

Fall had come to the northern hemisphere of Mars. At the north pole, the mean temperature had fallen to — 125° C—cold enough to freeze carbon dioxide out of the thin Martian atmosphere and begin forming the annual covering that would lay over the permanent cap of water-ice until spring. In the southern polar regions, where winter had ended, the carbon dioxide was evaporating. Along the edge of the retreating fields of dry ice, strong winds were starting to raise dust. During the short but hot southern summer, with Mars making its closest approach to the sun, the resulting storms could envelop the planet.

Edmund Halloran watched the surface details creep across the large wallscreen at one end of the mess area of Yellow Section, Deck B, of the interplanetary transfer vessel Mikhail Gorbachev, wheeling in orbit at the end of its six-month voyage from Earth to bring the third manned mission to the Red Planet. The other new arrivals sitting around him at the scratched and stained green-topped aluminum tables—where they had eaten their meals, played innumerable hands of cards, and talked, laughed, and exchanged reminiscences through the long voyage out—were also strangely quiet as they took in the view. Unlike the other views of Mars that they had studied and memorized, this was not being replayed from transmissions sent back from somewhere on the other side of millions of miles of space. This time it was really on the outside of the thin metal shell around them. Very soon, now, they would be leaving the snug cocoon with its reassuring routine and its company of familiar faces that they had come to know as home, to go down there. They had arrived.

The structure had lifted out from lunar orbit as a flotilla of three separate, identical craft, independently powered, each fabricated in

the general form of a T, but with the bar curved as part of the arc of a circle, rather than straight. On entering the unpowered free-fall phase that would endure for most of the voyage, the three ships had maneuvered together and joined at their bases to become the equispaced spokes of a rotating Y, creating comfortable living conditions in the three inhabited zones at the extremities. The triplicated design meant that in the event of a major failure in any of the modules, everybody could get home again in the remaining two—or at a push, with a lot of overcrowding and at the cost of jettisoning everything not essential to survival, even in a remaining one. The sections accommodated a total of 600 people, which represented a huge expansion of the existing population of 230 accrued from the previous two missions. Some of the existing population had been distributed between a main base on Lunae Planum and a few outlying installations. The majority, however, were still up in MARSANSKAYA MEZHODUN-ARODNAYA ORBITAL 'NAYA STANTSIYA, or

“Mars International Orbiting Station,” awaiting permanent accommodation on the surface. In the Russian Cyrillic alphabet this was shortened to MAPCMOC, yielding the satisfyingly descriptive transliteration MARSMOS in English, which was accepted as the standard international language.

The region coming into view now was an area roughly twenty degrees north of the equator. Halloran recognized the heavily cratered area of Lunae Planum and the irregular escarpment at its eastern edge, bounding the smoother volcanic plain of Chryse Planitia. Although he knew where to look, he could see no indication of the main base down there. He picked out the channels emerging from the escarpment, where volcanic heating had melted some of the underground ice that had existed in an earlier age, causing torrential floods to pour out across the expanse of Chryse, which lay about a kilometer lower.

An announcement from the overhead speakers broke his mood of reverie. “Attention please. The shuttle to MARSMOS is now ready for boarding. Arrivals holding disembarkation cards ninety-three through one hundred twenty should proceed through to the docking area. Ninety-three through one hundred twenty, to the docking port now.,,

Halloran rose and picked up his briefcase and a bag containing other items that he wanted to keep with him until the personal baggage caught up with them later. As he shuffled forward to join the flow of people converging toward the door, a voice spoke close behind him. "It looks as if we're on the same trip across, Ed." He looked

around. Ibrahim and Anna, a young Egyptian couple, were next in line.

"I guess so," Halloran grunted. Ibrahim was an electronics technician, his wife a plant geneticist. They were both impatient to begin their new lives. Why two young people like these should be so eager and excited about coming to a four-thousand-mile ball of frozen deserts, Halloran couldn't imagine. Or maybe he couldn't remember.

"We'll be going straight down from the station." Ibrahim gestured toward Anna; she smiled a little shyly. "The doctors want her to adapt to surface conditions as soon as possible."

Anna's pregnancy had been confirmed early in the voyage. Although the baby wouldn't be the first to be born on Mars, it would be one of a very select few. The knowledge added considerably to Ibrahim's already exuberant pride of first fatherhood.

"It may be a while before I see you again, then, eh?" Halloran said. "But I wouldn't worry about not bumping into each other again. It's not as if there are that many places to get lost in down there yet."

"I hope it won't be too long," Ibrahim said. "It was good getting to know you. I enjoyed listening to your stories. Good luck with your job here."

"You too. And take good care of Anna there, d'you hear."

They moved out through the mess doorway, into a gray-walled corridor of doors separated by stretches of metal ribbing. Byacheslav, one of the Russian construction engineers, moved over to walk beside Halloran as they came to the stairway leading up to the next deck, where the antechamber to the docking port was located. He was one of the relatively few older members of the group—around Halloran's age.

"Well, Ed . . . it would be two years at least before you saw Earth again, even if you changed your mind today."

"I wasn't planning on changing my mind."

"It's a big slice out of what's left of life when you get to our end of it. No second thoughts?"

"Oh, things get easier once you're over the hump. What happens when you get over the top of any hill and start going down the other side? You pick up speed, right? The tough part's over. People just look at it the wrong way."

Byacheslav smiled. "Never thought about it that way. Maybe you're right."

"How about you?"

"Me? I'm going to be too busy to worry much about things like that. We're scheduled to begin excavating the steel plant within a

month. Oh, and there was something else. . . .“ Byacheslav reached inside his jacket, took a billfold from the inside pocket, and peeled out Unodollar tens and ones. “That’s to settle our poker account—before I blow it all in the mess bar down at Mainbase.”

Halloran took the money and stuffed it in his hip pocket. “Thanks. You know, By, there was a time when I wouldn’t have trusted a

Russian as far as I could throw one of your earthmovers. It came with the trade.”

“Well, you’re in a different business now.”

“I guess we all are.”

They entered the antechamber, with its suiting-up room and two EVA airlocks on one side, and passed through the open doors of the docking port into the body of the shuttle. To align with the direction of the Mikhail Gorbachev’s simulated gravity, the shuttle had docked with its roof entry-hatch mating to the port, which meant they had to enter down a ladder into the compartment forward of the passenger cabin. The seats were small and cramped, and Halloran and Byacheslav wedged themselves in about halfway to the back, next to a young Indonesian who was keeping up a Continuous chatter with someone in the row behind.

“Do you know where you’re going yet, Ed?” Byacheslav asked as they buckled themselves in.

“Probably a couple of weeks more up in orbit, until the new admin facility is ready down below,” Halloran replied. “The director I’ll be working for from MCM is supposed to be meeting me at MARSMOS. I should find out for sure then. I guess it depends on you construction people.”

“Don’t worry. We won’t leave you stuck up here. . . .“ Byacheslav looked at Halloran and raised his eyebrows. “So, one of the directors is meeting you personally, eh? And will they have a red Carpet? If that’s the kind of reception an administrator gets, I think I’m starting to worry already. I can see how the whole place will end up being run. That was what I came all this distance to get away from. Hmm

maybe I’ve changed my mind. Perhaps we will leave you up here.”

Halloran’s rugged, pink-hued face creased into a grin. “I wouldn’t get too carried away if I were you. He’s based up at MARSMOS most of the time, anyway. I’m just here to take care of resource-allocation schedules. Nothing special. They used to call it being a clerk.”

“Now I think you’re being too modest. There’s a lot more to it than scratching in ledgers with pens these days. You have to know corn-

puter systems. And in a situation like this, the function is crucial. You can’t tell me you’re not good.”

“Don’t believe a word of it. It’s just Uncle Sam’s way of retiring off old spy chiefs in a world that doesn’t need so many spies anymore.”

Halloran sat back and gazed around the cabin. All of the passengers were aboard and seated, and the crew were securing the doors. The metaphoric umbilical back to Earth was about to be broken. It had been over thirty years ago when he joined the Agency. Who would have thought, then, that two months after turning fifty-five, he’d have found himself at a place like this, starting with a new outfit all over again?

And of all outfits to have ended up with, one with a name like Moscow-Chase-Manhattan Investments, Inc., which controlled a development consortium headed by the Aeroflot Corporation, the Volga-Hilton Hotels group, and Nippon Trans-Pacific Enterprises. Similar combinations of interests had opened up the Moon to the point where its materials-processing and manufacturing industries were mushrooming, with regular transportation links in operation and constantly being expanded, and tourism was starting to catch on. If the U.S. space effort hadn't fallen apart in the seventies and eighties, America could have had all of it, decades ahead of the Soviets. As it was, America was lucky to have come out of it, along with Europe and some of the other more developed nations, as junior partners. The Second Russian Revolution, they called it. Back to capitalism. Many people thought it was better that way.

In the case of Mars, of course, the big obstacle to its similar development was the planet's greater distance from Earth, with correspondingly longer flight times. But that problem would go away—and usher in a new era of manned exploration of the outer Solar System—when the race to develop a dependable, high-performance, pulsed nuclear propulsion system was won, which would bring the typical Mars round-trip down to somewhere around ten days. Although some unforeseen difficulties had been encountered, which had delayed development of such a drive well beyond the dates optimistically predicted in years gone by, the various groups working feverishly around the world were generally agreed that the goal was now in sight. That was the bonanza that MCM was betting on. Thirty years ago, Halloran would have declared flatly that such a coordination of Soviet and Western interests under a private initiative was impossible. Now he was part of it. Or about to be. . .

He found himself wondering again if the Vusilov who would be meeting him could be the same Vusilov from bygone years. Possibly

the KGB had its own retirement problems, too. But in any case, after all the months of wondering, it would be only a matter of minutes now before he found out.

The shuttle nudged itself away from the docking port, and Halloran experienced a strange series of sensations as it fell away from the Mikbail Gorbachev, shedding weight as it decoupled from the ship's rotational frame, and then accelerated into a curving trajectory that would carry it across to the MARS MOS satellite.

“MARS MOS has increased tenfold in size in the last six months,” Byacheslav commented. “You'll probably have more places to discover there in the next couple of weeks than I'll have down on the surface.”

“There'll need to be, with all these people showing up,” Halloran said.

Even before the arrival of the two previous manned missions, a series of unmanned flights had left all kinds of hardware parked in orbit around Mars. In a frenzy of activity to prepare for the arrival of the third mission, the construction teams from the first two had expanded the initial station into a bewildering Rube-Goldberg creation of spheres, cylinders, boxes, and domes, bristling with antennas, laser tubes, and microwave dishes, all tied together by a floating web of latticeworks and tethering cables. And the next ship from Earth, with another six hundred people, was only two months behind.

There was a brief period of free-fall, and then more disorienting feelings of unbalance came and went as the shuttle reversed and decelerated to dock at MARS MOS. When Halloran unfastened his restraining straps, he found himself weightless, which meant that they were at the nonrotating section of the structure. Using handrails and guidelines, the newcomers steered themselves out through an aft

sidedoor into an arrivals area where agents were waiting to give directions and answer questions.

After receiving an information package on getting around in MARSMOS, Halloran called Moscow-Chase-Manhattan's number and asked for Mr. Vusilov.

"Da?"

"Mr. Vusilov?"

"Speaking."

"This is Ed Halloran."

"Ah, Mr. Halloran! Excellent!" The voice sounded genial and exuberant. "So, you are arrived now, yes?"

"We docked about fifteen minutes ago. I've just cleared the reception formalities."

"And did you have a pleasant voyage, I trust?"

"It dragged a bit at times, but it was fine."

"Of course. So you are still liking the idea of working with us at MCM? No second regrets, yes?"

A reception agent murmured, "Make it brief, if you wouldn't mind, Mr. Halloran. There is a line waiting."

"None," Halloran said. "Er, I am holding up the line here. Maybe if I could come on through?"

"Yes, of course. What you do is ask directions to a transit elevator that will bring you out here to Red Square, which is a ring—a joke, you see, yes? This is where I am. It is the part of MARSMOS that rotates. First we have a drink of welcome to celebrate, which is the Russian tradition. You go to the south elevator point in Red Square, then find the Diplomatic Lounge. Our gentlemen's club here, comfortable by Martian standards—no hard hats or oily coverups. There, soon, I will be meeting you."

With no gravity to define a preferred direction, the geometry inside the free-fall section of MARSMOS was an Escherean nightmare of walls, planes, passages, and connecting shafts intersecting and going off in all directions, with figures floating between the various spaces and levels like fish drifting through a three-dimensional undersea labyrinth. Despite the map included in the information package, Halloran was hopelessly lost within minutes and had to ask directions three times to the elevator that would take him to the south terminal of Red Square. To reach it, he passed through a spin-decoupling gate, which took him into the slowly turning hub structure of the rotating section.

The elevator capsule ran along the outside of one of the structural supporting booms and was glass-walled on two sides. A panorama of the entire structure of MARSMOS changed perspective outside as the capsule moved outward, with the full disk of Mars sweeping by beyond, against its background of stars. It was his first close-up view of the planet that was real, seen directly with his own eyes, and not an electronically generated reproduction.

As the capsule descended outward and Halloran felt his body acquiring weight once again, he replayed in his mind the voice he had heard over the phone: the guttural, heavily accented tone, the

hearty, wheezing joviality, the tortured English. It had sounded like the Vusilov, all right. Perhaps he had upset somebody higher up in the heap, Halloran thought—which Vusilov had had a tendency to do from time to time—and despite all the other changes, the old Russian

penchant for sending troublemakers to faraway places hadn't gone away.

Direction had reestablished itself when he emerged at the rim. Halloran consulted his map again and found the Diplomatic Lounge located two levels farther down, in a complex of dining areas and social rooms collectively lumped together in a prize piece of technocratese as a “Communal Facilities Zone.” But as he made his way down, austere painted metal walls and pressed aluminum floors gave way to patterned designs and carpeting, with mural decorations to add to the decor, and even some ornaments and potted plants. Finally he went through double doors into a vestibule with closets and hanging space, where he left his bags, and entered a spacious, comfortably furnished room with bookshelves and a bar tended by a white-jacketed steward on one side. On the other, vast windows looked out into space, showing Phobos as a lumpy, deformed crescent. Leather armchairs and couches were grouped around low tables with people scattered around, some talking, others alone, reading. The atmosphere was calm and restful, all very comfortable and far better than anything Halloran had expected.

And then one of the figures rose and advanced with a hand extended. He was short and stocky, with broad, solid shoulders, and dressed casually in a loose orange sweater and tan slacks. As he approached, a toothy grin broadened to split the familiar craggy, heavyjowled face, with its bulbous, purple-veined nose—a face that had always made Halloran think of an old-time prizefighter—from one misshapen, cauliflower ear to the other.

Vusilov chuckled delightedly at the expression on Halloran's face. “Ah-hah! But why the so-surprised look, Edmund Halloran? You think you could get rid of me so easy, surely not? It has been some years now, yes? It's often I am wondering how they figure out what to do with you, Halloran. . . . So, to Mars, welcome I say to you, and to Moscow-Manhattan.”

They shook hands firmly. It was the first time they had done so, even though they had met on numerous occasions as adversaries. “I wondered if it was you, Sergei . . . from the name,” Halloran said.

“As I knew you would.”

“You knew who I was, of course.”

“Of course. I've seen your file. It wouldn't have been customary for them to show you mine.”

“Who'd have guessed we'd wind up like this?” Halloran said. “Times sure change. It all seems such a long time ago, now. But then, I guess, it was literally another world.”

“The axes are buried under the bridge,” Vusilov pronounced. “And now, as the first thing, we must drink some toast. Come.” He took Halloran's elbow lightly and steered him across to the bar. The bartender, young, swarthy, with dark eyes and flat-combed hair, looked up inquiringly. “This is Aifredo,” Vusilov said, gesturing with a sweep of his hand. “The best bartender on Mars.”

“The only one, too,” Aifredo said.

“Well, what of it? That also makes you the best.”

“I thought there was a bar down in the main surface base,” Halloran said.

“Pah!” Vusilov waved a hand. “That is just a workman’s club. Dishwashing beer from serve-yourself machines. This is the only bar. Alfredo is the source of all that’s worth knowing up here. If you want to know what goes on, ask Alfredo. Alfredo, I want you to meet Ed Halloran, a good friend of mine who is very old. He has now come here to work with us.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ed,” Alfredo said.

“Hi,” Halloran responded.

“Now, you see, from the old days I remember the files we keep on everybody. Your favorite choice to be poisoned with is a scotch, yes?”

“That would do fine.”

“I refuse absolutely. Today you are joining us here, so it must first be vodka. We have the best.”

“Okay. Make it on ice, with a splash of lime.”

“And my usual, Alfredo,” Vusilov said. “Put them on MCM’s account.”

Alfredo turned away and began pouring the drinks. After a few seconds, Halloran asked Vusilov idly, “When was the last time?”

Vusilov’s beady bright eyes darted restlessly as he thought back~ “In 2015, wasn’t it?Vienna . Hah-hah! Yes, I remember.” The Russian guffawed loudly and slapped the bar with the palm of his hand. “You paid a hundred thousand dollars to buy back the coding cartridge. But the truth, you never knew! It was worthless to us, anyway. We didn’t have the key.”

Halloran raised a restraining hand. “Now wait a minute. You may be the boss here, but I’m not gonna let you get away with that. We knew about the code. It was worth about as much as those hundreddollar bills I passed you. Didn’t your people ever check them out?”

“Hmph.” The smile left Vusilov’s face abruptly. “I know nothing about that. My department, it was not.” Halloran got the impression that it was more a slight detail that Vusilov had conveniently forgotten. Alfredo placed two glasses on the bar. Vusilov picked them up.

“Come,” he said. “There are two quiet chairs over there, by the window. Never before do you see so many stars, and so flammable, yes?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Halloran said as they began crossing the lounge. “You have to admit that we undid your whole operation inBonn . When we exposed Skater and he got sent back toMoscow , it pulled the linchpin out of it.”

Vusilov stopped and threw his head back to roar with mirth, causing heads to look up all around the room. “What, you still believe that? He was the decoy you were supposed to find out about. We were intercepting your communications.”

“Hell, we knew that. We were feeding you garbage through that channel. That was how we kept Reuthen’s cover. He was the one you should have been worrying about.”

Vusilov blanched and stopped in midstride. “Reuthen? The interpreter? He was with you?”

“Sure. He was our key man. You never suspected?”

“You are being serious, I suppose?”

Halloran smiled in a satisfied kind of way. “Well, I guess you’ll never know, will you?” It was a pretty tactless way to begin a relationship with his future boss, he admitted to himself, but he hadn’t been able to resist it. Anyhow, what did career prospects matter at his age? Hell, it had been worth it.

Vusilov resumed walking, and after a few paces stopped by a chair where a lean, balding man with spectacles and a clipped mustache was reading what looked like a technical report of some kind, in French. “This is Leon, who you should know.” Vusilov spoke stiffly, his joviality of a moment ago now gone. “Leonis with the European group here, who will build the launch base and make spaceships here.”

“Allo?” Leon said, looking up.

“Please meet Ed Halloran,” Vusilov said. “He comes here to work with us at MCM.”

“A pleasure, Monsieur ‘alloran.” Leon half-rose from his chair to shake hands.

“Mine, too,” Halloran said.

“They work very hard on the race for the nuclear pulse drive back home,” Vusilov went on. He seemed to have smoothed his feathers, and lowered his voice in a tone of mock confidentiality. “They think they will be first, and when they get it, they are already Out here at Mars ahead of us all to go deep-space. Isn’t it so, Leon, yes?”

The Frenchman shrugged. “Anything is possible. Who knows? I

think we ‘ave a good chance. Who else is there? Your prototype has problems. Rockwell and Kazak-Dynamik both admit it.”

“Well, there is always the Chinese,” Vusilov said, resuming his normal voice. He evidently meant it as a joke. For the past six months the Chinese had been constructing something large in lunar orbit, the purpose of which had not been revealed. It had provoked some speculation and a lot of unflattering satire and cartoons about their late-in-the-day start at imitating everyone else. “After all, what year is it of theirs? Isn’t it the Year of the Monkey, yes?”

Vusilov started to laugh, but Leon cut him off with a warning shake of his head, and nodded to indicate an Oriental whom Halloran hadn’t noticed before, sitting alone in an alcove on the far side of the room. He had a thin, droopy mustache and pointed beard, and was the only person in the room who was dressed formally, in a dark suit with necktie, which he wore with a black silk skullcap. He sat erect, reading from a book held high in front of his face, and showed no sign of having overheard.

Vusilov made a silent Oh with his mouth, in the manner of someone guilty of a faux pas, but at the same time raised his eyebrows in a way that said it didn’t matter that much.

“Who’s he?” Halloran murmured.

“The Chinese representative,” Leon replied quietly.

“What are they doing here?”

“Who knows what they do anywhere?” Vusilov said. “We have many countries with persons at MARSMOS, whose reasons are a mystery. They do it for getting the prestige.”

“That’s why this is called the Diplomatic Lounge,” Leon added.

“Anyway, we shall talk with you later, Leon,” Vusilov said.

“I ‘ope you enjoy your stay ‘ere, Monsieur ‘alloran.”

Vusilov led the way over to the chairs that he had indicated from the bar, set one of the glasses down on the small table between them, and sat down with the other. Halloran took the other chair and picked up his drink. “So, here’s to . . . ?” He looked at the Russian invitingly.

“Oh, a prosperous business future for us, I suppose. . . .” Vusilov’s mood became troubled again. He eyed Halloran uncertainly as their glasses clinked.

But, just for the moment, Halloran was oblivious as he sipped his drink and savored the feeling of a new future beginning and old differences being forgotten. A portent of the new age dawning . .

Until Vusilov said, “What else did Reuthen do for you?”

“Hell, why get into this?”

“A matter of professional pride. You forget that the KGB was the number-one, ace, properly run operation—not sloppy-dash slipshoe outfit like yours.”

“Oh, is that so? Then what about the general who defected in 2012, in Berlin? We snatched him from right under your noses. That was a classic.”

“You mean Obarin?”

“Of course, Obarin.”

Vusilov tried to muster a laugh, but it wasn’t convincing. “That old fart! We gave him to you. He knew nothing. He was more use to us on your side than on ours.”

“Come on, let’s get real. He’d been a frontline man ever since he was a major in Afghanistan back in the eighties. He was a gold mine of information on weapons and tactics.”

“All of it out of date. He was an incompetent in Afghanistan. It saved us having to pay his pension.”

“Let’s face it. You were all incompetents when it came to Afghanistan.”

“Is that so, now? And are you so quickly forgetting a little place called Vietnam? It was we who sucked you into that mess, you know, like the speed sands.”

“Baloney. It was our own delusion in the early fifties over a global Communist conspiracy being masterminded from the Kremlin.”

“Precisely! And where did the delusion come from, do you think? The misinformation-spreading was always one of our masterpiece arts, yes?”

They raised their glasses belligerently, looking at each other over the rims as they drank. Vusilov’s mouth contorted irascibly. Clearly he was unwilling to let it go at that, yet at the same time he seemed to be having a problem over whether or not to voice what was going through his mind.

“It didn’t do you a hell of a lot of good with China,” Halloran said. That did it. “But our greatest secret weapon of all, you never discovered.” Halloran raised his eyebrows. Vusilov wagged a finger. “Oh, yes. Even today, you don’t even suspect what it was. The Russian leaders we have today, they are young now, and even most of them forget.”

“What are you talking about?” Halloran asked.

Vusilov gave a satisfied nod. “Ah, so, now I have got you curious, eh?” He paused to extract the most from the moment. Halloran waited. The Russian waved a hand suddenly. His voice took on a stronger note. “Look around you today, Ed Halloran, and tell me

what do you see? Back on Earth, the Soviet space enterprises are supreme, and we are started already to colonize the Moon. And out here, you see we are the major presence in the nations who come to Mars. . . . Yet, now look back at the way the world was when it ends the Great Patriotic War in 1945, and you see it is America that holds the oyster in its hand, yes?” Vusilov shrugged. “So where does it all go down the pipes? You had it made, guys. What happened?”

Halloran could only shake his head and sigh. “These things hap. . . pen. What do you want me to say, Sergei? Okay, I agree that we blew it somehow, somewhere along the line. We’ve got a saying that every dog has its day—and so do nations. Look at history. We had ours, and now it’s your turn. Congratulations.”

Vusilov looked at him reproachfully. “You think that’s all there is to it, that the power plant which the USA had become all just goes away, like the dog who had a lousy day? You do us a disservice. Wouldn’t you grant us that perhaps, maybe, we might just have a little piece to do with what happens?”

Now it was Halloran’s turn to laugh. “You’re not trying to tell me it was your doing?”

“But that is exactly what I am telling you.” Vusilov stared back at him unblinkingly.

Halloran’s grin faded as he saw that the Russian was being quite serious. “What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded. “How?”

Vusilov snorted. “While for years your experts in universities are busy preaching our system and idolizing Marx, we are studying yours. In Wall Street you have the yo-yo economy that goes up, then it comes down again like a flat face in what you call the depressions. Well, what is it that makes the depressions, do you think?”

Halloran shrugged. “They’re part of the boom-bust cycle. It’s an inevitable part of the price you pay with a market economy.”

Vusilov shook his head, and his humor returned as he chuckled in the way of someone who had been suppressing a long-kept secret. “That’s what most Americans say. But the joke is that most Americans

don't understand how market economies work. A depression, you see, is what happens when malinvestments liquidate. A malinvestment is when capital and resources are poured into adventures for which there is no real demand. When the bubble goes bust, all the capital and labor and factory machinery and know-how that went in, nothing has any use for anymore, and so we have the depression.'

Halloran nodded stonily. "Okay. So?"

"What you have been seeing ever since the one giant step for mankind is the depression in the American space program. It comes from the same reasons of which I have been telling you."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"It is nothing to do with any boom-bust bicycle that comes with capitalism. That was a fiction that we invented, and your 'experts' believed. In a truly free market, some decision makers might guess the wrong way, but they go out of business. It only takes a few who are smart to get it right, and the others will soon follow. If it is not interfered with, the natural mechanism of prices to telegraph information adjusts supplies and demands to give the best bodyguards against malinvestments that you can get. The depression happens when all the businesspeoples make the same mistakes at the same time, which can only be because they all get the same wrong information. And there is only one way that can happen to the whole economy at once." Vusilov paused and looked at Halloran expectantly. Halloran shook his head. "Government!" Vusilov exclaimed. "They're the only ones who have the power. Only government interference can distort the whole picture to make the same mistakes happen everywhere."

Halloran didn't look convinced. "What about the big crash of 1929? Wasn't that a classic case of the free market going belly-up?"

"You see, I told you that Americans don't understand their own economics. No, it was nothing of the kind. The boom busted directly because of the inflation of the money supply through the late twenties by the Federal Reserve because they thought that easy credit would stimulate business, but what it really does is encourage reckless investments. Also, they made huge, soundless loans to Europe, to make Germany into a roadblock for Russia."

Halloran didn't want to get into all that. "So what does that have to do with our space program fifty years later?" he asked.

Vusilov shrugged. "Think what I have been saying. What happened to your space program was a depression, which is when wrong investments liquidate. And the only force that can cause it is when government meddles into the business of people who know what they're doing." He left it to Halloran to make the connection.

Halloran frowned. "What, exactly, are you saying?"

"Well, you tell me. What was the biggest case of where your government went muscling in and took over directing the space program?"

"Do you mean Kennedy and Apollo?"

Vusilov nodded emphatically and brought his palm down on the arm of his chair. "Da! Apollo! You've got it!"

Halloran was taken aback. “But . . . that was a success. It was magnificent.”

“Yes, it was a success. And I give you, it was magnificent. It did what Kennedy said. But what was that? You stuck a flag in the Moon

—fine, very good. And you concentrated your whole industry for years on producing the Saturn V behemoth engine, which ever since has no other use than to be a lawn ornament at the Johnson Space Center. An expensive gnome for the garden, yes?”

“Hey, there was more than that.”

“Oh, really?” Vusilov looked interested. “What? You tell me.”

“WTell . . .“

“Yes?”

“There was the spinoff . . . all kind of technologies. Big scientific discoveries, surely . .

“But what about the other things that didn’t happen because of it?” Vusilov persisted.

“What do you mean?”

“Think of all the other things that would have come true if Apollo had never happened. In the late fifties, the U.S. Air Force wanted to go for a spaceplane—a two-man vehicle that would have pushed the explored frontier to the fringes of space, the natural step from the rocket aircraft you had been flying. We were terrified of it. It would have led to a whole line of evolution that would have seen commercially viable hypersonic vehicles by the end of the sixties—New York to Tokyo in two or three hours, say, with the same payload and turnaround time of an old 747. That would have led to a low-cost, reusable surface-to-low-orbit shuttle in the seventies, permanently manned orbiting platforms in the eighties, with all the potential that would attract private capital, which gives us a natural jump-off point for the Moon, say, maybe in the mid-nineties, yes—all lightning-years ahead of anything we could have done.”

Halloran raised a hand and nodded glumly. “Okay, okay.” It was all true. What else could he say?

Vusilov nodded. “Yes, Apollo was magnificent. But the truth was, nobody really needed it then, militarily, commercially, or scientifically. It was all twenty or thirty years too soon. It got you your flag and your lawn pixie. But beyond that, it put government geniuses in charge of your whole space program. And what did that get you? Dead-end after Apollo. Then Skylab fell down. By the eighties you’d sunk everything in the original shuttle, which already had old-age.

When that blew up there was nothing, because it was the only one you had. The program was so bankrupt that you’d been reduced to playing a public-relations shell game by switching the same set of flyable insides around between different skins. That was why it took ten thousand technicians three months to prepare for a launch, and why you had to shut the line down for two years to build another. And by then, everything was over. The design was already obsolete, anyway.”

Halloran nodded wearily. Now that it was all spelled out, there was nothing really to argue about. He raised his glass to drink, and as he did so, he saw that Vusilov’s eyes were watching him and twinkling mischievously. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

The Russian replied softly, in a curious voice, “Well, surely you don’t imagine that all of that just . . . happened, do you?”

Halloran’s brow knotted. “You’re not saying it was you who brought it about?” Vusilov was nodding happily, thumping his hand on the arm of his chair again with the effort of containing himself. “But how? I mean, how could you possibly have manipulated U.S. government policy on such a scale? I don’t believe it.”

Vusilov brushed a tear from his eye with a knuckle. “It was like this. You see, we had been operating with centralized government control of everything under Stalin for decades, and we knew that it didn’t work. It was hopeless. Everything they touched, they screwed up. By the time we got rid of him after the war, we knew we had to change the system. But America was racing so far in front that we would never catch up. What could we do? Our only hope was to try somehow to get America to put its space program under government control and let them wreck it, while we were getting ours together.

And we did!”

Halloran was looking dumbfounded. “You’re not saying that . . .

“Yes, yes!” Vusilov put a hand to his chest and wheezed helplessly. “We strapped a bundle of obsolete missile-boosters together and threw Sputnik 1 into orbit; and then we scratched the Gagarin flight together on a shoelace and put him up, too. . . . And hysterical American public opinion and your wonderfully uninformed massmedia did the rest for us . . . ha-ha-ha! I can hear it now, Kennedy:

‘. . . this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth.’ He fell for it. It was our masterstroke!”

Halloran sat staring at the Russian, thunderstruck. Vusilov leaned back in his chair, and as if finally unburdened of a secret that had been weighing him down for years, laughed uproariously in an out-

burst that echoed around the lounge. Halloran had had enough. “Okay, you’ve had your fun,” he conceded bitterly. “Suppose we concentrate on the present, and where we’re going from here.”

Vusilov raised a hand. “Oh, but that isn’t the end of it. You see, it made for you an even bigger catastrophe on a national scale, precisely~ because it succeeded so well.”

Obviously Halloran was going to have to hear the rest. “Go on,” he said resignedly.

“The U.S. economy could have absorbed the mistake of Apollo and recovered. But you didn’t let it end there. It gave you a whole generation of legislators and lawmakers who saw the success and concluded that if central control by government and massive federal spending could get you to the Moon, then those things could achieve anything. And you went on to apply it beyond our wildest hopes—when Johnson announced the Great Society program and started socializing the USA. You didn’t stop with bankrupting the space industries; you bankrupted the whole country. Apollo was a bigger disaster for America than the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, at least you knew you’d gone wrong, and you learned something. But how can anyone argue with success?”

“And what made it so hilarious for us was that you were doing it while we were busy dismantling the same constructions of meddling bureaucrats and incompetents in our country, because we knew how well they didn’t work. That was our biggest secret—the discovery that made everything else that you see happening today possible. That was the secret that the KGB was there to protect. That was why it was

such a big organization.”

Despite himself, Halloran couldn't contain his curiosity. “What discovery?” he asked. “What secret are you talking about?”

“Capitalism! Free enterprise, motivated by individualism. That was why our defense industries and our space activities were so secret. That was how they were organized. If America wanted to waste the efficiency of its private sector on producing pet foods, laundry detergents, and breakfast cereals, while destroying everything that was important by letting government run it, that was fine by us. But we did it the other way around.”

Halloran was looking nonplussed. “That was the KGB's primary task?”

“Yes. And you never came close to finding out.”

“We assumed it was to protect your military secrets—bombs, missiles, all that kind of thing.”

“Bombs? We didn't have very many bombs, if you wish to know the truth.”

“You didn't?”

“We didn't need them. Washington was devastating your economy more effectively than we could have done with thousands of megatons.”

Halloran slumped back in his chair and stared at the Russian dazedly. “But why . . . how come we've never even heard a whisper of this?”

“Who knows why? The leaders we have now are all young. They only know what they see today. Only a few of us old-timers remember. Very likely, most of history was not as we believe.”

Halloran drew in a long breath and exhaled shakily. “Jesus . . . I need another drink. How about you? This time it's scotch, no matter

—“ At that moment a voice from a loudspeaker concealed overhead interrupted him.

“Attention, please. An important news item that has just come in over the laser link from Earth. The People's Republic of China has announced the successful launch of a pulsed-nuclear-propelled space vehicle from lunar orbit, which is now en route for the planet Jupiter. The vessel is believed to be carrying a manned mission, but further details have not been released. A spokesman for the Chinese government gave the news at a press conference held in Beijing this morning. The Chinese premier, Xao-Lin-Huong, applauded the achievement as tangible proof of the inherent superiority of the Marxist political and economic system.

“In a response from Moscow amid public outcry and severe criticism from his party's opposition groups, the new Soviet premier, Mr. Oleg Zhocharin, pledged a reappraisal of the Soviet Union's own program, and hinted of a return to more orthodox principles. ‘We have allowed ourselves to drift too far, for too long, into a path of indolence and decadence,’ Mr. Zhocharin said. ‘But with strong leadership and sound government, I am confident that by concentrating the resources of our mighty nation on a common, inspiring goal, instead of continuing to allow them to dissipate themselves uselessly in a thousand contradictory directions, the slide can be reversed. To this end, I have decreed that the Soviet Union will, within ten years from today, send men out to the star system of Alpha Centauri and return

them safely to Earth.' Mr. Zhocharin also stated that . . .“

Excited murmurs broke out all around the lounge. Halloran looked back at Vusilov and saw that the Russian was sitting ashen-faced, his mouth gaping.

And then a shadow fell across the table. They looked up to see that

the Chinese representative had risen from his chair in the alcove and stopped by their table on his way toward the door. His expression was impenetrable, but as Halloran stared up, he saw that the bright, glittering gray eyes were shining with inner laughter. The Chinese regarded them both for a second or two, his book closed loosely in his hand, and bowed his head politely. “Enjoy your day, gentlemen,” he said.

And walking without haste in quiet dignity, he left the room.