

COLD VENTURE by Darrell Fletcher

Chapter 1

Ice

The stars above offered me no solace. The ones below, on the sides and in front were equally silent. I think the ones behind me were laughing, outright. Anyway, that was what it felt like as I floated next to the asteroid, holding onto the anchor line with one hand. A voice in my head was berating me as I tried to figure a way out of this predicament. *Just had to go after one more. Couldn't be satisfied with this month's haul?* An involuntary shiver ran through my body and I checked the suit's power level, again. Low, and getting lower by the minute. I turned the thermostat down another couple of degrees to conserve my batteries. In front of me, I could see the blinking beacon on my ship, hanging in space . . . half a mile away. Well, it costs money to stay warm, out here in the Belt and 175 was a find I couldn't pass up.

Civilization probably wouldn't exist if not for the pursuit of warmth. Confused? Look at it this way. The basic medium of exchange in any society is some form of money. It could be gems, rare metals, shells, beads, rocks or whatever. This money is then used to purchase the necessities and luxuries of life. The total of which adds up to warmth, or comfort. The events leading up to my hanging out here, next to an asteroid, freezing my behind off, started a long time ago, on Earth. Okay, not that far back. Fast forward a million years . . .

When inexpensive hydrogen fusion was invented, one of the major impediments to individual freedom on the Earth, was removed. Suddenly there was an abundance of power and when a couple of amateur inventors stumbled onto the Inertial Conversion Drive (they were actually trying to make a super-stabilized unicycle), humanity exploded into space faster than you could say 'lift off'. Where there are people there is Enterprise, the buying and selling of necessities, luxuries and services.

Fusion power requires Hydrogen, which is hard to store in any quantity in its free state. It requires very bulky and expensive equipment. Not the sort a lot of people can afford to buy or maintain a million miles from home. The economical answer to this dilemma was water. It is a substance made up of two of the most important elements Space Travelers of Today need, Hydrogen for fuel and Oxygen to breathe. It's easy to store, nonvolatile and it prevents dehydration, something we all have to contend with. So, we have Fuel, Air and Water in one substance. Where do I come in? To repeat myself, Fusion power is not cheap, because it still takes money to drag water up from Earth. It is, however, a lot less expensive to find ice balls up here and tow them to the various ships, habitats and stations conducting operations in the Belt. That's what I do, catch ice balls. *Yeah, good catch,* the little voice taunted me. Ah, shut up! Realizing I was about to get into a heated exchange with . . . myself, I concentrated on recent events and reviewed how I had gotten into this mess.

Number 175 showed up on radar about a week ago and it was giving me a really bright return, which should have woken up the little voice, but he doesn't handle alcohol very well

and I was still feeling the effects of my last stop. When I got within visual range, I fired up the Laser Spectrographer. You can imagine my excitement when H₂O showed up on the display screen. The computer gave it a high water percentage. *Another unnoticed clue, Einstein.* Hey, can the chatter, I'm tryin' ta think, here. Let's see, where was I . . . oh yeah, I applied delta vee to intercept. Them' s fancy words for changin' course. When I had closed to less than half a mile, there was a bright flash and main power went down, followed shortly by the backup system. The Inertial Drive got screwed up and suddenly, Icehound was spinning six ways from last week. After an exhausting hour of stabilizing the ship, I matched orbits with 175. Drive units depend on rotating masses and applied energy to move the ship in the direction one wishes to go. When the electronics failed, a little manual labor was required.

My next task was to check out the condition of the ship. The hull wasn' t holed and the water tank wasn' t leaking. The Fusion unit was dead and wouldn't fire up because the backup batteries weren't up to the task. It was all they could do to keep life support going. There must be a short, somewhere, but I couldn't find it. Well, time to fall back on Alternate Plan Bravo. Unfold the solar array and get the batteries charged. That would take at least a week, way out here, so I figured I might as well go and stake out my ice. I suited up and shoved off for Ice Ball 175.

Now, I happen to be one of those people who have things happen to them in groups and this group wasn' t through with me yet. My Vac Suit is the latest in modern space hardware. Instead of gas or liquid maneuvering units, it uses a miniature Inertial Drive. As I approached the ice ball, the suit battery alarm went off and when I finally landed, I had about thirty minutes of power left. This was not nearly enough time to set the net anchors and mark the drill targets. Okay, so don' t waste the trip, do half the job. I got the Hammer out and started to drive in the first anchor. It' s not your normal type nail driver, we just call it that. The recoil slammed it back into my stomach so hard it knocked the wind out of me. Not an easy thing to do, in a spacesuit. I collected my wits and examined the spike it was supposed to drive in . . . it was *bent*. It seemed that ole' 175 was not what it appeared. That spike *should* have been able to penetrate nickel-iron. Maybe it was defective, but after that kick in the gut I decided to go at this a little slower. Back to the ship for more tools and power . . . another unpleasant surprise . . . I hadn't kept close enough watch on the suit power and the automatic safeties had disabled the Drive in favor of life support. Now I had a real problem and I had better figure a way out or I was going to be floating out here in the cold, for a long, long time.

Getting back to the ship using only muscle power seems easy. Obviously, this was space and the ice ball had no gravity to speak of, so I could just jump for it. A good idea in theory, but very chancy in practice. If my jump missed, there would be no way to correct my trajectory and instead of dying next to this rock, I would take the scenic route to the hereafter. So I modified the basic idea. I had about a thousand feet of high strength line with me that I had wrapped around the ice ball for something to hang on to. If I clipped the end to me and my jump was off, I could just pull myself back in and try again. After five tries I finally let

go of the line . . . if it hadn't been for my suit, I would have kissed Icehound's hull when I landed.

That was close. Make a note . . . buy some gas thrusters as backup. It had been getting mighty cold out there.

After some food and a hot drink, I did a status check on the rest of the ship and got comfortable, to ponder the very strange day I'd just had. The facts are, everything was normal until I tried to close on the ice ball. Then, there was a bright flash. Hmm, come to think of it, the flash hadn't come from the Bridge window but seemed to fill the whole forward cabin. Okay, because of the flash, the ship lost all power? Dead Fusion Unit. Many minutes of frantic activity on my part to stabilize the ship. After that no problems until I suited up and went over to the ice ball. My suit had a failure similar to the ship's. Then, the Hammer almost knocks me out. Obviously, there was something strange about Ice Ball 175. I checked the spectrograph data.

"Computer."

"READY."

"Analysis . . . level three . . . data latest spectrograph . . . GO"

"WORKING." I like my computer to sound like a computer. It makes me appreciate human company when I get it. It isn't the latest model but it works and it's paid for, two very important things out here. "ANALYSIS COMPLETE . . . SOFTCOPY, HARDCOPY OR VOICE."

"Computer, display . . . Save data . . . File ACQ175."

"FILE SAVED . . . DATA DISPLAYED . . . WAITING." I ambled over to the console and checked out the results.

WATER . . . 99%

OTHERS . . . 1% . . . UNMEASURABLE TO WITHIN 30% CERTAINTY.

Now, I've been at this ice ball catching game for a while and I've ~~never~~ seen an analysis that was this black and white. The Others category usually runs 20% with a 70% certainty. What the data meant was that either Ice Ball 175 was 99% pure water ~~or~~ the data was wrong *or* that 175 was not what it appeared. I was pretty sure the equipment was working, the computer does an extensive system check. That left door number one or door number three.

Door number one didn't have much of a chance because nothing in the belt is 99% pure. Now considering all that had happened today, it is pretty safe to assume that the *Unknown* has a hand in this. Since 90% of the Belt is unknown, using rather convoluted logic, it is safe to conclude that whatever 175 was, it wasn't just an ice ball. I must be tired, that should have been obvious from the beginning. The Comp. is on watch and I'm for the sack.

Day two of the exciting Saga of Ice Ball 175 dawned. The first thing I did was to check the ship vitals, most important, the battery charge. Ship . . . okay, battery . . . still charging. The Comp. seems happy and radar reports that nothing was going to hit me for at least ten years. Not that I planned to be here that long, supplies were running low and it was time to head for Belt Central, to stock up. Belt Central is the main marketplace in the Belt. About

a million miles spinward, was Logan' s Hole. In my opinion, Belt Central has delusions of grandeur and Logan' s Hole was just what it sounds like. Oh well, you take what you can get. Maybe when I get enough cash banked, I' ll start my own Rest and Rec. center.

Before I went back out there, I needed to rig up some sort of gas propulsion since battery power had proven to be . . . unreliable. Checking inventory I found some empty oxygen tanks I could fill and use as thrusters. Next, I got my hand tools together. What I figured was that using the line out there to hang on to, I could scrape off the ice to see what was below.

On the trip over I lost 40% of my suit power, again. I had brought a spare battery and it was okay, so I could stay for a full work period. Using the marked line, I measured my catch. The Ice Ball turned out to be 52 feet across and 150 feet long. This was a pretty big piece of something and it wasn' t ice. It took me the better part of 24 hours (not all at once) to clear a band a meter wide all the way around 175. What I found was, to say the least, astounding! It seemed that Kilroy had been here. I discovered that the surface below the ice was artificial, intelligence created, Alien! There was an entry lock, with markings in an unfamiliar script and a big hole near one end that didn' t look like it belonged there. The lock mechanism wasn't obvious so I decided to use the hole. My Rad meter told me that the area around it was slightly hotter than the rest of the object . . . so, with one ear on the Rad counter, and both eyes open, I pulled my way inside.

It was immediately obvious that something had exploded. I took a lot of pictures of the damage and looked for the entrance to the rest of the ship. *That's a stretch, isn't it?* My internal pest was back, but hey, when you find it in space and it' s artificial, it' s a ship until proven otherwise. The hatch was easy to find, being at the end of a catwalk. There was a window in it so I lit up the interior with my suit light. Lo and behold, it was an airlock with the other side closed. Up to this point, there hadn't been anything completely unfamiliar and the airlock was no exception. On each hatch, was a large handle, no mystery there, doors need knobs. So, firmly grasping the Unknown by the handle, I pushed in the obvious direction. The hatch opened . . . sorry, no bug eyed monsters were lying in wait, to ambush me.

Inside the airlock, were more cryptic symbols on the walls, cabinets and controls. I moved to the inner hatch, grabbed the Unknown again and shoved. The Unknown wasn' t moving, thank you. A few quick seconds of thought and a few long minutes of examination, uncovered the fact that the two hatches had a mechanical safety which prevented one from opening if the other was already open. These folks had a healthy respect for Old Man Vacuum. Okay, close the door and wipe your feet, sonny. So far, I hadn' t seen any light nor any indication of power, but when I got the inner hatch open, there was a dim glow from the front of the ship.

Moving cautiously toward the glow, I soon found myself on the Bridge. *Getting a little anthropomorphic, aren't we?* No, where you fly the ship from is the Bridge. To fly . . . well . . . it' s handy to have panoramic windows. This area had such windows, ergo, the Bridge. *Brilliant, Sherlock.* I ignored the voice, it was just being a pain. Besides, there were seats

at the front and they were occupied. On the surface they appeared human, two arms . . . two legs . . . two eyes, two ears, one nose and one mouth. They were also very dead. This discovery evoked all sorts of philosophical thoughts. Who were they? Where did they come from? Where did I come from? Are we related species or just similar evolution? It was all too much to consider, just standing there. So ignore philosophy and feel sad for them. To have died, way out here, millions of miles from a safe harbor.

I know a little bit about Physics and Biology having knocked around out here for the past ten years or so, but I could see that some high powered help was called for. An Alien artifact that could have been built by man and dead Aliens, which looked a lot like us, was not something to be investigated by an Ice Hunter, like me. Well . . . not alone anyway. After returning to the ship and ditching my suit, I got a hot cup of coffee and had the Comp. orient the High gain antenna toward Ceres.

Ceres, because of it being one of the larger rocks out here, was a natural place to occupy. It was developed by a company trying to invent a Faster Than Light drive. They were out here, because some of their experiments made the Lunatics nervous and Mars was a work in progress. The company was losing money like sand flowed through your fingers so they decided to give it up as a bad deal. The people that were working on the project decided to buy the operation and continue. They quickly discovered that living out here required 'money'. Remember, we discussed that earlier. What they came up with was to operate a Professional Center. You know, Doctors, Dentists, Repair and Maintenance facilities, etc. and in their spare time, some of them work on the FTL Drive. One of the Physics people was my favorite person in the whole System. Besides having an I.Q. in the high triple digits, she had a body that could make the dead rise, so it was with great joy and anticipation that I linked into the Ceres Comm system and keyed her number.

A very relaxing video, of a seashore, came on the screen and her melodious voice filled the confines of my control room. I had gotten her damn answering machine.

"I' m sorry, but, I am unable to answer the Vid right now, please leave a message."

"Hey, Fire, it' s me, Ice, answer the Vid!" Did I mention that she's a red head? When we started seeing each other, my friend Brain noted that since I was called Ice and she had red hair, it was only logical she should be Fire. It seemed Fi was screening her calls.

"I hope that this is a life or death situation Ice, I'm right in the middle of something." Came blasting out of the speaker as the sea scene dissolved and my sweetie came on, with thunder clouds over her eyebrows and lightning in her eyes. She has a temper to match her hair.

"Don' t cut off, I have to talk to you," I blurted out.

"What is it? I'm very busy." You'd think she'd be glad to see me after a whole month, but she tends to over focus on work.

"Listen, do you remember that vacation we took to Belt Central, last month?" I said, quickly. Her face cleared up instantly and her eyes got softer. She's not insensitive, just kind of single-minded.

"Right, you bet I do, switching now." We really had taken a vacation to Belt Central

recently but this only had a little to do with it. The problem with communication by radio, even with a high gain parabolic antenna, is that someone could always eavesdrop on conversations. A first reference to a vacation trip meant that we were to scramble the transmissions using a prearranged seed word, related to the trip.

"What' s wrong? Are you all right? Do you need help?" A rapid stream of questions came forth from her lovely lips. I held up my hand to forestall any more.

"Hang on . . . slow down . . . I' m fine. Even better since I called you. Listen, I' ve found a derelict ship and I need you, Doc and Brain out here as quickly as you can get away."

"Disabled ship! Are there any casualties?" She asked, frowning in concern.

"No, casualties and no survivors, but Fi, the ship wasn' t built in this solar system. The markings aren' t anything that my Comp. has on file."

"An Alien Ship!" She practically blew out the speaker.

"Yeah, but before the three of you come blasting out here, stow some supplies on board." I transmitted a list of supplies Comp. to Comp., and my coordinates.

"It' s about time I took a leave of absence from this madhouse and this find might supply some info for the Project. Our ETA should be about 48 hours, give or take a few."

Her eyes got soft again. "See you soon, love." As I signed off, a worry began to creep into my thoughts. The ETA of 48 hours could only mean that she intended to use the Flinger, or in technicalese . . . Centrifugal Velocity Enhancer. The Flinger is a fusion-powered wheel about a thousand feet in diameter. In operation, a ship is attached to the outside rim. Across the circle from the ship, tanks were filled with water to counter balance the wheel. "Ground power" was used to spin the wheel like a giant centrifuge. At a preprogrammed moment, depending on where you were heading, the ship was released and the water allowed to fill the rim to keep it from leaving the vicinity too fast. This was a tricky operation and more than a little dangerous. The Hospital used it in emergency cases. Once the ship' s trajectory was established, the pilot and Comp. spent the remaining time decelerating the ship and dodging small chunks of rock.

Doc and Brain were pretty much what their nicknames suggested. Both of them worked on the Project (they never liked to call it FTL or Stardrive . . . very secretive). Doc, is a Medical type and was out here to study the effects of faster than light travel, on us carbon units, if they ever develop the drive. Brain, is an Electronics whiz and Computer Genius. He also dabbles a bit in language and history, which was why I thought he should be here. Doc, I figured, could maybe prod around inside these two corpses and find out how closely we were related.

The only thing we really had to worry about, was someone else getting out here and trying a little claim jumping. One way to avoid that, was to use scrambled communications, which I had. Another way was to register the asteroid as a mining claim, which I immediately did. The third was to keep a sharp eye out for strangers and the guns handy in case they showed up unannounced.

Fusion power had unhooked people from the power companies and the Power Brokers, both Political and Technical had tried to stop it. Edicts came from the Heads of States about

how having all this 'uncontrolled' energy around was dangerous. Money came from the Power Companies to support the bureaucrats in their attempt to stifle Fusion. Well, the accounts of those years could fill a library. The American people finally woke up and took matters into their own hands. When three hundred million people stood up and told said parties, to take their bullshit and stuff it, there wasn't a lot the Control Freaks could do about it. It's amazing how people can become responsible individuals when they have the power (literally) to enforce that individualism. Government was drastically scaled back, all over the planet. It's also amazing that people tried to take advantage of the situation to further their own agendas. After the smoke cleared it became apparent that the only way people could live together was to follow the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you' and the famous saying 'mind your own business'. The only other 'rule' we have is 'Don't tread on me or I'll tread back'.

The time I spent, waiting for my visitors, was not going to go to waste. Using a Holo camera, I recorded the interior of the Alien ship. Loading this info into my Comp., allowed me to sit and relax in the comfort of my own ship to observe and plan what to do about it. Since Icehound's computer had full 3d holographic capability, I could rotate any view in any direction. This allowed me to study a lot of the visible items and devices and attempt to deduce what they did. Some of those deductions about the ship and its contents were very interesting, to say the least.

First, there was still a little power aboard. As well as the one indicator I saw on the 'main' control board, two others were lit as well. The one on the main control panel may be a warning light. I made this assumption because it was a little larger than the others and red. Making the inference that because it was red, it meant *warning* was, I admit, a little shaky. But the previous owners looked so much like humans, I felt the same reason red is a warning to us (blood is red) might apply to them also. The other two lights were green and on a side panel.

Second, the ship seemed capable of supporting four people. *People?* I thought you were asleep. Don't argue about what I call 'em . . . who's telling this story anyway? There were four seats in the main cabin and four smaller cabins containing a wealth of personal articles. There were only two bodies in the ship, although all four cabins seemed to have been occupied.

Third, was the problem of the power drain on my suit batteries every time I went over there. I had the distinct feeling that it related to the lights on the control panels but I was going to wait until the really intelligent people got here before pushing any buttons.

Fourth, after thoroughly checking the damaged rear portion of the Alien ship, I was certain the power source of this vessel had been a Fission plant, fer cryin' out loud. Those things are dangerous. Apparently, wherever this had come from didn't have Fusion power or they wouldn't have been using such an unsafe system. The key to a controlled fusion reaction turned out to be a quantum black hole. By creating a state that neutralizes the repulsive forces between atoms, Apparent Gravity and a little additional energy cause the atoms to collide and fuse. The apparatus to create this condition is about as big as a

refrigerator. The power room on the Alien ship was way too large for a Fusion system.

Fifth, there was no Inertial Drive. Regular space movement was by some sort of catalytic rocket engine whose fuel tanks were very empty. As for the propulsion system that got it to our solar system . . . well . . . I guess that would have to wait for better minds than mine to figure out. Just as I was putting these flashes of brilliance down, for posterity, the collision detection alarm got my attention.

“APPROACHING BODY ON COLLISION COURSE . . . 95% CERTAINTY,” the Computer bellowed. “ETA 27 MINUTES, 14 SECONDS.” Fortunately, this was not unexpected so I didn' t jump out of my skin . . . quite. I dabble a little in electronics, and mechanics, hydraulics and a host of other things. You have to, way out here in the middle of nowhere. Repair facilities are few and far between. I had made some modifications in the Search Radar which would have voided the warranty, if the system had been new enough to have one. Standard radar systems, for Belt ships, give about fifteen minutes warning which is normally plenty of time to do what has to be done, but I hate to be rushed. Incoming targets have to be tracked for a while to let the computer determine their course. On a planet the area scanned is a hemisphere, whereas out here in the wide-open spaces, the scan area is a sphere and targets are moving much faster. It helps to have a little more range. This particular target, was only the three wise men. Well, two wise men and a Crimson Haired Goddess.

Chapter 2

Fire

The Laser communicator came on and I heard the lilting tones of my light o' love, announcing her arrival.

"Wake up, you lazy bum. We're coming in hot." That was the last thing I wanted to hear. 'Coming in hot' meant that they were going to use rocket power to brake their velocity. Rockets are used when time is vital, as in a Medical Emergency. Rockets make me nervous.

"Message received. Don't get any closer to the Alien than Icehound and don't singe my eyebrows with your damn flame. Do you need any assistance, honey?" I beamed back. I had moved Icehound out of the . . . dead zone . . . for want of a better phrase.

"Help not needed, just yet. Brain has set up a braking sequence which should keep your eyebrows intact." Anxiously, I watched the radar screen. I also had the computer run position and velocity calculations and put markers on the screen. That way I'd know if anything went wrong. The orbital match up between the two of us went off without a hitch. Rockets, for all their inefficiency, were sure pretty.

Our two ships were as dissimilar as spaceships could get. The one which my friends arrived in has a rectangular hull. A control room is at one end and the racks holding the variable thrust solid fuel rockets at the other. All along the ship, on all four sides, were containers of various sizes which held rescue equipment and medical supplies. Sometimes it's faster to get the stuff you need without having to go back into the ship proper. My ship, on the other hand, resembled a squashed grapefruit that someone had stuck a finger into. Inside the 'dent' was an airlock and main cargo bay hatches. This arrangement, in a Belt prospector's ship, allowed a safety area in case of solar flares or a micrometeorite shower. Besides the main locks, all ships come with a Universal Docking Device, UDD for short, sometimes called udder. The UDD is a very simple way for two ships to be held together so that a short airtight tunnel can connect the airlocks. It works the same as Velcro. Ringing the two airlocks is a row of extensible Nitinol (memory metal) filaments. Each filament can rotate ninety degrees. When the two ships are in position, each one extends its filaments, rotated perpendicular to the other. As the filaments cool they revert to their remembered state which is a hook. A tunnel is extended between the ships which is gasketed and spring loaded to hold it in place. To disengage, all that needs to be done is retract the tunnel and heat the 'velcro' so it straightens out to its other remembered state and retract them into the ships.

After locking the two ships together, I was more than overjoyed when the most beautiful creature in a million miles, came through the lock and flew into my waiting arms for a long passionate kiss . . .

Like hell she did. What really happened was that I collected a quick peck on the cheek as she flew into the empty seat in front of my video screen saying; "What have we got here? Any recognizable hardware? I hope you haven't just been sitting here waiting for us." Now,

this is *not* the greeting a man expects to get from the woman he loves and hasn't seen in thirty days. I just stood there with my mouth open . . . staring.

"I'd like . . . to . . ." She started to say as she turned to me. My love is sometimes too focused on what's in front of her, but she is quick on the uptake.

"Oh! Sweetheart, I'm sorry." I then collected a hundred pounds or so of warm woman in my arms and got a proper greeting, at which time, Doc and Brain came through the lock.

"Godfrey Daniel! What have we here?" Doc said in his best W.C. Fields imitation. There must be an old movie revival going on Ceres.

"Come on Doc, knock it off will ya," Brain pleaded. Brain is one of the biggest men I have ever met. He stands more than six feet and must weigh two fifty. He got the nickname Brain when he first came out to the Belt, by a construction worker, and didn't seem to mind a bit. The joke was on the worker. He really was a brain, genius grade, at least. The two of them went on to become friends and drinking buddies, even after the worker got himself his own ship and became an Ice Hunter. What can I say? I was still wet behind the ears.

"My Boy, you have no appreciation for the finer things in life . . . yes."

"Make him quit the W.C. Fields bit, Ice. We're on your ship now, not his." Needless to say, I was only halfway paying attention.

"Have they been like this all the way out, Oh Fire of my Heart?" I asked, coming up for air.

"Nonstop, Brave and Fearless Hunter of Solid Hydrogen Oxide."

"Computer, we have category one guests on board until further notice."

"INPUT ACKNOWLEDGED . . . WELCOME ABOARD MADAM AND SIRs." There are only three category one guests and it's the easiest way to program the computer for other voices than mine.

"Computer . . . transfer Home Movies to the Big Stage."

I had picked up a new Holographic Display Stage on my last trip to Belt Central. I got out some refreshments and we viewed a showing of THE ALIEN, filmed by yours truly. While the recording was running, I gave them a rundown on my preliminary conclusions.

"Not bad for an amateur . . . yes," commented Doc, followed by a strangled gurgle from Brain.

"Lighten up will you Doc? We've got a pile of work to do and if Brain gets bugged he's not at his sharpest," Fire snapped. "And you," she said to me, "put your hands in your pockets or we'll never get going on this." As usual she was right . . . not much fun . . . but right.

"The obvious thing to do is to get the Alien into atmosphere so we can work on it without suits. Also, while we're traveling, I want to study the control panels," Brain said.

"The corpses should be brought to the Ambulance, so a complete autopsy and study can be made of their structure," Doc offered.

"I want to examine the Drive systems, in case something happens to the ship," my love piped up.

"WHOA everybody, first we have the little problem of the power drain whenever the Alien is approached," I said. The three of them looked at me.

"It must be the long lonely hours he endures," Brain commented, a concerned look on his face.

"No, but it could be Radiation poisoning," Doc said, a trace of worry in his voice.

"You're both wrong, it's caused by a heavy consumption of alcohol," My love said in mock disgust. Did you ever walk into the middle of a discussion and find that you must have missed something important because you didn't understand what was being said? That's the way I felt every time these three got together. They must be telepathic.

"Okay, cut the funny stuff and tell this brain dead person what he missed," I growled.

"Well, my poor retarded, sweetie, the answer to the anti-energy field is the red warning light. If you look close, you can see that it is not only a light but a button. The field must have been automatically activated by your Laser Spectrometer. Since the field is on, the light is on, then the button must be to turn it off," She explained, smiling and batting her eyelashes at me. Might be radiation . . . couldn't possibly be alcohol. On the other hand, how these three arrive at a correct conclusion with insufficient data has always been a mystery to me. Which, was one of the main reasons I called them here. I decided to let the joke pass, I'd get my revenge later.

"Well, if you guys are so sure, one of *you* can push it."

"Perhaps we should have some dinner and retire for the evening. We have a long day ahead of us." Doc was always thinking of our health.

"I'll be right back, lover. I've got to get some things from the Ambulance." Fi's bedroom voice could wake the dead. I was already in bed by the time she got back and as she undressed, I thought, I may be retarded, but I know what I like. She's was so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes

There is nothing more wonderful than waking up at dawn with the most important person in your universe curled up in your arms. Dawn, courtesy of holographic projection . . . after all this *is* the Outer Reaches of the Asteroid belt. The usual morning talk. Why don't we get married? . . . I'm not ready to settle down . . . etc. . . . I keep hoping that one of these days she'll say yes. We called the Ambulance, to wake up the rest of the crew. When they got here, we had breakfast. Brain started to examine the control panels in the Alien and Fire began looking for the FTL Drive while I hovered nearby. At least, until she asked me if there wasn't something I should be doing? Retarded I may be, but I know when to take a hint.

Towing a dead spaceship is not like towing a car. It's easy enough to attach a cable to the ship and begin towing it. The problem starts when you want to change direction or slow down. No friction. Normally the procedure is to tow under power until a calculated cruising speed is reached. At this time the tow-er changes position to the rear of the tow-ee and decelerates in order to match orbits with the destination. It sounds simple . . . right? Wrong. To start with, the center of mass of the object being towed becomes a factor in the initial acceleration. If you are towing off-center, in a frictionless environment, things tend to want

to go off at tangents. This causes the whole assembly to go in circles, big circles yes, but it plays havoc with the course you are trying to maintain. That's why Ice Hunters fracture the ice balls with explosives. The CM tends to be self aligning when being towed. If you know where the CM is on a standard ship, it's an easy tow. If you are trying to tow an unknown object with a large part of its insides gone (the missing reactor) it could get dangerous. The other major problem was that we were in the Asteroid Belt. Asteroid, as in a small to large chunk of navigation hazard, Belt, as in lots of em' . The larger rocks were mostly accounted for, so an orbit could be calculated to avoid them. Smaller ones had to be watched for and avoided. Changing course with a ship in tow could get tricky.

As it turned out, Brain solved both difficulties at once. By attaching a cable to each side of the Alien and using one computer to control the whole mess, we could navigate in something like a normal manner and still have good directional control.

It took us a couple of days (and glorious nights) to rig the towing harness. Brain set up the computer program and linked the two ships' controls.

Meanwhile, Doc was happy as a frog on a lily pad, examining and testing small samples of the two corpses. We didn't want to allow them to thaw out just yet so we left them where they were. It seemed like they were pretty damn close to Earth humans. This, of course, generated heated dinner discussions of parallel evolution vs. galactic seeding. The only thing we were able to decide at this time was, that if you met one on the street, you wouldn't know they weren't from around here.

At dinner on the third day, it suddenly occurred to Brain as how we were all dressed up, with no place to go . . . figuratively speaking.

"No problem," Fire blurted out, "We' ll just tow it back to Ceres and work there."

"Yeah," the always agreeable Brain put in, "we can rig a bubble around her and go to town."

"Righto, and I can get at the really good Lab Equipment for some proper tests," piped up the third Stooge . . . Curly, I think.

"Slow down, folks. You're not thinking this through far enough. There' s no way we can drag something like this to civilized parts without causing a stir and inviting a lot of unwanted attention."

"Sure, we just tow it back and . . ."

"Sure we do, then where do we park it? Ceres Corp. is going to want to charge us an arm and a leg for parking space within a mile of the place. Then, we will also have to pay for ground support and any equipment we might need. Wait," I said, holding up my hand, "I know what you' re going to say. We tell the Board of Directors of Ceres Corp. about it and they fall all over themselves to be helpful for only a small percentage . . . like Hell they will. If I know that group we' ll be lucky to maintain control over the project." Expressions were mixed as they thought this over.

"Furthermore, every low life and would be Captain Kidd will try to take it from us." Expressions were tending toward gloom as I continued. "Not to mention the fact that we all have to eat and breathe and I, for one, don' t have enough money stashed away to quit

working."

"Ice, my boy. Sometimes you are so practical it is depressing," Doc said with a sigh.

"Fortunately, Doc, I have a plan," I assured him. This immediately brightened everyone up because, while not being as fast as they are mentally, I do have a certain flair for *plans*. "We already have all the basic legal problems covered. What we need is a place to work, money to work with and secrecy . . . right?" Thoughtful looks, hums and haws etcetera, from the peanut gallery. "A place to work with all the amenities *and* secrecy is going to be pretty hard to find because the equipment we will need is concentrated in basically three places." A few more hums and haws.

"Wait a minute there, Iceman. I can think of two places, but the third . . . ?"

"Ah! And that, Boy Genius, is the beauty of my plan. If you want to hide something where is the best place?"

"Got it!" Fire exclaimed, excitedly. "In plain sight. All we have to do, is conceal the Alien inside something that is in plain sight . . . Uh . . . but," she tapered off, a puzzled look appearing on her face.

"My boy," Doc observed, "you may have something there, however, I can't think of any structure, large enough, that isn't full of people."

"The answer to that problem, is what makes my plan brilliant, folks." I know, I know, I'm modest. "First, we need to get someone with a lot of cash, interested in investing in a Venture. Next, we rent the some-day-to-be Starship, you guys are supposedly working on, outfit it for a trip to Saturn's Rings to get some Rare ice. We then set out on our way, picking up the Alien and storing it in one of the Cargo holds. The Starship has the equipment we need and if we have to buy more, it won't look suspicious. On the trip out to Saturn and back we'll have plenty of time to work on the Alien ship and hopefully, by the time we get back, you geniuses will have cracked the Alien Star drive. We sell the ice for a king's ransom, retrofit the Starship with the Drive, stock up with supplies and try to find out where the previous owners of the Alien came from," I finished triumphantly. Needless to say, my plan really wowed 'em. The only way to get the show on the road (so to speak), was to tow the Alien ship to my place so it was kind of hidden.

My home is a hollow asteroid that is sealed up to maintain air pressure. Atmosphere regeneration is Hydroponic, which also gives me fresh fruits and veggies so I don't miss those vitamins and minerals we all need (at least, that's what Mom always says). A few days were spent gathering more data, estimating what resources would be needed and trying to decide who our financial partner would be.

There are only four places any wealth is concentrated, out here. They are, in descending order of importance, Mars, Belt Central, Ceres and Logan's hole. You may have noticed that I didn't include Earth or Luna. It's not worth the trouble, too many people and opposing interests to deal with on Earth and as for the Lunatics, well . . .

Mars is the oldest settlement beyond the Moon. It is also the richest. Unfortunately, the only person we knew, with enough free cash to get us going, was a guy named Benton Carver, CEO and major stockholder of Mars Inc. Catchy name, huh? He only had two things

going against him being a good choice in my book. One was his self-inflated ego and the other was that he was trying to steal my girl. The ego problem manifested itself in the attitude that he was the only person smart enough to lead the Human race. The few times we had talked on the Comm, usually when he was trying to get Fire to come back to Mars and be with him, he sounded more like a government. Explaining what he thought was best for The People. Me, I' m not a people, I' m a Person, and I figured it was only a matter of time before he did the wrong thing to the right person and got his head blown off. If he keeps chasing after Fire, I might get to be that person.

Belt Central is a collection of shops and services. The inhabitants of the Belt take advantage of it for supplies and entertainment. These things are necessary for the continuation of Life, the support of Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness (to paraphrase a really great document). For some reason, however, the Pursuit of Happiness can take precedence over Life and Liberty, with us humans. This little quirk, makes the Entertainment portion of Belt Central, a gold mine. On Belt Central, you can get anything you want, even Alice. The hardest drugs to the most innocuous cartoons can be purchased and since it' s all legal, the price is reasonable. The people at either end of the spectrum tend to be a small portion of the population. Those that spend too much time stoned have a high accident rate and the ones living in a fantasy world soon find themselves in dire straits. Living out here is expensive and if you don' t come down out of free fall and take care of business, you could go broke and starve to death. Why don' t the decent people help these unfortunates, you ask? Well, we do. We allow them, as with everyone, to do what they want as long as it' s not stepping on our toes. Any charity is handled on a purely individual basis.

Most of the less drastic forms of fun are supplied by a group of corporations which are loosely organized into a Council. A shadowy individual named M.A. Lonetree is the apparent Chief of this happy little group. This Lonetree guy is hard to connect to and a very difficult person to do business with, by all accounts.

Ceres wasn't an option, because I didn't want Ceres Corp. trying to steal the Alien from us. The CEO, one Sylvia Pendergast was, according to Fire, a real Bitc . . . pain in the rear.

Last, and in my opinion definitely least, is Logan's Hole. Run by Hoadie Logan, it was the collection point of all the seedier folks in the Belt. You know, the type that was tryin' so hard to be individuals that they couldn' t have a pleasant word with *themselves*. The 'Hey, look, somebody with clean clothes just came in. Let's pound on 'em for a while' type. Logan was also rumored to be behind the nastier activities in the Belt. Oh well, not my problem . . . yet. As far as I was concerned, Logan wasn't even a player.

"Our choices appear to be limited to Carver and Lonetree," I began. "Mars is pretty far away and besides, I don' t like Carver. I' ve never met this Lonetree, so I like him better."

"Uh huh . . . we all know why you don' t like Carver, Iceman, but we shouldn' t let personal problems cloud the issue," my *pal* Brain commented. "Besides, he doesn' t have to go along, just lend us the money."

"Yeah, but he' ll use every excuse he can think up, to come out and check the work." And to work on Fi, I didn' t add out loud.

"I think you're just worried that all his charm, good looks and money will turn my head," Fire said with an impish twinkle in her eyes. I guess that shuts me down for a while. It would have hurt except that I caught that impish twinkle . . . still . . .

"Perhaps we should try both sources," Doc suggested. "After all, you can never have too much Financial Backing on a Venture."

"That's a great idea Doc!" Fi responded, enthusiastically. "You and I could go to Mars and talk with Bennie. Ice and Brain could check out Mr. Lonetree." My emotional drive revved up.

"*Bennie!*" I choked out. "Since when is it, *Bennie!*"

"Gee Doc, maybe he needs something to calm him down," Brain cracked.

"You could be right, my boy, notice the interesting shade of purple he's turning." I ignored the two of them and focused on Fire with a glare.

"I won't have you running off to Mars to meet with that . . ." *Oops*, my little voice said, *that was real bright*. Her eyes caught fire (I swear, that's just what it looked like) and she exploded.

"YOU won't have ME . . . YOU don't OWN me MISTER and I'll damn well go where I WANT to."

"Whoa . . . Hold it . . . QUIET!" Brain roared, which stopped my extremely acidic and poorly thought out, retort. Fi looked like she was about to start in on him, next.

"Ahem, personal feelings notwithstanding," Doc interjected, calmly, "Fire has a good idea. After all, who could get us a better deal, with Mr. Carver, than her?"

This put a damper on the eye-dagger exchange developing between Fire and me. A long silence followed as I thought this over. Doc had a point . . . dammit.

"I guess you're right Doc, Carver likes me about as much as I like him."

"Fine," snapped Fi, "come on Doc we better get the Ambulance back to Ceres and pack for Mars." With that she got up and stalked out of the room. Doc rose and followed her to the door. Turning back he said, "relax, son. She'll calm down in a while."

"Yeah, I just hope it's *before* she gets to Mars," I replied, sullenly.

Chapter 3

Belt Central

Due to Time, Space and Orbital motion, Ceres was actually closer to my place than Belt Central. However, Fire and Doc had to return the Ambulance and wait for a Mars bound liner, so Brain and I waited an extra day before we left for Belt Central.

"Hey Ice, how are we going to get hold of this Lonetree, anyway? I've heard that unless you are extremely well placed you can't even get an appointment," Brain asked as we were working out in my Multi-Grav gym. In it, we could work out in any gravity field from zero to three g's.

"I'm not sure maybe our best bet might be to just ask to see him, but that might be too direct . . . got any ideas?"

"Well . . . UH . . . what you got this thing set to, anyway?"

"Only one and a half, wimp. You're getting flabby."

"No way, you skinny runt. I got more muscle on my little finger than you have on your whole arm."

"Twenty bucks?"

"You're on." At the count of three, we started pumping.

"I...(gasp) . . . don't believe it, maybe I'm getting sick or . . . (pant) . . . something. You actually tied me," was Brain's, labored comment, as we both just lay there, sucking in air.

"Naw . . . (pant) . . . do you concede defeat, mortal . . . (gasp)."

"I never concede, there has to be a trick here," Brain said, as he got up and walked over to the control panel.

"Hah! Just as I suspected, your half of the floor is set to normal. No wonder you could lift as much as me."

"Oh, didn't I mention my handicap?" I replied innocently.

"No, you did not, so pay up." Oh well, it was worth a try. Besides, it's not how you play the game that counts, it's remembering that it's just a game.

"Now that you've financially wiped me out, have you gotten any ideas on Lonetree?"

"No, maybe we should hit Rosita's and ask Tom."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's get cleaned up and have some dinner. We can leave first thing in the morning."

Why divide days into units that have planetary importance but don't apply in space? Well, Humankind came from a million years of evolution, on a planet. Our biological clocks are attuned to the rhythm of a morning, afternoon, evening and night. Since we have the technology to duplicate that rhythm, why mess with our bodies unnecessarily?

After breakfast, we locked the place up and set the Security System. My system, like most others, is custom made. If you want info on it, you're going to have to torture it out of me. The trip to Belt Central was uneventful, no would be Pirate or other space junk bothered us. They usually don't on the way in. It's the outbound traffic that has to worry.

Belt Central started out as one large asteroid, used as a platform for various business enterprises to base at. With localized Gravity control it didn't matter where you stuck your station on or in the rock.

As time passed, more people were coming out to the Belt and they needed a place to start from as well as a place to go to. The various companies on Belt Central got together and started expanding out from the central rock, like a tinker toy set, using asteroids as the hubs and the rods as interconnects for traffic. Currently it's up to fifteen rocks and still growing.

Rosita's was a hangout for outside entrepreneurs like me. Ice hunters, Rockhounds (prospectors) and Gravel Grinders (miners). Ice hunters got started by accident. When the Belt was first being settled, supplies and services were handled the conventional way. They were lifted from Earth, a very expensive proposition. Just after the Change, a very large comet was discovered on a collision course with Earth. It was the first crisis of the new age and I think we handled it pretty well. There were a few old Nuclear weapons the United States was keeping active, after the Middle East Incident, just in case. The rest of the world's arsenal had been dismantled, sometimes forcibly. Anyway, a flight of missiles was sent to intercept the Comet. Certain people in the Belt managed to get the time and place of impact with the Comet adjusted so that the debris took up an orbit which intersected the Belt. Said debris was composed of ice and light elements, presto, a new industry was born. When this comet runs out of remains, we'll find another one. There's millions of 'em out there. Ah, but I digress, back to Rosita's.

The place was owned and operated by one Tom O'Malley. Why he didn't call it, O' Malley's I haven't a clue. There isn't anyone called Rosita associated with the place, not even a picture. I asked him about it once and he got a strange look on his face and offered me another drink. I took the hint. If you want to know, ask him yourself.

Remember the Bar in that old Intergalactic Sci-Fi movie, or the Saloons in the even older Westerns? Well, Rosita's wasn't like them. It was quiet, except when there was live entertainment, and the patrons were a little reserved. You gotta watch your manners in space, because the only thing separating you and a lot of other people from a gruesome death, are thin metal bulkheads. There have been a few incidents over the years, like the time a hothead took a shot at another hothead in a fancy restaurant, from outside the door. Blew the large window out and thought he got away with murder. Unfortunately for him, someone in the corridor saw what he did and as the airtight safety door started to close, shoved him into the room. Scratch one asshole. You wanna fight, use your fists or a knife. Better still, keep cool.

"Iceman, me boyo, and the Brain, long time it's been. What's yer poison?" O' Malley greeted us as we sat at the bar.

"Something light to start with, we're on a fact-finding mission," I answered.

"Give the Wimp here something light. I'll take a double scotch rocks." My partner was obviously still perturbed over our little contest. I turned around to survey the room. It was still early and there were only a few other customers. I turned back to O' Malley.

"Say Tom, we need some info and I'd like it kept quiet that we asked."

"Well laddy that depends on a couple things, such as do I have yer answers, and how much yer willin' ta pay?"

"We' rtrying to get in touch with M.A. Lonetree, as discreet and direct as possible. You know anything that will help us?"

Tom looked from me to Brain and back, a calculating expression on his face. "You gents look a mite hungry to me, how about we be retirin' to me private dinnin' room. GEORGE, I' ntakin' a wee break, watch the bar. Lassie," he said, as he flagged down a passing waitress, "bring a menu into the back room in a few minutes. After you, gentlemen."

He motioned us around the corner of the bar and into the Back Room. We knew it was the back room ' cause that' s what it said on the door.

"Now Lads," he started as we sat, "What yer askin' is not only difficult but can be a wee bit dangerous, as well."

"We realize that it could be hard to do' " I reassured him, "but how can it be dangerous? After all, why should this Lonetree be afraid of a couple of space bums like us?"

"Well boys, you do have a reputation for bein' a couple o' deadly space bums, know what I mean? So I' ll be needin' to know what you want to see him for," he said.

"Geez Iceman, it' s not like we' re trying to do anything dangerous or secret," Brain piped up. "We just need some cash backing . . . "

Just then the door opened and the waitress came in with the menus, thankfully putting a cork in my, intelligent but naive, partner' s verbal diarrhea. I think he has a thing for her. We silently read the menus for a few minutes.

"Tom," I said in mild surprise, "the price of vegetables and beef went down since I was here last."

"Aye laddie, some folks opened a new farm a few clicks counter clockwise and they' re chargin' pretty low prices. I may even start sellin' eggs if the chickens work out." Chickens have always had a problem in space. They don' t seem to be able to lay fertile eggs for some unknown reason. The supply of eggs lasts only as long as the chicken does, then you have to bring another one from Earth. It also makes any kind of chicken dish very expensive. We made our selections and the waitress left.

"What Brain said isn' t entirely true Tom. While our project is not Top Secret, it wouldn' t be wise to make it public before we even get started."

"Lad, the need for discretion in business dealin's isn' t lost on me now, but I canna go before himself wi' out some notion of what ya want." Brain and I exchanged looks. Oh well, we' re gonna have to let at least Phase one out of the bag.

"It' s like this Tom, a group of us came up with the idea to lease the Ceres Starship for a business venture. The big problem is ready cash. Between us we have enough to stock the ship with vitals and fuel. What we need is operating cash."

"Well it seems to me that all you folks have to do is offer Ceres Corp. a share in the profit and that little problem would be fixed."

"We thought of that Tom. Considering that there are so many share holders in Ceres Corp. we felt that our cut would end up being smaller than we liked."

"Aye, probably what Paddy shot at and missed," Tom interjected, thoughtfully.

"The plan is that a couple of wealthy individuals would make less of a dent."

"I see the wisdom of it laddie, but you mentioned a couple of investors. Who might the other feller be?"

"That's not important now and will only be divulged with the permission of said party. I might add that the same applies to Mr. Lonetree." Tom sat back with one hand on his chin, eyeing us. This interview was getting more involved than it should, with a middleman.

"Why don't you lads finish your meal and have a few more drinks? I'll see what I can do," Tom said, rising from the table.

"If ye need a refill, just press the button there and the wee lassie will get yer order." After Tom left the room, I turned to Brain. "I don't know if this is . . ."

Brain held up one hand, a finger to his lips. He then pointed to the far corner of the room. High up near the ceiling was a small dark circle. I 'accidentally' dropped my fork and snuck a peek under the table. Just as I thought, there was a microphone stuck to the underside. The only question was if it was a recorder or a monitor, I decided to find out.

"Not telling a man his confidential discussion is being recorded isn't very polite, is it Brain?"

"Sure isn't, Iceman. I think we ought to split. We can always find someone a little more trustworthy to deal with." We got up from the table and headed for the door. Just as we stepped through, Tom came rushing up to stop us.

"Lads, Lads, I'm soiree if I've offended ye wi' that wee bit o' tronics, but don't be leavin' in a rush now that himself is consentin' ta see ya. Why don't ye go back in an finish yer meal, then we can go see Lonetree."

In all probability we had just made our case to Mr. Lonetree. This might be easier than I thought. We went back inside and finished. When we came out of the back room, I caught Tom's eye.

"After you Tom and there better not be any more tricks." He led us down a short corridor to the next main passage. About a hundred yards to the left we entered a door with a small sign above the entrance that read, LONETREE ENTERPRISES. Inside, was a spacious, at least for Belt Central, lobby with a slick looking male receptionist at the desk. I began to wonder about Mr. Lonetree. Tom went over to the desk.

"We bein' here to see Mr. Lonetree laddy, if ya please."

"Yes sir, one moment and I'll see if he's ready for you," Slick said as he buzzed his boss. After a short exchange, he directed us through the door behind his desk and Tom headed back to Rosita's.

Lonetree's office was certainly impressive. It was very large and had a huge window looking out into deep space. A portion of Belt Central was showing in the lower right corner. The floor space was occupied by shelves of items, furniture and two desks. Behind the larger of the desks was man who was running a close second to Brain in the 'most mass on two legs' category. The smaller desk was decorated by an extremely beautiful black-haired woman.

"Gentlemen, welcome to Lonetree Enterprises," Mister Big said, as he rose from behind

the desk, to shake our hands.

"I am M.A. Lonetree. Please be seated," he said, directing us to the plush divan near the window. "Would you gentlemen like some refreshments?"

"No thanks Mr. Lonetree," I said. No sense getting tipsy, we had business to discuss.

"Well then, Marie would you bring a pad and pencil and join us?" The dark-haired lady rose with the requisite items and came over. What a body! I glanced over at Brain and could see he was completely gone. That starving look, with the glazed eyes, is specifically reserved for the love struck, poor guy. I could see the attraction though, she was almost as tall as he was.

"A pad and pencil seem a little archaic in this day and age Mr. Lonetree," I said making small talk so I could drag my eyes back to him.

"Yes, I suppose it does. However, electronic media is prone to security problems. Paper is harder to get and to copy. Now, as I understand it, your group would like financial backing for a business enterprise. What, exactly, do you have in mind?" He asked. I quickly outlined the Saturn rare ice proposal.

"So, you are looking for investors for a trip to Saturn to harvest some, Ah, ' Rare Ice' Marie, if you please?"

"Rare Ice, a mixture of methane, ammonia, and various other frozen hydrocarbon compounds." Nice voice, too. Brain was going to be no help in this discussion, at all. "At the going Belt Exchange rate and filling the four holds of the proposed craft, should net a return of one hundred million dollars."

Excuse me while I reattach my lower jaw. Wow! We had never even bothered figuring it out because it wasn't the main reason for the trip. That number even got Brain's attention.

"Unfortunately, it will only be three holds as the fourth will be taken up with, uh, scientific equipment," Brain managed to get out before his eyes locked onto Marie again.

"Scientific equipment Mr. Scott?" Lonetree asked. I answered for him, seeing his mental condition.

"Yes sir, the other members of the expedition are scientists and there has never been a manned expedition to Saturn before," I said, hoping he wouldn't get too nosy.

"Ah yes, that cuts the return to seventy-five million . . . Marie?"

"We have estimated the cost of securing the ship to be about eight million." Doing a little quick math, the four of us had come out with ten million for the Alien project. That left us with fifteen million, probably enough to buy the Starship outright and outfit the first Interstellar Expedition.

"Not too bad. There are three Principals in the partnership, assuming you go in with us, which gives a hefty return for all parties," I said.

"Three Principals, Mr. Thomas, and what is the investment you require of us?" Lonetree got right to the point.

"About half the cost of the supplies should be adequate. The other partner should be able to handle the other half and my group's investment will cover the ship."

"Your Proposal sounds very profitable, at first estimates. I would like to make some

more inquiries before giving you a firm yes or no. Where can we get in touch with you in the next two days?" I looked sideways at Brain . . . yep, he was still in a trance.

"We hadn' t been planning on staying here at Belt Central, but I suppose we could wait a couple of days before we left," I mused. "I think the Hilton would have rooms this time of year."

"Excellent," he said, rising. "I' ll call there for you within the next two days. By the way, if there is a problem getting accommodations, mention that Louis sent you. Marie, would you escort the gentlemen out, please?"

After hand shakes all around, we were out the door. Brain was almost cross eyed at this point and I hoped that he wasn' t going to start with the ' unrequited love' bit.

"Mr. Thomas, it has been a pleasure to meet you," Marie said, shaking my hand. "I hope to see you again soon." As she took Brain's hand, I couldn't help but notice a twinkle in her eyes. "And you too, Mr. Scott."

"Uh, why don' t you join us for dinner tonight . . . uh . . . maybe . . . ? " Brain managed to blurt out, as she was turning away.

She looked back. "Perhaps . . . I' ll call you later." Her serious look had changed to a coy smile. Well, it looked like Brain was going to be useless for the rest of the trip.

Chapter 4

Ceres

The Ambulance actually *lurched*, in spite of gravity stabilization, as Fire decoupled and accelerated away from the Ice's home.

"My dear, please remember your older passengers while driving," Doc pleaded.

"NAVIGATION . . . set course for Ceres base . . . Please," Fire directed the Computer as she turned to Doc. "Sorry, I'm a little ticked off at the moment. Besides, there aren't any old passengers, only you and me."

"CAPTAIN . . . COURSE IS SET . . . DO YOU WISH TO ACCELERATE?"

"Yes NAVIGATION, accelerate."

"Thank you for the compliment," Doc replied, "but you really should calm down, it is bad for your blood pressure. Mine also I might add."

"Sometimes, that man just gets under my skin. Talking like he owns me or something," Fire ground out.

"You know that is not the way that he thinks of you, my dear," Doc said, in an attempt to cool her off.

"I don't know, lately he seems to be getting a little possessive and it bothers me."

"Still, I think you should calm down," Doc said, continuing under his breath, "oh dear, it is going to be a long trip."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, nothing," He replied. Fire's thoughts ran on. *Sometimes Ice can be such a shit! . . . Lately he seems to be getting worse. He knows I want to get married someday but how can he possibly resent my friendship with Benton? After all, I used to work for Mars Inc. years ago and we never got involved then. Sure his money is nice but somehow there never was any chemistry between us. Bennie keeps trying every time we meet, but the only guy that seems to light me up, is Ice.*

After docking the Ambulance and checking with her lab, they went to Ceres Admin. to make an appointment with Sylvia Pendergast, CEO of Ceres Corp. Ceres base is constructed as a conventional style planetary base because of the large size of the asteroid. Administration and the major life support facilities are built under the surface. The various labs and research facilities are all on the surface, in craters, away from the main complex. This, in order to minimize damage in case of an experiment gone wild. Docking facilities are on the other side of the asteroid. Tunnels connect the various sites on and in the rock and electric cars are used as transportation.

As a paid Staff Member of Ceres Corp., getting an appointment with the CEO should be easy for Fire. Right? Hah! Being the head of operations for a large base like Ceres is a busy job, at least that's *what she says*. *Personally*, thought Fire, *I can't see what the big deal is. Maybe she's just a self-centered, egotistical, dyed in the wool . . . Bitch.*

After setting up an appointment, Doc and Fire went their separate ways. The next day

they met in Sylvia's reception area. Cooling their heels for an hour after they arrived, they finally got an Audience with Her Majesty.

"Fionna, Dear, and the eminent Doctor Richards, what a Pleasure to See You." Her syrupy voice gave Fire an urge for pancakes.

"Sylvia, good of you to see us on such short notice, I *Know* how . . . *Busy* You Are." Sarcasm is the proper response to Syrup. Sylvia's eyes took on a steely glint.

"A CEO' s Work is Never Done it seems, so perhaps we had better get to business." Aha . . . the old, remind the subordinate who' s boss, ploy. Time is money and if their plan worked out, Fire wouldn' t have to put up with her much longer.

"Doc and I represent a group of investors who wish to purchase the Starship for a speculative enterprise." Fire could see Sylvia was surprised, by the way her eyebrows shot up.

"We wish to know the asking price and other options such as a lease to buy, that the Corporation is willing to entertain."

"Well . . . I don' t . . . know . . . " You could almost *see* her brain trying to regain control of her face. "I' ll have to contact the board members, convene a meeting and let you know, perhaps three days from now?"

"That sounds fine Ms. Pendergast, it will give us time to prepare for the trip to Mars," Doc commented. Unfortunately he was too far away to kick, without being obvious.

"Oh, you' re going on a trip Doctor? Business or pleasure?" Sylvia said in that ' isn' t it cute, a man that can talk' tone of voice. The Lib movement may have done irreparable harm to this one.

"Business . . . um . . . and some entertainment," Doc finished weakly, as Fire was able to catch his eye with a ' shut up' glare.

"Ah well . . . Henry will contact you with the details, So Good to See You, Again." The audience over she rose, shook their hands and dismissed them

"Henry, come in here at once."

"Yes Mam."

"Dr. Henderson and Dr. Richards, are up to something. Find out what it is."

"I should know by tomorrow, the good Doctor can be quite talkative, in the right . . . situations." Having stated what was only obvious to Sylvia, he left.

"Doc, you have to watch what you say around her, she' s ruthless when money is involved." Fire tried to keep her voice calm. When it comes to Women in Business, Doc just didn' t understand.

"Not to worry, my dear, mums the word."

"I' ll call you tonight and we can discuss the proposal we want to present to Ceres Corp." She figured it would be better to stay close to Doc for the next three days.

"Not tonight, it' s the monthly meeting of the Sherlock Holmes Society and I must attend, as next month we may be otherwise engaged." Fire would just have to keep her fingers

crossed, that was a men only group. It' s not that they are chauvinistic, Sherlock Holmes just didn' t get involved with the fair sex.

"Well, see you tomorrow and take care," Fire said as they caught separate tracks at the main concourse station. Doc lived in the opposite direction from her apartment.

The sign read ' Berkshire Downs Hotel' . As Watson walked through the door and into the lobby he could not help but admire the attention to detail shown in the room. It seemed that he had stepped back in time to Olde Englande.

"I say chap, might I enquire as to what room Mr. Sherlock Holmes is in, as I am to meet him here this evening." With a suspicious look from under his bushy eyebrows, the worthy behind the counter quizzed,

"An oo might you be?"

"I don' t see as iits any business of yours my good fellow, however, I am Dr. Watson."
Uppity clerk.

"Oh! sorry sir, Mr. Holmes directed that he be disturbed by no one ceptin' yourself, which is why I inquired about yor identity." Ah ha, it appears that Holmes was already on the scent of something.

"Quite right my good man. You do well to follow Mr. Holmes instructions to the letter. Now, what was that room number?" Watson repeated.

"Oh, of course, how forgetful of me, it' s room fourteen."

"Very good, and a good day to you sir." Getting into character is sometimes difficult, Doc reflected as he walked down the hall toward the designated room. The Lobby, clerk and resulting exchange helped a person overcome the temporal discrepancy between old England and modern Ceres.

"Enter Watson." Issued from behind the closed door as he raised his hand to knock.

"It always amazes me Holmes, how you do that," Watson exclaimed in wonder as he closed the door behind him. Turning, to hang up his hat and cloak, he sees that Holmes is sitting on the divan, stoking up his perpetual pipe.

"You are, of course, wondering why we are meeting here in a public hostel instead of Baker Street," he said, looking up.

"Again, it' s as if you could read my mind, amazing!"

"Elementary, Watson. We have been together so long, we are as two parts of the same person. Your concern at our meeting place is only a mirror of my own."

"This sounds serious," Watson said, with growing apprehension.

"Indeed." He paused to take a puff of his pipe. "Consider. A man comes to see me about a matter of importance. Mrs. Hudson does not show him up. He knocks upon the door. I bade him enter, and mind his head on the door frame. The door opens. An extremely tall man with a tattoo on his right hand and a patch on his left eye falls through with a large knife in his back. As I rush to his side he looks up and utters ' more' , then expires."

"My God, is Mrs. Hudson all right?"

"Of course Watson, else you would have been summoned immediately. She merely fainted at the sight of the knife." A tone of mild reproof in his voice.

"But surly, you have some clue as to what is going on?" Watson said, overcome with the vision in his mind. "What could he have meant?"

"Ah Watson, I fear my late visitor departed this mortal coil before he finished what he was saying. I dare say, he did not complete the first word."

More . . . more . . . more . . . conjuring up words in his mind, beginning, with the sound . . . more.

"Holmes!" He cried, "you don' t mean . . ."

"Yes Watson, my old nemesis, Moriarty." Suddenly the room light came up and the rear wall slid aside.

"Gentlemen, a sterling performance."

The president of the Society praised, to a background of clapping. You see, each pair of Holmes and Watsons go through a scene of their current adventure before joining the meeting. They then sit back, enjoy refreshments, converse with one another and await the next pair of players. After everyone has arrived, the meeting is called to order and a vote is taken on who gave the best performance and who gave the worst. The losing pair is then designated as the last to arrive at the next meeting, missing some of the festivities in the beginning.

"So Sidney, how are things in your neck of the woods?" The club president asked.

"Actually, things, as you say, are going quite well. I have recently begun a new and quite promising line of research, which I fear, will require my going to Mars for an unknown length of time." There, that was circumspect enough.

"Wonderful Doctor, but does that mean you' ll miss the next meeting?"

"Yes, I' m afraid I will. In fact, at this point, I' m not sure when I will be able to attend next."

"How unfortunate, we will have to find a replacement for you. Did you, perhaps, have someone in mind?"

"Ah . . . no . . . this came up too quickly for me to find a replacement, is there anyone on the waiting list?"

"As a matter of fact, we just had a new applicant. Since you and your partner are so far ahead in the standings, this might be a good time to get his feet wet, as it were, and give the other teams a chance to catch up to you."

"Excellent John, I had better meet this fellow and brief him on the story."

"Of course, let's see . . . ah there he is. Henry . . . Henry Jones, how are you enjoying your first meeting?" the president asked, as they approached a rather nondescript man who looked to be in his early thirties, and vaguely familiar, oh yes, Sylvia's secretary.

"I'm having a great time, Mr. President. I can hardly wait to get on a team, myself."

"Well then, I have good news for you. This is Doctor Sidney Richards. He is leaving on an extended trip soon and you are to be his replacement."

"We've met. As much of a loss it must seem to you to have to leave on this trip, I must

profess my joy at being able to get in on the fun. Is your absence to be a long one or will you be back soon?"

"As I just told the president, at this time it is indefinite, but I hope to be back within the year."

"Pity, oh well, business before pleasure." Doc then proceeded to brief Henry on the story so far, and gave him the access code to his personal record of the Adventure of the Shining Knife, so he could maintain the log of the story. As the evening wound to a close the discussion returned to Doc's impending trip.

"I do hope your trip comes to a satisfactory conclusion, Mars is said to be an exciting place." *Not too exciting, I hope.* Doc reflected silently. "I assume you will be leaving on the City of Chicago when it embarks on Thursday."

"Ah . . . yes actually, well I had better be going . . . um big day tomorrow." Doc had suddenly gotten a strange feeling about this conversation.

"So Henry, What have you learned about the good Doctor's trip?" Sylvia asked her lackey the next day.

"Not much Mam, he got really closed-mouth, all of a sudden, but I did learn that they are leaving on the City of Chicago on Thursday." Well, she thought, I suppose that's something, but if this male doesn't watch his step I'll replace him . . .

"All right Henry, you may go." When she was alone, Sylvia placed a scrambled call.

"Mr. Mason, this is Ms. Pendergast. I would like you to acquire some information for me. Doctors Henderson and Richards, are leaving Thursday, on the Chicago. I would like you to find out the purpose of their trip if you please . . . No, I don't care how you find out, that's not my problem . . . Yes, five hundred a day plus expenses is acceptable . . . Thank you, goodbye."

The next few days passed with no problems. Doc and Fire had another meeting with Sylvia and the Board and a tentative agreement for the purchase of the Starship was reached. The board voted to sell the ship as opposed to leasing because some of the Drive scientists thought that its present design was not the correct one for the theories they were working on. Sylvia of course wanted to lease, so as to hold on to control of the ship and a part of whatever they were working on. After the meeting, Sylvia left under a dark cloud and Fire knew they had not heard the last of her.

Chapter 5

Fun and Games

As expected, Brain was overflowing with excitement about Marie. Fortunately, the trip to the hotel was short and when we got to our respective rooms, I got some peace. A hot shower, a cool drink, and I was all set for a bit of celebrating. I called Brain to set up a dinner time.

"Iceman, I was about to call you. Marie left a message at the desk to meet her in the Hilton Room. Are you ready to go yet?" His enthusiasm seemed to be oozing out of my Vid.

"No, not yet. Why don' t you go down and meet her and get us a table?"

"Okey-doke, but don' t take to long."

"Be down before you can get seated. By the way, try to keep mum about the Project, okay?"

"Um. Sure Iceman, you know me around beautiful women, tongue tied . . . Boy, is she gorgeous, did you notice the way her eyes . . . "

"Put a sock in it, Brain. You're giving me indigestion."

I hung up before he got going again. I hoped something worked out for the big guy, he hasn' t had very good luck with his relationships.

The Hilton was the best hotel on Belt Central. I had stayed here a couple of times while equipment was being installed in my ship and to my thinking, the Hilton Room was the best restaurant this side of the Sun. Instead of the expected large window showing a view of space, something you can get really tired of looking at, every booth was an enclosed holographic display. The views were selected by the patrons from the controls at the table, but they all had the same theme, scenic outlooks from various places on Earth and Mars. This is just what a space weary ice hunter needs to see. When I arrived at the restaurant, the maitre' d conducted me to their table. Marie had arrived before me and Brain was completely engrossed in conversation with her.

"Good evening, Mr. Thomas," Marie greeted me.

"Evenin' Mam, I hope Brain here hasn' t been boring the life out of you."

"Oh, No, Alphonse has been a very interesting and charming host," she replied. At this point Brain registered my presence and looked up.

"Hey Iceman, you finally got here. Marie has been telling me about her job and what it's like working for Mr. Lonetree," he greeted me, stupid grin and all. Oh brother, my buddy needs all the help he can get with this one if all he can talk about is work. Maybe I can come up with something to get them onto more fun topics.

"Alphonse?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at Brain. He turned about three different shades of red. I think this is about the second time I've heard anyone use Brain' s given name and the first guy ended up with a broken jaw. We ate a delicious dinner and I suggested that

we all go dancing, because the night was still young. Marie was excited by the idea and Brain was excited by Marie, which completed the first part of my plan.

Dancing is a good way for Belters to get exercise and meet people. There were a lot of people dancing but most of the women were paired off. Marie and I danced a few, then I let Brain monopolize her time. When it looked like they were comfortable with each other I initiated the final phase of my plan.

"Well, you two, I gotta be getting back to the hotel, I need my beauty rest. Have fun."

"Uh, yeah Iceman, see you later," Brain replied in an offhand manner. Marie at least looked at me. "It' s been a very nice evening and I promise not to keep your partner out too late." I gave her a big grin.

"T' nhis partner, not his mother. You kids have a good time, he can catch up on his sleep later." With that, I exited stage left, headed for the egress, made like a tree and leaved.

I wasn' t really tired of course, so I decided to check out the nearest casino. A little Black Jack might be what I needed to get my spirits up. My thoughts kept drifting back to Fi and driving my emotions into the red zone. I was angry at myself for popping off like I had and I was angry at her for not understanding what I had meant. Overriding the anger was my fear for her. She was going to Mars and I wouldn' t be there to protect her if something happened. Deep down there was the small voice of reason saying that I was worrying too much. Fi could take care of herself. Also, she was with Doc who, appearance to the contrary, was no stranger to violence. Unfortunately, one of the things about us humans, is our ability to allow emotion to completely override reason.

Getting to the nearest Casino was easy, down the corridor, around the corner and up a lift tube. I started playing and was soon up to my neck in losses. Deciding that my frame of mind needed tweaking, I went over to the bar to play a little electronic poker. I also indulged myself in a gallon or two of alcohol and started getting chummy with some of the other patrons. What we talked about, is a little hazy and at one point, one of the guys got up and made a call. He came back and mentioned someone named Manson or Maison or something like that. Deciding that I was too drunk to continue, I got up to leave.

"Well Guysh, itsh bin a blasht bu' I gots ta go."

"Hey, buddy, you don' look so good. Maybe we should help ya home."

"Thansh, bu' ish jush doown the shreet," I replied and started to wend my tipsy way out the door. In the corridor, I stopped for a moment to get my bearings, and noticed that my two pals from the bar were also leaving. If I hadn' t been a whole Clipper Ship of sheets to the wind, I would have been on my guard. Ambling toward the hotel, I passed a small cross corridor. It would have been called an alley on Earth. Just then my drinking buddies came up and grabbed me.

"Guysh!" I exclaimed. "Long time no shee." That' s when the lights went out.

"Well Alphonse, it has been a wonderful evening, but I have work in the morning, and I need my beauty rest," Marie said.

"Uh, Well . . . " *C' morbrain, think of something*, "It' s been one of the most enjoyable

evenings I've had, in a long time," Brain replied with relief. *Man, he thought, I wish I was as glib as Iceman with the ladies, wait a divine inspiration!* "But, I hardly think you need any more beauty sleep, you are by far the most beautiful lady I've ever met." *Tic . . . tic . . . tic . . .*

"Why Alphonse, how nice of you to say so," She replied, touching his hand, a smile lighting up her face.

Bingo! Maybe, with a bit more practice, I can get a handle on this man-woman thing. However, she was right, it was late and Ice will probably be up at the crack of doom . . . er, dawn. He paid the bill and they left the dance hall.

"You should let me walk you home," Brain said, hopefully.

"No, you don't have to. I feel quite safe on Belt Central, after all, I do work for M.A. Lonetree," she said, with a chuckle.

"I will walk you to *your* hotel though, we can't have visitors getting in trouble here." *Okay, I can't walk her home but she'll walk me to the hotel. It's a start* As they got within a block of the hotel, walking arm in arm, they saw three drunks coming toward them. One on either side, supporting the third between them. Brain glanced over at Marie who had a mild look of reproach on her face.

"People should control how much they drink, that is not a pretty sight," She said. *Well, something for future reference, I guess I'm going to have to cut back a bit* She thought as they passed the besotted trio.

"I agree. Not only is heavy drinking unhealthy, but it could be dangerous . . . hey, wait a minute!" Brain whipped around. "That's Iceman they got between them."

"Hey, you three, stop right there," he yelled running toward them. The two goons looked back, dropped Ice and spun to meet the attack. Brain could tell this was trouble as they dropped into a crouch. *Oh well, this probably wasn't going to make much of an impression on Marie, but that's life* She thought as they collided, fists and feet flying. Brain managed to knock them apart and concentrated on only one. This guy was good and they traded blows far too long for Brain's taste. At any moment he expected the other one to cold-cock him. Finally Brain got an opening and managed to get in an uppercut that knocked the goon unconscious and landed him five feet away. He spun around, looking for the other guy. Finding him was not hard. He was flat on his face and Marie, looking a little ruffled, was standing over him. She had an expression on her face that said she was just hoping he would get up again.

"Marie, are you all right?" Brain asked, rushing over to her. She relaxed.

"Yes, I'm fine. He isn't though," she said, holding onto his arm with a grip like a vise. This was one strong lady.

"Let's see how Ice is." He was breathing, at least. Brain lifted his face and slapped his cheeks to try to get him conscious. He moaned.

"We should get him to a medic," Marie said.

"Naw, he's just loaded."

"I suppose that's wine all over his head?" Marie commented, a hint of sarcasm in her

voice.

"Oh Wow, you're right. Where is the nearest Aid Station?"

"The Hilton has the best one on Belt Central."

"All right, the two of us should be able to get him there."

They managed to stand Ice up. Supporting him between them, they got to the front door of the Hilton. The Doorman saw them and rushed to help.

"Goodness, what has happened?"

"My friend got attacked by a couple of goons down the street and he needs Medical help."

"Come this way please. Our Aid Station is right down the hall." They got him into the Station and the Doorman roused the Medic out of bed. While Iceman was being treated, Marie and Brain suddenly remembered the two goons they had left lying in the street. Unfortunately, by the time they got back outside, the bad guys were gone.

"Hell, now we won't be able to find out what this was all about."

"You know, those two guys looked familiar," Marie commented thoughtfully. "I'll check the Lonetree data base. It's possible we've dealt with them before."

"That would be great Marie, Ice is going to want to find them, real bad, when he wakes up."

They returned to the Hilton Aid Station. The medic informed them that Ice was not severely injured but should come back tomorrow for another check. The Medic also gave Ice a shot of De-Tox to sober him up. *Boy, Ice was really going to be mad now, he hates the way that stuff works.* In addition to counteracting some of the effects of alcohol, it makes you really, really thirsty. Drinking lots of water is the only way to quench the thirst, then you have to get rid of the water, which is the way it gets the alcohol out of your system. This means a lot of trips to the bathroom. With the help of the Hotel staff, they got Ice up to his room and tucked into bed. Brain and Marie walked to the elevator and waited for it to arrive.

"Gosh Marie, I'm sorry the evening ended on such a bad note."

"That's all right Alphonse, it was a lovely date and I hope we can do it again, soon." The elevator came and as the door closed Marie turned to him. They gazed into each others eyes. Suddenly, they were immersed in the most passionate kiss either had ever had the pleasure to get. The door opened and they broke apart.

"My goodness!" Marie exclaimed as they both caught their breath.

"Uh . . . Yes, very good indeed," Brain said, trying to drag his scattered wits back into his head.

"Oh my," Marie said slightly under her breath, "This is going to be very nice or very complicated."

Gently caressing her jaw line, Brain said, "Probably both." At which she smiled, gave him a quick brush across the lips, and left the Hotel. *Hot Damn, Brain thought, I don't care how bad a mood Ice is going to be in tomorrow, I'm in love.*

OOOOOOOOH GOD!!! Where am I . . . *bathroom* . . . Uh. The morning after the night

before is always horrible. Mouth feels like cotton, head hurts like hell, *thirsty* . . . must be De-Tox . . . crap. The previous evening started to come back to me in dribs and drabs, between trips to the head and ice water dispenser. Up to a point it' s clear, then everything goes blank. Let' s see . . . I' m in my room, so whatever happened couldn' t have been too bad . . . my head has a bandage on it . . . hmm. It seems I owe somebody a favor. Guess I' ll have to call Brain and find out what went on. Suddenly, sounding like a collision alarm from hell, the Vid chimed. I answered it.

"Hello, the party you are trying to reach is dead, please don' t call again . . ." I managed to grind out.

"Ice, it' s me. Time to get up and at' em," the painfully happy voice of my soon-to-be ex-buddy erupted out of the speaker.

"Why are you up so early Brain? It' s only . . . two o' clock."

"Yeah, in the afternoon. Get up and meet me in the restaurant. I' m sure you' re relying to know what happened." Wise guy.

"Right, see you in a few." I hung up. After what seemed like a Herculean effort on my part, I met Brain and he filled me in.

"So, do we know who these clowns were?" I asked.

"Marie said she would try and find out. She should have some info when we meet with Lonetree in an hour."

"Okay. So, how did the date go, Big Guy?"

"It was great, Ice, I think I' m in love and I think she might be too."

"You realize we' ll be gone the better part of a year on this trip. I wouldn' t get my hopes too high," I cautioned him. It would be just his luck that she was married by the time we got back.

"You think that might be a problem?" He asked with a furrowed brow.

"Never can tell. Just stay on course and keep cool. Things could work out, besides, we have a lot of work to do." After a few more gallons of water and lots of trips to the bathroom . . . I *hate* De-Tox . . . we arrived at Lonetree headquarters, Slick showed us in.

"Gentlemen, come in, take a seat. Mr. Thomas, how are you feeling. Marie updated me on the night' s adventures. I believe we have a make on your assailants."

"Thanks, I' d like to meet those two again."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Thomas, they left Belt Central about six hours ago and by reports are headed for Logan' s Hole." Damn! The bastards were going to get away. We didn' t have time for a stern chase to Rat Hole City right now.

"That' s too bad, I guess my revenge will have to be postponed a while. You didn' t get names by any chance?" If I ever ran into them again . . . *POW*.

"Oh, much more than that. Marie, would you please bring in the dossier we compiled?" A side door opened and the lady entered with a data cube in hand. I wasn' t even looking at him and I could tell Brain' s whole body came to attention. Hell, the lint between his toes probably stiffened up.

"Mr. Thomas, you appear to be in much better shape than when I saw you last."

"I think so, I don' t remember much. Brain tells me that I have you to thank in part for my rescue." I would have to do something nice for this lady. "Why don' t you call me Ice? All my friends do and if Brain' s . . . um . . . enthusiasm is any indication, we *will* be friends." A large foot descended on mine. Looking at Brain, I received a raised eyebrow glare. I bounced my own eyebrows up and down a couple of times in return. Looking back at Lonetree and Marie I noticed a couple of *looks* being exchanged between them. This could get interesting.

"Ahem . . . yes . . . well . . . Marie, the computer if you please." Lonetree appeared to be discomfitted. "As you can see, they are freelance muscle. They do most of their work for Mr. Mason, one of our more . . . influential . . . residents here at Belt Central. He deals mostly in information brokering so it is likely someone wants to find out your business. Does anyone else know about your project?"

"Nobody at Belt Central, except the occupants of this room and Tom O'Malley. It' s conceivable that there was a leak by our two other partners at Ceres," I speculated.

"Fire and Doc, aren' t blabber mouths, Ice. Maybe our Comm lines have been compromised," Brain suggested, talking in Marie's direction.

"Mr. O'Malley is beyond reproach. Ceres Corp. is run by Sylvia Pendergast. If the offer to buy the ship went through her, it is likely that she is the source of the 'inquiry' that Mr. Thomas . . . I mean Ice, experienced." Marie' s analysis sounded probable. Laser Comm, is difficult to tap and though I have never met her, Fi' s description of Sylvia's personality fit the scenario. Marie seemed to be one smart cookie, I hoped Brain was up to it.

"Brain, we have to get a message to Fi and Doc, to warn them." *And fast*, I thought to myself. *Fi! You are in danger and I' m not there . . . damn, damn, damn . . .*

"After discussing your offer with my own interested parties, I believe we would like to become one of your partners. Marie will give you a standard Terms of Partnership agreement signed by Lonetree Inc. If there are any changes you might wish to make please inform me. Signing the Agreement and sending a copy to me is all that is necessary to put it in place. The agreement states primarily what we discussed yesterday. There is only one stipulation that we have added, the inclusion of a representative on the trip. Ah . . . Ah, hear me out," He said, holding up a hand to quell our objections. "In view of the interest of other parties, we believe that an extra hand may be needed. This representative will be there to help . . . repel boarders . . . so to speak. The representative will also be able to fill in on any other duties which may come up. You *are* contemplating a rather long trip."

"We will need to discuss this with the other participants before we can make a decision about your representative," I said. We concluded the meeting and after Brain and Marie exchanged Comm codes, departed for the docking bay. I wanted to get under way and get a message to Fi as quickly as possible. I also wanted to run the Agreement through my Legality program to check for any hidden gotcha' s.

"Marie, I still think it is a bad idea for you to get involved. It is dangerous. What do you know about these people? What happens if the organization needs you?"

"Oh Uncle, don' t worry about Brain. He' s a nice person and when you get to know him you' ll agree. Besides, we both know I need to get away from here for a while. This last year has been much too stressful. I *need* a vacation and you can handle things here, just fine."

We collected our stuff from the hotel and stopped in at Rosita's to say ' see ya later' to O' Malley.

"So boyos, did yer meetin' go well?" O' Malley said with a grin as he delivered our drinks.

"Well enough, Tom, thanks for the connection," I answered, with a smile.

"Ah weel, I' m always glad ta lend a helpin' hand. Kinda wishes I could go wi' ya. Bet the rings are a grand sight."

"We could always use a . . . hey, wait a minute, how the hell do you know what our project is?" I shot back at him.

"Relax laddie, wheels within wheels as they say. Don' t worry yer secret be safe with me. Lonetree and I go way back. Speaking o' backs, you lads better be keepin' a sharp eye out fer yer own. Word' s out, somebody be wantin' ta know what ya be doing, real bad." Tom left the table and went back to tending to business. Brain hadn' t said a word through this whole exchange and looking at him I could see why. Him, with this big stupid grin on his face.

"Hey genius, wake up over there . . . yoo-hoo, universe to Brain . . . "

"Huh?" He replied, wittily.

"Look, I know how you feel and I' m happy for you, but if you are going to be like this the whole trip you might as well stay home."

"No way, Shorty," he growled back. "Someone has to watch your back and keep you from making an ass of yourself. We better hit vacuum and get in contact with Fi and Doc about this situation." We finished our drinks and boarded ship in the docking bay. I powered up the Icehound, and got under way.

Chapter 6

Past, Present and Future

"Computer, flight schedules, Ceres to Mars, one stop maximum, last five days."

"DAY ONE . . . CITY OF DETROIT . . . STOP AT WAY STATION . . . NO PASSENGER LIST. DAY TWO . . . CITY OF CHICAGO . . . NO STOPS . . . PASSENGER LIST TO SCREEN. DAY THREE . . . JOHNS HOPE . . . NO STOPS . . . CARGO . . . NO PASSENGERS. DAY 4 AND 5 . . . NO SHIPS."

I checked the City of Chicago passenger list on the screen and sure enough, Fi and Doc were there. It looked like we had to catch the Chicago.

"Computer, window flight plans for spaceship City of Chicago."

"ON SCREEN." Brain had gone to make a sandwich and came strolling back in with his mouth full.

"Welf, di jer fine anyting?"

"Yes Mister Manners, didn't your mom ever tell you not to talk with your mouth full?"

"Yeah, but she' s not here right now and it hardly seems worth the effort with just you. So what have you got?"

"They took the Chicago."

"We can' t raise the Liner by tightbeam radio from here. We' ll have to get higher in the Belt plane so we can clear the rocks."

"I guess we had better get going then."

"Well, quit jawin' and set the course."

"Computer, lay in an intercept course for the spaceship City of Chicago." You had to be exact in telling the computer where you wanted to go. We might have landed in Chicago . . . the one at the bottom of Earth' s gravity well.

"COURSE ENTERED, CAPTAIN." Man, I really loved this part. "Computer . . . ENERGIZE." I could hear the Inertial Conversion Drive winding up, humming like some huge generator. There was a slight feeling of acceleration before the G-force compensation took effect. In just a few minutes we were accelerating at two gravities.

"ETA . . . 3 DAYS"

During the trip we discussed this "representative" Lonetree wanted to send along. I could see a whole host of problems with it.

"Lonetree' sep could be a big problem Ice. If he gets a whiff of the real Project, it could cause all kinds of resentment on Lonetree' s part."

"Yeah, if Lonetree wanted to, he could try to get a part of the Project by taking us to Arbitration. Or, he could just try to take all of it and say there was an ' accident' which killed all of us except the 'representative'. This is certainly going to require some serious thought on our part. Maybe Fi or Doc can come up with a way to head them off, or deal with it." This was getting complicated and my brain was starting to hurt.

On day two we were watching a video and munching snacks when . . .

"This is the City of Chicago inbound for Mars. We are being pursued by raiders and request the assistance of any nearby friendlies. Our present course is . . . ~~~~~` ~~~"

"SIGNAL LOST, CAPTAIN."

"We have to intercept ASAP. Computer, plot an intercept with the Space Ship City of Chicago. Minimum time maximum speed. Biological parameters."

"COURSE PLOTTED, CAPTAIN. ACCELERATION WILL BE AT 2 GRAVITIES OVER COMPENSATION FOR 1.5 HOURS."

"Ouch!" My large companion exclaimed. "I guess we' ll be seat-bound for a while."

"Yeah, and if the compensation fails, it' s going to hurt, a lot." Gravity compensation was good up to 5g' s which meant Icehound was going to be doing 7g maneuvers.

"Well, I hope everything is lashed down. Saddle up pard and let's get this show on the road."

"All belted in here Ice, fire when ready."

"Computer, engage." As I finished the words, I felt the ship move. My ship did not have rocket engines like the Ambulance, so the speed built up slowly. As we passed the compensation point, I felt a giant start to sit on my chest. It' s a good thing that Brain and I keep ourselves in shape ' cause this was going to be a real ordeal.

"How . . . you . . . doin' . . . Brain."

"Like . . . I got . . . planet . . . sittin' . . . on me . . . We . . . might . . . let up . . . fifteen . . . minutes . . . at max . . . speed . . . rest a bit." That sounded okay to me. The last thing we needed was to feel weak and puny when we met the Chicago.

"Com . . . puter. Modulate . . . ac . . . celer . . . ation . . . fifteen . . . minute . . . intervals . . . minus . . . two . . . g's . . . two . . . minute . . . period."

"UNDERSTOOD CAPTAIN. COURSE MODIFIED, ARRIVAL TIME PLUS 15 MINUTES." Please don't let us be 15 minutes late.

Though most members are reasonable and rule-accepting, some people in our society tend to move toward extremes. At one extreme are the control freaks who want to reinstate big Government. At the other extreme are the ' chaotic anarchists' These are the criminal elements who prey upon the weak and gullible. They only thought of themselves . . . real bad boys.

At our first rest break we took care of necessities and made sure our weapons were charged. Weapons consist of three basic types' Projectile, energy, and personal. Projectile weapons were mainly bullets driven by chemical or electric propulsion. This included small arms and rockets. Energy weapons were either Laser or Nuclear Beams. Personal arms ranged from knives and swords to Taser like devices. What you used depended on where the fight was taking place. Lasers and Beams were mainly used in combat between ships and Stations. Small Lasers and projectile weapons were used in "urban combat" situations. Hand-held lasers tended to be low power, consequently, they were good anti-personnel weapons. Projectile weapons were the most common because the ammo could be selected according to what you were trying to accomplish. If you were trying to capture someone or just trying to drive them away, rubber bullets with built in Taser devices could be used. If

you really wanted someone dead, a solid projectile was used. The rubber/Taser slugs were called stunners and the solid slugs were called killers. Most people stuck with stunners, killers were only used when the integrity of the station/ship would not be compromised. Nobody wanted to accidentally shoot out a window and end up sucking vacuum.

These forms of combat arose because, next to your life, property was usually more valuable than revenge. Someone forcibly boarding your ship was more interested in stealing your stuff than killing you. A 'pirate' who killed his victims was soon hunted down to destruction by everyone who could join the chase. It might seem easy to hide, in the vast reaches of space, but keep in mind, even pirates need food, air and water, not to mention luxuries and repairs. A pirate spent more effort figuring out ways to hide his identity than how to kill people.

The next few legs of the trip were as grueling as the first. Finally, we rendezvoused with the City of Chicago. On our approach, radar showed two ships . . .

"City of Chicago this is Icehound. What is your status?"

"Icehound, our drives are disabled but otherwise we are all right. However two passengers, Dr. Henderson and Dr. Richards, have been abducted by the pirates. We were warned that if anyone follows them the prisoners will die."

"Understood Chicago." I felt as if my blood had turned to ice water.

"Pirate Vessel, this is Icehound. What are your terms for hostage release?" The words, like steel shards, came from my mouth.

"Icehound . . . name sounds familiar . . . hmm . . . no matter, the prisoners will be released as soon as we have interrogated them for our client. Of course, I can't guarantee what condition they will be in."

"Ice, the bastards are accelerating."

"Computer . . . match course with the pirate vessel."

"AYE CAPTAIN."

"Captain of the pirate . . . cease acceleration, NOW!"

"Attempt to stop us and the prisoners will suffer."

"Pirate if you do not release the hostages immediately, I . . . Will . . . Destroy . . . you." I composed myself and continued. "Are you willing to die over a little profit or just chalk this up as a deal gone sour?"

"Destroy me? Ha ha ha ha . . . ah . . . I haven't had a good laugh in years." There was a momentary flicker in the cabin lights.

"CAPTAIN. WE HAVE JUST BEEN HIT BY AN ELECTROMAGNETIC PULSE."

"Acknowledged, computer." We've been on the receiving end of an EMP gun before. Brain and I made sure EMP would never damage Icehound again.

"Ice, I've got the I-Bore primed, where do you want it?" Brain asked. He was the gunner because I couldn't trust myself.

"Last chance, pirate . . . free the hostages or die."

"No way, Icehound . . . Icehound . . . now I remember you're . . ." I glanced over at Brain.

"Take out the forward radar housing."

"Firing." An Ice Bore is really a mining tool used to vaporize a hole into the interior of a large chunk of ice. Then, an explosive charge is inserted to fracture it. The beam has to have an incredible amount of energy because the ice is so cold. Naturally, the tinkerer that I am . . .

The lights on the bridge dimmed . . . a piece of the sun impacted the nose of the pirate ship and vaporized the first ten feet of the ship's forward section.

"Icehound. . . you're Iceman . . . and she's your woman . . . and . . . oh shit . . ."

"Iceman. The pirate is ceasing acceleration."

"Icehound . . . we will comply with your request on the grounds that we may leave without further damage."

"Agreed, send the hostages out in a life pod."

"CAPTAIN, A LIFE POD IS EJECTING FROM THE PIRATE SHIP."

"We will go now, Icehound."

"Not so fast Captain Kidd. I need to verify the condition of the contents of the pod." After we got the pod on board and found Fire and Doc, sound asleep, feeling started to return to my body. If we had not gotten here in time, the pirate would have succeeded with the abduction. I gave the pirate leave.

"All right pirate, GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE BEFORE I REALLY LOSE MY TEMPER." Life out here is not cheap, nor are spacecraft and Brain and I have a reputation. We will not tolerate any ill will toward friends of ours, period. It didn't take long for the two sleeping beauties to wake up.

"Fi, that was so close. I almost lost you."

"Oh Ice, I love you . . . I'm sorry I got mad . . . it's just that . . . oh baby, you're shaking!" Reaction was setting in and it took a few seconds for it to pass.

"I know honey, we both kind of flew off the handle . . . let's try not to do it again . . . huh? She smiled up at me. "We both know that's not likely to happen, Sweetheart, but we shouldn't have to travel half way to Mars to make up." Holding her close was helping my shakes subside.

"True my love, but I promise I'll count to ten before I start snapping back. Are you okay? Did they hurt you at all?"

"I feel all right. We were returning to our cabins on the Chicago and that's the last thing I remember. What about you Doc?"

"I recall someone gassing us but after that, nothing till I woke up here." Rats, it looked like I wasn't going to get any info on who hired the space scum.

"Well, we better check with the Chicago, they might need some help. Maybe we should call this Mars trip off. You can come back with us."

"I don't know . . . what do you think, Doc? Feel up to continuing the trip?"

"We still need to secure backing for our Venture, my dear. If you want to return with Ice, I can continue to Mars."

"We will still get a better deal with Benton, if I'm there. Are you going to be all right with that Sweetheart? I mean me seeing Benton?" I looked deep into her eyes. "If I can't trust the woman I love, then I don't know who I can trust." Shortly, we docked with the liner and the captain insisted we stay for dinner while the repairs were made. That was fine with Brain, mention food and he's your friend for life.

"So, Captain Carter, are you sure you can make it to Mars?"

"Without a doubt Captain Thomas. The EMP pulse only disrupted the drive control circuits and we have spares . . . but, please, call me Art."

"Okay, Art, and I'm Ice to my friends. Uh . . . for a small fee, I can send you an EMP defense design. It may require some structural modifications to your ship though."

"Ice . . . ah yes, I thought Thomas sounded familiar. A pleasure sir. I'm sure I speak for all of us in the trade, thank you."

"Oh pshaw, twern't nothin' and . . . I'd rather not talk about it," I said, looking him right in the eye.

"Ah, I see, no more need be said, then. I will contact my superiors about your EMP defense. The company policy has been to limit the amount of force required to stop the ship. This, in the hope that the violence will stay at a low level for encounters of this kind." During this exchange I could feel Fire staring at me and I knew she was going to want to know more about what the captain was talking about. Unfortunately, I wasn't so sure I wanted to tell her. After dinner, the four of us met in Fi's cabin and Brain and I brought them up to date on the Lonetree negotiations.

"This Lonetree character sounds kind of questionable, to me. Are you sure he can be trusted?" Doc asked

"Well, he seemed honest and there was nothing in the contract that raised any flags. Besides, Brain and his secretary are dating." We all glanced at Brain, who was trying to light up the room with his face.

"Really? What's she like? I think that's so sweet," Fire said enthusiastically. "When we get back from Mars, I want to meet her, anybody Brain likes can't be all bad." I actually felt sorry for the big lug. Fire was going to drag all the juicy details out of him. She knows how to interrogate someone. Brain and Doc went on to Doc's cabin and left us alone. After a short, intense encounter . . .

"Well love, Brain and I better get going. With all this happening, I think we should get back to my place and guard the goods."

"And when we see each other next, you're going to tell me what Captain Art was talking about . . . yes?"

"I don't know, maybe."

"Oh, you will . . . you know it . . ." She said nibbling on my earlobe.

"Did you have family in the CIA or the KGB or something?" I asked, nibbling back.

Captain Art assured me that Fire and Doc would be completely safe the rest of the trip. I figured the Pirates wouldn't be back, but I convinced the two of them to wear sidearms. You never know, there might still be an inside man. Later, on our way back to my place,

my gunner had to stir the pot, a little.

"Iceman, if you don't tell her, she'll find out some other way. It would be better to hear it from you."

"I know. It's just that I still wake up nights shaking. It isn't easy to talk about."

"No kidding. I was there too, remember? It might help to tell her."

"Maybe. Look, I know you mean well, but let's drop it huh? I need some rest so you take the first watch."

"Right buddy, take as long as you need," was Brain's compassionate reply. I went to my cabin and drank myself to sleep, something I *never* do aboard the ship. The nightmare was a real doozy . . .

Our trip back to my place was uneventful. We sighted some ice balls and I plotted the orbits for future reference. This settled my mind a little and I was able to bury the memories of the distant past far enough down that I could ignore them. We finally docked and began the waiting game. My house Comp. reported three flybys while we were gone, which were warned off and had the good sense to heed the warning. My ship is not the only place I have a modified I-bore. Lonetree asked for an update on our progress, having heard something about the Chicago encounter. Word gets around fast. Brain wanted to deliver it in person, but I convinced him to tightbeam an encrypted version of the incident, for now. When our traveling friends got back, we could all go for a visit. My sweetie Commed me when the Chicago made Mars Orbit. During the waiting period that followed, Brain and I examined the Alien some more.