

WHERE THE GOLDEN APPLES GROW

Kage Baker

One of the most prolific new writers to appear in the late nineties, Kage Baker made her first book sale in 1997 to *Asimov's Science fiction*, and has since become one of that magazine's most frequent and popular contributors with her sly and compelling stories of the adventures and misadventures of the time-traveling agents of the Company; of late, she has also started two other linked sequences of stories there as well, one of them set in as lush and eccentric a High Fantasy milieu as any we've ever seen. Her stories have also appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Sci Fiction*, *Amazing*, and elsewhere. Her first Company novel, *In the Garden of Iden*, was also published in 1997 and immediately became one of the most acclaimed and widely reviewed first novels of the year. More Company novels quickly followed, including *Sky Coyote*, *Mendoza in Hollywood*, *The Graveyard Game*, *The Life of the World to Come*, as well as a chapbook novel, *Tell*, *Empress of Mars*, and her first fantasy novel, *The Anvil of the World*. Her many stories have been collected in *Black Projects*, *White Knights* and *Mother Aegypt and Other Stories*. Her most recent books include two new collections, *Children of the Company* and *Dark Mondays*. Coming up are two new novels, *Yes*, *Machine's Child* and *Sons of Heaven*, and a new collection, *Gods and Fawns*. In addition to her writing, Baker has been an artist, actor, and director at the Living History Center, and has taught Elizabethan English as a second language. She lives in Pismo Beach, California.

Here she takes us to a newly colonized frontier Mars, still wild and dangerous, for a taut adventure that demonstrates that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence—no matter which side of the fence you're looking over.

* * * *

1

He was the third boy born on Mars.

He was twelve years old now, and had spent most of his life in the cab of a freight

His name was Bill.

Bill lived with his dad, Billy Townsend. Billy Townsend was a Hauler. He made the long runs up and down Mars, to Depot North and Depot South, bringing ice back from the ends of the world. Bill had always gone along on the runs, from the time he'd been packed into the shotgun seat like a little duffel bag to now, when he sat hunched in the far corner of the cab with his Gamebuke, ignoring his dad's loud and cheerful conversation.

There was no other place for him to be. The freighter was the only home he had known. His dad called it *Beautiful Evelyn*.

As far as Bill knew, his mum had passed on. That was one of the answers his dad had given him, and it might be true; there were a lot of things to die from on Mars, with the cold and dry and blowing grit, and so little air to breathe. But it was just as likely she had gone back to Earth, to judge from other things his dad had said. Bill tried not to think about her, either way.

He didn't like his life very much. Most of it was either boring—the long, long runs between the Depots, with nothing to look at but the monitor screens showing miles of red rocky plain—or scary, like the times they'd had to run through bad storms. *Beautiful Evelyn* had broken down in the middle of nowhere.

Better were the times they'd pull into Mons Olympus. The city on the mountain had a lot to see and do (although Bill's dad usually went straight to the *Eighties of Mars Tavern* and stayed there); there were plenty of places to eat, and shops, and a big public data terminal where Bill could download school programs into his Buke. But what Bill liked most about Mons Olympus was that he could look down through its dome and see the Long Acres.

The Long Acres weren't at all like the city, and Bill dreamed of living there. Instead of endless cold red plains, the Long Acres had warm expanses of green life, and actual water for crop irrigation, stretching out for kilometers under vizio tunnels. Bill had heard that from space, it was supposed to look like green lines crossing the lowlands of the

People stayed put in the Long Acres. Families lived down there and worked the land. Bill liked that idea.

His favorite time to look down the mountain was at twilight. Then the lights were just coming on, shining through the vizio panels, and the green fields were empty; Bill liked to imagine families sitting down to dinner together, a dad and a mum and kids in their homes, safe in one place from one year to the next. He imagined that they saved their money, instead of going on spending sprees when they hit town, like Bill's dad did. They never forgot things, like birthdays. They never made promises and forgot to keep them.

* * * *

“Payyyydayyyy!” Billy said happily, beating out a rhythm on the console wheel as he drove. “Gonna spend my money free! Yeah! We’ll have us a good time, eh, mate?”

“I need to buy socks,” said Bill.

“Whatever you want, bookworm. Socks, boots, buy out the whole shop.”

“I just need socks,” said Bill. They were on the last stretch of the High Road, rocking along under the glittering stars, and ahead of them he could see the high-up bright lights of Mons Olympus on the monitor. Its main dome was luminous with colors from the neon inside; even the outlying Tubes were lit up, from all the psuit-lights of the people going in and out. It looked like pictures he had seen of circus tents on Earth. Bill shut down his Gam and slid it into the front pocket of his psuit, and carefully zipped the pocket shut.

“Time to put your mask on, Dad,” he said. If Billy wasn’t reminded, he tended to forget. He took a gulp of air, jump from the cab, and sprint for the Tube airlocks, and once or twice he had tripped and fallen, and nearly killed himself before he’d got his mask on.

“Sure thing,” said Billy, fumbling for the mask. He had managed to get it on his face unassisted by the time the beautiful Evelyn roared into the freighter barn, and backed into the Unload bay. Father and son climbed from the cab and walked away together toward the Tube, stiff-legged after all those hours on the road.

At this moment, walking side by side, they really did look like father and son. Bill’s shock of wild hair that stuck up above the mask, and though he was small for a Mars-born kid, he was lean and rangy like Billy. Once they stepped through the airlocks into the Tube, they pushed up their masks, and then they looked different; for Billy had crazy eyes in a lean wind-red face, and a lot of wild red beard. Bill’s eyes were dark, and there was nothing crazy about him.

“Payday, payday, got money on my mind,” sang Billy as they walked up the hill to the freight office. “Bam! I’m gonna start with a big plate of Scramble with gravy, and then a slice of duff, and then it’s hello Ares Amber Lager. What’ll you do, kiddo?”

“I’m going to buy socks,” said Bill patiently. “Then I guess I’ll go to the public terminal to get my next lesson plan, remember?”

“Yeah, right.” Billy nodded, but Bill could tell he wasn’t paying attention.

Bill went into the freight office with his dad, and waited in the lobby while Billy went to present their chits. As he waited, he took out his Buke and thumbed it on, and accessed their bank account. He watched the screen until it flashed and updated, and checked the

bank balance against what he thought it should be; the amount was correct.

He sighed and relaxed. For a long while last year, the paycheck had been short a month; money taken out by the civil court to pay off a fine Billy had incurred for beating another guy. Billy was easygoing and never started fights, even when he drank, but he had long reach and no sense of fear, so he tended to win them. The other Haulers never made a good fight; this one time, though, the other guy had been a farmer from the MAC, and he had sued Billy.

Billy came out of the office now whistling, with the look in his eyes that meant he wanted to go have fun.

"Come on, bookworm, the night's young!" he said. Bill fell into step beside him and they went on up the Tube, and out to Commerce Square.

Commerce Square was the biggest single structure on the planet. Five square miles of breathable air! The steel beams soared in an unsupported arch, holding up Permapan panes through which the stars and moons shone down. Beneath it rose the domes of houses and shops, and the spiky towers of the *Allan Poe Memorial Center for the Performing Arts*. It was built in an Old Earth style called *Art Deco*. Bill had learned that just last term.

"Right!" Billy stretched. "I'm off to the Empress! Where you going?"

"To buy socks, remember?" said Bill.

"Okay," said Billy. "See you round, then." He wandered off into the crowd.

Bill sighed. He went off to the general store.

You could get almost anything at *Rowan's*; this was the only one on Mars and it had been here a whole year now, but Bill still caught his breath when he stepped inside. Row upon row of shiny things in brilliant colors! Cases of fruit juice, electronics, furniture, tools, clothing, tinned delicacies—and all of it imported from Earth. A whole aisle of download stations selling music, movies, books, and games. Bill, with a packet of cotton socks in hand, approached the aisle furtively.

Should he download more music? It wasn't as though Billy would ever notice or care, but the downloads were expensive. All the same...

Bill saw that *Earth Hand* had a new album out, and that decided him. He plugged it in his Buke and ordered the album, and twenty minutes later was sneaking out of the store feeling guilty. He went next to the public terminal and downloaded his lesson plan; that, at least, was free. Then he walked on up the long steep street, under the flashing red and

green and blue signs for the posh hotels. His hands were cold, but rather than put his back on he simply jammed his fists in his suit pockets.

At the top of the street was ~~the~~ *Empress of Mars*. It was a big place, a vast echoing tavern with a boarding house and restaurant opening off one side and a bathhouse opening off the other. All the Haulers came here. Mother, who ran the place, didn't mind the Haulers. They weren't welcome in the fancy new places, which had rules about noise and gambling and fighting, but they were always welcome ~~here~~ *at the*

Bill stepped through the airlock and looked around. It was dark and noisy in the tavern, with only a muted golden glow over the bar and little colored lights in the booths. It smelled like spilled beer and frying food, and the smell of the food made Bill's mouth water. Haulers sat or stood everywhere, and so did construction workers, and they were all eating and drinking and talking at the top of their lungs.

But where was Billy? Not in his usual place at the bar. Had he decided to go for a bath first? Bill edged his way through the crush to the bathhouse door, which was already clouded with steam he couldn't see in. He opened the door and peered at the row of people hanging up behind the attendant, but Billy's psuit wasn't one of them.

"Young Bill?" said someone, touching him on the shoulder. He turned and saw Mother herself, a solid little middle-aged lady who spoke with a thick PanCeltic accent. She wore a lot of jewelry; she was the richest lady on Mars, and owned most of Mons Olympus. "What do you need, my dear?"

"Where's my dad?" Bill shouted, to be heard above the din.

"Hasn't come in yet," Mother replied. "What, was he to meet you here?"

Bill felt the familiar stomachache he got whenever Billy went missing. Mother, looking into his eyes, patted his arm.

"Like as not just stopped to talk to somebody, I'm sure. He's friendly, our Billy, even. Would start a conversation with any stone in the road, if he thought he recognized it. Now you come and sit in the warm, my dear, and have some supper. Soygold strip with grass sprouts, that's your favorite, yes? And we've barley-sugar duff for afters. Let's get you some tea..."

Bill let her settle him in a corner booth and bring him a mug of tea. It was deliciously salty-sweet and spicy, and the warmth of the mug felt good on his hands; but it didn't unclench the knot in his stomach. He sipped tea and watched the airlock opening and closing. He tried raising Billy on the psuit comm, but Billy seemed to have forgotten to turn on. Where was his dad?

2

He was the second boy born on Mars, and he was six years old.

In MAC years, that is.

The Martian year was twenty-four months long, but most of the people in Mons Olympus and the Areco administrative center had simply stuck to reckoning time in twelve-month-long Earth years. That way, every other year, Christmas fell in the Martian summer, and those years were called Australian years. A lot of people on Mars had emigrated from Australia, so it suited them fine.

When the Martian Agricultural Collective had arrived on Mars, though, they'd decided to do things differently. After all (they said), it was a new world; they were breaking with Earth and her traditions forever. So they set up a calendar with twenty-four months. The twelve months were named Stothart, Engels, Hardie, Bax, Blatchford, Pollitt, Mieville, Attlee, Bentham, Besant, Hobsbawm and Quelch.

When a boy had been born to Mr. and Mrs. Marlon Thurkettle on the fifth day of the new month of Blatchford, they named their son in honor of the month. His friends, such as he had, called him Blatt.

He disliked his name because he thought it sounded stupid, but he really disliked Blatt, because it led to another nickname that was even worse: Cockroach.

Martian cockroaches were of the ~~Blattellidae~~ *Blattellidae*, and they had adapted very nicely to all the harsh conditions that had made it such a struggle for humans to settle Mars. They had mutated, and now averaged six inches in length and could survive outside the Tubes. Fortunately they made good fertilizer when ground up, so the Collective had paid a bounty of three Martian Pence on each insect. MAC children hunted them with hammers and earned pocket money that way. They knew all about cockroaches, and so Blatchford was even two before Hardie Stubbs started calling him Cockroach. All the other children thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard.

He called himself Ford.

He lived with his parents and his brothers and sisters, crowded all together in an allotment shelter. He downloaded lesson programs and studied whenever he'd finished his chores for the day, but now that he was as tall as his dad and his brother Sam, his dad had begun to mutter that he'd had all the schooling he needed.

There was a lot of work for an able-bodied young man to do, after all: milking the cows, mucking out their stalls, spreading muck along the rows of sugar beets and soy. There was cleaning the canals, repairing the vizio panels that kept out the Martian climate, working in the methane plant. There was work from before the dim sun rose every morning until after the little dim moons rose at night. The work didn't stop for holidays, and it didn't stop if you got sick or got old or had an accident and were hurt.

The work had to be done, because if the MAC worked hard enough, they could turn Mars into another Earth; only one without injustice, corruption, or poverty. Every MAC worker was supposed to dream of that wonderful day, and do his or her part to make it arrive.

But Ford liked to steal out of the shelter at night, and look up through the vizio at the foot of Mons Olympus, where its city shone out across the long miles of darkness. That was where he wanted to be! It was full of lights. The high-beam lights of the big freighters rocketed along the High Road toward it, roaring out of the dark and cold, and if you waited long enough you could see them coming and going from the city all night. They came back from the poles of the world, and went out there again.

The Haulers drove them. The Haulers were the men and women who rode the High Road through the storms, through the harsh dry places nobody else dared to go, but they went because they were brave. Ford had heard lots of stories about them. Ford's dad said the Haulers were all scum, and half of them were criminals. They got drunk, they fought, they made huge sums in hazard pay and gambled it away or spent it on rich food. They had adventures. Ford thought he'd like to have an adventure someday.

As he grew up, though, he began to realize that this wasn't very likely to happen.

* * * *

"Will you be taking Blatchford?" asked his mum, as she shaved his head.

Ford nearly jumped up in his seat, he was so startled. But the habit of long years kept him still, and he only peered desperately into the mirror to see his dad's face before the reply. *Yes please, yes please, yes please!*

His dad hesitated a moment, distracted from bad temper.

"I suppose so," he said. "Time he saw for himself what it's like up there."

"I'll pack you another lunch, then," said his mum. She wiped the razor and dried Ford's scalp with the towel. "There you go, dear. Your turn, Baxine."

Ford got up as his little sister slid into his place, and turned to face his dad. He was all on fire with questions he wanted to ask, but he knew it wasn't a good idea to make r

noise when his dad was in a bad mood. He sidled up to his older brother Sam, who was sitting by the door looking sullen.

“Never been up there,” he said. “What’s it like, eh?”

Sam smiled a little.

“You’ll see. There’s this place called the Blue Room, right? Everything’s blue in there with holos of the Sea of Earth, and lakes too. I remember lakes! And they play sounds that sound like Earth like rain—”

“You shut your face,” said his dad. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talking that to a kid.”

Sam turned a venomous look on their dad.

“Don’t start,” said their mum, sounding more tired than angry. “Just go and do what you’ve got to do.”

Ford sat quietly beside Sam until it was time to go, when they all three pulled on their stocking caps and face masks, slid on their packs, and went skulking up the Tube.

They skulked because visiting Mons Olympus was frowned upon. There was no need to go up there, or so the Council said; everything a good member of the Collective might need could be found in the MAC store, and if it couldn’t, then you probably didn’t need it, or certainly shouldn’t want it.

The problem was that the MAC store didn’t carry boots in Sam’s size. Ford’s dad had tried to order them, but there was endless paperwork to fill out, and the store clerk had looked at Sam as though it was his fault for having such big feet. ~~and~~ though a member of the Collective would have sawed off a few toes to make himself fit the boots the MAC store stocked.

But *Prashant’s* up in Mons Olympus carried all sizes, so every time Sam wore out a pair of boots, that was where Ford’s dad had to go.

As though to make up for the shame of it, he lectured Ford the whole way up the mountain, while Sam stalked along beside them in resentful silence.

“This’ll be an education for you, Blatchford, yes indeed. You’ll get to see thieves and drunks and fat cats living off the sweat of others. Everything we left Earth to get away from! Shops full of vanities to make you weak. Eating places full of poisons. It’s a right cesspool, that’s what it

is.”

“What’ll happen to it when we turn Mars into a paradise?” asked Ford.

“Oh, it’ll be gone by then,” said his dad. “It’ll collapse under its own rotting weight, you mark my words.”

“I reckon I’ll have to go home to Earth to buy boots then, won’t I?” muttered Sam.

“Shut up, you ungrateful lout,” said his dad.

They came out under the old Settlement dome, where the Areco offices and the MAC store were, as well as the spaceport and the Ephesian Church. This was the farthest Ford had ever been from home, and up until today the most exotic place he had ever seen. There was a faint sweet incense wafting out from the Church, and the sound of chanting. Ford’s dad hurried them past the Ephesian Tea Room with a disdainful sniff, ignoring the signs that invited wayfarers in for a hot meal and edifying brochures about the Goddess.

“Ignorance and superstition, that is,” he told Ford. “Another thing we left behind when we came here, but you can see it’s still putting out its tentacles, trying to control the minds of the people.”

He almost ran them past the MAC store, and they were panting for breath as they ducked up the Tube that led to Mons Olympus.

Ford stared around. The Tube here was much wider, and much better maintained, than where it ran by his parents’ allotment. The vizio used was a more expensive kind, for one thing: it was almost as transparent as water. Ford could now see clearly across the mountainside, the wide cinnamon-colored waste of rocks and sand. He gazed up at Mons Olympus, struck with awe at its sheer looming size. He turned and looked back on the lowlands, and for the first time saw the green expanse of the Long Acres that had been his whole world until now, stretching out in domed lines to the horizon. He walked backwards a while, gaping, until he stumbled and his dad caught him.

“It’s hard to look away from, isn’t it?” said his dad. “Don’t worry. We’ll be going home soon enough.”

“Soon enough,” Sam echoed in a melancholy sort of way.

Once past the airlock from the spaceport, the Tube became crowded, with suited strangers pushing past them, dragging baggage, or walking slow and staring as hard as Ford was staring: he realized they must be immigrants from Earth, getting their first glimpse of a new world.

But Ford got his new world when he stepped through the last airlock and looked into Commerce Square.

“Oh...” he said.

Even by daylight, it glittered and shone. Along the main street was a double line of actual *trees*, like on Earth; there was a green and park-like place immediately to the left, where real flowers grew. Ford thought he recognized roses, from the images in his lessons. Their scent hung in the air like music. There were other good smells, from spicy foods cooking in a dozen little stalls and wagons along the Square, and big stores breathing out a perfume of expensive wares.

And there were *people!* More people, and more kinds of people, than Ford had even known existed. There were Sherpa contract laborers and Incan construction workers, speaking to one another in languages Ford couldn't understand. There were hawkers selling souvenirs and cheap nanoproducts from handcarts. There were Ephesian missionaries talking earnestly to thin people in ragged clothes.

There were Haulers—Ford knew them at once, big men and women in their psuits, and their heads were covered in long hair and the men had beards. Some had tattooed faces. All had bloodshot eyes. They talked loudly and laughed a lot, and they looked as though they didn't care what anyone thought of them at all. Ford's dad scowled at them.

“Bloody lunatics,” he told Ford. “Most of ‘em were in Hospital on Earth, did you know that, Blatchford? Certifiable. The only ones Areco could find who were reckless enough for that kind of work. Exploitation, I call it.”

Sam muttered something. Their dad turned on him.

“What did you say, Samuel?” he demanded.

“I said we're at the shop, all right?” said Sam, pointing at the neon sign.

Ford gasped as they went in, as the warmed air and flowery scent

wrapped around him. It was nothing like the MAC store, which had rows of empty shelves, and what merchandise was there, was dusty; everything here looked clean and new. He didn't even know what most of it was for. Sleek, pretty people smiled from behind the counters.

He smiled back at them, until he passed a counter and came face to face with three men skulking along—skinny scarecrows with shaven heads, with canal mud on their boots. He blushed scarlet to realize he was looking into a mirror. Was he that gawky person between his dad and Sam? Did his ears really stick out like that? Ford pulled his cap down, so mortified he wanted to run all the way back down the mountain.

But he kept his eyes on the back of his dad's coat instead, following until they came to the Footwear Department. There he was diverted by the hundreds and hundreds of shoes on the walls, apparently floating in space, turning so he could see them better. They were every color there was, and they were clearly never designed to be worn while shoveling muck out of the cowsheds.

He came close and peered at them, as his dad and Sam argued with one of the beautiful people, until he saw the big-eyed boy staring back at him from beyond the dancing shoes. Another mirror; did he really have his mouth hanging open like that? And, oh, look at his nose, pinched red by the cold, and look at those watery blue eyes all rimmed in red, and those gangling big hands with the red chapped knuckles!

Ford turned around, wishing he could escape from himself. There were his dad and Sam, and they looked just like him, except his dad was old. Was he, Ford, going to look just like that, when he was somebody's dad? How mean and small his dad looked, trying to sound posh as he talked to the clerk:

"Look, we don't want this fancy trim and we don't want your shiny brass, thank you *very* much, we just want plain decent waders the lad can do a day's honest work in! Now, you can understand that much, can't you?"

"I like the brass buckles, Dad," said Sam.

"Well, you don't need 'em—they're only a vanity," said their dad. Sam shut his mouth like a box.

Ford stood by, cringing inside, as more boots were brought, until at last a pair was found that was plain and cheap enough to suit their dad. More embarrassment followed then, as their dad pulled out a wad of MAC

scrip and tried to pay with it, before remembering that scrip could only be used at the MAC store. Worse still, he then pulled out a wrinkly handful of Martian paper money. Both Ford and Sam saw the salesclerks exchange looks; what kind of people didn't have credit accounts? Sam tried to save face by being sarcastic.

"We're all in the Stone Age down the hill, you know," he said loudly, accepting the wrapped boots and tucking them under his arm. "I reckon we'll get around to having banks one of these centuries."

"Banks are corrupt institutions," said their dad like a shot, rounding on him. "How'd you get so tall without learning anything, eh? What have I told—"

"Sam?" A girl's voice stopped him. Ford turned in astonishment and saw one of the beautiful clerks hurrying toward them, smiling as though she meant it. "Sam, where were you last week? We missed you at the party—I wanted to show you my new..." She faltered to a stop, looking from Sam to their dad and Ford. Ford felt his heart jump when she looked at him. She had silver-gold hair, and wore makeup, and smelled sweet.

"I... er... Is this your family? How nice to meet you—" she began lamely, but their dad cut her off.

"Who's *this* painted cobweb, then?" he demanded of Sam. Sam's face turned red.

"Don't you talk that way about her! Her name is Galadriel, and—it so happens we're dating, not that it's any of your business."

"You're *what!*" Outraged, their dad clenched his knobby fists. "So you've been sneaking up here at night to live the high life, have you? No wonder you're no bloody use in the mornings! MAC girls not good enough for you? Fat lot of use a little mannequin like that's going to be when you settle down! Can she drive a tractor, eh?"

Sam threw down the boots. "Got a wire for you, Dad," he shouted. "I'm not settling down on Mars! I *hate* Mars, I've hated it since the day you dragged me up here, and the *minute* I come of age, I'm off back to Earth! Get it?"

Sam leaving? Ford felt a double shock, of sadness and betrayal. Who'd tell him stories if Sam left?

“You self-centered great twerp!” their dad shouted back. “Of all the ungrateful—when the MAC’s fed you and clothed you all these years—Just going to walk out on your duty, are you?”

Galadriel was backing away into the crowd, looking as though she wished she were invisible, and Ford wished he could be invisible too. People all over the store had stopped what they were doing to turn and stare.

“I never asked to join the MAC, you know,” said Sam. “Nobody’s ever given a thought to what I wanted at all!”

“That’s because there are a few more important things in the world than what one snotty-nosed brat wants for himself!”

“Well, I’m telling you now, Dad—if you think I’m going to live my life doing the same boring thing every day until I get old like you, you’re sadly mistaken!”

“Am I then?” Their dad jumped up and grabbed Sam by the ear, wringing tight. “I’ll sort you out—“

Sam, grimacing in pain, socked their dad. Ford bit his knuckles, terrified. Their dad staggered back, his eyes wide and furious.

“Right, that’s it! You’re no son of mine, do you hear me? You’re disowned! The Collective doesn’t need a lazy, backsliding traitor like you!”

“Don’t you call me a traitor!” said Sam. He put his head down and ran at their dad, and their dad jumped up and butted heads with him. Sam’s nose gushed blood. They fell to the ground, punching each other. Sam was sobbing in anger.

Ford backed away from them. He was frightened and miserable, but there was a third emotion beginning to float up into his consciousness: a certain sense of wonder. Could Sam really stop being his father’s son? Was it really possible just to become somebody else, to drop all the obligations and duties of your old life and step into a new life? Who would he, Ford, be, if he had the chance to be somebody else?

Did he *have* to be that red-nosed farm boy with muddy boots?

People were gathering around, watching the fight with amusement

and disgust. Someone shouted, "You can't take the MAC anyplace nice, can you?" Ford's ears burned with humiliation.

Then someone else shouted, "Here come Mother's Boys!"

Startled, Ford looked up and saw several big men in Security uniforms making their way through the crowd. Security!

The police are a bunch of brutes, his dad had told him. They like nothing better than to beat the daylights out of the likes of you and me, son!

Ford's nerve broke. He turned and fled, weaving and dodging his way through the crowd until he got outside the shop, and then he ran for his life.

He had no idea where he was going, but he soon found himself in a street that wasn't nearly as elegant as the promenade. It was an industrial district, dirty and shabby, with factory workers and energy plant techs hurrying to and fro. If the promenade with its gardens was the fancy case of Mons Olympus, this was its circuit board, where the real works were. Feeling less out of place, Ford slowed to a walk and caught his breath. He wandered on, staring around him.

He watched for a long moment through the open door of a machine shop, where a pair of mechanics were repairing a quaddy. Their welding tools shot out fiery-bright stars that bounced harmlessly to the ground. There were two other men watching too, though as the minutes dragged by they began watching Ford instead. Finally they stepped close to him, smiling.

"Hey, Collective. You play cards?" said one of them.

"No," said Ford.

"That's okay," said the other. "This is an easy game." He opened his coat and Ford saw that he had a kind of box strapped to his chest. It had the word NEBULIZER painted on it, but when the man pressed a button, the front of the box swung down and open like a tray. The other man pulled a handful of cards from his back pocket.

"Here we go," he said. "Just three cards. Ace, deuce, Queen of Diamonds. See 'em? I'm going to shuffle them and lay them out, one, two, three." He laid them out facedown on the tray. "See? Now, which one's the queen? Can you find her?"

Ford couldn't believe what a dumb game this was. Only three cards? He turned over the queen.

"Boy, it's hard to fool *you*," said the man with the tray. "You've got natural luck, kid. Want to go again?" The other man had already swept the three cards up and was shuffling them.

"Okay," said Ford.

"Got any money? Want to place a bet?"

"I don't have any money," said Ford.

"No money? That's too bad," said the man with the tray, closing it up at once. "A lucky guy like you, you could win big. But they don't get rich down there in the Collective, do they? Same dull work every day of your life, and nothing to show for it when it's all over. That's what I hear."

Ford nodded sadly. It wasn't just Sam, he realized; everybody laughed at the MAC.

"What would you say to a chance at something better, eh?" said the man with the cards. In one smooth movement he made the cards vanish and produced instead a text plaque. Its case was grubby and cracked, but the screen was bright with a lot of very small words.

"Know what I have here? This is a deal that'll set you up as a diamond prospector. Think of that! You could make more with one lucky strike than you'd make working the Long Acres the whole rest of your life. Now, I know what you're going to say—you don't have any tools and you don't have any training. But, you know what you *have* got? You're *young*. You're in good shape, and you can take the weather Outside.

"So here's the deal: Mr. Agar has the tools and the training, but he ain't young. You agree to go to work for him, and he'll provide what you need. You pay him off out of your first big diamond strike, and then you're in business for yourself. Easiest way to get rich there is! And all you have to do is put your thumbprint right there. What do you say?" He held out the plaque to Ford.

Ford blinked at it. He had heard stories of the people who dug red diamonds out of the clay—why, Mons Olympus had been founded by a lady who'd got rich like that! He was reaching for the plaque when a voice

spoke close to his ear.

“Can you read, kid?”

Ford turned around. A Hauler was looking over his shoulder, smiling.

“Well—I read a little—”

“Get lost!” said the man with the plaquette, looking angry.

“I can’t read,” the Hauler went on, “but I know these guys. They’re with Agar Steelworks. You know what they’re trying to get you to thumb? That’s a contract that’ll legally bind you to work in Agar’s iron mines for fifteen years.”

“Like you’d know, jackass!” said the man with the plaquette, slipping it out of sight. He brought out a short length of iron bar and waved it at the Hauler meaningfully. The Hauler’s red eyes sparkled.

“You want to fight?” he said, smacking his fists together. “Yeah! You think I’m afraid of you? You lousy little street-corner hustler! C’mere!”

The man took a swipe at him with the bar, and the Hauler dodged it and grabbed it out of his hand. The other two broke and ran, vanishing down an alley. The Hauler grinned after them, tossing the bar into the street.

“Freakin’ kidnappers,” he said to Ford. “You’re, what, twelve? I have a kid your age.”

“Thank you,” Ford stammered.

“That’s okay. You want to watch out for Human Resourcers, though, kid. They work that con on a lot of MAC boys like you. Diamond prospectors! Nobody but Mother ever got rich that way.” The Hauler yawned and stretched. “You head off to the nearest Security post and report ‘em now, okay?”

“I can’t,” said Ford, and to his horror he felt himself starting to shake. “I—they—there was this fight, and—Security guys came and—I have to hide.”

“You in trouble?” The Hauler leaned down and looked at Ford closely. “Fighting? Mother’s Boys don’t allow no fighting, that’s for sure. You need a place to hide? Maybe get out of town until it all blows over?” He gave Ford

a conspiratorial wink.

“Yes, please,” said Ford.

“You come along with me, then. I got a safe place,” said the Hauler. Without looking back to see if Ford was following him, he turned and loped off up the street. Ford ran after him.

“Please, who are you?”

The Hauler glanced over his shoulder. “Billy Townsend,” he said. “But don’t tell me who *you* are. Safer that way, right?”

“Right,” said Ford, falling into step beside him. He looked up at his rescuer. Billy was tall and gangly, and lurched a little when he walked, but he looked as though he wasn’t the least bit worried what people thought of him. His face and dreadlocked hair and beard were all red, the funny bricky red that came from years of going Outside and having the red dust get everywhere, until it became so deeply engrained water wouldn’t wash it off. There were scars all over his face and hands, too. On the back of his psuit someone had painted white words in a circle.

“What’s it say on your back?” Ford asked him.

“Says bipolar BOYS AND GIRLS,” said Billy. “On account of we go Up and Down there, see? And because we’re nutcases, half of us.”

“What’s it like in the ice mines?”

“Cold,” said Billy, chuckling. “Get your face mask on, now. Here we go! Here’s our *Beautiful Evelyn*.”

They stepped out through the airlock, and the cold bit into Ford. He gulped for air and followed Billy into a vast echoing building like a hangar. It was the car barn for the ice processing plant. Just now it was deserted, but over by the loading chute sat a freighter. Ford caught his breath.

He had never seen one up close before, and it was bigger than he had imagined. Seventy-five meters long, set high on big knobbed ball tires. Its steel tank had been scoured to a dull gleam by the wind and sand. At one end was a complication of hatches and lenses and machinery that Ford supposed must be the driver’s cab. Billy reached up one long arm and grabbed a lever. The foremost hatch hissed, swung open, and a row of steps clanked down into place.

“There you go,” said Billy. “Climb on up! Nobody’ll think to look for you in there. I’ll be back later. Make yourself at home.”

Ford scrambled up eagerly. He looked around as the hatch squeezed shut behind him, and air rushed back in. He pulled down his mask.

He was in a tiny room with a pair of bunks built into one side. The only light came from a dim panel set in the ceiling. There was nothing else in the room, except for a locker under the lower bunk and three doors in the wall opposite. It was disappointingly plain and spotless.

Ford opened the first door and beheld the tiniest lavatory he had ever seen, so compact he couldn’t imagine how to use it. He tried the second door and found a kitchen built along similar lines, more a series of shelves than a room. The third door opened into a much larger space. He crawled through and found himself in the driver’s cab.

Timidly, he edged his way farther in and sat down at the console. He looked up at the instrument panels, at the big screens that ran all around the inside of the cab. They were blank and blind now, but what would it be like to sit here when the freighter was roaring along the High Road?

On the panel above the console was a little figurine, glued in place. It was a cheap-looking thing, of cast red stone like the souvenirs he had seen for sale on the handcarts in Commerce Square. It represented a lady, leaning forward as though she were running, or perhaps flying. The sculptor had given her hair that streamed back in an imaginary wind. She was grinning crazily, as the Haulers all did. She had only one eye, of red cut glass; Ford guessed the matching one had fallen off. He looked on the floor of the cab, but didn’t see it.

Ford grinned too, and, because no one was there to see him, he put his hands on the wheel. “Brrrrrooom,” he whispered, and looked up at the screens as though to check on his location. He felt a little stupid.

But in every one of the screens, his reflection was smiling back at him. Ford couldn’t remember when he’d been so happy.

* * * *

Bill's dinner had gone cold, though he stuffed a forkful in his mouth every now and then when he noticed Mother watching him. He couldn't keep his eyes away from the door much. *Where was Billy?*

He might have gotten in a fight, and Mother's Boys might have hauled him off to the Security Station; if that were the case, sooner or later Mother would come over to Bill with an apologetic cough and say something like, "Your dad's just had a bit of an argument, dear, and I think you'd best doss down here tonight until he, er, wakes up. We'll let him out tomorrow." And Bill would feel his face burning with shame, as he always did when that happened.

Or Billy might have met someone he knew, and forgotten about the time... or he might have gone for a drink somewhere else... or...

Bill was so busy imagining all the places Billy might be that he got quite a shock when Billy walked through the airlock. Before Billy had spotted him and started making his way across the room, the cramping worry had turned to anger.

"Where were you?" Bill shouted. "You were supposed to be here!"

"I had stuff to do," said Billy vaguely, sliding into the booth. He waved at Mother, who acknowledged him with a nod and sent one of her daughters over to take his order. Bill looked him over suspiciously. No cuts or bruises on his face, nothing broken on his psuit. Not fighting, then. Maybe he had met a girl. Bill relaxed just a little, but his anger kept smoldering.

When Billy's beer had been brought, Bill said:

"I wondered where you were. How come you had the comm turned off?"

"Is it off?" Billy groped for the switch in his shoulder. "Oh. Wow. Sorry, kiddo. Must have happened when I took my mask off."

He had a sip of beer. Bill gritted his teeth. He could tell that, as far as Billy was concerned, the incident was over. It had just been a mistake, right? What was the point of getting mad about it? Never mind that Bill had been scared and alone...

Bill exhaled forcefully and shoveled down his congealing dinner.

"I got my socks," he said loudly.

“That’s nice,” said Billy. Lifting his glass for another sip, his attention was taken by the holo playing above the bar. He stared across at it. Bill turned around in his seat to look. There was the image of one of Mother’s Boys, a sergeant from his uniform, staring into the foremost camera as he made some kind of announcement. His lips moved in silence, though, with whatever he was saying drowned out by the laughter and the shouting in the bar.

Bill looked quickly back at Billy. Why was he watching the police report? Had he been in some kind of incident after all? Billy snorted with laughter, watching, and then pressed his lips shut to hide a smile. Why was he doing that?

Bill looked back at the holo, more certain than ever that Billy was in trouble, but now saw holofootage of two guys fighting. Was either one of them Billy? No; Bill felt his anger damp down again as he realized it was only a couple of MAC colonists, kicking and punching each other as they rolled in the street. Bill was appalled; he hadn’t thought the Collective ever did stupid stuff like that.

Then there was a closeup shot of a skinny boy, with a shaven head –MAC, Bill supposed. He shrugged and turned his attention back to his plate.

Billy’s food was brought and he dug into it with gusto.

“Think we’ll head out again tonight,” he said casually.

“But we just got back in!” Bill said, startled.

“Yeah. Well...” Billy sliced off a bit of Grilled Strip, put it in his mouth and chewed carefully before going on. “There’s... mm... this big bonus right now for CO₂, see? MAC’s getting a crop of something or other in the ground and they’ve placed like this humungous order for it. So we can earn like double what we just deposited if I get a second trip in before the end of the month.”

Bill didn’t know what to say. It was the sort of thing he nagged at his dad to do, saving more money; usually Billy spent it as fast as he had it. Bill looked at him with narrowed eyes, wondering if he had gotten into trouble after all. But he just shrugged again and said, “Okay.”

“Hey, Mona?” Billy waved at the nearest of Mother’s daughters.

"Takeaway order too, okay, sweetheart? Soygold nuggets and sprouts. And a bottle of batch."

"Why are we getting takeaway?" Bill asked him.

"Er..." Billy looked innocent. "I'm just way hungry, is all. Think I'll want a snack later. I'll be driving all night."

"But you drove for twelve hours today!" Bill protested. "Aren't you ever going to sleep?"

"Sleep is for wusses," said Billy. "I'll just pop a Freddie."

Bill scowled. Freddie's were little red pills that kept you awake and jittery for days. Haulers took them sometimes when they needed to be on the road for long runs without stopping. It was stupid to take them all the time, because they could kill you, and Bill threw them away whenever he found any in the cab. Billy must have stopped to buy some more. So *that* was where he'd been.

* * * *

Night had fallen by the time they left the *Empress* and headed back down the hill. Cold penetrated down through the Permavizio; Bill shivered, and his psuit's thermostat turned itself up. There were still people in the streets, though fewer of them, and some of the lights had been turned out. Usually by this time, when they were in off the road, Bill would be soaking in a stone tub full of hot water, and looking forward to a good night's sleep someplace warm for a change. The thought made him grumpy as they came round the corner into the airlock.

"Masks on, Dad," Bill said automatically. Billy nodded, shifting the stoneware bucket of takeaway to his other hand as he reached for his mask. They went out to *Beautiful Evelyn*.

Bill was climbing up to open the cab when Billy grabbed him and pulled him back.

"Hang on," he said, and reached up and knocked on the hatch. "Yo, kid! Mask up, we're coming in!"

"What?" Bill staggered back, staring at Billy. "Who's in there?"

Billy didn't answer, but Bill heard a high-pitched voice calling *Okay* from inside the cab, and Billy swung the hatch open and climbed up. Bill scrambled after him. The hatch sealed behind them and the air whooshed back. Bill pulled off his mask as the lights came on to reveal a boy, pulling off his own mask. They stared at each other, blinking.

Billy held out the bucket of takeaway. "Here you go, kid. Hot dinner!"

"Oh! Thank you," said the other, as Bill recognized him for the MAC boy from the holofootage he'd watched.

"What's *he* doing here?" he demanded.

"Just, you know, sort of laying low," said Billy. "Got in a little trouble and needs to go off someplace until things cool down. Thought we could take him out on the run with us, right? No worries." He stepped sidelong into the cab and threw himself into the console seat, where he proceeded to start up *Beautiful Evelyn's* drives.

"But—but—" said Bill.

"Er... hi," said the other boy, avoiding his eyes. He was taller than Bill but looked younger, with big wide eyes and ears that stuck out. His shaven head made him look even more like a baby.

"Who're you?" said Bill.

"I'm, ah—" said the other boy, just as Billy roared from the cab:

"No names! No names! The less we know, the less they can beat out of us!" And he whooped with laughter. The noise of the drives powering up drowned out anything else he might have said. Bill clenched his fists and stepped close to Ford, glaring up into his eyes.

"What's going on? What'd my dad do?"

"Nothing!" Ford took a step backward.

"Well then, what'd *you* do? You must have done something, because you were on the holo. I saw you! You were fighting, huh?"

Ford gulped. His eyes got even wider and he said, "Er—yeah. Yeah, I punched out these guys. Who were trying to trick me into working in the

mines for them. And, uh, I ran because, because the Security Fascists were going to beat the daylights out of me. So Billy let me hide in here. What's your name?"

"Bill," he replied. "You're with the MAC, aren't you? What were you fighting for?"

"Well—the other guys started it," said Ford. He looked with interest at the takeaway. "This smells good. It was really nice of your dad to bring it for me. Is there anywhere I can sit down to eat?"

"In there," said Bill in disgust, pointing into the cab.

"Thank you. You want some?" Ford held out the bucket timidly.

"No," said Bill. "I want to go to sleep. Go on, clear out of here!"

"Okay," said Ford, edging into the cab. "It's nice meeting you, Billy."

"Bill!" said Bill, and slammed the door in his face.

Muttering to himself, he dimmed down the lights and lay down in his bunk. He threw the switch that inflated the mattress, and its contours puffed out around him, cradling him snugly as the freighter began to move. He didn't know why he was so angry, but somehow finding Ford here had been the last straw.

He closed his eyes and tried to send himself to sleep in the way he always had, by imagining he was going down the Tube to the long Acres, step by step, into green, warm, quiet places. Tonight, though, he kept seeing the two MAC colonists from the holo, whaling away at each other like a couple of clowns while the city people looked on and laughed.

* * * *

Ford, clutching his dinner, sat down in the cab and looked around. With all the screens lit up there was plenty of light by which to eat.

"Is it okay if I sit in here?" he asked Billy, who waved expansively.

"Sure, kid. Don't mind li'l Bill. He's cranky sometimes."

Ford opened the bucket and looked inside. "Do you have any forks?"

“Yeah. Somewhere. Try the seat pocket.”

Ford groped into the pocket and found a ceramic fork that was, perhaps, clean. He was too hungry to care whether it was or not, and ate quickly. He wasn't sure what he was eating, but it tasted wonderful.

As he ate, he looked up at the screens. Some had just figures on them, data from the drives and external sensors. Four of them had images from the freighter's cameras, mounted front and rear, right and left. There was no windscreen—even Ford knew that an Earth-style glass windscreen would be scoured opaque by even one trip through the storms of sand and grit along the High Road, unless a forcefield was projected in front of it, and big forcefields were expensive, and unlikely to deflect blowing rocks anyhow. Easier and cheaper to fix four little forcefields over the camera lenses.

The foremost screen fascinated him. He saw the High Road itself, rolling out endlessly to the unseen night horizon under the stars. It ran between two lines of big rocks, levered into place over the years by Haulers to make it easier to find the straightest shot to the pole.

Every now and then Ford caught a glimpse of carving on some of the boulders as they flashed by—words, or figures. Some of them had what looked like tape wrapped around them, streaming out in the night wind.

“Are those...” Ford sought to remember his lessons about Earth roads. “Are those road signs? With, er, kilometer numbers and all?”

“What, on the boulders? Nope. They're shrines,” said Billy.

“What's a shrine?”

“Place where somebody died,” said Billy. “Or where somebody should have died, but didn't, because Marswife saved their butts.” He reached out and tapped the little red lady on the console.

Ford thought about that. He looked at the figurine. “So... she's like, that Goddess the Ephesians are always on about?”

“No!” Billy grinned. “Not our Marswife. She was just this sheila, see? Somebody from Earth who came up here like the rest of us, and she was crazy. Same as us. She thought Mars, was, like, her husband or something. And there was this big storm and she went out into it, without a mask. And they say she didn't die! Mars got her and changed her into something else

so she could live Outside. That's what they say, anyway."

"Like, she mutated?" Ford stared at the little figure.

"I guess so."

"But really she died, huh?"

"Well, you'd think so," Billy said, looking at him sidelong. "Except that there are guys who swear they've seen her. She lives on the wind. She's red like the sand and her eye is a ruby, and if you're lost sometimes you'll see a red light way off, which is her eye, see? And if you follow it, you'll get home again safe. And I know that's true, because it happened to me."

"Really?"

Billy held up one hand, palm out. "No lie. It was right out by Two-Fifty-K. There was a storm swept through so big, it was able to pick up the road markers and toss 'em around, see? And *Beautiful Evelyn* got thrown like she was a feather by the gusts, and my nav system went out. It was just me and li'l Bill, and he was only a baby then, and I found myself so far off the road I had no clue, *no clue*, where I was, and I was sure we were going to die out there. But I saw that red light and I figured, that's somebody who knows where they are, anyway. I set off after it. Hour later the light blinks out and there's Two-Fifty-K Station right in front of me on the screen, but there's no red lights anyplace."

"Whoa," said Ford, wondering what Two-Fifty-K station was.

"There's other stories about her, too. Guys who see her riding the storm, and when she's there they know to make for a bunker, because there's a Strawberry coming."

"What's a Strawberry?"

"It's this kind of cyclone. Big *big* storm full of sand and rocks. Big red cone dancing across the ground. One took out that temple the Ephesians built, when they first got up here, and tore open half the Tubes. They don't come up Tharsis way much, but when they do—" Billy shook his head. "People die, man. Some of your people died, that time. You never heard that story?"

"No," said Ford. "But we're not supposed to talk about bad stuff after it happens."

“Really?” Billy looked askance.

“Because we can’t afford to be afraid of the past,” said Ford, half-quoting what he remembered from every Council Meeting he’d ever been dragged to. “Because fear will make us weak, but working fearlessly for the future will make us strong.” He chanted the last line, unconsciously imitating his dad’s intonation.

“Huh,” said Billy. “I guess that’s a good idea. You can’t go through life being scared of everything. That’s what I tell Bill.”

Ford looked into the takeaway bucket, surprised that he had eaten his way to the bottom so quickly.

“It’s good to hear stories, though,” he said. “Sam, that’s my brother, he gets into trouble for telling stories.”

“Heh! Little white lies?”

“No,” Ford said. “Real stories. Like about Earth. He remembers Earth. He says everything was wonderful there. He wants to go back.”

“Back?” Billy looked across at him, startled. “But kids can’t go back. I guess if he was old enough when he came up, maybe he might make it. I hear it’s tough, though, going back down. The gravity’s intense.”

“Would you go back?”

Billy shook his head. “All I remember of Earth is the insides of rooms. Who needs that? Nobody up here to tell me what to do, man. I can just point myself at the horizon and go, and go, as far and as fast as I want. Zoom! I can think what I want, I can feel what I want, and you know what? The sand and the rocks don’t care. The horizon don’t care. The wind don’t care.

“That’s why they call this *space*. No, no way I’d ever go back.”

Ford looked up at the screens, and remembered the nights he had watched for the long light-beams coming in from the darkness. It had given him an aching feeling for as long as he could remember, and now he understood why.

He had wanted *space*.

* * * *

4

They drove all night, and at some point Billy's stories of storms and fights and near-escapes from death turned into confusion, with Sam there somehow, and a room that ran blue with water. Then abruptly Ford was sitting up, staring around at the inside of the cab.

"Where are we?" he asked. The foremost screen showed a spooky gray distance, the High Road rolling ahead between its boulders to... what? A pale void full of roaming shadows.

"Almost to Five-Hundred-K Station," said Billy, from where he hunched over the wheel. "Stop pretty soon."

"Can Security follow us out here?"

Billy just laughed and shook his head. "No worries, kiddo. There's no law out here but Mars's."

The door into the living space opened abruptly, and Bill looked in at them.

"Morning, li'l Bill!"

"Good morning," said Bill in a surly voice. "You never stopped once all night. Are you ever going to pull us off somewhere so you can sleep?"

"At Five-Hundred-K," Billy promised. "How about you fix a bite of scan, eh?"

Bill did not reply. He stepped back out of sight and a moment later Ford felt the warmth in the air that meant that water was steaming. He could almost taste it, and realized that he was desperately thirsty. He crawled from his seat and followed the vapor back to where Bill had opened the kitchen and was shoving a block of something under heating coils.

"Are you fixing tea?"

"Yeah," said Bill, with a jerk of his thumb at the tall can that steamed above a heat element.

“Can I have a cup, when it’s ready?”

Bill frowned, but he got three mugs from a drawer.

“Do you fight much, in the Collective?” he asked. Ford blinked in surprise.

“No,” he said. “It wasn’t me fighting, actually. It was just my dad and my brother. They hate each other. But my mum won’t let them fight in the house. Sam said he was deserting us and my dad went off on him about it. I ran when the Security came.”

“Oh,” said Bill. He seemed to become a little less hostile, but he said: “Well, that was pretty bloody stupid. They’d only have taken you to Mother’s until your dad sobered up. You’d be safe home by now.”

Ford shrugged.

“So, what’s your name, really?”

“Ford.”

“Like that guy in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*?” Bill smiled for the first time.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a book I listen to all the time. Drowns out Billy singing.” Bill’s smile went away again. The tea can beeped to signal it was hot enough, and Bill turned and pulled it out. He poured dark bubbling stuff into the three mugs, and, reaching in a cold-drawer, took out a slab of something yellow on a dish. He spooned out three lumps of it, one into each mug, and presented one to Ford.

“Whoa.” Ford stared into his mug. “That’s not sugar.”

“It’s butter,” said Bill, as though that were obvious. He had a gulp of tea, and, not wanting to seem picky, Ford took a gulp too. It wasn’t as nasty as he had expected. In fact, it wasn’t nasty at all. Bill, watching his face, said:

“You’ve never had this before?”

Ford shook his head.

"But you guys are the ones who make the butter up here," said Bill. "This is MAC butter. What do you drink, if you don't drink this?"

"Just... batch, and tea with sugar sometimes," said Ford, wondering why this should matter. He had another gulp of the tea. It tasted even better this time.

"And the sugar comes from the sugar beets you grow?" Bill persisted.

"I guess so," said Ford. "I never thought about it."

"What's it like, living down there?"

"What's it like?" Ford stared at him. Why in the world would anybody be curious about the Long Acres? "I don't know. I muck out cow sheds. It's boring, mostly."

"How could it be *boring*?" Bill demanded. "It's so beautiful down there! Are you crazy?"

"No," said Ford, taking a step backward. "But if you think a big shovelful of cow-shite and mega-roaches is beautiful, *you're* crazy."

Billy shouted something from the front of the cab and a second later *Beautiful Evelyn* swerved around. Both boys staggered a little at the shift in momentum, glaring at each other, and righted themselves as forward motion ceased.

"We're at Five-Hundred-K Station," Bill guessed. There was another beep. He turned automatically to pull the oven drawer open as Billy came staggering back into the living area.

"Mons Olympus to Five-Hundred-K in one night," he chortled. "That is some righteous driving! Where's the tea?"

They crowded together in the cramped space, sipping tea and eating something brown and bubbly that Ford couldn't identify. Afterward Billy climbed into his bunk with a groan, and yanked the cord that inflated his mattress.

"I am so ready for some horizontal. You guys go up front and talk

about stuff, okay?"

"Whatever," said Bill, picking up his Gamebuke and stalking out. Billy, utterly failing to notice the withering scorn to which he had just been subjected, smiled and waved sleepily at Ford. Ford smiled back, but his smile faded as he turned, shut the door behind him, and followed Bill, who he had decided was a nasty little know-it-all.

Bill was sitting in one corner, staring into the screen of his Gamebuke. He had put on a pair of earshells and was listening to something fairly loud. He ignored Ford, who sat and looked up at the screens in puzzlement.

"Is this the station?" he asked, forgetting that Bill couldn't hear him. He had expected a domed settlement, but all he could see was a wide place by the side of the road, circled by boulders that appeared to have been whitewashed.

Bill didn't answer him. Ford looked at him in annoyance. He studied the controls on the inside of the hatch. When he thought he knew which one opened it, he slipped his mask on. Then he leaned over and punched Bill in the shoulder.

"Mask up," he yelled. "I'm going out."

Bill had his mask on before Ford had finished speaking, and Ford saw his eyes going wide with alarm as he activated the hatch. It sprang open; Ford turned and slid into a blast of freezing air.

He hit the ground harder than he expected to, and almost fell. Gasping, hugging himself against a cold so intense it burned, he stared in astonishment at the dawn.

There was no ceiling. There were no walls. There was nothing around the freighter, as far as the limits of his vision, but limitless space, limitless sky of the palest, chilliest blue he had ever seen, stretching down to a limitless red plain of sand and rock. He turned, and kept turning: no domes, no Tubes, nothing but the wide open world in every direction.

And here was a red light appearing on the horizon, red as blood or rubies, so bright a red it dazzled his eyes, and he wondered for a moment if it was the eye of Marswife. Long purple shadows sprang from the boulders and stretched back toward his boots. He realized he was looking at the rising sun.

So this is where the lights were going to, he said to himself, all those nights they were going away into the dark. They were coming out here. This is the most wonderful thing I have ever seen.

Somehow he had fallen into the place he had always wanted to be.

But the cold was eating into his bones, and he realized that if he kept on standing there he'd freeze solid in his happy dream. He set off toward the nearest boulder, fumbling with the fastening of his pants.

Someone grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

"You *idiot!*" Bill shouted at him. "Don't you know what happens if you try to pee out here?"

From the horror on Bill's face, even behind the mask, Ford realized that he'd better get back in the cab as fast as he could.

When they were safely inside and the seals had locked, when Bill had finished yelling at him, Ford still sat shivering with more than cold.

"You mean it boils and *then* it explodes?" he said.

"You are such an idiot!" Bill repeated in disbelief.

"How was I supposed to know?" Ford said. "I've never been Outside before! We use the reclamation conduits at home—"

"This isn't the Long Acres, dumbbell. This is the middle of frozen Nowhere and it'll kill you in two seconds, okay?"

"Well, where can you go?"

"In the lavatory!"

"But I didn't want to wake up your dad."

"He'll sleep through anything," said Bill. "Trust me."

Red with humiliation, Ford crawled into the back and after several tries figured out how to operate the toilet, as Billy snored away oblivious. Afterward he crawled back up front, carefully closed the door and said:

“Er... so, where does somebody have their bath?”

Bill, who had turned his Gamebuke on again, did not look up as he said:

“At the *Empress*.”

“No, I mean... when somebody has a bath *out here*, where do they have it?”

Bill lifted his eyes. He looked perplexed.

“What are you on about? Nobody bathes out here.”

“You mean, you only wash when you’re at the *Empress*?”

Now it was Bill’s turn to flush with embarrassment.

“Yeah.”

Ford tried to keep his dismay from showing, but he wasn’t very good at hiding his feelings. “You mean I can’t have a bath until we get back?”

“No. You can’t. I guess people wash themselves every day in the Long Acres, huh?” said Bill angrily.

Ford nodded. “We have to. It stinks too bad if we don’t. Because there’s, er, manure and algae and, er, the methane plant, and... we work hard and sweat a lot. So we shave and wash every day, see?”

“Is *that* why the MAC haven’t got any hair?”

“Yeah,” said Ford. He added, “Plus my dad says hair is a vanity. Means being a showoff, being flash.”

“I know what it means,” said Bill. He was silent a moment, and then said:

“Well, you won’t be sweating much out here. Freezing is more like it. So you’ll have to cope until we get back to the *Empress*. It’ll only be two weeks.”

Two weeks? Ford thought of what his dad and mum would say to him

when he turned up again, after being missing for so long. His mouth dried, his heart pounded. He wondered desperately what kind of lie he might tell to get himself out of trouble. Maybe that he'd been kidnapped? It had almost really happened. Kidnapped and taken to work in the iron mines, right, and... somehow escaped, and...

Billy retreated to his Gamebuke again, as Ford sat there trying to imagine what he might say. The stories became wilder, more unbelievable, as they grew more elaborate; and gradually he found himself drifting away from purposeful lies altogether, dreamily wondering what it might be like if he never went back to face the music at all.

After all, Sam was going to do it; Sam was clever and funny and brave, and he was walking away from the Collective to a new life. Why couldn't Ford have a new life too? What if he became a Hauler, like Billy, and lived out the rest of his life up here where there were no limits to the world? Blatchford the MAC boy would vanish and he could be just Ford, himself, not part of anything. *Free*.

* * * *

5

It took them most of a week to get to Depot South. Ford enjoyed every minute of it, even getting used to the idea of postponing his bath for two weeks. Mostly he rode up front with Billy, as Bill stayed in the back sulking. Billy told him stories as they rocketed along, and taught him the basics of driving the freighter; it was harder than driving a tractor but not by as much as Ford would have thought.

"Look at you, holding our *Evelyn* on the road!" said Billy, chuckling. "You are one strong kid, for your age. Li'l Bill can't drive her at all yet."

"I'm a better navigator than you are!" yelled Bill from the back, in tones of outrage.

"He is, actually," said Billy. "Best navigator I ever saw. Half the time I have to get him to figure coordinates for me. You ever get lost in a storm or anything, you'll wish you had Li'l Bill there with you." He looked carefully into the back to see if Bill was watching, and then unzipped a pouch in his psuit and took out a small bottle. Quickly he shook two tiny red pills into his palm and popped them into his mouth.

"What're those?" Ford asked.

"Freddie Stay-awakes," said Billy in a low voice. "Just getting ready for another night shift. We're going to set a new record for getting to the Depot, man."

"We don't have to hurry or anything," said Ford. "Really."

"Yeah, we do," said Billy, looking uncomfortable for the first time since Ford had known him. "Fun's fun, and everything, but... your people must be kind of wondering where you are, you know? I mean, it was a good idea to get you away from Mother's Boys and all, but we don't want people thinking you're dead, huh?"

"I guess not," said Ford. He looked sadly up at the monitor, at the wide open world. The thought of going back into the Tubes, into the reeking dark of the cowsheds and the muddy trenches, made him despair.

* * * *

Depot South loomed ahead of them at last, a low rise of ice above the plain. At first, Ford was disappointed; he had expected a gleaming white mountain, but Billy explained that the glacier was sanded all over with red dust from the windstorms. As the hours went by and they drew closer, Ford saw a low-lying mist of white, from which the glacier rose like an island. Later, two smaller islands seemed to rise from it as well, one on either side of the road.

"There's old Jack and Jim!" cried Billy. "We're almost there, when we see Jack and Jim."

Ford watched them with interest. As they drew near, he laughed; for they looked like a pair of bearded giants hacked out of the red stone. One was sitting up, peering from blind hollow eyes and holding what appeared to be a mug clutched to his stomach. The other reclined, with his big hands folded peacefully on his chest.

"How'd they get there?" he exclaimed, delighted.

"The glacier deposited them," said Bill, who had come out of the back to see.

"No! No! You have to tell him the story," said Billy gleefully. "See, Jack and Jim were these two Haulers, come up from Australia. So they

liked their beer cold, see? *Really* cold.

“So they go into the *Empress*, and Mother, she says, *Welcome, my dears, have a drop of good cheer, warm buttery beer won’t cost you dear*. But Jack and Jim, both he and him, they liked their beer cold. Really cold!

“Says one to the other, like brother to brother, there must be a place in this here space where a cobbler can swill a nice bit of chill, if he likes his beer cold. Really *cold*.”

“So they bought them a keg, and off they legged it for the Pole, the pole, where it’s nice and cold, and they chopped out a hole in the ice-wall so, and that keg they stowed in the ice, cobbler, ever so nice. And it got cold. *Really* cold.

“So they drank it down and another round and another one still and they drank until they set and they sot and they clean forgot, where the white mists creep they fell asleep, and they got cold. Really cold.

“In fact they froze, from nose to toes, and there they are to this very day, and the moral is, don’t die that way! ‘Cause what’s right for Oz ain’t right on Moz, ‘cause up here it’s *cold*. Really cold!”

Billy laughed like a loon, pounding his fist on the console. Bill just rolled his eyes.

“They’re only a couple of boulders,” he said.

“But you used to love that song,” said Billy plaintively.

“When I was three, maybe,” said Bill, turning and going into the back. “You’d better get him out one of your extra psuits. He won’t fit in any of mine.”

“He used to sing it with me,” said Billy to Ford, looking crestfallen.

* * * *

They pulled into Depot South, and once again Ford expected to see buildings, but there were none; only a confused impression of tumbled rock on the monitor. He looked up at it as Billy helped him into a psuit.

“Is it colder out there?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Bill, getting down three helmets from a locker. “You’re at the South Pole, dummy.”

“Aw, now, he’s never been there, has he?” said Billy, adjusting the fit of the suit for Ford. “That feel okay?”

“I guess it—whoa!” said Ford, for once the fastenings had been sealed up the suit seemed to flex, like a hand closing around him, and though it felt warm and snug it was still a slightly creepy sensation. “What’s it doing?”

“Just kind of programming itself so it gets to know you,” Billy explained, accepting a helmet from Bill. “That’s how it keeps you alive, see? Just settles in real close and puts a couple of sensors places you don’t notice. Anything goes wrong, it’ll try to fix you, and if it can’t, it’ll flash lights at you so you know.”

“Like that?” Ford pointed at the little red light flashing on Billy’s psuit readout panel. Billy looked down at it.

“Oh. No, that’s just a short circuit or glitch or something. It’s been doing that all the time lately when nothing’s wrong.”

“Some people take their suits into the shop when they need repair, you know,” said Bill, putting on his own helmet. “Just an idea, Dad. Hope it’s not too radical for you.”

As Billy helped him seal up his helmet, Ford looked at Bill and thought: *You’re a mean little twit. I’d give anything if my dad was like yours.*

But when they stepped Outside, he forgot about Bill and even about Billy. He barely noticed the cold, though it was so intense it took his breath away and the psuit helpfully turned up its thermostat for him. Depot South had all his attention.

They were surrounded on three sides by towering walls, cloudy white swirled through with colors like an Ice Pop, green and blue blue and lavender, all scarred and rough, faceted and broken. Underneath his feet was a confusion of crushed and broken rock, pea-sized gravel to cobbles, ice mixed with grit and stone, and a roiling mist swirled about his ankles.

Here and there were carvings in the ice wall, roughly gouged and

hacked: haulers rule ok and barsoom bruce GOT here alive, and one that simply said THANKS MARSWIFE, over a niche that had been scraped from the ice where somebody had left a little figurine like the one on *Beautiful Evelyn's* console. There were figures carved too; on a section of green ice, Ford noticed a four-armed giant with tusks.

Behind him, he became aware of a clatter as Billy and Bill opened a panel in the freighter's side and drew out something between them. He turned to see Billy hoisting a laser-saw, and heard the *hummmzap* as it was turned on.

"Okay!" said Billy, his voice coming tinnily over the speaker. "Let's go cut some ice!"

He went up to the nearest wall, hefted the laser, and disappeared in a cloud of white steam. A moment later, a great chunk of ice came hurtling out of the steam, and bounced and rolled to Bill's feet. He picked it up, as another block bounded out.

"Grab that," said Bill. "If we don't start loading this stuff, Dad will be up to his neck in ice."

Ford obeyed, and followed Bill around to the rear of the freighter, where a sort of escalator ramp had been lowered, and watched as Bill dropped the block to the ramp. It traveled swiftly up the ramp to a hopper at the top of *Beautiful Evelyn's* tank, where it vanished with a grinding roar, throwing up a rainbowed shatter of ice-shards and vapor against the sunlight. Fascinated, Ford set his block on the ramp and watched as the same thing happened.

"What's it doing?"

"Making carbon dioxide snowcones, what do you think?" said Bill. "And we take the whole lot back to Settlement Base, and sell it to the MAC."

"You do?" Ford was astonished. "What do we need it for?"

"Hel-LO, terraforming, remember?" said Bill. "Making Mars green like Earth? What the MAC was brought up here to do?"

He turned and trudged back around the side of the freighter, and Ford walked after him thinking: *I'll bet you wouldn't hold that nose so high up in the air if I bashed it with my forehead.*

But he said nothing, and for the next hour they worked steadily as machines, going back and forth with ice blocks to the ramp. The tank was nearly full when they heard the drone of ice-cutting stop.

"That's not enough, Dad," Bill called, and nobody answered. He turned and ran. Ford walked around the side of the freighter and saw him kneeling beside Billy, who had fallen and lay with the white mist curling over his body.

Ford gasped and ran to them. The whole front of Billy's psuit was lit with blinking colors, dancing over a readout panel that had activated. Bill was bending close, waving away the mist to peer at it. Ford leaned down and saw Billy's face slack within the helmet, his eyes staring and blank.

"What's wrong with him?" said Ford.

"He's had a blowout," said Bill flatly.

"What's a blowout?"

"Blood vessel goes *bang*. Happens sometimes to people who go Outside a lot." Bill rested his hand on his father's chest. He felt something in one of the sealed pouches; he opened it, and drew out the bottle of Freddie Stay-awakes. After staring at it for a long moment, his face contorted. He hurled the bottle at the ice-wall, where it popped open and scattered red pills like beads of blood.

"I knew it! I knew he'd do this! I knew this would happen someday!" he shouted. Ford felt like crying, but he fought it back and said:

"Is he going to die?"

"What do you think?" said Bill. "We're at the bloody South Pole! We're a week away from the infirmary!"

"But—could we maybe keep him alive until we get back?"

Bill turned to him, and a little of the incandescent rage faded from his eyes. "We might," he said. "The psuit's doing what it can. We have some emergency medical stuff. You don't understand, though. His brain's turning to goo in there."

"Maybe it isn't," said Ford. "Please! We have to try."

“He’ll die anyway,” said Bill, but he got Billy under the shoulders and tried to lift him. Ford came around and took his place, lifting Billy easily; Bill grabbed his father’s legs, and between them they hoisted Billy up and carried him into the cab.

There they settled him in his bunk, and Bill fumbled in a drawer for a medical kit. He drew out three sealed bags of colored liquid with tubes leading from one end and hooks on the other. The tubes he plugged into ports in the arm of Billy’s psuit; the hooks fitted into loops on the underside of the upper bunk, so the bags hung suspended above Billy.

“Should we get his helmet off him?” Ford asked. Bill just shook his head. He turned and stalked out of the compartment. Ford took a last look at Billy, with the glittering lights on his chest and his dead eyes staring, and followed Bill.

“What do we do now?”

“We get the laser,” said Bill. “We can’t leave it. It cost a month’s pay.”

* * * *

6

The freighter was a lot harder to handle now, full of ice, than it had been on the way out when Billy had let him drive. It took all Ford’s strength to back her around and get her on the road again, and even so the console beeped a warning as they trundled out through Jack and Jim, for he nearly swerved and clipped one of the giants. At last he was able to steer straight between the boulders and get up a little speed.

“We really can’t, er, send a distress signal or anything?” he asked Bill. Bill sat hunched at his end of the cab, staring at the monitors.

“Nobody’ll hear us,” he said bitterly. “There’s half a planet between Mons Olympus and us. Did you notice any relay towers on the way out here?”

“No.”

“That’s because there aren’t any. Why should Areco build any? Nobody comes out here except Haulers, and who cares if Haulers die? We

do this work because nobody else wants to do it, because it's too dangerous. But Haulers are a bunch of idiots; *they* don't care if they get killed."

"They're not idiots, they're brave!" said Ford. Bill looked at him with contempt. Neither of them said anything for a long while after that.

* * * *

By the time it was beginning to get dark, Ford was aching in every muscle of his body from the sheer effort of keeping the freighter on the road. The approaching darkness was not as fearful as he'd thought it might be, because for several miles now someone had daubed the lines of boulders with photoreflexive paint, and they lit up nicely in the freighter's high-beams. But *Beautiful Evelyn* seemed to want to veer to the left, and Ford wondered if there was something wrong with her steering system until he saw drifts of sand flying straight across the road in front of her, like stealthy ghosts.

"I think the wind's rising," he said.

"You think, genius?" Bill pointed to a readout on the console.

"What's it mean?"

"It means we're probably driving right into a storm," said Bill, and then they heard a shrill piping alarm from the back. Bill scrambled aft; Ford held the freighter on the road. *Please don't let that be Billy dying! Please, Marswife, if you're out there, help us!*

Bill returned and crawled into his seat. "The air pressure's dropping in here. The psuit needed somebody to okay turning it up a notch."

"Why's the air pressure dropping?"

Bill sounded weary. "Because this is going to be a really bad storm. You'd better pull over and anchor us."

"But we have to get your dad to an infirmary!"

"Did you think we were going to drive for a whole week without sleeping?" Bill said. "We don't have any Freddie's now. We have to sit out the storm no matter what happens. Five-Fifty-K is coming up soon. Maybe

we can make it that far.”

It was in fact twelve kilometers away, and the light faded steadily as they roared along. Ford could hear the wind howling now. He remembered a story Billy had told him, about people seeing dead Haulers in their high-beams, wraiths signaling for help at the scenes of long-ago breakdowns. The whirling sand looked uncannily like figures with streaming hair, diving in front of the freighter as though waving insubstantial arms. He was grateful when the half-circle of rocks that was Five-Fifty-K Station appeared in her lights at last, and she seemed eager to swerve away from the road.

Bill punched in the anchoring protocol, and *Beautiful Evelyn* gave a lurch and dropped abruptly, as though she were sitting down. Ford cut the power; the drives fell silent. They sat there side by side in the silence that was filled up steadily by the whine of blowing sand, and a patter of blown gravel that might have sounded to them like rain, if they had ever heard rain.

“What do we do now?” said Ford.

“We wait it out,” said Bill.

They went into the back to check on Billy—no change—and heated something frozen and ate it, barely registering what it was. Then they went back into the cab and sat, in their opposite corners.

“So we really are on our own?” said Ford at last. “Areco won’t send Security looking for us?”

“Areco doesn’t send Mother’s Boys anyplace,” said Bill, staring into the dark. “Mother hired ‘em.”

“Who’s Mother, anyway?”

“The lady who found the diamond and got rich,” said Bill. “And bought Mons Olympus, and everybody thought she was crazy, because it was just this big volcano where nobody could grow anything. Only, she had a well drilled into a magma pocket and built a power station. And she leased lots to a bunch of people from Earth and that’s why Mons Olympus makes way more money than Areco and the MAC.”

“The MAC isn’t supposed to make money,” said Ford. “We’re supposed to turn Mars into a paradise. Our contract says Areco is going to give it to us for our own, once we’ve done it.”

“Well, you can bet Areco isn’t going to come rescue us,” said Bill. “Nobody looks out for Haulers except other Haulers. And their idea of help would be giving Dad a big funeral and getting stinking drunk afterward.”

“Oh,” said Ford. Bill gave him an odd look.

“People in the MAC look out for each other, though, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” said Ford wretchedly. “There’s always somebody watching what you do. Always somebody there to tell you why what you want to do is wrong. Council meetings go on for hours because everybody has to say something or it isn’t fair, but they all say the same thing anyway. Blah blah blah. I *hate* it there,” he said, surprising himself by how intensely he felt.

“What’s it supposed to be like, when Mars is a paradise?”

Ford looked at Bill to see if he was being mocking, but he wasn’t smiling.

“Well, it’ll be like... there’ll be no corruption or oppression. And stuff. They say water will fall out of the sky, and nobody will ever have to wear a mask again.” Ford slumped forward and put his head on his knees. “I used to imagine it’d be... I don’t know. Full of lights.”

“People would be safe, if Mars could be made like that,” said Bill in a thoughtful voice. “Terraformed. Another Earth. No more big empty spaces.”

“I *like* big empty spaces,” said Ford. “Why does Mars have to be just like Earth anyway? Why can’t things stay the way they are?”

“You *like* this?” Bill swung his arm up at the monitors, that showed only the howling night and a blur of sand. “ ‘Cause you can have it. I hate it! Tons of big nothing waiting to kill us, all my whole life! And Dad just laughed at it, but he isn’t laughing now, huh? You know what’s really sick? If he dies—if we get back alive—I’ll be better off.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Ford.

“But I *will*,” said Bill, with a certain wonderment. “Lots better off. I can sell this freighter—and Dad paid into the Hauler’s Club, so there’d be some money coming in there—and... wow, I could afford a *good* education. Maybe University level. I’ll be able to have everything I’ve always wanted,

and I'll never have to come out here again."

"How can you talk like that?" Ford yelled. "You selfish pig! You're talking about your own dad dying! You don't even care, do you? Your dad's the bravest guy I ever met!"

"He got himself killed, after everything I told him. He was stupid," said Bill.

"He isn't even dead yet!" Ford, infuriated, swung at him. Bill ducked backward, away from his flailing fists, and got his legs up on the seat and kicked Ford. Ford fell sideways, but scrambled up on his knees and kept coming, trying to back Bill into the corner. Bill dodged and hit him hard, and then again and again, until Ford got so close he couldn't get his arms up all the way. Ford, sobbing with anger, punched as hard as he could in the cramped space, but Bill was a much better fighter for all that he was so small.

By the time they had hurt each other enough to stop, both of them had bloody noses and Ford had the beginning of a black eye. Swearing, they retreated into their separate corners of the cab, and glared at each other until the droning hiss of the wind and the pattering of gravel on the tank lulled them to sleep.

* * * *

7

When they woke, hours later, it was dead quiet.

Ford woke groaning, partly because his face was so sore and partly because he had a stiff neck from sleeping curled up on the seat. He sat up and looked around blearily.

He realized that he couldn't hear anything. He looked up at the monitors and realized that he couldn't see anything, either; the screens were black. Frightened, he leaned over and shook Bill awake. Bill woke instantly, staring around.

"The power's gone out!" Ford said.

"No, it hasn't. We'd be dead," said Bill. He punched a few buttons on the console and peered intently at figures that appeared on the readout.

Then he looked up at the monitors. “What’s that?” He pointed at the monitor for the rear of the freighter, where there was a sliver of image along the top. Just a grayish triangle of light, shifting a little along its lower edge, just like...

“Sand,” said Bill. “We’re buried. The storm blew a dune over us.”

“What do we do now?” said Ford, shivering, and the psuit thought he was cold and warmed up comfortably.

“Maybe we can blow it away,” said Bill. “Some, anyway.” He switched on the drives and there was a shudder and a jolt that ran the whole length of the freighter. With a *whoosh*, *Beautiful Evelyn* rose a few inches. The rear monitor lit up with an image of sand cascading past it; some light showed on her left-hand monitor too.

“Okay!” said Bill, shutting her down again. “We’re not going to die. Not here, anyway. We can dig out. Get a helmet on.”

They went aft to get helmets—Billy still stared at nothing, though his psuit blinked at them reassuringly—and, when they had helmeted up, Bill reached past Ford to activate the hatch. It made a dull muffled sound, but would not open. He had to try three more times before it consented to open out about a hand’s width. Sand spilled into the cab, followed by daylight.

Bill swore and climbed up on the seat, pushing the hatch outward. “Get up here and help me!”

Ford scrambled up beside him and set his shoulder to the hatch. A lot more sand fell in, but they were able to push it open far enough for Bill to grab the edge and pull himself up, and worm his way out. Ford climbed after, and in a moment was standing with Bill on the top of the dune that covered the freighter.

Bill swore quietly. Ford didn’t blame him.

They stood on a mountain of red sand and looked out on a plain of red sand, endless, smooth to the wide horizon, and the low early sun threw their shadows far out behind them. The sky had a flat metallic glare; the wind wailed high and mournful.

“Where’s the road?” cried Ford.

“Buried under there,” said Bill, pointing down the slope in front of them. “It happens sometimes. Come on.” He turned and started down the

slope. Ford stumbled after him, slipped, and fell, rolling ignominiously to the bottom. He picked himself up, feeling stupid, but Bill hadn't noticed; he was digging with his hands, scooping away sand from the freighter.

Ford waded in to help him. He reached up to brush sand from the tank, but at his touch the sand puckered out in a funny starred pattern. Startled, he drew his hand back. Cautiously he reached out a fingertip to the tank; the instant he touched it, a rayed star of sand formed once again.

"Hey, look at this!" Giggling, he drew his finger along the tank, and the star spread and followed it.

"It's magnetic," said Bill. "Happens sometimes, when the wind's been bad. My dad said it's all the iron in the sand. It fries electronics. Hard to clean off, too."

Ford brushed experimentally at the tank, but the sand stuck as though it were a dense syrup.

"This'll take us forever," he said.

"Not if we get to the tool chest," said Bill. "We can scrape off most of it."

They worked together and after ten minutes had cleared a panel in the freighter's undercarriage; Bill pried it open and pulled out a couple of big shovels, and after that the work went more quickly.

"Wowie. Sand spades. All we need is buckets and we could make sand castles, huh?" said Ford, grinning sheepishly.

"What's that mean?"

"It's something kids do on Earth. Sam says, before we emigrated, our dad and mum took him to this place called Blackpool. There was all this blue water, see, washing in over the sand. He had a bucket and spade and he made sand castles. So here we are in the biggest Blackpool in the universe, with the biggest sand spades, yeah? Only there's no water."

"How could you make castles out of sand?" Bill said, scowling as he worked. "They'd just fall in on you."

"I don't know. I think you'd have to get the sand wet."

“But why would anybody get sand wet?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think people do it on purpose; I think it just happens. There’s all this water on Earth, see, and it gets on things. That’s what Sam says.”

Bill shook his head grimly and kept digging. They cleared the freighter’s rear wheels, and Ford said:

“Why do you reckon the water’s blue on Earth? It’s only green or brown up here.”

“It’s not blue,” said Bill.

“Yes, it is,” said Ford. “Sam has holos of it. I’ve seen ‘em. It’s bluer than the sky. Blue as blue paint.”

“Water isn’t any color really,” said Bill. “It just looks blue. Something about the air.”

Ford scowled and went around to the other side of the freighter, where he dug out great shovelfuls of sand and muttered, “It is blue. They wouldn’t have that Blue Room if it wasn’t blue. All the songs and stories say it’s blue. So there, you little know-it-all.”

He had forgotten that Bill could hear him on the psuit comm, so he was quite startled when Bill’s voice sounded inside his helmet:

“Songs and stories? Right. Go stick your head in a dune, moron.”

Ford just gritted his teeth and kept shoveling.

It took them a long while to clear the freighter, because they only made real progress once the wind fell a little. Eventually, though, they were able to climb back into the cab and start up *Beautiful Evelyn’s* drives. She blasted her way free of the dune and Ford strained to steer her up, over and down across the rippled slope below.

“Okay! Where’s the road?” he said.

“There,” said Bill, pointing. “Don’t you even know directions? We anchored at right angles to the road. It’s still there, even if we can’t see it. Just take her straight that way.”

Ford obeyed. They rumbled off.

They drove for five hours, over sand and then over rocky sand and at last over a cobbled plain, and there was no sign of the double row of boulders that should have been there if they had been on the High Road.

Bill, who had been watching the readouts, grew more and more pale and silent.

"We need to stop," he said at last. "Something's wrong."

"We aren't on the High Road anymore, are we?" said Ford sadly.

"No. We're lost."

"What happened?"

"The storm must have screwed up the nav system," said Bill. "All that magnetic crap spraying around."

"Can we fix it?"

"I can reset it," said Bill. "But I can't recalibrate it, because I don't know where we are. So it wouldn't do us any good."

"But your dad said you were this great navigator!" said Ford.

Bill looked at his boots. "I'm not. He just thought I was."

"Well, isn't that great?" said Ford. "And here you thought I was such an idiot. What do we do now, Professor?"

"Shut up," said Bill. "Just shut up. We're supposed to go north, okay? And the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. So as long as we keep the setting sun on our left, we're going mostly in the right direction."

"What happens at night?"

"If the sky's clear of dust clouds, maybe we can steer by the stars."

Ford brightened up at that. "I used to watch the stars a lot," he said. "And we ought to be able to see the mountain after a while, right?"

"Mons Olympus? Yeah."

“Okay then!” Ford accelerated again, and *Beautiful Evelyn* plunged forward. “We can do this! Billy wouldn’t be scared if he was lost, would he?”

“No,” admitted Bill.

“No, because he’d just point himself at the horizon and he’d just go, zoom, and he wouldn’t worry about it.”

“He never worried about anything,” said Bill, though not as though he thought that was especially smart.

“Well, it’s dumb to worry,” said Ford, with a slightly rising note of hysteria in his voice. “You live or you die, right? The main thing, is... is... to be really *alive* before you die. I could have lived my whole life walking around in the Tubes and never, ever seen stuff like I’ve seen since I ran away. All this sky. All that sand. The ice and the mist and the different colors and everything! So maybe I don’t get to be old like Hardie Stubbs’s granddad. Who wants to be all shriveled up and coughing anyway?”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Bill. “I’d give anything to be down in the Long Acres right now, and I wouldn’t care what work I had to do. And you wish you were there too.”

“No, I don’t!” Ford shouted. “You know what I’m going to do? As soon as we get back, I’ll go see my dad and I’ll say: ‘Dad, I’m leaving the MAC Sam did it and so can I. Only I’m not going back to Earth. Mars is *my* place! And I’m going to be a Hauler, and stay Outside all the rest of my life!’”

Bill stared at him.

“You’re crazy,” he said. “You think your dad will just let you go?”

“No,” said Ford. “He’ll grab my ear and about pull it off. It doesn’t matter. Once I’m nine, the MAC says I have a right to pick whatever job I want.”

“Once you’re *nine*?”

Ford turned red. “In MAC years. We have one for every two Earth years.”

“So... you’re how old now?” Bill began to grin. “Six?”

“Yeah,” said Ford. “And you can just shut up, okay?”

“Okay,” said Bill, but his grin widened.

* * * *

8

They drove all the rest of that day, but when night fell they were so tired they agreed to pull over to sleep. Ford stretched out in the cab and Bill went back to crawl into the bunk above Billy, who lay there still, staring and unresponsive as a waxwork.

* * * *

He was still alive when morning came. Bill was changing his tube-bags when Ford came edging in, yawning.

“You wait and see,” said Ford, in an attempt to be comforting. “He’ll be fine if we can get him to the infirmary. Eric Chetwynd’s dad fell off a tractor and fractured his skull, and *he* was in this coma, see, for days, but then they did surgery on him and he was opening his eyes and talking and everything. And your dad hasn’t even got any broken bones.”

“It’s not the same,” said Bill morosely. “Never mind. Let’s get going. Sun’s on our right until noon, got it?”

They drove on. Ford’s muscles ached less now; he was beginning to feel more confident with *Beautiful Evelyn*. He watched the horizon and imagined Mons Olympus rising there, inevitable, the red queen on the vast chessboard of the plain. She *would* come into view soon. She had to. And someday, when he had a freighter of his own and drove this route all the time, a little thing like going off course wouldn’t bother him at all. He’d know every sand hill and rock outcropping like the palm of his hand.

He thought about getting a tattoo on his face. Deciding what it ought to look like occupied his thoughts for the next couple of hours, as Bill sat silent across from him, staring at the monitors and twisting his hands together in his lap.

Then:

“Something’s moving!” said Bill, pointing at the backup cam monitor.

Ford spotted it: something gleaming, sunlight striking off a vehicle far back in their dust-wake.

“Yowie! It’s another Hauler!” he said. “Billy’s saved!”

He slowed *Beautiful Evelyn* and turned her around, so the plume of dust whirled away and they could see the other vehicle more clearly.

“It’s not a Hauler,” said Bill. “It’s just a cab. Who is that? That’s nobody I know.”

“Who cares?” said Ford, pounding on the console in his glee. “They’ll know how to get back to the road!”

“Not if they’re lost too,” said Bill. The stranger was barreling toward them quite deliberately and they could see it clearly now: a freighter’s cab with no tank attached, just the tang of the hookup sticking out behind, looking strange as some tiny insect with an immense head. It pulled up alongside them. Bill hit the comm switch and cried, “Who’s that?”

There was a silence. Then a voice crackled through the speakers, distorted and harsh: “Who’s that crying ‘who’s that?’ Sounds like a youngster.”

Ford leaned over and shouted, “Please, we’re lost! Can you show us how to get back to the road?”

Another silence, and then:

“Two little boys? What’re you doing out here, then? Daddy had a mishap, did he?”

Bill gave Ford a furious look. Ford wondered why, but said:

“Yes, sir! We need to get him to the infirmary, and our nav system went out in the storm! Can you help us?”

“Why, sure I can,” said the voice, and it sounded as though the speaker were smiling. “Mask up now, kids, and step Outside. Let’s talk close-up, eh?”

“You jackass,” muttered Bill, but he pulled on his mask.

When they slid down out of the cab they saw that the stranger had painted his cab with the logo CELTIC POWER and pictures of what had been Celtic knots and four-leaved clovers, though they were half scoured away. The hatch swung up and a man climbed out, a big man in a psuit also painted in green and yellow patterns. He looked them over and grinned within his mask.

"Well, hello there, kids," he said. "Gwill Griffin, at your service. Diamond prospector by trade. What's the story?"

"Bill's dad had a blowout," said Ford. "And we were trying to get him back, but we've lost the road. Can you help us, please?"

"A blowout?" The man raised his eyebrows. "Now, that's an awful thing. Let's have a look at him."

"You don't need—" began Bill, but Mr. Griffin had already vaulted up into *Beautiful Evelyn's* cab. Bill and Ford scrambled after him. By the time they had got in he was already in the back, leaning down to peer at Billy.

"Dear, dear, he's certainly in trouble," he said. "Yes, you'd better get him back to Mons Olympus, and no mistake." He looked around the inside of the cab. "Nice rig he's got here, though, isn't it? And a nice full tank of CO₂, I take it?"

"Yeah," said Ford. "It happened right as we were finishing up. Do you know how to, er, recalibrate nav systems?"

"No trouble at all," said Mr. Griffin, shoving past them and into the seat at the console. Bill watched him closely as he punched it up and set in new figures. "Poor little lads, lost on your own Outside. You're lucky I found you, you know. The road's just five kilometers east of here, but you might have wandered around forever without finding it."

"I knew we had to be close," said Ford, though he did not feel quite the sense of relief he might have, and wondered why.

"Yes; terrible things can happen out here. I saw your rig in the middle of nowhere, zigzagging along, and I said to myself: 'Goddess save me, that must be Freeze-Dried Dave!' I've seen some strange things out here in my time, I can tell you."

"Who's Freeze-Dried Dave?" asked Ford.

"Him? The Demon Hauler of Mare Cimmerium?" Mr. Griffin turned to him, pushing his mask up. He was beardless and freckled, though he wore a wide mustache, and was not as old as Ford had thought him to be at first.

"Nobody knows who Freeze-Dried Dave was; just some poor soul who was up here in the early days, and they say he died at the console whilst on a run, see? And his cab's system took over and went on Autopilot. They think it veered off the road in a storm and just kept roving on, and every time the battery'd wear out it'd sit somewhere until another storm scoured the dust off the solar cells. Then it'd just start itself up again."

Ford realized what was making him uneasy. The man sounded like an actor in a holo, like somebody who was speaking lines for an effect.

"Some prospectors found it clean out in the middle of nowhere, and went up to it and got the hatch to open. There was Freeze-Dried Dave still sitting inside her, shriveled up like; but no sooner had they set foot to the ladder than she roared to life and took off, scattering 'em like bowling pins. And what do you think she did then? Only swerved around and came back at 'em, that's what she did, and mashed one into the sand while the others ran for their lives.

"*They* made it home to tell the tale. There's many a Hauler since then who's seen her, thundering along on her own business off the road, with that dead man rattling around inside. Some say it's Dave's ghost driving her, trying to find his way back to Settlement Base. Some say it's the freighter herself, that her system's gone mad with sorrow and wants to kill anyone gets close enough, so they don't take her Dave away. You'll never find a prospector like me who'll go anywhere near her. Why it's bad luck even to see her." He winked broadly at Ford.

"We need to get my dad to the infirmary," said Bill, clearing his throat. "Thanks for helping us. Let's go, okay?"

"Right," said Mr. Griffin, masking up again. "Only you'd best let me do a point-check on your freighter first, don't you think? That was quite a storm; could be all sorts of things gummed up you don't know about. Wouldn't want to have a breakdown out here, eh?"

"No, sir," said Ford. Mr. Griffin jumped down from the cab. Bill was preparing to jump after him, but he held up his hand.

"Now, I'll tell you what we'll do," he said. "You lads sit in there and

watch the console. I'm going to test the tread relays; that's the surest thing will go wrong after a storm, with all those little magnetic particles getting everywhere and persuading the relays to do things they shouldn't. Could cause all your wheels to lock on one side, and you don't want that to happen at speed! You'd roll and kill yourselves for sure. I'll just open the panel and run a quick diagnostic; you can give me a shout when the green lights go on."

"Okay," said Bill, and climbed back in and closed the hatch. As soon as it was closed, he swore, and kept swearing. Ford stared at him.

"What are you on about?" he demanded. "We're safe now."

"No, we Woody aren't," said Bill. "Gwill Griffin, my butt. I know who that guy is. His name's Art Finlay. He was one of Mother's Boys. She fired him last year. He liked to go into the holding cell and slap guys around. He thought nobody was looking, but the cameras caught him. So all that old-diamond-pro prospector-with-his-tall-tales stuff was so much crap. So's the PanCeltic accent; he emigrated up here from some place in the Americans on Earth."

"So he's a phony?" Ford thought of the inexplicably creepy feeling the stranger had given him.

"Yeah. He's a phony," said Bill, and reached over to switch on the comm unit. "How are those relays?" he said.

"Look fine," was the crackly answer. "Your daddy took care of this rig, sure enough. Look at the console, now, lads; tell me when the green lights go on."

They stared at the panel, and in a moment: "They're on," chorused Bill and Ford.

"Then you're home and dry."

"Thanks! We're going to go on now, okay?" said Bill.

"You do that. I'll just follow along behind to be sure you get home safe, eh?"

"Okay," said Bill, and shut off the comm. "Get going!" he told Ford. "Five kilometers due east. We ought to be able to see it once we get over that rise. Let's leave this guy way behind us."

Ford started her up again, and *Beautiful Evelyn* rolled forward. She picked up speed and he charged her at the hill, feeling a wonderful sense of freedom as she zoomed upward. Bill cut into his reverie by yelling:

"The camera's been changed!"

"Huh?"

"Look," said Bill, pointing up at the left-hand monitor. It was no longer showing *Beautiful Evelyn's* port side and a slice of ground, as it had been; now there was only a view of the northern horizon. "He moved the lens. Move it back!"

"I don't know how!" Ford leaned in, flustered, as Bill jumped up and reached past him to stab at the controls that would align the camera lenses. *Beautiful Evelyn's* side came back into view.

"She looks all right," said Ford. "And, hey! There's the High Road! Hooray!"

"No, she doesn't look all right!" said Bill. "Look! He left the relay panel open! How come the telltale warning isn't lit?"

"I don't know," said Ford.

"Of course *you* don't know, you flaming idiot," said Bill, shrill with anger. "And here he comes!"

Ford looked up at the backup cam and saw Mr. Griffin's cab advancing behind the freighter; then the image switched to the left-hand camera, as it moved up on *Beautiful Evelyn's* port side. It drew level with the open panel. They watched in horror as the cab's hatch swung down. They saw Mr. Griffin, masked up, leaning out.

"He's going to do something to the panel!" shrieked Bill.

"Oh, no, he won't," said Ford, more angry than he had ever been in his life. Without a second's hesitation, he steered *Beautiful Evelyn* sharply to the left. She more than sideswiped Mr. Griffin; with a terrific crash, she sent his cab spinning away, rolling over and over, and they saw him go flying out of it. *Beautiful Evelyn* lurched and sagged. They rumbled to a stop. They sat for a moment, shaking.

“We have to go see,” said Bill. “Something’s wrong.”

They masked up and went Outside.

* * * *

9

Beautiful Evelyn’s foremost left tire had exploded. There was a thick crust of polyceramic around the wheel, but nothing else. It must have sent pieces flying in all directions when it burst. Ford gaped at it while Bill ran down to the open panel. Ford heard a lot of swearing. He turned and saw Bill tearing something loose, and holding it up.

“Duct tape,” said Bill. “He put a piece of duct tape over the warning sensor.”

“Did he damage the, whatzis, the relays?” Ford looked in concern at the open panel, with no idea what he was seeing inside.

“No. You nailed him in time. But if he’d bashed them with something once we’d come up to speed, we’d have flipped over, just like he said. Then all he’d have had to do was move in and pick over the wreck. Help himself to the tank. Tell anybody who asked questions a story about some ‘poor little dead lads’ he’d found out here.” Bill looked over at the dust rising from the wreck of Griffin’s cab.

He bent and picked up a good-sized rock.

Ford followed his gaze.

“You think he’s still alive?” he said, shuddering.

“Maybe,” said Bill. “Get a rock. Let’s go find out.”

But he wasn’t alive. They found him where he’d fallen, nine meters from his cab.

His mask had come off.

“Oh,” said Ford, backing away. “Oh—“

He turned hastily and doubled up, vomiting into his mask. Turning, he ran for the freighter. Scrambling in and closing the hatch, he groped his way to the lavatory and pulled his mask off. He vomited again, under Billy's blank gaze.

He had cleaned himself up a little and stopped crying by the time he heard Bill coming back.

"Can you mask up?" Bill asked him, over the commlink.

"Yeah—" said Ford, his voice breaking on another sob. Hating himself, he pulled the mask on and heard the hatch open. Bill climbed in.

"We might be okay," said Bill. "I had a look at his rig. Same size tires as ours. Maybe we can change one out."

"Okay," said Ford. Bill looked at him.

"Are you going to be all right? You're green."

"I killed a guy," said Ford.

"He was trying to kill us," said Bill. "He deserved what he got."

"I know," said Ford, beginning to shiver again. "It's just—the way it *looked*. The face. Oh, man. I'm going to see it when I close my eyes at night, for the rest of my life."

"I know," said Bill, sounding tired. "That was how I felt, the first time I saw somebody die like that."

"Does it happen a lot?"

"To Haulers? Yeah. Mostly to new guys." Bill stood up. "Come on. Blow your nose and let's go see if we can change the tire."

Walking out to the wreck, Ford began to giggle weakly.

"We really blew *his* nose for him, huh?"

* * * *

The cab had come to rest upright. Its hatch had been torn away, and the inside was a litter of tumbled trash and spilled coffee that had already

frozen. Ford made a step of his hands so Bill could climb up and in.

"I don't see any lug nuts," Ford said, looking at the nearest tire. "How do we get them off?"

"They're not like tractor tires," said Bill crossly, punching buttons on the console. "Crap. All the electronics are fried. There's supposed to be an emergency release, though. Ours is under the console, because it's a Mitsubishi. This is a Toutatis. Let me look around in here..."

Ford glanced over his shoulder in the direction in which the dead man lay. He looked back hurriedly and gave an experimental tug at the tire. It felt as immovable as a ten-ton boulder. He reached in and got his arms around it, and pulled as hard as he could.

"I think maybe this is it," said Bill, from inside the cab. "Stand clear, okay?"

Ford let go hastily and tried to scramble away, but the tire shot off the axle as though it had been fired from a cannon.

It caught him in the stomach. He was thrown backward two meters, and fell sprawling on the ground, too winded to groan.

"Dumbass," said Bill, looking down. He jumped from the cab and pushed the tire off Ford. "I *said* stand clear. Why doesn't anybody ever listen to me?"

Ford rolled over, thinking he might have to throw up again. He got painfully to his hands and knees. Bill was already rolling the tire toward *Beautiful Evelyn*, so Ford struggled to his feet and followed.

He held the tire upright, standing well clear of the axle when Bill fired off the burst one. It shot all the way over to the wreck. Then Bill got back down, and, together, they lifted the tire up and slammed it into place. They drove down to the road, between two boulders, and turned north again.

"Look, you need to get over it," said Bill, who had been watching Ford. "It's not like you meant to kill him."

"It's not that," said Ford, who was gray-faced and sweating. "My stomach really hurts, is all."

Bill leaned close and looked at him.

"Your psuit says something's wrong," he said.

"It does?" Ford looked down at himself. How had he missed that flashing yellow light? "It's like it's shrinking or something. It's so tight I can almost not breathe."

"We have to stop," said Bill.

"Okay," said Ford. *Beautiful Evelyn* coasted to a stop and sat there in the middle of the road, as Bill climbed over and stared intently at the diagnostic panel on the front of Ford's psuit. He went pale, but all he said was:

"Let's trade places."

"But you can't drive her," Ford protested.

"If we're on the straightaway and there's no wind, I can sort of drive," said Bill. He dove into the back, as Ford crawled sideways into his seat, and came out a moment later with one of the little tube-bags. "Stick your arm up like *this*, okay?"

Ford obeyed, and watched as Bill plugged the tube into the psuit's port. "So that'll make me feel better?"

"Yeah, it ought to." Bill swung himself into the console seat and sent *Beautiful Evelyn* trundling on.

"Good." Ford sighed. "What's wrong with me?"

"Psuit says you've ruptured something," said Bill, staring at the monitor. He accelerated.

"Oh. Well, that's not too bad," said Ford, blinking. "Jimmy Linton got a rupture and he's okay. Better than okay, actually. The medic said he couldn't work with a shovel anymore. So... they made him official secretary for the Council, see? All he has to do is record stuff at meetings and post notices."

"Really."

"So if I have a rupture, maybe my dad won't take it so hard that I want to be a Hauler. Since that way I get out of working in the methane plant and

the cowsheds. Maybe.”

Bill gave him an incredulous look.

“All this, and you still want to be a Hauler?”

“Of course I do!”

Bill just shook his head.

* * * *

They drove in a dead calm, at least compared to the weather before. Far off across the plains they saw dust devils here and there, twirling lazily. The farther north they drove, the clearer the air was, the brighter the light of the sun, shining on standing outcroppings of rock the color of rust, or milk chocolate, or tangerines, or new pennies.

“This is so great,” said Ford, slurring his words as he spoke. “This is more beautiful than anything. Isn’t the world a big place?”

“I guess so,” said Bill.

“It’s *our* place,” said Ford. “They can all go back to Earth, but we never will. We’re Martians.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see, I have hair growing in?” Ford swung his hand up to pat his scalp. “Red like Mars.”

“Don’t move your arm around, okay? You’ll rip the tube out.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s all right. Maybe you should mask up, you know? You could probably use the oxygen.”

“Sure...” Ford dragged his mask into place.

After a while, he smiled and said: “I know who I am.”

He murmured to himself for a while, muffled behind the mask. The next time Bill glanced over at him, he was unconscious.

And Bill was all alone.

Billy wasn't there to be yelled at, or blamed for anything. He might never be there again. He couldn't be argued with, he couldn't be shamed or ignored or made to feel anything Bill wanted him to feel. Not if he was dead.

But he'd been like that when he'd been alive, too, hadn't he?

The cold straight road stretched out across the cold flat plain, and there was no mercy out here, no right or wrong, no lies. There was only this giant machine hurtling along, that took all Bill's strength to keep on the road.

If he couldn't do it, he'd die.

Bill realized, with a certain shock, how much of his life he'd wanted an audience. Someone else to be a witness to how scared and angry he was, to agree with him on how bad a father Billy had been.

What had he thought? That someday he'd stand up in some kind of giant courtroom, letting the whole world know how unfair everything had been from the day he'd been born?

Out here, he knew the truth.

There was no vast cosmic court of justice that would turn Billy into the kind of father Bill had wanted him to be. There was no Marswife to swoop down from the dust clouds and guide a lost boy home. The red world didn't care if he sulked; it would casually kill him, if it caught him Outside.

And he had always known it.

Then what was the point of being angry about it all the time?

What was the point of white-knuckled fists and a knotted-up stomach if things would never change?

His anger would never force anybody to fix the world for him.

But...

There were people who tried to fix the world for themselves. Maybe he could fix his world, just the narrow slice of it that was his.

He watched the monitors, watched the wind driving sand across the barren stony plain, the emptiness that he had hated ever since he could remember. What would it take to make him love it, the way Billy or Ford loved it?

He imagined water falling from the sky, bubbling up from under the frozen rock. Maybe it would be blue water. It would splash and steam, the way it did in the bathhouse. Running, gurgling water to drown the dust and irrigate the red sand.

And green would come. He couldn't get a mental image of vizio acres over the whole world, tenting in greenness even up here; that was crazy. But the green might creep out on its own, if there was enough water. Wiry little desert plants at first, maybe, and then... Bill tried to remember the names of plants from his lesson plans. Sagebrush, right. Sequoias. Clover. Edelweiss. Apples. A memory came back to him, a nursery rhyme he'd had on his Buke once: *I should like to rise and go, where the golden apples grow...*

He blurred his vision a little and saw himself soaring past green rows that went out forever, that arched over and made warm shade and shelter from the wind. Another memory floated up, a picture from a lesson plan, and his dream caught it and slapped it into place: cows grazing in a green meadow, out under a sky full of white clouds, clouds of water, not dust.

And, in the most sheltered places, there would be people, Families. Houses lit warm at night, with the lights winking through the green leaves. Just as he had always imagined. One of them would be his house. He'd live there with his family.

Nobody would give him a house, or a family, or a safe world to live in, of course. Ever. They didn't exist. But...

Bill wrapped it all around himself anyway, to keep out the cold and the fear, and he drove on.

At some point—hours or days later, he never knew—his strength gave out and he couldn't hold *Beautiful Evelyn* on the road anymore. She drifted gently to the side, clipping the boulders as she came, and rumbled to a halt just inside Thousand-K Station.

Bill lay along the seat where he had fallen, too tired and in too much pain to move. Ford still sat, propped up in his corner, most of his face hidden by his mask. Bill couldn't tell if he was still alive.

He closed his eyes and went down, and down, into the green rows.

* * * *

He was awakened by thumping on the cab, and shouting, and was bolt upright with his mask on before he had time to realize that he wasn't dreaming. He crawled across the seat and threw the release switches. The hatch swung down, and red light streamed in out of a black night. There stood Old Brick, granddaddy of the Haulers, with his long beard streaming sideways in the gale and at least three other Haulers behind him. His eyes widened behind his mask as he took in Bill and Ford. He reached up and turned up the volume on his psuit.

"CONVOY! WE GOT KIDS HERE! LOOKS LIKE TOWNSEND'S RIG!"

* * * *

10

Bill was all right after a couple of days, even though he had to have stuff fed into his arm while he slept. He was still foggy-headed when Mother came and sat by his bed, and very gently told him about Billy.

Bill mustn't worry, she said; she would find Billy a warm corner in the *Empress*, with all the food and drink he wanted the rest of his days, and surely Bill would come talk to him sometimes? For Billy was ever so proud of Young Bill, as everyone knew. And perhaps take him on little walks round the Tubes, so he could see Outside now and again? For Billy had so loved the High Road.

* * * *

Ford wasn't all right. He had to have surgery for a ruptured spleen, and almost bled to death once they'd cut his psuit off him.

He still hadn't regained consciousness when Bill, wrapped in an outsize bathrobe, shuffled down to the infirmary's intensive care unit to see him. See *him* was all Bill could do; pale as an egg, Ford lay in the center of a mass of tubes and plastic tenting. The only parts of him that weren't white were his hair, which was growing in red as Martian sand, and the greenish bruise where Bill had punched him in the eye.

Bill sat there staring at the floor tiles, until he became aware that someone else had entered the room. He looked up.

He knew the man in front of him must be Ford's father; his eyes were the same watery blue, and his ears stuck out the same way. He wore patched denim and muddy boots, and a stocking cap pulled down almost low enough to hide the bandage over his left eyebrow. There was a little white stubble along the line of his jaw, like a light frost.

He looked at Ford, and the watery eyes brimmed over with tears. He glanced uncertainly at Bill. He looked down, lined up the toes of his boots against a seam in the tile.

"You'd be that Hauler's boy, then?" he said. "I have to thank you, on behalf of my Blatchford."

"Blatchford," repeated Bill, dumfounded until he realized whom the old man meant. "Oh."

"That woman explained everything to me," said Ford's dad. "Wasn't my Blatchford's fault. Poor boy. Don't blame him for running off scared. Your dad did a good thing, taking him in like that. I'm sorry about your dad."

"Me, too," said Bill. "But For—Blatchford'll be all right."

"I know he will," said Ford's dad, looking yearningly at his son. "He's a strong boy, my Blatchford. Not like his brother. You can raise somebody up his whole life and do your best to teach him what's right, and—and overnight, he can just turn into a stranger on you."

"My Sam did that. I should have seen it coming, him walking out on us. He never was any good, really. A weakling."

"Not like my little Blatchford. Never a word of complaint out of *him*, or whining after vanities. *He* knows who he is. He'll make the Collective proud one day."

Bill swallowed hard. He knew that Ford would never make the Collective proud; Ford would be off on the High Road as soon as he could, in love with the wide horizon, and the old man's angry heart would break again.

The weight of everything that had happened seemed to come

crashing down on Bill at once. He couldn't remember when he'd felt so miserable.

"Would you tell me something, sir?" he said. "What does it take to join the MAC?"

"Hm?" Ford's dad turned.

"What do you have to do?"

Ford's dad looked at him speculatively. He cleared his throat. "It isn't what you do. It's what you *are*, young man."

He came and sat down beside Bill, and threw back his shoulders.

"You have to be the kind of person who believes a better world is worth working for. You can't be weak, or afraid, or greedy for things for yourself. You have to know that the only thing that matters is making that better world, and making it for everyone, not just for you.

"You may not even get to see it come into existence, because making the world right is hard work. It'll take all your strength and all your bravery, and maybe you'll be left at the end with nothing but knowing that you did your duty.

"But that'll be enough for you."

His voice was thin and harsh; he sounded as though he was reciting a lecture he'd memorized. But his eyes shone like Ford's had, when Ford had looked out on the open sky for the first time.

"Well—I'm going to study agriculture," said Bill. "And I thought, maybe, when I pass my levels, I'd like to join the MAC. I want that world you talk about. It's all I've ever wanted."

"Good on you, son," said Ford's dad, nodding solemnly. "You study hard, and I'm sure you'd be welcome to join us. You're the sort of young man we need in the MAC. And it does my heart good to know my Blatchford's got a friend like you. Gives me hope for the future, to think we'll have two heroes like you working in our cause!"

He shook Bill's hand, and then the nurse looked in at them and said that visiting hours were over. Ford's dad went away, down the hill. Bill walked slowly back to his room.

He didn't climb back into bed. He sat down in a chair in the corner, and looked out through Settlement Dome at the cold red desert, at the far double line of boulders where the High Road ran off into places Billy would never see again. He began to cry, silently, tears burning as they ran down his face.

He didn't know whether he was crying for Billy, or for Ford's dad.

The world was ending. The world was beginning.