and a large screen on the forward bulkhead became a three-dimensional representation of the void ahead—pinpoints of cold fire on black velvet. Each point had a long, wispy tail, indicating they were still traveling at a significant fraction of the speed of light—"c" in the shorthand of space. One such point directly ahead, stood boldly from the rest.

"We're exactly on course and on schedule. Our current speed is point two three c, decelerating on a standard gamma curve. We'll make planetfall in just over two weeks. We'll need every minute to be ready to disembark."

"Captain, we seem to have sustained some damage while we were napping." The chief engineer, Jerry Hackett, was the least changed of the lot. He had been skin and bones when they left and he had gained no weight during the voyage.

"Looks like we survived, Jerry. What happened?"

“A small collision, probably a rock. Whatever it was hit LM Three—through and through. Auto-maintenance made the patches—apparently not serious enough to trigger a wakeup.”

“How serious—your opinion?” This from the Old Man—James Katzmier, officially listed as co-pilot. The title was a formality. He was, indeed a qualified landing module pilot, and would be at the helm of LM3. He was also the civil head of the colony. This was his mission—he had poured most of his adult life into the design, financing, and politics of getting it off the ground. Not a man given to many words, he sat quietly in a chair without an attached console.

“Too early to tell, Sir. Doesn’t look bad from here. Got at least two days of diagnostics to run before I’m sure.”

“I believe I’ll have a look now. I’m too old to think of flying a damaged LM as exciting.” He touched a panel next to a black hole in the wall and said, “Passenger Three.” He stepped into the black hole, and vanished.

Captain Condon said, “Keep me posted, Jerry. We’re at full pressure now, and I’ve got too much on my plate to have to start worrying about hull integrity. Joanne, you want to check up on our guests?”

“You got it.” She touched the same wall panel, and said, “Passenger One.”

Roy watched the still-remarkable figure step into the drop tube and vanish. Although they had never had anything but a professional relationship, he found himself flushing—awake or not, it had been a long time. Mark interrupted his thoughts.

“Captain, we’re going to pass the outermost planet in this system soon. It’s just a frozen rock, but we should map it. It may be years before the colony is established well enough to be back out in space.”

Mark seemed genuinely interested—Roy thought he looked like an aging bloodhound on a fresh scent. “Any danger of being pulled off course by the gravitational field?”

“Absolutely, but the nav computer’s worked out a solution.” His fingers danced, and the star map changed to show a blowup of the system just ahead. A complex set of vector lines and waypoints overlaid the projected map.

Roy eased himself into the captain’s seat and studied the map for a long moment. He didn’t like it, but he couldn’t put his finger on a reason. *The captain doesn’t need a reason.* “How much distance can we put between us and the planet, and still hold course?”

A frown of surprise replaced the eagerness. “At this speed, we can’t make any big changes. We’re still doing point two-two C. Besides, I’d like to get closer, not farther away.”

“What’s the best you can give me?”

“Away?” At the captain’s nod, the frown increased.

Fingernails clicked above the almost subsonic background hum of the engines. A new set of vectors appeared only slightly outside the curve of the old ones. “Anything more will put too much strain on the hull. If you want aerobatics, ask me again next week.”

Roy muttered an obscenity. “Stay with your first solution, but be on your toes. Something doesn’t feel right.” Just loud enough to be heard he muttered, “Second to the right, and straight on ‘till morning.”

To cover his disappointment, Mark affected a bad Cockney accent. “On me toes it is, Cap’n. ‘ow about ‘at survey?”

“If you can do it from our present course, go ahead.”

“Bless you, Sir.”

“Can the sarcasm, just get us there in one piece.”

“Aye aye, Sir. One piece it is, Sir.”

Roy had an irritated retort on the tip of his tongue when the comm annunciator chimed, and the intercom light glowed green.

James Katzmier's voice sounded strange. "Roy, can you drop down to Passenger Three? Bring Jerry and Alan." The light went out.

Alan was Alan Witherspoon, whose title was Chief of Security. He was a second thumb just now, but soon enough he would fly Landing Module 2 down to the surface along with the others.

Roy had never cared for drop tubes, and in his present physical state, he found them downright annoying. Unfortunately, they were the only practical way between modules. "Passenger Three," he said as he stepped into the blackness. His stomach did a flip and landed in his throat, and then he was there.

Katzmier was examining weld marks and shiny metal where the maintenance crawlers had repaired the module's hull.

"What's the problem?" Roy asked. "Looks sound."

Katzmier turned, and pointed. "The repairs are fine, but look at that strut."

One of the structural members had been slightly deformed by the passage of whatever had pierced the hull. The auto-maintenance system had deemed it fit for service, and had not undertaken anything as serious as cutting into a structural member.

"Looks fine to me," Roy said. "Jerry?"

"Weakened, certainly, perhaps ten percent. The member has a fifty percent safety factor built into it. Auto-maintenance made the right call."

"You say so," said Katzmier. He sounded less than convinced. "A trip down in lifeboats is not the way I'd like to start man's adventure on this planet."

The stasis pods were designed to be jettisoned in an emergency. Their internal systems could sustain life for two weeks—16 days at the outside. No one planned to use one in that mode—ever.

Alan Witherspoon followed the line of repairs with his eye, but said nothing.

Ultimately, they all went their way. They would be insanely busy for the next two weeks, and nothing was foolproof. One had to choose carefully which imperfect details over which to worry.

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They passed the first planet without major incident. The pull of gravity caused some scary creaks and groans from the hull, but everything held. Jerry was able to record most of what he needed, and was satisfied.

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Separation was now moments away; the planet hung large below them. The huge ship could never land, of course. Most of its black bulk had carried fuel and supplies for the long trip, and was now useless. Six sections were designed to separate from the main ship and land as individuals. Sections One through Four carried passengers; Five and Six held the food, shelters and equipment needed to survive on a virgin planet.

"Comm check," Captain Condon said.

One by one the other five modules responded.

Roy took a deep breath—although it was the only way, it was still hard to abandon *Orion*. He would sorely miss command. "Then let's do this. On my mark . . ."

Squibs fired. The six landing modules drifted slowly away from the kilometer-long cylinder that carried them in a cluster around the bow. In less than a minute, they had maneuvering room.

Each engaged the module's limited drive, rolled 180 degrees so the pilots could see each other, and applied power.

“One, three,” sounded in everyone's headset.

“One”, Roy responded with his module number.”

Katzmier said, “Roy, I've got warning lights all over the place. I think . . . .”

Five pilots watched in horror as Landing Module 3 shattered into a cloud of tiny pods. It happened in slow motion—there was, of course, no sound.

## Chapter 1

Andar, son of Jordan, watched in awe as the devil fell like lightning from a copper sky and vanished into parched, brown foothills. Although he had neither met the evil one, nor even seen one of his disciples, Andar never entertained a moment's uncertainty about who had flashed overhead. He was, after all, an adult now, and had been for three months. An adult would know such things.

Andar took the duties of adulthood seriously. In preparation, he had studied the Book every day, without fail, since he was first permitted access to it on his sixth birthday. Nine years, every day, Wet and Dry. Every moral and legal obligation of adulthood as well as the answer to every question an adult could ask lay somewhere within those sacred pages. This matter was no exception.

The First Book of Wars described the devil's flying contraptions clearly enough; in Andar's mind it was intuitively obvious that the devil would be driving his own machine.

As the word "machine" crossed his mind, Andar painfully bent one knee, and made a circular sign in the air above his head. He had never deliberately spoken an obscene word in his life, and it anguished him, especially now in adulthood, that his thoughts were not always pure. Protected by the sign, and purified by the pain and humility of bending the knee, he struggled to his feet, secure in the knowledge that it was the devil that had caused him to sin. He himself was not to blame.

With a deliberate act of will, he tried to put the incident behind him—Opening Day was supposed to be a happy day, one to be remembered his whole life. He remembered carefully planting the spoor the day he became an adult, and today it was ready. His parents would be there, and Omorti, his father's father, and his father's brothers as well. And all the women. Everyone would treat him with dignity, as befits an adult with his own home. My own home! Just think of the room I will have. And I could start to look for a mate . . . perhaps.

He was only partially successful in expunging the incident. In spite of his efforts to control his mind, the shame continued to peek around the corners of his other thoughts. He tried harder.

He could not have asked for a more perfect Dry day. The sky was the color of flame, deepening to dark red behind the mountains, little dust devils danced on the path, the soft sound of parched grasses in the wind drifted down from the hills. His solid, round feet made a satisfying plop at each ponderous step. The hot dust felt good. It was flawless.

As he approached the sheltering hollow, the top of the first home in his circle became visible below the ridge. A few more steps and the rest were in sight. It was a small circle—the third ring was less than half filled—but it was the center of his life. It had never occurred to him to desire more.

It was a well-kept circle; Omorti demanded it. None of its 23 homes were shriveled or damaged in any way. Fresh dung lay in a neat ring around each home, spaced exactly the diameter of one foot away from the stem. Every spot of ground within the circle was packed smooth and swept clean. His father's father would have it no other way. There was an unusual air of excitement, due, no doubt, to his Opening.

He started down the well-worn path. Halfway down, a small figure broke from a knot of juveniles maintaining the grounds and started up to meet him at an indecently rapid pace. Although the circle's collective mind easily reached him, Andar was still too far away to address the circle, but he was soon able to touch the undignified little one panting his way up to him. It

was Juno, his father's brother's middle son, and the youngster could barely force himself to wait for his elder to speak.

"Is the circle at peace?"

"The circle is peaceful and you are welcome in it." It was the minimum response. "Did you see it? You were out of the hollow; did you get a good look?" Juno was now close enough to be recognized by sight. His large, dark eyes sparkled with excitement as he continued his breathless pace up the hill.

"Is Omorti well?" Andar continued with the ritual. He had only been gone half a day; his grandfather's health was not likely to have changed.

The two met on the path and touched fingertips. Juno positively exuded excitement and curiosity, and tried unsuccessfully to hide his frustration at the formal pace of the conversation. "Omorti is well and stands under the arbor. Are you going to tell me what you saw, or not? Was it truly one of the devil's fliers?"

"I believe it was," answered Andar with grave dignity befitting his new adulthood. They walked on in silence.

The boy matched the soft plop of his footfalls to those of his elder as a sign of respect.

Andar noticed and was flattered. "Can you remember the description from First Wars?" By now, half the circle had made individual contact with their minds, and were listening in polite silence.

Juno began to quote with a stilted rhythm:

"The devil and his disciples came from the setting sun. High in the air they rode, for none dared set foot on the sacred Soil. That that bore them were round in their shape, larger on one end than on the other. Four times the height of a man, they were as glowing embers in the wind. Wherever they flew, fire rained down, the land was cursed, and animals, both great and small, refused to produce in their appointed season. And the devil..."

"You quote well, little brother."

There was a rustle of approval from all across the circle.

"It was exactly as the Book described it, although there was only one, and I did not go to see if the land was cursed. But it came from the setting sun and crossed the sky like a firebrand. It passed beyond Daktar's circle, and then vanished into the foothills; I do not believe it could have crossed the mountains."

Andar felt the immense presence of Omorti's ancient mind summoning him to the arbor. He was at once flattered and terrified. Once, the day after he became an adult, Andar stood politely between two homes of the first ring and exercised his adulthood by looking at the great, vine-covered log bower in the very center of the inner circle. Even from where he stood he could see the holy blue flowers hanging in long streamers from the vine, and feel the authority of the one who stood under them.

On that day, he dared move no closer, but today he would enter the structure. It was possible that one of the flowers would fall on him. Being thus selected by the holy blue was the best of omens. He quickly groomed his short, slate-gray fur, and then turned directly toward the arbor.

The silvery old man leaned comfortably against the stump of a tree that must have been unimaginably huge when it was alive. Andar doubted he could span the stump with both arms. Omorti's right arm twisted and curled around the Staff of the Patriarchs, a gnarled piece of root as tall as the old man's head. The staff was black as night, polished smooth by a hundred venerable

hands. Imbedded in a burl near the top, the deep blue of the Eye of Wisdom sparkled in the afternoon light. The Eye was the Soil's own stamp of approval on the staff and its bearer.

"The circle is at peace, son of my son, and I am well."

The old man spoke aloud—Andar was so awed he stood open-mouthed, and made no reply.

Omorti seemed amused by his grandson's discomfort. He rocked gently against his stump and slid his arm up the staff until both fingers rested in a v-shaped groove cut into its top.

At last, Andar found his voice and replied, "The circle's peace is assured by your wellbeing, father." The words formed awkwardly on his lips. He was unaccustomed to vocal speaking, and the response was reserved for patriarchs. He felt like a bumbling child.

"I am told you have seen the devil himself. Is that true?"

Andar chose his words carefully. The ability to do so was the chief reason for conducting formal hearings in this archaic way. "It is not strictly true. I saw one flier come from the setting sun and vanish into the foothills. Everything else is supposition. Still, I believe it was him. It matches the description; who else could it be?"

The old man stroked his silver chest with his free hand, and rocked himself quietly. When he spoke again, it was in the common form so every member of the circle could hear his judgment. "You have spoken with care and restraint as befits an adult of the circle. Your mother has raised you well, my son, and Jordan has reason to stand tall before the arbor. Now, hear my charge. Take three adults of your own choosing. Find the flier's path, and see if its rider dared put foot to soil. If there is any evidence, I will see it with my own eyes."

Andar's mind was a blank. He was the youngest adult; how could he lead anything? His response was conditioned—mindless. "May you outlive your sons' sons."

A twinkle came to the old man's eye. "Indeed, I will try to outlive them all except you. Now go. Choose your group wisely."

Andar turned and padded away in the direction of his father's home. The Opening! He stopped dead in his tracks.

Omorti's mind pressed him gently. "Open or not, you will not sleep in it tonight. It will not shrivel if you wait a few days."

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The little group wouldn't get far before nightfall, but Omorti had made it clear they were to leave as soon as possible. With the sun low on his left, Andar abandoned the smooth road that would have been easier walking, but would have added half a day to their walk. He set out cross-country at the best pace he could sustain. The others fell in behind.

Andar, as the youngest adult in the circle, traditionally would have brought up the rear, but every mind had been listening when the old man had given him his commission. Not a soul in the circle would consider going against the patriarch's choice.

Omer was second in the column. She was Andar's oldest sister; the one he had always looked up to. She had taken Jole for her mate before Andar was born. Next to his parents, Omer and Jole had been Andar's heroes for as long as he could remember.

Jon followed Omer. He was Andar's father's younger brother's firstborn. Jon's mother was from Gondol's circle, three days walk, one handbreadth left of the rising sun. Andar had chosen him for his size and strength. Jon stood half a head taller than the rest of them and had thick, supple arms. Andar had once seen Jon lift himself completely off the ground by wrapping his arms around a tree limb and pulling. Andar had tried it himself once, and spent five days nursing a

pulled muscle. Jon's size had earned him a good deal of teasing as a boy. Although people of the Soil don't hold grudges, Jon kept his mind closed most of the time, content with his own company.

Padiea was last. He was Omer and Jole's son, barely a year older than Andar, but already a scholar of some note, even outside the circle. Andar and Padiea often studied together. As they left the road, Padiea resumed the complaint he had started the moment he had learned his mother would accompany them.

"I will have little time for study, Andar." It was the fifth objection he had generated since they left the circle. "It is not too late, Andar. You could pick any number of young adults that have fewer responsibilities."

Andar simply walked on in silence. When the complaints stopped, he said, "I chose you because I need your knowledge. I will not change my mind."

In a rough bag made of beaten bark, each of them carried his copy of the Book, and provisions for seven days. They carried nothing else. As the four traversed uneven ground covered with crackling-dry grasses half the height of a man, their bags swung awkwardly at their sides.

As they walked, Omer said, "The Soil favors you, Andar, I do not remember such high praise from Omorti given to one in his first year of adulthood."

"I am not sure such praise is a good thing. If we succeed, I will have only lived up to his expectations. If we fail, I will carry all the disgrace."

Padiea said, "Then the answer is simple; you must not fail."

Andar walked on for several steps, and then said, "We are looking for someone we have never seen. We have assumed that he actually landed, but we have little basis for that assumption. We are headed into the foothills where walking is always difficult, and sometimes impossible. If we succeed, it will be a gift from the Soil."

Omer said, "Do you think the Eye failed Omorti?"

"I do not think the Eye can fail, but it speaks in riddles. Perhaps Omorti acted in haste, at least in choosing me."

The sun squeezed between two peaks, then vanished altogether.

"In any case," Omer continued, "It is not you who will be tested; we will all succeed or fail together."

As twilight darkened, Andar debated with himself between the urgency of the mission and his desire to have some study time, no matter how brief. Ultimately, he was unwilling to give up his perfect study record. He turned aside into a shallow, sandy wash with an embankment steep enough for leaning. He found a spot free of sharp rocks, wiggled his feet into the warm brown sand, and settled in for the night. In fifteen minutes, the light was too far gone for reading, but no matter. He had read a page and a half. They ate nightmeal in the dark.

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From space, Eden was a giant blue-and-white marble much like Earth. The five landing modules surfed the wispy outer atmosphere one complete orbit before the computers finally endorsed their airspeed. On the sunward side, land flashed by—lushly green rolling plains carved by silver rivers, and broken by great forests. A small ring of mountains rose oddly sheer to form a dust-clouded, circular valley. As the sunset line approached, a sapphire waterline grew from the horizon, separated from emerald forest by the thinnest line of glowing white sand.

They began powered flight close to the midnight line, still heading against the rotation. On Earth that would have been east, but Eden rotated clockwise as viewed from the north pole. No

one had yet decided whether to declare that the sun rose in the west, or go with their gut feelings. For all humans, the sun rises in the east.

There were other differences, of course. Eden was the second of five planets. It orbited Tau Ceti in a nearly circular path once every 374.41 local days. Its days lasted 25.02 earth hours. No one had yet decided how to deal with the fraction. The probe data showed very little declination, which meant no notable seasons.

The planet's polar radius was 6500 kilometers, compared to roughly 6400 for Earth. Gravity was reading 1.05 earth normal—they had major adjustments ahead.

Roy Condon keyed his mike and transmitted into virgin airspace. “Everybody flying straight and level? Give me a check-in call.” His calm voice belied the turmoil he was feeling. He had been Katzmier’s first recruit; they had been friends for ten years, not counting stasis time. His mind had not yet come to grips with his loss.

“Two’s good,” came Witherspoon’s response.

There was a pregnant pause as everyone half expected to hear the Old Man report in. Logically, they knew better. The colonists in their pods had a fair chance of landing safely: without a pod, the pilot had died instantly.

At last, Joanne said, “Four’s all green.” Her tone was sober.

“Five flies like a passenger ship.” That from Mark Hubble, who seemed less affected by the loss of Katzmier than the rest.

Jerry said, “Six’s on backup flight controls, but everything’s responding normally. I wouldn’t call it a problem.”

“First good news I’ve heard since I woke up. In the next ten hours, we’ll see every square meter of the surface at least once. I want each of you to nominate a first and second choice for a base camp. Choose carefully, you’ll be there at least a year.”

Jerry came back, “I thought the probe selected a site.”

“It did, but we’re here, and it isn’t. If you want to go with the probe’s site as one of your choices, knock yourself out. Personally, I’d just as soon make my own choice. Come to an altitude of three thousand meters, and spread out to fifty kilometers between ships.” A litany of acknowledgment followed, and the craft began their search pattern. They were still moving fast; dawn arrived in just over an hour.

As the probe had predicted, there were two continents, separated by two interconnected seas, one much larger than the other. The advancing dawn line began revealing more of the second continent. Green forest gave way to grasslands that finally became arid. The semi-desert ended abruptly at a range of high mountains that bordered the larger sea.

They unanimously chose a site nestled between the shore of the larger sea and the range of rugged, snow-capped mountains. There, the line of mountains dipped inland slightly for several kilometers sheltering a lush pocket, grassy near the sea, forested in the foothills. A large, relatively level, grassy meadow made it an attractive landing site.

They turned, and came in over the sea, flying low and slow. The LM’s were designed to land on unimproved ground. Nonetheless, they held their collective breath as the big arrowhead-shaped craft settled, one by one, into the grass.

When all five were safely stopped, the airwaves crackled with whoops and congratulations. The next order of business was reviving the passengers.

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At first light, Andar and his party shared firstmeal, then started walking again, keeping the morning sun on their right. Each of them contributed what he knew of the area to the rough map Andar was forming in his head.

The terrain was demanding. They picked their way across the dusty steppes in silent concentration on the next footfall until the sun stood overhead. Under the shade of a lone rock, they stopped for middaymeal. The rock was tall, thin, and oddly tilted, as though pointing their way. It was also the only shade they had seen for almost an hour.

Having eaten, they resumed the march, still moving at right angles to the sun's path. Padiea began a chant, and one by one, they all joined in:

From the stem to the mountains,  
The great circle of Soil,  
Is the wellspring of life.

When we of the Soil,  
Keep the circle's full unity,  
The Soil grants us peace.

Less than an hour before sunset, the three great black rocks sheltering Daktar's circle grew from behind an intervening hill. As soon as he was close enough, Andar joined fingers with the others and said, "Is Daktar's circle at peace?"

"We have the Soil's peace in abundance. You are welcome to rest in it, if you will."

Andar detected an edge of irritation at their late arrival. No one would mention it, of course, but it was there on the edges nonetheless. "Omorti sends greeting. Is Daktar well?" They passed the closest boulder, and stood at the edge of a circle of four rings, with three new homes forming the beginnings of a fifth. At this distance, they released their grip on each other.

A dust cloud of juveniles pounded out to greet them.

"Daktar was in good health and spirit when he left for Gondol's circle, two days ago. I am Dolep, second in the circle. I suppose you will stay with us? It is late for travel."

"I am Andar, son of Jordan, of Omorti's circle. We will share your peace tonight, and be grateful for it." Andar chose not to notice the irritation. It was a rational emotion, and well suppressed.

Dolep proved to be a small man with a powerful presence that made him seem larger than he actually was. He led the four to a home on the second ring, made the sign of peace before the door, and then entered.

Soon, a juvenile brought water. They all drank deeply, and shared nightmeal. Afterward, each retreated into evening studies. They spent that night as comfortably as if they had been in their own homes.

After firstmeal, Andar brought his brief encounter with the devil's flyer to the forefront of his mind and shared it with Daktar's circle who willingly added detail to the composite map already in Andar's mind. Many here had also seen something, but few believed it was the evil one.

In the background, it was clear that many thought Omorti had sent a young man on a fool's errand. For the sake of peace, the travelers chose not to notice.

Beyond Daktar's circle, the good road once again ran in their direction. After they were far enough away to debate in privacy, the four agreed on the flyer's probable path, although each placed the probable landing site—assuming the craft had indeed landed—in a different location.

Andar considered the composite map in his mind. "If we follow this road," he said, marking the path on which they stood and making sure the others saw it, "then we will cross the path we all agree the flier must have taken. We will then turn toward the rising sun and walk until we find something, or come to the mountains."

The others indicated assent without comment.

In the simple, pragmatic way of the circle, Andar scooped up his bag and plopped off along the path at his best pace. The others fell in behind him, each in his proper place.

Padiea spent the morning in a recitation of the first part of Second Wars; a dreary passage recounting the savagery of the Ancients in the days when the devil ruled and his despoilers profaned the soil.

Andar found himself reciting along. He knew some scholars believed these passages should be excluded from the Book because they portray the ancients as ordinary people led to do unspeakable things by their passion for...devices. It was hard to choose an acceptable word. He found the ancients fascinating, if improbable. They were described as, "taller than a man by twice, yet thin as small trees." He had difficulty forming a picture in his mind.

Just after noon they stopped. Andar said, "I think this is where the flyer crossed," and began munching a piece of dried fruit from his bag, signaling middaymeal.

The ground here was rolling. Although dense with brush and dry grass, it lacked any suitable resting spot. Without a word, they paired up and leaned on their partners, back to back.

As they started away from the setting sun, Omer asked, "What makes you sure this is the exact path the flier took?"

"I am not sure at all. We all agreed on the estimated path. We have no way of improving on our estimate, and this looks like walkable ground. Do you have a better plan?"

"No. You seemed very sure of yourself; I just wondered if you knew something you had not shared with us."

"Not a thing, my sister."

Padiea said, "If you find the devil, what will you do?"

"You heard Omorti charge me to bring back whatever evidence I found. If we are stronger than the devil, we will bring him before the arbor. Omorti may do what he likes with him. If not, we will be forced to make a decision."

"You mean *you* will make a decision."

"We will all participate. If we cannot agree, I will decide. Would you like to take that responsibility?"

Padiea's mind cringed. "I would never even think it."

After about an hour, they came to a barrier not marked on their composite map, one they could not pass over. Omer thought it was a fault line from some recent quake; no one else had a better theory. No matter how it had been formed, no one could climb it.

The wall of dirt stood straight and vertical, as high as an adult's head. Andar sent Padiea left along the wall while he himself went right. The others would spread out to relay. The two would walk in opposite directions until they lost contact. Perhaps they would find a way.

After half an hour, things were worse, not better. To the right, the wall rose well above a man's head and showed every sign of going higher. To the left it was not so high, but a crevasse opened at the base of the wall. By the time the wall was low enough to consider trying an

undignified roll over the top, the crack was three feet wide and very deep. Andar decided their best hope lay in continuing left. He began to retrace his steps.

In another hour, they were together again and moving left of the sun. Eventually the wall dwindled to nothing, but the crack had widened another foot. It was late and there were trees here. Andar called a halt for the evening; he didn't know what else to do.

As they ate and rested against the trees' rough bark, Andar studied a fallen log and pondered life and death. Some held that trees lived and fell exactly as people do. If they were right, this grove where he now trespassed would be their circle. It was an unsettling thought and he thrust it from his mind before it damaged the peace of the group. He was unprepared for the thought that replaced it.

In his mind's eye, he saw the four of them pushing and tugging the log to the edge of the crack, then working one end across to the other side. It sounded, somehow, if not obscene, then unseemly. It was a strong image; the others picked it up instantly.

Omer snapped, "What childish thoughts are these?"

The idea instantly gained stature in Andar's mind.

Jon entered in for the first time that day. "You cannot be serious, little brother. If we got the log across, what good would it do? Should we walk across a four-foot crack on a log less than a foot wide?"

"Would you return to Omorti empty handed?"

"I find it better than the picture of the circle grieving for months because we never returned at all. All the circles will say, 'They went in search of the devil, and he surely found them.' It will bring dishonor to Omorti's circle for years to come."

Andar felt his newfound authority slipping away. He said, "It is late; we will rest here tonight. I will decide in the morning." After a few minutes, he walked to the old dry log.

His legs were no more than twice their diameter in length and very strong, but in their strength they had sacrificed flexibility. It was possible to bend a knee—painful, but possible. Climbing any obstacle higher than half the diameter of his foot was virtually out of the question. The log fell well within that category.

At one point, however, the log lay against a low, smooth rock. Before he had fully considered the implications of his actions, Andar had his right foot on the rock. He instantly had the attention of the other three. With great effort, he rocked himself forward onto his right foot, and then strained to get his left foot up on the log. In some pain, he made it. The loose bark was rough underfoot, and he had no experience at keeping his balance this way. His serpentine arms twisted this way and that, but lacked the necessary mass to counterbalance his body properly. To walk, he swung his legs in an arc, an awkward motion. After three steps, he lost his balance and fell heavily to the ground.

Jon entwined Andar's arms with his own and slowly drew him to his feet. No one spoke.

Andar shuffled painfully to the nearest tree and dug out his copy of the Book. He began reading a favorite poem to cover his shame. He had fallen only once before in his life. He had been three years old at the time.

He rested poorly that night. His body ached, and his thoughts were in turmoil; he was at great pains to keep his mind closed. He had already fallen like an infant, and had to be lifted to his feet. He could not bear that his thoughts would destroy the peace of the group if he lost control of them. But, neither could he make himself face returning to the arbor empty-handed. Not on his first commission. Not after Omorti's public praise. When he did sleep, he had nightmares of slipping off the log and falling, and falling, and... He awoke with a jerk.

The sky toward the rising sun was a rare purple; a sure sign the end of Dry was drawing near and Wet was nearly upon them. Andar shuffled stiffly to the edge of the rift and looked morosely at the other side. He thought idly that if one of them were standing on the far edge, they could touch fingers across the gap, and bid each other peace and long life. There was, of course, no way to test his theory here and now. He limped back to his leaning tree and rummaged in his bag for firstmeal.

Ideas generally grow like seeds. Something is planted in the mind, small and seemingly unrelated to what it will be. In time, it germinates, and the tiny husk begins to swell. As Andar chewed the last bite, an idea burst through its husk into full leaf.

“We are going to cross the rift,” he stated to anyone within hearing.

Omer looked at him in amazement. “Did you hit your head when you fell?”

Padiea chimed in, “Perhaps during a long night without peace he learned the secret of flight.”

Jon scratched his back on his chosen tree and said nothing.

Andar felt his skin grow warm, but he controlled his mind like an adult. “Do you believe in the peace of the Soil and the unity of the circle?”

His three companions were speechless. How dare he question their faith in the twin foundations? There was no appropriate response, but their anger hung in the air like a cloud.

“Good. If we use the things the soil has provided and strive together as one person, we will make it across. I will stake my life on it.”

There was a long moment of absolute silence. Omer finally said, “Show us your plan, little brother.”

The log proved heavier than he had thought. Only Jon’s added strength allowed them to roll it from the depression it had made for itself in the soil. After that, it was much easier. In an hour they had rolled and tugged and pushed the log until it spanned the gaping fissure. Jon dragged the flat rock along and pushed it against the side of the log. Andar closed his eyes and put the image of yesterday’s shame out of his mind. Ignoring the pain, he forced his right foot up onto the rock.

Jon moved to the far side of the log. They entwined arms. Jon pulled.

Before he knew it, Andar was once again standing on the log. Then, following the plan, Omer stood next to the rock. They interlocked fingers and held to each other tightly. Instead of swinging his legs, Andar side-shuffled to a point just above the edge. He dared not look down.

Omer put foot to rock, then, with Jon’s help, she mounted the log. With one hand, she held Jon’s hand, with the other she reached out to grasp Andar’s. Her grip on Andar’s fingers tightened, he inched along after Andar until their bodies were almost touching.

Jon and Padiea, one on either side of the log, steadied Omer who, in turn, steadied Andar.

Andar sidestepped out over the rift. He gripped Omer’s fingers until they were numb, but he continued to inch across the deadly chasm. He had barely reached safety when their two arms would stretch no more.

Omer stood frozen to the log, unable to venture out over the void, yet unwilling to abandon Andar.

Andar said, “It is not easy, but it is possible. See, I am across. Remember, we must strive together as one person. Now it is your time to move.”

Omer moved one foot, just a little. It felt terribly wrong standing thus, suspended between soil and sky, but she didn’t fall. The others steadied her. She inched out again, then again.

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The moment he awoke, Terry O'Neal knew something was terribly wrong. Instead of the bright lights and smiling faces he expected, he was alone in total darkness. The air hung foul about him—barely breathable. His heart raced and his lungs pumped in a vain attempt to rid his body of the CO<sup>2</sup> building up in its tissues. And something was missing.

Claustrophobia suddenly gripped him. He was completely disoriented; he could have sworn he was hanging by his heels. He weighed a ton. He screamed away the some of his precious air—a long, wordless, terrified sound reverberating from unseen steel walls. No one answered.

What could be wrong? He had practiced in this very pod, what, a hundred times—no, more than that. He had trained in darkness at least twice. This was *not* right. Why was the pod door not open? If he was awake, the door should be open.

“Terrance Eugene, get a grip!” he snapped at himself. “You’re not a child.”

That part was true enough. He had been eighteen when he left earth in deep stasis. Even stasis pods could not stop the aging process entirely for 51 years; his body had matured to a thirty-something state.

He started by moving his right index finger. He felt it slide along the pliant surface of a massage pad. Concentration and tactile feedback helped drive back the demons of the dark. He moved his left index finger.

He worked his right arm free of the pads; it fell almost straight up over his head. His first instinct had been correct; he had to be hanging upside down instead of resting flat on his back. He could barely lift his arm, his head hurt like hell, and he fought a growing nausea. *I can't breathe.* The pod was equipped with scrubbers and emergency oxygen; even if the ship's power had failed, how could the air be bad?

He worked his left leg free. It fell against his chest with such force the rest of him peeled out of the travel bed, tumbling and slipping down the steep incline and finally free-falling two feet onto what should have been the door. The last thing he remembered before the darkness overtook his mind was the taste of blood.

Consciousness returned slowly. He shook his head to clear it, and then reached up to touch his face and felt dried blood; he must have been out a long time. Something was still missing, and his arms were lead. A goose egg on his forehead caused him to wince when he touched it. The air was worse than before, foul and heavy. Suddenly, it struck him; it was sound that was missing. Except for the sounds he himself made, the pod was silent. The sub-woofer throb of *Orion's* engines was gone. No hissing ventilator, no whining shunt-wound motor, not a word or a footstep broke the silence. It was a tomblike stillness and he had to break it, one way or another.

“Pod status,” he rasped. No response; he hadn't expected one, but it was worth a try. He lay still and pictured the layout of the pod in his mind. The picture was all foggy, as though he had learned it years ago. *You did learn it years ago, dummy. Now concentrate!* There would be a mechanical release to the left of the door, but which side was left? Which side was up? Where in hell was he? He held as tightly as he could to a flange on the door, and took deep, rancid breaths. *If you panic, you'll never see your nineteenth birthday.* Slowly his heart rate came down and he groped for the doorframe.

The emergency door release was exactly where he remembered it. He went through the drill he had learned so long ago: Remove the safety interlock pin. Lift the latch cover. Grasp the latch handle firmly, and pull it directly toward you.

The handle moved only with great difficulty, although he couldn't be sure if the handle was stiff, or he was weak. On the third try, it clicked loudly and the door opened a crack. A shaft of deep orange light penetrated the inky darkness and a draft of fresh air hit him in the face. The air was hot and dusty, and had an unfamiliar odor. It was wonderful. He put his feet on the door and pushed, but it refused to move. Small pieces of a reddish gravel trickled into the opening.

The implications of sunlight arrived a moment later. His stasis pod should have been one of 75 contained in a landing module. If he was seeing sunlight, the pod was now in its lifeboat mode—a cylinder three meters in diameter by five long. The ship was gone, and with it his parents, friends, and life as he knew it. His gut tightened. What could possibly have happened?

To make it worse, the light was the wrong color. His ship had carried 300 colonists en route to a class-M planet they called Eden. It had been thoroughly, if remotely, surveyed; the light should not have been orange. Could he be alone on the wrong planet?

With an immense act of his will, he brought his terror under control. Although his fate was not completely in his own hands, he was hardly helpless.

He took several deep breathes. He told himself, give yourself a rest and find something to eat. Then that door has to open. You can't stay here.

He rolled over to reach the food locker and pressed the button. Nothing happened. Irritated, he drove his left heel hard into the center of the plastic panel and instantly regretted it. A sharp-edged sliver of plastic lodged deep in the side of his foot. He said some words his parents didn't think he knew, and then opened the emergency locker. He found some antiseptic and a roll of gauze and set them aside. He braced himself for what he knew he had to do.

When the jagged piece of plastic came out, the pain was too much for him. The pain and fear and bewilderment all came out in a long, wailing, primal scream that sounded all the louder in his confining quarters.

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Andar was feeling as pleased with himself as he dared. When the last of them was safely across the log and on the soil, a wave of grudging admiration radiated from the others. They followed the rift back to the point at which they had originally encountered it, and then turned once again to the rising sun.

After two hours of walking without any sign of the devil or his flier, they stopped at a large rock to rest and eat. Andar had just found a comfortable leaning spot and was about to take his first bite when they heard the old demon's lament—a cry of such anguish that Andar stopped breathing and held perfectly still. The cry was not repeated.

Padiea said, "It is him! We have found the devil." He made the circular sign of purification above his head.

Omer snapped at him sharply, "Be quiet. We have heard a cry of pain. We heard it with our ears, and felt it in our mind. Anything more is supposition. Andar, do you have a plan?"

"No. Do you?"

"No, but we cannot spend the rest of the day leaning on this rock."

Andar felt the pressure of the responsibility Omorti had placed on him. He took a deep breath, and said, "Then three of us will go to find the person or devil that made this terrible cry. Padiea will stay here and listen. If we are taken, or killed, someone must carry word to the circle." Andar braced himself for an outburst of protest from Padiea. When the young man meekly nodded in assent, he made a mental note of it, but didn't comment.

The cry had come from half-right to the rising sun, beyond a low hill. Andar decided to walk around the base of the hill rather than risk showing themselves on the horizon. After all, in Second Wars, Jopak had lost twenty strong men when they stood in a line on the ridge of a hill, exposing themselves to the disciples' weapons. He was glad he had studied so diligently.

The three moved off as quietly as they could. After twenty minutes of slow going, the hill tapered off to nothing. Andar led the way into a narrow valley where his eye was instantly drawn to a reflection from something unnatural. He began to wish he could trade places with Padiea, but his feet continued their steady march forward.

It was not an egg as the Book had predicted. The object was a cylinder, rounded at both ends. There could be no doubt it was the flier he had seen; its landing path was plain to see. It had struck the far slope at an oblique angle and slid the full width of the valley. Several rocks had been thrown from its path, some larger than a man. The battered cylinder now rested halfway up the near slope, and looked as though it might roll back down at any moment. If the devil was in there, his machine had surely taken him on a peace-robbing, bone-bruising ride. He spoke the forbidden word to himself, of course, but he spoke it deliberately and without remorse.

“What do you think, my friends?” It was more than a courtesy; he had no plan at all.

Jon said gravely, “I will go to it. Devil or not, whatever we heard is injured. I will not let even the devil suffer if I can help.”

Andar considered the plan for a moment. It was not a true plan, only a course of action, but nothing better came to mind. “Go in peace, then. Be careful not to walk on the downhill side. It could roll down without warning.”

Jon padded off without a reply. The hill was steep and his progress was slow, but in time he reached the side of the flier.

Andar had underestimated its size. In diameter, it was at least three times a man’s height, and five times in length. From the Book’s descriptions of such things, it had to be made of metal. He watched Jon touch it. Contact did not seem to harm him.

Jon climbed farther up the hill and disappeared behind the cylinder.

Omer took a few steps toward the flier, then stopped and looked back.

Andar decided nothing was to be gained by waiting so far back, and started up the hill himself. As he drew closer, he began to feel the pain and despair of the cylinder’s occupant. There were no words, only cryptic, undecipherable images like those of a newborn. Whatever was in there was alone, frightened, hurt...and definitely not evil.

He reached out as clearly as he could. “Who are you?” There was no response; nothing to suggest that he had even been heard. Could this be an adversary? This creature who could not even speak?

Just then, Jon said, “I have found the door, but it is on the lower side and jammed into the soil. It is open about the diameter of a man’s arm, although it is too small for mine.”

The other two started up the hill as fast as they could manage.

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The emergency locker, thankfully, had a purely mechanical latch. Besides the dressing for his wound, he had found some painkiller in it, and now felt much better. Terry had cleaned his wound and wrapped it as tightly as he dared. He was now chewing on a bland bar of some sort, and drinking a tart liquid from a silvery bag.

It was clear that he was no longer on *Orion*. He could think of no reason for that to be true that didn’t spell disaster with a capital “D.” Still, there was sunlight out there, and gravel—not possible aboard *Orion*.

The pod was designed to function as an emergency landing vehicle—heat shields, tiny antigrav unit, two weeks or so of air. The functional word here was emergency; where was everyone else? Although he has solved the air problem, the pod carried little food or drink. If he couldn’t get it to roll over . . . he refused to allow his mind to go there.

Suddenly there was a rattling sound, like a stream of small stones bouncing along the side of the pod.

“Dad?” he cried. “Dad, Mom, is that you?”

Silence. Even the rattling sound had stopped.

“Who’s out there?”

Silence.

He scrambled to the door and tried to close it, but it would not budge. He watched with growing terror as shadows flickered across the ebbing ray of light that had given him so much comfort. He looked for a weapon but found only the shard of plastic he had removed from his foot. Finally, he crawled into the travel bed, wriggling into the inverted depression as best he could. One foot was where his head should be. He got the best grip he could on the leg pads, and held his breath.

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Andar slipped as they rounded the top of the cylinder. A tiny landslide bounced along the side and trickled away to the valley floor. A voice cried out. An audible voice, muffled by the cylinder, but quite clear. The tone was strong, but the mind that made it was as simple as a newborn, and very frightened. If the cry was a message, he could not recognize it. The voice cried out again, and then fell silent. Andar climbed down to where Jon stood by what was clearly a door. It had opened as far as it could, but it was nearly under the edge, just where the pushed-up soil cradled the great polished thing. Bits of soil and small rocks from the landslide filled the lower part of the opening. Andar reached down to squeeze his arm into the dark crack of the door.

“What are you doing?” There was genuine concern in Omer’s voice.

“Trying to find a way to open the door farther.”

“There is something *in* there.” Omer realized she was announcing the obvious.

“Listen to it. Whatever it is, it has no evil in its mind. I do not believe it will harm me.”

Omer remained unconvinced. Still, the mission was Andar’s, and the responsibility, as well as the arm that was at risk. She held her peace.

Andar slid his small arm easily into the slot and felt along the inside. There were bumps and ridges, but if any of them had a function, he could not make it out. He withdrew his hand and braced his back on the cylinder while he thought things out.

“We must open the door,” Jon said. “We cannot carry this thing back to the arbor, and whatever is inside needs our help.”

Andar agreed with him. “Tell us your plan, my brother.”

“The three of us must grasp the edge of the door and lift. If we cannot open it, then we must call Padiea.”

There was instant assent. Even Omer, having seen that no harm came to Andar, was willing.

The three of them wrapped their fingers around the door and lifted. At first nothing moved, but then the soil shifted slightly, and the cylinder slid a foot or two down the hill. As it went, it rolled slightly away from them and the door flew open.

## Chapter 2

The reddish shaft of light disappeared. Something blocked the narrow door opening admitting only dim, reflected light. Terry's eyes were riveted to the slit as he clung tenaciously to the near-vertical travel bed. Something moved in the dim light.

He couldn't see it clearly; something was in the narrow door opening. It appeared to be a vine or snake of some sort with the last few centimeters split down the middle. Whatever it was, it curled and twisted around as though searching for something. The split end acted like a hand, groping and feeling its way along the doorframe. Terry held his breath for fear of making a sound. After a long minute, whatever it was withdrew.

Suddenly six of them were in the slot, their split ends grasping and pulling at the door. Without warning, the pod shifted then rolled a few degrees.

The door flew open.

Terry held on with all the strength he had left. It wasn't enough. The pod's sudden movement tore the bed from his grasp and he fell a little over a meter, landing flat on his back on the pod's steel wall. All the breath left his body. Little colored lights floated in his field of vision. For a moment, he didn't know where he was.

When his head cleared, three faces peered at him through the door. At least they appeared to be faces. The heads were rounded and had no discernable neck. Two small, bright eyes peeked out, roughly where humans would expect eyes to be, but he could see no nose and only a suggestion that there might be a mouth under the soft-looking fur that covered the whole face.

He moved a little and decided nothing was broken. The faces in the door didn't look aggressive, although it occurred to him he wouldn't know what aggression looked like on these faces. He stood up. The little creatures in the door shuffled backward in what seemed to Terry to be a hasty retreat. They had odd little gumdrop-shaped bodies with two stumpy legs that hardly seemed long enough to be useful. The serpentine things that had opened the door sprouted from their trunks about in the middle, one on each side, and apparently served as arms. They made not a sound.

Through the door, Terry could see the pod sat on a steep slope. As though on cue, it shifted again. Friend or foe, at the moment the creatures seemed less a threat to life and limb than the pod. He carefully climbed through the door.

Just outside, he remembered the food and emergency supplies. As he turned to go back, the pod slid two meters down the hill, caught on a rock and turned slowly sideways. Ponderously it rolled and bounced down the hill into the valley.

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The creature had been hiding somewhere in the upper part of the cylinder, although Andar couldn't conceive how any living creature could get up there. It fell just inside the open door with a solid thud that caused the cylinder to shift slightly. Andar assumed the creature was dead; it would take a miracle for it to survive such a fall, and it showed no sign of life. For no reason he could explain, he felt a great sense of loss.

Suddenly the confusing mental images were back. Unbelievably, the creature had returned from the dead. His heart now knew this had to be the devil, although his mind had decided some

time ago that, whatever it was, it was harmless. The Book would have the answer to this enigma when he had time enough to study it through.

It was an unimaginably strange creature, impossibly thin and fragile. Its legs were as long as its arms. Its arms were thick as tree branches, and just as stiff, just as the Book had predicted. Its head had bumps and flaps marring its surface, and sat atop a frail-looking stalk. But the thing that struck Andar the most was its nakedness. It had almost no fur at all. What little there was, grew in scattered patches, thin and coarse. The creature stirred, and then opened the most amazing eyes on sacred soil. They were blue, holy blue. Could anything evil have blue eyes? Silly question, nothing has blue eyes. Andar looked again. The eyes were still blue.

The creature rose, unassisted, on its spindly legs. It was too much. Andar called a retreat, and the three of them backed up to a safer distance.

The creature stepped through the door, and drew itself to full height. It was at least twice as tall as an adult, yet thin as a sapling.

“How will you capture it, my brother?”

Andar had almost forgotten Padiea, who had only been able to see through the eyes of the others. He replied, “I am not sure it needs to be captured. We have not yet asked it to follow us. Where are your manners, brother?”

Andar took one cautious step forward.

The creature turned as though to return through the door. Just then the whole flyer shifted, and began to roll down the hill, leaving the twig creature behind.

Andar noticed one foot was wrapped in something white, and the creature seemed to favor that foot. He made a protective sign in the soil and shuffled up to the creature.

It stood its ground and looked down at him with those unbelievable eyes.

Andar reached out and gingerly touched the wrapped foot with the tip of his finger. When the creature failed to strike at him, Andar plucked at the wrapping. If the foot was injured, he stood a good chance of fulfilling the commandment to “. . . heal the wounded stranger. . .” The creature folded its twig-legs and sat shamelessly on the ground.

Andar slowly unwound whatever was on its foot. After a turn or two, the thin strip was stained the color of the sun on the horizon. When the strip was removed, it revealed a nasty cut oozing a fluid the same bright color.

Andar stared at the thick, sticky fluid. It could be nothing else but blood; how could he heal something with blood that looked like a liquid sunset?

“Padiea, find me a plant and bring it here. We must do what we can to fulfill the commandment.” In the typical shorthand of the circle, the word “plant” was accompanied by a mental image. The circle used few nouns, all trees were “tree”, all rocks “rock”. The attached picture was clearer than any definition could be.

Andar took his copy of the Book from his bag and placed it reverently on the soil. Then he cautiously grasped the injured foot and placed it on the sacred pages. The foot did not shrivel and the Book did not burst into flames. It was settled then; this could not be the devil.

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Terry had almost forgotten the pain. For a boy who had spent half his life in his father's physics lab, or debating with one of his mother's colleagues at the Smithsonian, this was fascinating. One of the gumdrops had made the first move, coming forward cautiously, showing interest in Terry's only article of clothing. Its intentions were, of course, unknown, but in Terry's

experience, a pack of hunters, or warriors, would have attacked as a unit. *These may be your only companions on this planet, go with it. Without help, you're dead anyway.* Terry sat, and allowed it to unwrap the bandage; it was wonderfully dexterous with the tips of his two "fingers." Terry promptly dubbed him "Doc."

Doc removed a thick, leathery rectangle from a rough bag slung around his body.

The thing looked for all the world like a book, although Terry instantly discounted that idea. Terry forced himself to examine the prejudice that allowed him to discount the possibility of a book. He decided it stemmed from their apparent lack of speech. After all, how could a species that had no speech, read? He reminded himself that this place, and everything in it, was alien to his experience. He needed to watch the Earth prejudices.

Doc gently lifted Terry's injured foot and placed it on the block,

Just then, a fourth gumdrop came plopping over the rim of the valley, raising little puffs of brown dust at every step. The newcomer carried a reddish brown, fern-like plant, which it passed to Doc.

Doc began plucking tiny bulbs from the root system and made as though it would place them in the open wound. Terry quickly withdrew the foot, and then slowly, deliberately extended it. He had no antibiotics—if nothing intervened, the wound would almost certainly kill him. The gumdrop could do no worse.

When doc had finished placing the bulbs, he twisted the fronds like a cloth. A thick, red liquid dripped from the twisted stems and splashed into the gash. On contact, the liquid started to foam violently. All pain left the foot. Terry was not prepared to accept that any creature incapable of speech understood medicine, even herbal medicine, but he could not deny his foot felt fine. Again, he cautioned himself about prejudging things on an alien planet, whichever planet it was.

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When the plant had finished its work and no longer boiled away the disharmony, Andar rewrapped the tiny foot. How could any living thing balance on so small a base?

The sun was low, and the first wispy evening cloud of the season flamed in the sky.

Andar said, "We will rest here tonight, and set out early tomorrow. We can rest on the cylinder." Having made his announcement, Andar shuffled carefully down the hill, followed closely by the others. Halfway down he turned to see what the stick creature would do. It had scrambled to its feet, but showed no inclination to follow. *Patience*, he quoted to himself, *nothing good is conceived in haste.*

As they reached the bottom of the hill, they found the metal door, its hinges twisted off, lying in a patch of tall golden grass. The cylinder was resting on level ground just a minute's walk farther on.

Each of the four found a comfortable spot on the curved metal side and settled in. Andar noticed Padiea made the purification sign before he would touch the thing. It had been a long and eventful day, and as they ate their fruit, the air fairly quivered with their thoughts and recollections. After they had eaten, all four produced copies of the Book and fell quiet.

Deep shadow filled the little valley well before the surrounding hills were plunged into darkness. The twilight painted everything in shades of red and black. Andar almost missed the spindly shadow that slipped soundlessly through the open door and vanished into the inky interior.

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Terry had found the pod resting solidly, in very close to its normal attitude. He felt for the food, and found two bars and a drink pack that somehow had not fallen out of the shattered locker. After eating these, he had slipped gratefully into the travel bed's soft womb and was asleep in seconds.

Morning came much too early; a blazing shaft of sunlight woke him what seemed like a moment later. Every muscle, bone and joint ached, and his injured foot felt slightly warm. He gave himself a lecture on self-discipline and reluctantly got up. He pondered the plastic cover to the clothing locker, then, remembering the food locker disaster, went in search of a suitable tool. The gumdrops stood in a row against the side of the pod. Each had one of the dark, leathery things grasped in both hands. Each one was open like a book and as Terry watched, the big one turned a page. The implications were stunning. The gumdrops read books and practiced medicine, yet didn't speak. He felt like the farmer that saw his first giraffe and said, "There ain't no such animal."

Terry picked up a grapefruit-sized rock and plotted the destruction of the clothing locker cover.

A bath would have been heaven, but clothes were the next best thing. He zipped up his favorite non-issue, royal-blue jump suit, pulled on a pair of issue sneakers, and took inventory. There was little enough. Two pairs each of t-shirts, briefs, and socks, food for a day or so, a tiny flashlight, a gray, issue jumpsuit. His pocket computer also survived, for all the good it did him. Without a web link, the powerful device was little more than a calculator.

After checking over the pod one last time, he packed everything into the spare jumpsuit, tied the arms and legs together and slung the makeshift pack over his shoulder. He pondered his situation and decided his best chance of finding the colony was to follow Doc and the others to their village. The alternative was to stay with the pod, and that held little hope. Clearly, his first task was to retrieve the food and drink packets that had fallen out of the pod. Doc plopped past the door, and Terry decided it was time to move out. He took a deep breath and one last look around the pod, and then stepped into the morning sun. The gumdrops turned in unison, and then froze.

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Andar couldn't believe his eyes. Twig had covered himself with blue. All four of them made signs of purification, but stood their ground. Andar had never seen so much blue in a single spot, as much as all the flowers of the arbor put together. The covering gave a little substance to the slender limbs, but it was still impossibly tall and slender. And *blue*.

"Blasphemy!" Padiea gave the word a cutting edge. "The evil creature has wrapped itself in holy blue." His right arm scooped up a small rock and threw it as hard as he could. Rock throwing was a child's game at which Padiea had excelled, but he had been an adult for over a year. Lack of practice and his sudden, uncontrolled anger took their toll. The rock missed the creature's head by a finger's width and bounced off the side of the cylinder with an unexpectedly loud ringing sound.

The creature hesitated only a heartbeat, and then raced away at incredible speed.

Omer reacted first. "Padiea! Are you not yet an adult? Would you disgrace the whole family? Tell me exactly how such a sinful outburst will contribute to the peace of the Soil and the unity of the circle."

His mother's words were a whiplash across the face, the pain so intense that all of them suffered. Padiea slowly bent his right knee until it touched the ground. "Forgive me, Mother, but the creature has desecrated the blue."

Omer was too angry to respond. Her arms twisted and jerked in rage and her eyes closed in rejection of the young man's plea.

Andar spoke aloud. It was his first judicial judgment, and he wanted it to carry full force. "Your accusation of blasphemy will receive a full hearing before the arbor. We will not speak of it again until then. Your childish action reflects badly on us all, and may have caused us to fail Omorti. Hear my judgment, Padiea son of Jole of Omorti's circle. Unless you can find the twig creature, and bring it before the arbor, you may not walk within our hearing. You must repair the damage you have done. Does anyone speak against this judgment?"

Utter silence.

Banishment! The sentence was more than Padiea had expected; the circle hated being alone, and could not survive if separated for long periods. He struggled to his feet. No one offered to help. He shuffled away in the direction the creature had taken. The tips of his fingers dragged dejectedly in the dust.

The others moved into a close, symbolic circle of intertwined arms, soothing their collective mind with a soft chant designed to restore peace and unity.

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The stone had taken Terry completely by surprise. It flashed past his ear like a rifle shot; the pod behind him rang like a bell. The little gumdrop should pitch for the Red Socks. What had he done? Confused, he forgot the spilled food and drink packets, and decided to put some distance between himself and the pitcher. He trotted off west, up the shallow dry canyon. After a hundred meters or so, he turned and scrambled up the north wall. The soil was dry and powdery, with a fair number of stones and boulders. It supported only scattered patches of dry grasses and bare-limbed bushes—predominate colors were rust-red, and the light brown of the soil. Even the sky was bronze. The place looked fearsomely inhospitable, but the gumdrops survived here, and so would he. He needed to find his mom and dad. They must be worried sick...and he missed them...a little. It nettled him that he needed or missed anyone. He was, and always had been, the smart one, the self-sufficient one.

On the ridge, he stretched out in a clump of brown grass that crackled and broke under his weight—which was considerable. His body had matured in space. Furthermore, the unmanned survey probe had estimated the gravity here at 1.05 earth normal. It felt like 1.5 but some of that was, undoubtedly, his pathetic muscle tone—years in stasis will do that to you. Gravity or muscle tone, his little climb left him winded and trembling. The probe had also said the planet was green and lush. Forget the stupid probe. This couldn't be the same planet. What you see is what you get.

Something was going on with the gumdrops. The pitcher, who Terry had dubbed Cy Young, was standing at an odd angle facing the others. Slowly, he straightened up. It was only then that Terry realized the little creature had been on one knee. Terry had never considered that they might have knees in those stumpy little legs.

"Got in trouble, did you? Serves you right. You could hurt someone with an arm like that." The sound of his own voice felt comforting.

Cy started plodding up the canyon, his fingertips dragging in the dust. Although it could have had any number of meanings, it made the little gumdrop look like a whipped puppy.

Terry pulled his makeshift pack around in front of him and rested his arms on it. His breathing had settled somewhat, but his muscles still quivered with exhaustion. He tried to remember everything his mother had taught him about anthropology. Someday, this could be the basis for a doctoral thesis.

When he was directly below, Cy stopped and looked up. He took a tentative step toward the canyon wall, apparently decided it was too steep, then turned and continued west. In five minutes, he was out of sight.

Fifteen minutes later, Doc, the big one, who Terry had named Jumbo, and the other gumdrop broke out of the huddle they had been in since Cy left. They too, moved west, up the canyon. They ignored his existence.

Terry got up, swung his pack over one shoulder, and kept pace with them, well out of pitching range. For him, their pace was a leisurely stroll.

The canyon had quickly petered out, and ever since, they had been crossing ever-diminishing hills where little dust devils played, but nothing else moved. About noon, the three gumdrops stopped in a grove of stunted, barren trees. He had not seen Cy since this morning.

The sun was fierce. The trees were the first things taller than himself Terry had seen for an hour. He contemplated joining the gumdrops in their partial shade, but thought better of it. He still had no idea what he could have done, what taboo he might have transgressed, that would have drawn such a reaction from Cy. He sat in the dust, twisted a T-shirt into a makeshift turban to block out the merciless sun. He finished off the last of the emergency rations before they moved out. He began to question how long he could keep this up.

After about an hour, they came to a road—nothing else would describe it. The beaten path was at least four meters wide and actually depressed into the earth a few centimeters. The gumdrops changed direction slightly to follow it.

The ground became less and less hilly until it was a level sea of knee-high, dry grass. By Terry's best judgment, an hour of daylight remained when they came to the rock.

He had been watching the massive thing grow out of the horizon for over two hours—a rich, red stone, veined with black, perhaps volcanic, certainly different from anything he had seen before. It must have stood 50 meters high, 300 wide, and stretched on for a kilometer. It reminded him of Uluru in the Australian outback—the place the tourists called Ayers Rock—except the sides of this one were nearly vertical. The road skirted the near end of the rock. On the far side, a north-south road crossed the one they were on.

Near the intersection, the gumdrops wedged themselves into polished niches in the stone and produced their books. Apparently, the travel day was over.

Terry's mouth was so dry his tongue was beginning to swell, and he was more than a little hungry. Part way up the side of the rock was what appeared to be a small cave. After spending the day watching them skirt even the slightest obstacle, Terry was sure the gumdrops couldn't climb and the cave looked much better than the open ground. He picked a wide crack in the stone and began to practice half-forgotten climbing skills from summer camp. Halfway up, he was sure he would fall—his muscles were cramping. Fear increased the problem. He stopped climbing until he regained at least partial control, and then began inching upward once again.

The cave felt deliciously cool after the relentless sun. A slight breeze drafted out from somewhere deep within the rock. He lay flat on his back and tried sucking on a pebble to stimulate saliva flow. The results were disappointing.

At last, he had regained enough strength to sit on his pack. From this vantage point, he could see forever. The drab landscape went on, unbroken until it faded into the dusty atmosphere. He appeared to be in a broad valley rimmed by steep mountains. They had been walking away from them all day, but from this height, they circled around at least as far as the rock would let him see. There were patches of green high on the mountains—there must be *some* moisture in this desert, but he had seen no sign of it. He was sure he wouldn't be able to reach those mountains, much less climb them. He lay down with the pack for a pillow and willed himself to sleep. Thirst kept him awake.

He thought he heard a sound coming from the depths of the dark cave—faint—he wasn't sure. He held his breath and listened. It was absolutely still. Nothing moved, there were no birds and the gentle breeze was as quiet as fog. He heard it again, far away and full of echoes, the sound of water dripping. You're hallucinating, go to sleep. Once again, it splashed faintly.

Terry dug the finger-sized emergency flashlight from his pack and left the rest of the stuff in the mouth of the cave. The passage narrowed quickly; within a few feet, he found himself sidestepping between smooth stone walls. He heard it again. Still full of echoes, but now, unmistakably, the sound of water. Added to that, he was sure he could *smell* water. The passage squeezed tighter, but his thirst drove him deeper into what was now no more than a crack and less smooth than before. Then he stuck.

He was wedged in place, unable to move forward or back. A small bump of rock pressed under his breastbone, limiting his breathing. He fought down a rising scream. After a few labored breaths, he held the light in his teeth and reached as far back as he could, but found nothing but smooth stone. It was increasingly hard to breathe.

Ahead, blackness swallowed up his light and gave nothing in return. He strained ahead as far his arm would go, and found a handhold. He threw the last of his strength into one final effort.

He popped free like a cork from a champagne bottle—and then he was falling.

His impact caused a huge, noisy splash and knocked the light from his teeth. He fought his way to the surface, gasping and sputtering.

It was, indeed, deep, cool water. He rolled in it, splashed in it, drank a great gulp, floated on his back, and then did it all over again. After a few minutes and several mental warnings not to drink too much, he took stock. He could see his light resting on what appeared to be a ledge, three or four meters down. He could see nothing else. Terry recovered the light on the third try, and shut it off to conserve its tiny battery. The effort left him winded, and weak.

He was floating like a cork. For water, this must be some dense stuff, he thought then started to worry about what it might do to his body. Without it, you're dead anyway. A few strokes brought him to a vertical wall. He slowly groped his way around the smooth, stone wall, but found not so much as a ridge or crack.

From the echoed sound of his splashing, he guessed the cistern was more or less round, but he knew sound could be tricky. He had no way of knowing if he was halfway around or had been around twice. He rested, floating on his back, then continued his search, treading water lightly and moving carefully along the wall. Suddenly, his foot struck a solid object that made him yelp in pain. It seemed to be a stone, flat and level and less than a meter deep. He stood on it and dug the light from his pocket.

A narrow stone stairway rose out of the water and vanished into an arched opening in the wall. Except for his pod and perhaps the gumdrops' books, it was the first manufactured thing he had seen on the planet. He knew at once the gumdrops could not have made it, nor could they use it. The steps were steep, each one rising halfway to his knee.

The steps twisted and wound upward for a long time. He tried to keep count, but lost it more than once. He was too tired to care very much, and finally gave up altogether. Every few steps he had to sit on a step and rest.

After he had climbed for what seemed like an eternity, the pitch-blackness gave way to a dim light. Shortly, he stepped through an arch into what seemed to be a small room. Diffused starlight lit three large windows to the west. There were another three windows to the east. Terry lay down on the bare stone floor and was asleep almost instantly.

The sun woke him. Three burning shafts of orange light streamed in through windows in the east wall. Nothing about him wanted to work. His arms and legs threatened to sue for divorce if he even thought of getting up, but if he didn't, the gumdrops would leave without him.

Divorce proved an idle threat, but his arms, legs and back nagged and complained at every step. He could easily have eaten a horse.

The room was made of cut stone, smooth and well worked. There was a wooden door in the north wall, exactly across from the stairs. Its heavy planks were smooth and even and it fit into the arched stone doorway without a crack. Terry lifted a simple metal latch and pushed the door open on hand-forged hinges.

It was a village, or had been. It had streets and alleys and houses and storefronts and other buildings for which he could make out no particular purpose. Dust and sand lay thick in sheltered corners, but most of it was windswept and clean. Whoever had built it appeared to have left a very long time ago. Exposed corners were wind-eroded. Here and there, a roof had collapsed.

There were artifacts—odd pieces of furniture in the sheltered areas, fragile with age, mostly fragments, but still recognizable. And other things, some he couldn't even picture a use for, but a hammer is a hammer and a shovel is recognizable no matter how odd the shape.

The entire village had been hewn from solid stone, and occupied the majority of the top of the rock. Several narrow sets of steps led up the outer wall to the natural top of the monolith where a wide path surrounded the village. From the top, he could see three tiny figures moving slowly westward along the road. There was no apparent way down, and he clearly was not leaving the way he had entered.

His heart sank. The gumdrops were alien, but they were the only contact he had. If there was food in this valley, the gumdrops were doubtless his only chance of finding it. He search frantically—there was simply no way. At last, the three shapes faded from view.

The village looked as though it might have come from Europe in the fifteenth century, except for the red color of the stone and all the oddly shaped artifacts. The quality of the stone cutting and woodwork was about right.

He spent several hours poking through rooms looking for a suitable place to sleep. There were beds, all in ruins. Little, in fact was useful. Half buried in sand, along with a broken pot and a necklace of carved stone, he found what could only be a small, ornate axe. It appeared to have been ceremonial, rather than a working tool. It only survived intact because it was made entirely of something that resembled bronze. In design, it fit the character of the village. In fact, the only

item that was out of character was a container he found sitting on a high wooden shelf in a large hall.

The jar was clear, or had been. A fine layer of red dust made it almost opaque. It seemed to be made of some type of plastic, although he could not scratch it. Except for an overturned, dry rotted stool, the rest of the hall was empty, and offered no clue as to the jar's origin. The container was cylindrical, with a slight lip around the open top like a lab jar. It looked as though it should hold about four or five liters. Terry used it to bring a supply of water up from the cistern. He didn't find the exit for two more days.

He searched the top of the perimeter wall meter by meter, all the way around. There simply was no way down without ropes and climbing gear. As he searched, he remembered bits and pictures of his family and his former life.

He remembered a rabbit, roasting whole at the margin of a small, hot fire. The Australian Outback—six weeks on foot with his mother and an Aboriginal guide they called Joe because neither of them could manage a reasonable approximation of his true name. Throughout his life, it had nearly always been his mother. The name, Dr. Abigail O'Neal, got them access to places usually off limits. In this case, Joe had agreed to take them to Uluru, although a treaty with the Aboriginal Nation had placed it off limits to most non-Aboriginals a decade earlier. Terry understood his mother's passion for anthropology, and did his best to share it. What he longed for most, however, he rarely got.

His father's attention was most often focused in the physics lab. This focus had produced a Ph.D. in theoretical physics from MIT, the E.O. Lawrence Award in Physics, and both a W.H.K. Panofsky Prize and a Nobel Prize for his work on the interstellar drive. It had not produced a close relationship with Terry. They were civil, of course; The O'Neal's were civil to a fault. Oddly, now facing death, Terry grieved the loss of his father most of all.

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Gene O'Neal held his wife tightly and watched Captain Roy Condon climb onto a packing crate.

In a slightly shaky voice, Condon said, "As you doubtless have heard, planetfall did not go smoothly. A fourth of our people are adrift in space. I lost a close personal friend; some of you may or may not have lost a family member. At this point we have no way of knowing who, or how many.

"One thing is sure; we have lost a great leader. Like it or not, we all depend on each other for survival, now more than ever. If we all work together, I know we can make it. Every one of you has been through this a dozen times in training. Our priority is to get the tents up, and start a kitchen. You know your jobs; I need you to set your grief aside for a day or two and work your butts off. By then we'll know how much grieving we need to do."

Abby O'Neal toted and stacked, pulled beams and bolted panels, working short shifts and eating the specially prepared, high-energy food provided. Later, she would remember little of what she did. She allowed her training to take over her body, but her mind was a formless, furious sea from which Terry's blue eyes haunted her. Irrationally, she blamed Roy for the danger her son now faced. She invented a hundred ways to exact justice—no, revenge—upon the person of Roy Condon, should Terry not reappear.

She saw little of Gene who was working on the shelter dome closest to the sea. Dubbed Seaside, for the obvious reason, it would hold most of the work areas and all of the power production equipment. She worked on the second dome, 250 meters east, toward the mountains, where the colony would live and eat. Although it was kilometers from the mountains, they were calling this one Mountainside.

The second day, Abby's muscles were so stressed they cramped—simply refusing to move for brief periods. During one of those periods, a redheaded woman stopped to massage her aching arms. As she worked, she made small talk.

Abby only grimaced.

“You're Dr. Abigail O'Neal, aren't you? I'm Kathryn Dietz—call me Kat. I've been such an admirer of your work for years. After all, anthropologists and archaeologists study the same sort of things, except the people I study are all dead and turned to stone. I've worked in your husband's lab a few times; met your son there once. Terry, isn't it?”

Kat instantly winced, her face showing her regret at mentioning Terry. Abby suspected the cloud of terror she was feeling was just as obvious.

Kat went on quickly. “How are you holding up?”

“I suppose I'll live. They tried to warn us, but I never dreamed it could be so hard. The combination of being something-teen years older, out of shape, and working like a horse in five-percent higher gravity is about to do me in. It's time for my break, can you take one?”

“Ten more minutes. I'll see you there.”

Abby was draped into a lightweight folding chair under the shade of a white, open-sided tent when Kat walked in. As she approached, Abby waved her into a facing chair.

“I think I owe you an apology,” Abby said after taking a long sip of lime-flavored electrolyte replacement. “When you mentioned Terry, I must have given you such a look. You clammed up, and then changed the subject like a kid caught talking about sex. I'd be a fool to tell you I'm not worried, I am, but Terry's alive. I don't know how I know, I just know. The worry is about getting him down safely. You said you met him?”

Kat blushed slightly. “The first time I went to Dr. O'Neal's lab, he helped me find the spectrometer. He's a fine-looking boy.”

Abby noticed the blush, wondered about it a little, but let it slide. “He won't be a boy anymore. He was pushing nineteen when we left; he'll be a man in his thirty's. I don't think I'm ready for this.”

Kat looked away toward the mountains for a moment, then turned back and said, “When I first looked in a mirror, I wanted to crawl in a hole, but I'm getting used to it. I've even gained a kilo. The thing that really gets to me is the children. The youngest one here is seventeen now, and looks twenty.”

Abby smiled, “When the stress wears off, you'll look fine, and there'll be more children in due time. Well, break's over for me. Are you alone?”

Again the blush. “Yes.”

“Have dinner with Gene and me tonight. He'd love to talk to you.”

“Do you give rain checks? By supertime, I'm too far gone for conversation. Give me a week or so.”

Abby only nodded as she ducked under the edge of the tent.

Three days later, the framework for both domes was up. At 7:14, just after a breathtaking sunset over the sea, a warning horn sounded. The first of the lifeboat pods had entered the upper atmosphere.

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On Terry's second day, between bouts of nausea from hunger, he searched the wall's base at village street level. The longer he looked the harder it was to control the panic. He poked and inspected every nook and cranny to no avail. There was no way off the rock.

Late in the day, he climbed to the top once again, and sat on the inner edge. Looking out over the village, he tried to picture what life must have been like there. He didn't believe a village could support life without a real, honest-to-goodness *door*.

The streets ran exactly north and south, with narrow alleys running east and west. The buildings were roofed with thin flakes of stone, like slate, but in the same black-veined red as the rest of the village. In the center, an open square contained a large building somewhat taller than the rest with a domed roof. Terry had never been all the way to the center. He decided now was the time.

The main hall was a good thirty meters across and perfectly round. Inside, two rings of pillars supported the dome. In the center, a circular stone staircase at least five meters across dropped straight down into darkness. Large blackened spots above metal wall brackets suggested the way was once lighted by torches.

By the time Terry got back to the house he had commandeered it was nearly dark. He gathered his water and the axe he had found. A bag would have been nice, but there was nothing of the kind in the village. Rot seemed inconsistent with the dry climate, but there was ample evidence here had been water here at one time. With everything ready, he slept fitfully.

At first light, he went straight to the central hall. The circular staircase never got completely dark. Light filtered down to the bottom, although toward the end it was very dim. Opposite the last step, a great metal-bound wooden door stood open.

Beyond the door, the passageway was pitch black. By the dimming beam of the flashlight, Terry followed the passage straight to a massive stone door that, if he had counted his paces correctly, should lead to the outside. The door was closed tightly and there was no latch in it. A good solid push produced absolutely nothing. To one side of the door, a polished wooden beam occupied half of a long, horizontal pocket in the red stone wall. Above it, angular characters cut in the stone could have been inscription or decoration, there was no way to be sure. He tried to take the bar, but it would move only slightly at one end. Using the axe handle as a lever, he pried the beam out a few centimeters. Then, grasping the heavy shaft in both hands, he braced his feet against the wall and pulled as hard as he could. With a rasp of old age, the bar swung in an arc until it rested in the other half of the pocket. Nothing happened.

After a few seconds, Terry heard the rushing and gurgling of water somewhere in the wall. Ever so slowly, the great stone slab began to turn.

Outside, the stone door looked exactly like the rest of the monolith, and Terry was sure it would be invisible when closed. He considered closing it—if he returned the beam to its original position, there should be plenty of time to get out before the door closed. Ultimately, he decided against it. The road was not in sight, and even if the gumdrops found the door, they wouldn't be able to climb the stairs. Besides, he felt oddly uncomfortable with cutting himself off from this retreat. He had no desire to enter it again using his original path.

It took two hours to round the end of the monolith, climb to the little cave and retrieve his pack. He wrapped the axe in his T-shirt and stored it in the pack. The water he carried by hand.

It was nearly midday when he set off after Doc and company. The road ran in the shade for the full length of the rock and he set a quick, but sustainable pace for himself in the slim hope of catching up. As the last of the great wall drew close, a single figure detached itself from a depression in the stone and shuffled into the road. As far as he could tell, it was Cy.