

# THE ZIGGURAT

by GENE WOLFE

[VERSION 1.1 (Dec 08 03). If you find and correct errors in the text, please update the version number by 0.1 and redistribute.]

First published in *Full Spectrum 5*, edited by Jennifer Hersh, Tom Dupree and Janna Silverstein, 1995.

It had begun to snow about one-thirty. Emery Bainbridge stood on the front porch to watch it before going back into the cabin to record it in his journal.

13:38 Snowing hard, quiet as owl feathers. Radio says stay off the roads unless you have four-wheel. Probably means no Brook.

He put down the lipstick-red ballpoint and stared at it. With this pen... He ought to scratch out *Brook* and write *Jan* over it.

"To hell with that." His harsh voice seemed loud in the silent cabin. "What I wrote, I wrote. *Quod scripsi* whatever it is."

That was what being out here alone did, he told himself. You were supposed to rest up. You were supposed to calm down. Instead you started talking to yourself. "Like some nut," he added aloud.

Jan would come, bringing Brook. And Aileen and Alayna. Aileen and Alayna were as much his children as Brook was, he told himself firmly. "For the time being."

If Jan could not come tomorrow, she would come later when the county had cleared the back roads. And it was more than possible that she would come, or try to, tomorrow as she had planned. There was that kind of a streak in Jan, not exactly stubbornness and not exactly resolution, but a sort of willful determination to believe whatever she wanted; thus she believed he would sign her papers, and thus she would believe that the big Lincoln he had bought her could go anywhere a Jeep could.

Brook would be all for it, of course. At nine, Brook had tried to cross the Atlantic on a Styrofoam dinosaur, paddling out farther and farther until at last a lifeguard had launched her little catamaran and brought him back, letting the dinosaur float out to

sea.

That was what was happening everywhere, Emery thought -- boys and men were being brought back to shore by women, though for thousands of years their daring had permitted humanity to survive.

He pulled on his red-plaid double mackinaw and his warmest cap, and carried a chair out onto the porch to watch the snow.

Suddenly it wasn't... He had forgotten the word that he had used before. It wasn't whatever men had. It was something women had, or they thought it was. Possibly it was something nobody had.

He pictured Jan leaning intently over the wheel, her lips compressed to an ugly slit, easing her Lincoln into the snow, coaxing it up the first hill, stern with triumph as it cleared the crest. Jan about to be stranded in this soft and silent wilderness in high-heeled shoes. Perhaps that streak of hers was courage after all, or something so close that it could be substituted for courage at will. Little pink packets that made you think whatever you wanted to be true would be true, if only you acted as if it were with sufficient tenacity.

He was being watched.

"By God, it's that coyote," he said aloud, and knew from the timbre of his own voice that he lied. These were human eyes. He narrowed his own, peering through the falling snow, took off his glasses, blotted their lenses absently with his handkerchief, and looked again.

A higher, steeper hill rose on the other side of his tiny valley, a hill clothed in pines and crowned with wind-swept ocher rocks. The watcher was up there somewhere, staring down at him through the pine boughs, silent and observant.

"Come on over!" Emery called. "Want some coffee?"

There was no response.

"You lost? You better get out of this weather!"

The silence of the snow seemed to suffocate each word in turn. Although he had shouted, he could not be certain he had been heard. He stood and made a sweeping gesture: *Come here.*

There was a flash of colorless light from the pines, so swift and slight that he could not be absolutely certain he had seen it. Someone signaling with a mirror -- except that the sky was the color of lead above the downward-drifting whiteness of the snow, the sun invisible.

"Come on over!" he called again, but the watcher was gone.

Country people, he thought, suspicious of strangers. But there were no country people around here, not within ten miles; a few hunting camps, a few cabins like his own, with nobody in them now that deer season was over.

He stepped off the little porch. The snow was more than ankle-deep already and falling faster than it had been just a minute before, the pine-clad hill across the creek

practically invisible.

The woodpile under the overhang of the south eaves (the woodpile that had appeared so impressive when he had arrived) had shrunk drastically. It was time to cut and split more. Past time, really. The chain saw tomorrow, the ax, the maul, and the wedge tomorrow, and perhaps even the Jeep, if he could get it in to snake the logs out.

Mentally, he put them all away. Jan was coming, would be bringing Brook to stay. And the twins to stay, too, with Jan herself, if the road got too bad.

The coyote had gone up on the back porch!

After a second or two he realized he was grinning like a fool, and forced himself to stop and look instead.

There were no tracks. Presumably the coyote had eaten this morning before the snow started, for the bowl was empty, licked clean. The time would come, and soon, when he would touch the rough yellow-gray head, when the coyote would lick his fingers and fall asleep in front of the little fieldstone fireplace in his cabin.

Triumphant, he rattled the rear door, then remembered that he had locked it the night before. Had locked both doors, in fact, moved by an indefinable dread. Bears, he thought -- a way of assuring himself that he was not as irrational as Jan.

There were bears around here, that was true enough. Small black bears, for the most part. But not Yogi Bears, not funny but potentially dangerous park bears who had lost all fear of Man and roamed and rummaged as they pleased. These bears were hunted every year, hunted through the golden days of autumn as they fattened for hibernation. Silver winter had arrived, and these bears slept in caves and hollow logs, in thickets and thick brush, slept like their dead, though slowly and softly breathing like the snow -- motionless, dreaming bear-dreams of the last-men years, when the trees would have filled in the old logging roads again and shouldered aside the cracked asphalt of the county road, and all the guns had rusted to dust.

Yet he had been afraid.

He returned to the front of the cabin, picked up the chair he had carried onto the porch, and noticed a black spot on its worn back he could not recall having seen before. It marked his finger, and was scraped away readily by the blade of his pocketknife.

Shrugging, he brought the chair back inside. There was plenty of Irish stew; he would have Irish stew tonight, soak a slice of bread in gravy for the coyote, and leave it in the same spot on the back porch. You could not (as people always said) move the bowl a little every day. That would have been frightening, too fast for any wild thing. You moved the bowl once, perhaps, in a week; and the coyote's bowl had walked by those halting steps from the creek bank where he had glimpsed the coyote in summer to the back porch.

Jan and Brook and the twins might -- would be sure to -- frighten it. That was unfortunate, but could not be helped; it might be best not to try to feed the coyote at all until Jan and the twins had gone. As inexplicably as he had known that he was being watched, and by no animal, he felt certain that Jan would reach him somehow,

bending reality to her desires.

He got out the broom and swept the cabin. When he had expected her, he had not cared how it looked or what she might think of it. Now that her arrival had become problematic, he found that he cared a great deal.

She would have the other lower bunk, the twins could sleep together feet-to-feet in an upper (no doubt with much squealing and giggling and kicking), and Brook in the other upper -- in the bunk over his own.

Thus would the family achieve its final and irrevocable separation for the first time; the Sibberlings (who had been and would again be) on one side of the cabin, the Bainbridges on the other: boys here, girls over there. The law would take years, and demand tens of thousands of dollars, to accomplish no more.

Boys here.

Girls over there, farther and farther all the time. When he had rocked and kissed Aileen and Alayna, when he had bought Christmas and birthday presents and sat through solemn, silly conferences with their pleased teachers, he had never felt that he was actually the twins' father. Now he did. Al Sibberling had given them his swarthy good looks and flung them away. He, Emery Bainbridge, had picked them up like discarded dolls after Jan had run the family deep in debt. Had called himself their father, and thought he lied.

There would be no sleeping with Jan, no matter how long she stayed. It was why she was bringing the twins, as he had known from the moment she said they would be with her.

He put clean sheets on the bunk that would be hers, with three thick wool blankets and a quilt.

Bringing her back from plays and country-club dances, he had learned to listen for them; silence had meant he could return and visit Jan's bed when he had driven the sitter home. Now Jan feared that he would want to bargain -- his name on her paper for a little more pleasure, a little more love before they parted for good. Much as she wanted him to sign, she did not want him to sign as much as that. Girls here, boys over there. Had he grown so hideous?

Women need a reason, he thought, men just need a place.

For Jan the reason wasn't good enough, so she had seen to it that there would be no place. He told himself it would be great to hug the twins again -- and discovered that it would.

He fluffed Jan's pillow anyway, and dressed it in a clean white pillowcase.

She would have found someone by now, somebody in the city to whom she was being faithful, exactly as he himself had been faithful to Jan while he was still married in the eyes of the law, to Pamela.

The thought of eyes recalled the watcher on the hill.

14:12 Somebody is on the hill across the creek with some kind of signaling device.

That sounded as if he were going crazy, he decided. What if Jan saw it? He added, maybe just a flashlight, although he did not believe it had been a flashlight.

A lion's face smiled up at him from the barrel of the red pen, and he stopped to read the minute print under it, holding the pen up to catch the gray light from the window. "The Red Lion Inn/San Jose." A nice hotel. If -- when -- he got up the nerve to do it, he would write notes to Jan and Brook first with this pen.

The coyote ate the food I put out for him, I think soon after breakfast. More food tonight. Tomorrow morning I will leave the back door cracked open awhile.

14:15 I am going up on the hill for a look around.

He had not known that until he wrote it.

The hillside seemed steeper than he remembered, slippery with snow. The pines had changed; their limbs drooped like the boughs of hemlocks, springing up like snares when he touched them, and throwing snow in his face. No bird sang.

He had brought his flashlight, impelled by the memory of the colorless signal from the hill. Now he used it to peep beneath the drooping limbs. Most of the tracks that the unseen watcher had left would be covered with new snow by this time; a few might remain, in the shelter of the pines.

He had nearly reached the rocky summit before he found the first, and even it was blurred by snow despite its protection. He knelt and blew the drifted flakes away, clearing it with his breath as he had sometimes cleared the tracks of animals; an oddly cleated shoe, almost like the divided hoof of an elk. He measured it against his spread hand, from the tip of his little finger to the tip of his thumb. A small foot, no bigger than size six, if that.

A boy.

There was another, inferior, print beside it. And not far away a blurred depression that might have been left by a gloved hand or a hundred other things. Here the boy had crouched with his little polished steel mirror, or whatever he had.

Emery knelt, lifting the snow-burdened limbs that blocked his view of the cabin. Two small, dark figures were emerging from the cabin door onto the porch, scarcely visible through the falling snow. The first carried his ax, the second his rifle.

He stood, waving the flashlight. "Hey! You there!"

The one holding his rifle raised it, not putting it to his shoulder properly but acting much too quickly for Emery to duck. The flat crack of the shot sounded clearly, snow

or no snow.

He tried to dodge, slipped, and fell to the soft snow.

"Too late," he told himself. And then, "Going to do it for me." And last, "Better stay down in case he shoots again." The cold air was like chilled wine, the snow he lay in lovely beyond imagining. Drawing back his coat sleeve, he consulted his watch, resolving to wait ten minutes -- to risk nothing.

They were robbing his cabin, obviously. Had robbed it, in fact, while he had been climbing through the pines. Had fired, in all probability, merely to keep him away long enough for them to leave. Mentally, he inventoried the cabin. Besides the rifle, there had not been a lot worth stealing -- his food and a few tools; they might take his Jeep if they could figure out how to hot-wire the ignition, and that was pretty easy on those old Jeeps.

His money was in his wallet, his wallet in the hip pocket of his hunting trousers. His watch -- a plastic sports watch hardly worth stealing -- was on his wrist. His checkbook had been in the table drawer; they might steal that and forge his checks, possibly. They might even be caught when they tried to cash them.

Retrieving his flashlight; he lifted the limbs as he had before. The intruders were not in sight, the door of the cabin half open, his Jeep still parked next to the north wall, its red paint showing faintly through snow.

He glanced at his watch. One minute had passed, perhaps a minute and a half.

They would have to have a vehicle of some kind, one with four-wheel drive if they didn't want to be stranded with their loot on a back road. Since he had not heard it start up, they had probably left the engine running. Even so, he decided, he should have heard it pull away.

Had they parked some distance off and approached his cabin on foot? Now that he came to think of it, it seemed possible they had no vehicle after all. Two boys camping in the snow, confident that he would be unable to follow them to their tent, or whatever it was. Wasn't there a Boy Scout badge for winter camping? He had never been a Scout, but thought he remembered hearing about one, and found it plausible.

Still no one visible. He let the branches droop again.

The rifle was not really much of a loss, though its theft had better be reported to the sheriff. He had not planned on shooting anyway -- had been worried, as a matter of fact, that the twins might get it down and do something foolish, although both had shot at tin cans and steel silhouettes with it before he and Jan had agreed to separate.

Now, with his rifle gone, he could not...

Neither had been particularly attracted to it; and their having handled and fired it already should have satisfied the natural curiosity that resulted in so many accidents each year. They had learned to shoot to please him, and stopped as soon as he had stopped urging them to learn.

Four minutes, possibly five. He raised the pine boughs once more, hearing the muted growl of an engine; for a second or two he held his breath. The Jeep or Bronco or whatever it was, was coming closer, not leaving. Was it possible that the thieves

were coming back? Returning with a truck to empty his cabin?

Jan's big black Lincoln hove into view, roared down the gentle foothill slope on which his cabin stood, and skidded to a stop. Doors flew open, and all three kids piled out. Jan herself left more sedately, shutting the door on the driver's side behind her almost tenderly, tall and willowy as ever, her hair a golden helmet beneath a blue-mink pillbox hat.

Her left hand held a thick, black attaché case that was probably his.

Brook was already on the porch. Emery stood and shouted a warning, but it was too late; Brook was inside the cabin, with the twins hard on his heels. Jan looked around and waved, and deep inside Emery something writhed in agony.

By the time he had reached the cabin, he had decided not to mention that the intruders had shot at him. Presumably the shooter had chambered a new round, ejecting the brass cartridge case of the round just fired into the snow; but it might easily be overlooked, and if Brook or the twins found it, he could say that he had fired the day before to scare off some animal.

"Hello," Jan said as he entered. "You left your door open. It's cold as Billy-o in here." She was seated in a chair before the fire.

"I didn't." He dropped into the other, striving to look casual. "I was robbed."

"Really? When?"

"A quarter hour ago. Did you see another car coming in?"

Jan shook her head.

They had been on foot, then; the road ended at the lake. Aloud he said, "It doesn't matter. They got my rifle and my ax." Remembering his checkbook, he pulled out the drawer of the little table. His checkbook was still there; he took it out and put it into an inner pocket of his mackinaw.

"It was an old rifle anyhow, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "My old thirty-thirty."

"Then you can buy a new one, and you should have locked the door. I--"

"You weren't supposed to get here until tomorrow," he told her brusquely. The mere thought of another gun was terrifying.

"I know. But they said a blizzard was coming on TV, so I decided I'd better move it up a day, or I'd have to wait for a week -- that was what it sounded like. I told Doctor Gibbons that Aileen would be in next Thursday, and off we went. This shouldn't take long." She opened his attaché case on her lap. "Now here--"

"Where are the kids?"

"Out back getting more wood. They'll be back in a minute."

As though to confirm her words, he heard the clink of the maul striking the wedge. He ventured, "Do you really want them to hear it?"

"Emery, they *know*. I couldn't have hidden all this from them if I tried. What was I going to say when they asked why you never came home anymore?"

"You could have told them I was deer-hunting."

"That's for a few days, maybe a week. You left in August, remember? Well, anyway, I didn't. I told them the truth." She paused, expectant. "Aren't you going to ask how they took it?"

He shook his head.

"The girls were hurt. I honestly think Brook's happy. Getting to live with you out here for a while and all that."

"I've got him signed up for Culver," Emery told her. "He starts in February."

"That's best, I'm sure. Now listen, because we've got to get back. Here's a letter from your--"

"You're not going to sleep here? Stay overnight?"

"Tonight? Certainly not. We've got to start home before this storm gets serious. You always interrupt me. You always have. I suppose it's too late to say I wish you'd stop."

He nodded. "I made up a bunk for you."

"Brook can have it. Now right--"

The back door opened and Brook himself came in. "I showed them how you split the wood, and Layna split one. Didn't you, Layna?"

"Right here." Behind him, Alayna held the pieces up.

"That's not ladylike," Jan told her.

Emery said, "But it's quite something that a girl her age can swing that maul -- I wouldn't have believed she could. Did Brook help you lift it?"

Alayna shook her head.

"I didn't want to," Aileen declared virtuously.

"Right here," Jan was pushing an envelope into his hands, "is a letter from your attorney. It's sealed, see? I haven't read it, but you'd better take a look at it first."

"You know what's in it, though," Emery said, "or you think you do."

"He told me what he was going to write to you, yes."

"Otherwise you would have saved it." Emery got out his pocketknife and slit the flap. "Want to tell me?"



Jan shook her head, her lips as tight and ugly as he had imagined them earlier.

Brook put down his load of wood. "Can I see?"

"You can read it for me," Emery told him. "I've got snow on my glasses." He found a clean handkerchief and wiped them. "Don't read it out loud. Just tell me what it says."

"Emery, you're doing this to get even!"

He shook his head. "This is Brook's inheritance that our lawyers are arguing about."

Brook stared.

"I've lost my company," Emery told him. "Basically, we're talking about the money and stock I got as a consolation prize. You're the only child I've got, probably the only one I'll ever have. So read it. What does it say?"

Brook unfolded the letter; it seemed quieter to Emery now, with all five of them in the cabin, than it ever had during all the months he had lived there alone.

Jan said, "What they did was perfectly legal, Brook. You should understand that. They bought up a controlling interest and merged our company with theirs. That's all that happened."

The stiff, parchment-like paper rattled in Brook's hands. Unexpectedly Alayna whispered, "I'm sorry, Daddy."

Emery grinned at her. "I'm still here, honey."

Brook glanced from him to Jan, then back to him. "He says -- it's Mister Gluckman. You introduced me one time."

Emery nodded.

"He says this is the best arrangement he's been able to work out, and he thinks it would be in your best interest to take it."

Jan said, "You keep this place and your Jeep, and all your personal belongings, naturally. I'll give you back my wedding and engagement rings--"

"You can keep them," Emery told her.

"No, I want to be fair about this. I've always tried to be fair, even when you didn't come to the meetings between our attorneys. I'll give them back, but I get to keep all the rest of the gifts you've given me, including my car."

Emery nodded.

"No alimony at all. Naturally no child support. Brook stays with you, Aileen and Alayna with me. My attorney says we can force Al to pay child support."

Emery nodded again.

"And I get the house. Everything else we divide equally. That's the stock and any

other investments, the money in my personal accounts, your account, and our joint account." She had another paper. "I know you'll want to read it over, but that's what it is. You can follow me into Voylestown in your Jeep. There's a notary there who can witness your signature."

"I had the company when we were married."

"But you don't have it anymore. We're not talking about your company. It's not involved at all."

He picked up the telephone, a diversion embraced at random that might serve until the pain ebbed. "Will you excuse me? This is liable to go on awhile, and I should report the break-in." He entered the sheriff's number from the sticker on the telephone.

The distant clamor -- it was not the actual ringing of the sheriff's telephone at all, he knew -- sounded empty as well as artificial, as if it were not merely far away but high over the earth, a computer-generated instrument that jangled and buzzed for his ears alone upon some airless asteroid beyond the moon.

Brook laid Phil Gluckman's letter on the table where he could see it.

"Are you getting through?" Jan asked. "There's a lot of ice on the wires. Brook was talking about it on the way up."

"I think so. It's ringing."

Brook said, "They've probably got a lot of emergencies, because of the storm." The twins stirred uncomfortably, and Alayna went to a window to look at the falling snow.

"I should warn you," Jan said, "that if you won't sign, it's war. We spent hours and hours--"

A voice squeaked, "*Sheriff Ron Wilber's Office.*"

"My name is Emery Bainbridge. I've got a cabin on Route Eighty-five, about five miles from the lake."

The tinny voice spoke unintelligibly.

"Would you repeat that, please?"

"It might be better from the cellular phone in my car," Jan suggested.

"*What's the problem, Mister Bainbridge?*"

"My cabin was robbed in my absence." There was no way in which he could tell the sheriff's office that he had been shot at without telling Jan and the twins as well; he decided it was not essential. "They took a rifle and my ax. Those are the only things that seem to be missing."

"*Could you have mislaid them?*"

This was the time to tell the sheriff about the boy on the hill; he found that he could not.

"*Can you hear me, Mister Bainbridge?*" There was chirping in the background, as if there were crickets on the party line.

He said, "Barely. No, I didn't mislay them. Somebody was in here while I was away -- they left the door open, for one thing." He described the rifle and admitted he did not have a record of its serial number, then described the ax and spelled his name.

"*We can't send anyone out there now, Mister Bainbridge. I'm sorry.*"

It was a woman. He had not realized until then that he had been talking to a woman. He said, "I just wanted to let you know, in case you picked somebody up."

"*We'll file a report. You care come here and look at the stolen goods whenever you want to, but I don't think there's any guns right now.*"

"The theft just occurred. About three or a little later." When the woman at the sheriff's office did not speak again, he said, "Thank you," and hung up.

"You think they'll come back tonight, Dad?"

"I doubt very much that they'll come back at all." Emery sat down, unconsciously pushing his chair a little farther from Jan's. "Since you kids went out and split that wood, don't you think you ought to put some of it on the fire?"

"I put mine on," Aileen announced. "Didn't I, Momma?"

Brook picked up several of the large pieces he had carried and laid them on the feeble flames.

"I founded the company years before we got married," Emery told Jan. "I lost control when Brook's mother and I broke up. I had to give her half of my stock, and she sold it."

"It's not--"

"The Stock you're talking about dividing now is the stock I got for mine. Most of the money in our joint account, and my personal account, came from the company before we were taken over. You can hang on to everything in your personal accounts. I don't want your money."

"Well, that's kind of you! That's extremely kind of you, Emery!"

"You're worried about the snow, you say, and I think you should be. If you and the twins want to stay here until the weather clears up, you're welcome to. Maybe we can work out something."

Jan shook her head, and for a moment Emery allowed himself to admire her clear skin and the clean lines of her profile. It was so easy to think of all that he wanted to say to her, so hard to say what he had to: "In that case, you'd better go."

"I'm entitled to half our community property!"

Brook put in, "The house's worth ten times more than this place."

Boys here, Emery thought. Girls over there. "You can have the house, Jan. I'm not disputing it -- not now. Not yet. But I may, later, if you're stubborn. I'm willing to

make a cash settlement..." Even as he said it, he realized that he was not.

"This is what we negotiated. Phil Gluckman represented you! He said so, and so did you. It's all settled."

Emery leaned forward in his chair, holding his hands out to the rising flames. "If everything's settled, you don't need my signature. Go back to the city."

"I -- Oh, *God!* I should have known it was no use to come out here."

"I'm willing to give you a cash settlement in the form of a trust fund for the twins. A generous settlement, and you can keep the house, your car, your money, and your personal things. That's as far as I'll go, end it's further than I ought to go. Otherwise, we fight it out in court."

"We negotiated this!"

She shoved her paper at him, and he was tempted to throw it into the fire. Forcing himself to speak mildly, he said, "I know you did, and I know that you negotiated in good faith. So did we. I wanted to see what Phil Gluckman could come up with. And to tell you the truth, I was pretty sure that it would be something I could accept. I'm disappointed in him."

"It's snowing harder," Alayna told them.

"He didn't--" Emery stiffened. "Did you hear something?"

"I haven't heard a thing! I don't have listen to this!"

It had sounded like a shot, but had probably been no more than the noise of a large branch breaking beneath the weight of the snow. "I've lost my train of thought," he admitted, "but I can make my position clear in three short affirmations. First, I won't sign that paper. Not here, not in Voylestown, and not in the city. Not anywhere. You might as well put it away."

"This is completely unfair!"

"Second; I won't go back and haggle. That's Phil's job."

"Mister high-tech himself, roughing it in the wilderness."

Emery shook his head. "I was never the technical brains of the company, Jan. There were half a dozen people working for me who knew more about the equipment than I did."

"Modest, too. I hope you realize that I'm going to have something to say after you're through."

"Third, I'm willing to try again if you are." He paused, hoping to see her glare soften. "I realize I'm not easy to live with. Neither are you. But I'm willing to try -- hard -- if you'll let me."

"You really and truly think that you're a great lover, don't you?"

"You married a great lover the first time," he told her.

She seethed. He watched her clench her perfect teeth and take three deep breaths as she forced herself to speak calmly. "Emery, you say that unless I settle for what you're willing to give we'll fight it out in open court. If we do, the public -- every acquaintance and business contact you've got -- will hear how you molested my girls."

Unwilling to believe what he had heard, he stared at her.

"You didn't think I'd do it, did you? You didn't think I'd expose them to that, and I don't want to. But--"

"It's not true!"

"Your precious Phil Gluckman has questioned them, in my presence and my attorney's. Call him up right now. Ask him what he thinks."

Emery looked at the twins; neither would meet his eyes.

"Do you want to see what a court will give me when the judge hears that? There are a lot of women judges. Do you want to find out?"

"Yes." He spoke slowly. "Yes, Jan. I do."

"It'll ruin you!"

"I'm ruined already." He stood up. "That's what you're refusing to understand. I think you'd better leave now. You and the twins."

She stood too, jumping to her feet with energy he envied. "You set up one company. You could start another one, but not when this gets around."

He wanted to say that he had seen a unique opportunity and taken it -- that he'd had his chance in life and made the best of it, and finished here. All that he could manage was, "I'm terribly sorry it's come to this. I never wanted it to, or..." His throat shut, and he felt the sick hopelessness of a fighter whose worst enemies are his own instincts. How would it feel and taste, how would it look, the cold, oiled steel muzzle in his mouth? He could cut a stick in the woods, or even use the red pen to press the trigger.

"Come on, girls, we're going. Goodbye, Brook."

Brook muttered something.

For a brief moment Emery felt Alayna's hand in his; then she was gone. The cabin door slammed behind her.

Brook said, "Don't freak out. She's got it coming."

"I know she does," Emery told him. "So do I, and we're both going to get it. I don't mind for my sake, but I mind terribly for hers. It was my job -- my duty -- to--"

On the front porch Jan exclaimed, "*Hey!*" Presumably she was speaking to one of the twins.

"I thought you handled yourself really well," Brook said.

Emery managed to smile. "That's another thing. It's my job to teach you how that sort of thing's done, and I didn't. Don't you see that I let her leave -- practically made her go -- before she'd agreed to what I wanted? I should have moved heaven and earth to keep her here until she did, but I pushed her out the door instead. That's not how you win, that's how you lose."

"You think the sheriff might get your gun back?"

"I hope not." Emery took off his coat and hung it on the peg nearest the front door. For Brook's sake he added, "I like to shoot, but I've never liked shooting animals."

Outside, the sound diminished by distance and the snow, Jan screamed.

Emery was first out of the door, but was nearly knocked off the porch by Brook. Beyond the porch's meager shelter, half obscured by blowing snow, the black Lincoln's hood was up. Jan sprawled in the snow, screaming. One of the twins grappled a small, dark figure; the other was not in sight.

Brook charged into the swirling snow, snow so thick that for a moment he vanished completely. Emery floundered through shin-high snow after him, saw a second small stranger appear -- as it seemed -- from the Lincoln's engine compartment, and a third emerge from the interior with his rifle in its hand, the dome light oddly spectral in the deepening gloom. For a moment he received the fleeting impression of a smooth, almond-shaped brown face.

The rifle came up. The diminutive figure (shorter than Brook, hardly larger than the twins) jerked at its trigger. Brook grabbed it and staggered backward, falling in the snow. The struggling twin cried out, a childish shriek of pain and rage.

Then their attackers fled -- fled preposterously slowly through snow that was for them knee high, but fled nonetheless, the three running clumsily together in a dark, packed mass that almost vanished before they had gone twenty feet. One turned, wrestled the rifle's lever, jerked the rifle like an unruly dog, and ran again.

Emery knelt in the snow beside Jan. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head, sobbing like a child.

The twin embraced him, gasping, "She hit me, she hit me." He tried to comfort both, an arm for each.

Later -- though it seemed to him not much later -- Brook draped his shoulders with his double mackinaw, and he realized how cold he was. He stood, lifting the twin, and pulled Jan to her feet. "We'd better get back inside."

"No!"

He dragged her after him, hearing Brook shut the Lincoln's passenger's-side door behind them.

By the time they reaches the cabin, Jan was weeping again. Emery put her back in the chair she had occupied a few minutes before. "Listen! Listen here, even if you can't stop bawling. One of the twins is gone. Do you know where she is?"

Sobbing, Jan shook her head.

"That girl with the hood? She hit Mama, and Aileen ran away." The remaining twin pointed.

Brook gasped, "They didn't hurt her, 'Layna?"

"They hurt *me*. They hit my arm." She pushed back her sleeve, wincing.

Emery turned to Brook. "What happened to you?"

"Got it in the belly." Brook managed a sick smile. "He had a gun. Was it the one they stole from you?"

"I think so."

"Well -- I grabbed the barrel," Brook paused, struggling to draw breath, "and I tried to push it up," he demonstrated, "so he couldn't shoot. I guess he hit me with the her end. Knocked my wind out."

Emery nodded.

"It happened one time when I was a little kid. We were playing kick-ball. I fell down and another kid kicked me."

The image glimpsed through failing snow returned: Brook floundering toward the shall hood figure with the leveled rifle. Emery felt weak, half sick with fright. "You damned fool kid," he blurted, "you could've been killed!" It sounded angry and almost vicious, although he had not thought himself angry.

"Yeah, I guess I could of."

Jan stopped crying long enough to say, "Emery, don't be mean."

"What were you being when you made the girls say I had molested them?"

"Well, you did!"

Brook said, "He tried to shoot me. I saw him. I think the safety was on. I tried to get to him fast before he wised up."

"That rifle doesn't have one, just the half-cock."

Brook was no longer listening. Under his breath, Emery explained, "He was short-stroking it, pulling down the lever a reasonable distance instead of all the way. You can't do that with a lever-action -- it will eject, but it won't load the next round. He'll learn to do right pretty soon, I'm afraid."

Jan asked querulously, "What about Aileen? Aren't you going to look for Aileen?"

"Alayna, you pointed toward the lake when I asked which way your sister went. Are you sure?"

Alayna hesitated. "Can I look out the window?"

"Certainly. Go ahead."

She crossed the cabin to the front window and looked out, standing on tiptoe. "I never said you felt us and everything like Mama said. I just said all right, all right, I see, and yes, yes, because she was there listening." Alayna's voice was almost inaudible; her eyes were fixed upon the swirling snow beyond the windowpane.

"Thank you, Alayna." Emery spoke rapidly, keeping his voice as low as hers. "You're a good girl, a daughter to be proud of, and I am proud of you. Very proud. But listen -- are you paying attention?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"What you tell your mama--" he glanced at Jan, but she was taking off her coat and lecturing Brook, "isn't important. If you've got to lie to her about that so she won't punish you, do what you did. Nod and say yes. What you tell the lawyers is more important, but not very important. They lie all the time, so they've got no business complaining when other people lie to them. But when you're in court, and you've sworn to tell the truth, everything will be terribly important. You *have* to tell the truth then. The plain unvarnished truth, and nothing else. Do you understand?"

Alayna nodded solemnly, turning to face him.

"Not to me, because my life's nearly over. Not to God, because we can't really hurt God, only pain him by our spite and ingratitude. But because if you lie then, it's going to hurt you for years, maybe for the rest of your life.

"When God tells us not to lie, and not to cheat or steal, it's not because those things hurt him. You and I can no more harm God than a couple of ants could hurt this mountain. He does it for the same reason that your mama and I tell you not to play with fire -- because we know it can hurt you terribly, and we don't want you to get hurt.

"Now, which way did Aileen run?"

"That way." Alayna pointed again. "I know because of the car. There was a lady at the front looking at the motor, and she sort of tried to catch her, but she got away."

"You say -- Never mind." Emery stood. "I'd better go after her."

"Comin' with," Brook announced.

"No, you're not. You're going to see about Alayna's arm." Emery put on his coat. His gloves were in the pockets and his warmest cap on a peg. "There's plenty of food here. Fix some for the three of you -- maybe Alayna and her mother will help. Make coffee, too. I'll want some when I get back."

Outside, the creek and the hill across it had disappeared in blowing snow. It would have been wise, Emery reflected, for Jan to have turned the car around before she stopped. It was typical of her that she had not.

He squinted at it through the snow. The hood was still up. The intruders -- the boys who had robbed his cabin -- had no doubt intended to strip it, stealing the battery and so on, or perhaps hot-wire it and drive it someplace where it could be stripped at leisure. There were three, it seemed -- three at least, and perhaps more.

Reaching the Lincoln, he peered into the crowded engine compartment. The



battery was still there; although he could not be sure, nothing seemed to be missing. Jan, who had told him he should have locked the cabin door, should have locked the doors; but then Jan seldom did, even in the city, and who would expect trouble way out here during a blizzard?

Emery slammed down the hood. Now that he came to think of it, Jan left her keys in the car more often than not. If she had, he could turn it around for her before the snow got any deeper. Briefly he vacillated, imagining Aileen hiding behind a tree, cold and frightened. But Aileen could not be far, and might very well come out of hiding if she heard the Lincoln start.

As he had half expected, the keys were in the ignition. He started the engine and admired the luxurious interior until warm air gushed from the heater, then allowed the big car to creep forward. Alayna felt certain her twin had run toward the lake, and he had to go in that direction anyway to turn around.

He switched on the headlights.

Aileen might come running when she saw her mother's car. Or he might very well meet her walking back toward the cabin, if she had sense enough to stick to the road; if he did, she could get in and warm up at once.

The Lincoln's front-wheel drive, assisted by its powerful engine, seemed to be handling the snow well so far. At about two miles an hour, he topped the gentle rise beyond the cabin and began the descent to the lake.

Aileen had run down this road toward the lake; but in what direction had the boys run? Emery found that though he could picture them vividly as they fled -- three small, dark figures bunched together, one carrying his rifle (somehow carrying away his death while fleeing from him) -- he could not be certain of the direction in which they had run. Toward town, or this way? Their tracks would be obscured by snow now in either case.

Had they really fled, as he'd assumed? Wasn't it possible that they'd been pursuing Aileen? It was a good thing--

He took his eyes off the snow-blanketed road for a second to stare at Jan's keys. The doors had been unlocked, the keys in the ignition. If the boys had wanted to strip this car, why hadn't they driven it away?

He stopped, switched on the emergency blinkers, and blew the horn three times. Aileen might, perhaps, have run as far as this -- call it three-quarters of a mile, although it was probably a little less. It was hard to believe that she would have run farther; though no doubt a healthy eleven-year-old could run farther than he, and faster, too. Not knowing what else to do, he got out, leaving the lights on and the engine running.

*"Aileen! Aileen, honey!"*

She had told Phil Gluckman that he, Emery Bainbridge, her foster father, had molested her. Had she believed it, too? He had read somewhere that young children could be made to believe that such things had happened when they had not. What about a bright eleven-year-old?

He made a megaphone of his hands. "*Aileen! Aileen!*"

There was no sound but the song of the rising wind and the scarcely audible purr of the engine.

He got back in and puffed fine snow off his glasses before it could melt. When he had left the cabin, he had intended to search on foot -- to tramp along this snow-covered road calling Aileen. Perhaps that would have been best after all.

Almost hesitantly, he put the automatic transmission into first, letting the Lincoln idle forward at a speed that seemed no faster than a slow walk. When a minute or more had passed, he blew the horn again.

That had been a shot he had heard as he sat arguing with Jan; he felt sure of it now. The boy had been trying out his new rifle, experimenting with it.

He blew the horn as he had before, three short beeps.

That model held seven cartridges, but he couldn't remember whether it had been fully loaded. Say that it had. One shot fired at him on the hill, another in the woods (where?) to test the rifle. Five left. Enough to kill him, to kill Jan, and to kill Brook and both twins, assuming Aileen wasn't dead already. Quite possibly the boy with the rifle was waiting in the woods now, waiting for Jan's big black Lincoln to crawl just a little bit closer.

All right, let him shoot. Let the boy shoot at him now, while he sat behind the wheel. The boy might miss him as he sat here, alone in the dark behind tinted safety glass. The boy with his rifle could do nothing worse to him than he had imagined himself doing to himself, and if he missed, somebody -- Jan or Brook, Aileen or Alayna -- might live. And living, recall him someday with kindness.

The big Lincoln crept past the dark, cold cabin of his nearest neighbor, a cabin whose rather too-flat roof already wore a peaked cap of snow.

He blew the horn, stopped, and got out as before, wishing that he had remembered to bring the flashlight. As far as he could tell, the snow lay undisturbed everywhere, save for the snaking track behind the Lincoln.

He would continue to the lake, he decided; he could go no farther. There was a scenic viewpoint there with parking for ten or twelve cars. It would be as safe to turn around there as to drive on the road as he had been doing -- not that the road, eighteen inches deep in snow already, with drifts topping three feet, was all that safe.

Kicking snow from his boots and brushing it from his coat and trousers, he got back into the car, took off his cap, and cleaned his glasses, then eased the front wheels into the next drift.

When Jan and the twins had left the cabin, they must have seen the boys, perhaps at about the time they were raising the hood. Jan had shouted at them -- he had heard her -- and gone to her car to make them stop, followed by the twins. What had she said, and what had the boys said in reply? He resolved to question her about it when he returned to the cabin. Somebody had knocked her down; he tried to remember whether her face had been bruised, and decided it had not.

The Lincoln had pushed through the drift, and was already approaching another; here, where the road ran within a hundred feet of Haunted Lake, the snow swirled more wildly than ever. Was there still open water at the deepest part of the lake? He peered between the burdened trees, seeing nothing.

When one of the boys had hit their mother, Aileen had run; Alayna had attacked him. Aileen had acted sensibly and Alayna foolishly, yet it was Alayna he admired. The world would be a better place if more people were as foolish as Alayna and fewer as sensible as Aileen.

Alayna had said something peculiar about their attacker. *The boy with the hood. He hit Mama and Aileen ran away.*

That wasn't exactly right, but close enough, perhaps. The boy had worn a hood, perhaps a hooded sweatshirt underneath his coat, the coat and sweatshirt both black or brown; something of that kind.

For a moment it seemed the Lincoln would stall in the next drift. He backed out and tried again. Returning, he could go through the breaks he had already made, of course; and it would probably be a good idea to turn around, if he could, and return now.

Two dark figures stepped out of the trees at the edge of his lights. Between them was a terrified child nearly as tall as they. One waved, pointing to Aileen and to him.

He braked too hard, sending the crawling Lincoln into a minor skid that left it at an angle to the road. The one who had waved gestured again -- and he, catching a glimpse of the smooth young face beneath the hood, realized that it was not a boy's at all, but a woman's.

He got out and found his own rifle pointed at him.

Aileen moaned, "Daddy, Daddy..."

The smooth-faced young woman who had waved shoved her at him, then patted the Lincoln's fender, speaking in a language he could not identify.

Emery nodded. "You'll give her to me if I'll give you the car."

The women stared at him without comprehension.

He dropped to his knees in the snow and hugged Aileen, and made a gesture of dismissal toward the Lincoln.

Both women nodded.

"We'll have to walk it," he told Aileen. "A little over two miles, I guess. But we can't go wrong if we stay on the road."

She said nothing, sobbing.

He stood, not bothering to clean the snow from his knees and thighs. "The keys are in there."

If they understood, they gave no sign of it.

"The engine's running. You just can't hear it."

The freezing wind whipped Aileen's dark hair. He tried to remember how the twins had been dressed when he had seen them getting out of the Lincoln in front of his cabin. She'd had on a stocking cap, surely -- long white stocking caps on both the twins. If so, it was gone now. He indicated his own head, and realized that he had left his cap in the car; he started to get it, stopping abruptly when the woman with his rifle lifted it to her shoulder.

She jabbed the rifle in the direction he had come.

"I just want to get my cap," he explained.

She raised the rifle again, putting it to her shoulder without sighting along the barrel. He backed away, saying, "Come on, Aileen."

The other woman produced something that looked more like a tool than a weapon, a crooked metal bar with what seemed to be a split pin at one end.

"I don't want to fight." He took another step backward. He pointed to Aileen's head. "Just let me get my cap and give it to her."

The shot was so sudden and unexpected that there was no time to be afraid. Something tugged violently at his mackinaw.

He tried to rush the woman with the rifle, slipped in the snow, and fell. She took his rifle from her shoulder, pulled down and pushed up its lever almost as dexterously as he could have himself, and pointed it again.

"No, no!" He raised his hands. "We'll go, I swear." He crawled away from her, backward through the snow on his hands and knees, conscious that Aileen was watching with the blank, horror-stricken expression of a child who has exhausted tears.

When he was ten yards or more behind the Lincoln, he stood up and called, "Come here, Aileen. We're going back."

She stared at the women, immobile until one motioned to her, then waded slowly to him through the snow. His right side felt as though it had been scorched with a soldering iron; he wondered vaguely how badly he had been wounded. Catching her hand, he turned his back on the woman and began to trudge away, trying to brace himself against the bullet that he more than half expected.

"Daddy?"

He scarcely dared to speak, but managed, "What is it?"

"Can you carry me?"

"No." He felt he should explain, but could think only of the rifle pointed at his back. "We've got to walk. You're a big girl now. Come on, honey." It was easier to walk in the curving tracks of the Lincoln's tires, and he did so.

"I want to go home."

"So do I, honey. That's where we're going. Come on, it can't be far." He risked a glance toward the lake, and this time caught sight of ice lit by blue lights far away. More to himself than to the doleful, shivering child beside him, he muttered, "Somebody's out there on a boat." No one -- no sane, normal person at least -- would have a boat in the lake at this time of year. The boats had been drawn up on shore, where they would stay until spring.

He took off his glasses and dropped them into a pocket of his mackinaw, and looked behind him. Jan's Lincoln would have been invisible if it were not for the blinking red glow of its taillights. They winked out together as he watched. "They're stripping it," he told Aileen. "They just got the alternator or the battery."

She did not reply; and he began to walk again, turning up his collar and pulling it close about his ears. The wind was from his left; the warmth on the other side was blood, soaking his clothes and warming the skin under them, however briefly. Slow bleeding, or so it seemed -- in which case he might not be wounded too badly and might live. A soft-nosed hunting bullet, but expansion required a little distance, and it could not have had much, probably had not been much bigger than thirty caliber when it had passed through his side.

Which meant that life would continue, at least for a time. He might be tempted to give his body to the lake -- to walk out on its tender ice until it gave way and his life, begun in warm amniotic fluid, should terminate in freezing lake water. He might be tempted to lie down in the snow and bleed or freeze to death. But he could not possibly leave Aileen or any other child out here alone, although he need only tell her to follow the road until she reached his cabin.

"Look," she said, "there's a house."

She released his hand to point, and he realized that he was not wearing his gloves, which were in his pockets. "It's closed up, honey." (He had fallen into the habit of calling both the twins "honey" to conceal his inability to distinguish them.) "Have you got gloves?"

"I don't know."

He forced himself to be patient. "Well, look. If you've got gloves or mittens, put them on." This girl, he reminded himself, was the wonder of her class, writing themes that would have done credit to a college student and mastering arithmetic and the rudiments of algebra with contemptuous ease.

"I guess those ladies didn't give them back."

"Then put on mine." He handed them to her.

"Your hands will get cold."

"I'll put one in my pocket, see? And I'll hold your hand with my other one, so the one glove will keep us both warm."

She gave a glove back to him. "My hand won't go around yours, Daddy, but yours will go around mine."

He nodded, impressed, and put the glove on.

It might be possible to get into his neighbor's lightless cabin, closed or not. "I'm going to try to break in," he told Aileen. "There ought to be firewood and matches in there, and there may even be a phone."

But the doors were solid, and solidly locked; and there were grilles over the small windows, as over his own. "We've had a lot of break-ins," he confided, "ever since they paved the road. People drive out to the lake, and they see these places."

"Is it much farther?"

"Not very far. Maybe another mile." He remembered his earlier speculations. "Did you run this far, honey?"

"I don't think so."

"I didn't think that you would." Somewhat gratified, he returned to her and the road. It was darker than ever now, and the tire tracks, obscured by advancing night as well as new-fallen snow, were impossible to follow. Pushing up his sleeve, he looked at his watch: it was almost six o'clock.

"I don't like them," Aileen said. "Those ladies."

"It would surprise me if you did."

"They took my clothes off. I said I'd do it, but they didn't pay any attention, and they didn't know how to do it. They just pulled and pulled till things came off."

"Out here? In the snow?" He was shocked.

"In the ziggurat, but it was pretty cold in there, too."

He found the point in a drift at which the Lincoln had bulldozed its way through, and led her to it. "What did you say? A ziggurat?"

"Uh-huh. Is it much farther?"

"No," he said.

"I could sit down here. You could come back for me in your Jeep."

"No," he repeated. "Come on. If we walk faster, we'll keep warm."

"I'm really tired. They didn't give me hardly anything to eat, either. Just a piece of bread."

He nodded absently, concentrating on walking faster and pulling her along. He was tired too -- nearly exhausted. What would he say when he wrote his journal? To take his mind off his weariness and the burning pain in his right side -- off his fear, as he was forced to concede -- he attempted to compose the entry in his mind.

"I got in the sleeper thing, but it was so cold. My feet got really cold, and I couldn't pull them up. I guess I slept a little."

He looked down at her, blinking away snow; it was too dark for him to gauge her expression. "Those women took you into a ziggurat--"

"Not really, Daddy. That was a kind of temple they had in Babylon. This one just looks like the picture in the book."

"They caught you," he continued doggedly, "and took you there, and undressed you?"

If she nodded, he failed to see the motion. "Did they or didn't they?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"And they fed you, and you slept a little, or anyway tried to sleep. Then you got dressed again and they brought you back here. Is that what you want me to believe?"

"They showed me some pictures, too, but I didn't know what lots of the things were."

"Aileen, you can't possibly have been gone more than a couple of hours at the outside. I doubt it was that long."

He had thought her beyond tears, but she began to sob, not loudly, but with a concentrated wretchedness that tore at his heart. "Don't cry, honey." He picked her up, ignoring the fresh pain in his side.

The wind, which had been rising all afternoon, was blowing hard enough to whistle, an eerie moan among the spectral trees. "Don't cry," he repeated. He staggered forward, holding her over his left shoulder, desperately afraid that he would slip and fall again. Her plastic snow boots were stiff with ice, the insulated trousers above them stiff too.

He could not have said how far he had walked; it seemed miles before a lonely star gleamed through the darkness ahead. "Look," he said, and halted -- then turned around so that his daughter, too, could see the golden light. "That's our cabin. Has to be. We're going to make it."

Then (almost at once, it seemed) Brook was running through the snow with the flashlight, he had set Aileen upon her feet, and they were all three stumbling into the warmth and light of the cabin, where Jan knelt and clasped Aileen to her and cried and laughed and cried again, and Alayna danced and jumped and demanded over and over, "Was she lost, Daddy? Was she lost in the woods?"

Brook put a plate of hot corned-beef hash in his lap and pushed a steaming mug of coffee at him.

"Thank you." Emery sighed. "Thank you very much, son." His face felt frozen; merely breathing the steam from the mug was heavenly.

"The car get stuck?"

He shook his head.

"I fixed stuff like you said. Layna helped, and Jan says she'll do the dishes. If she won't, I will." Brook had called her Mother for the length of the marriage; but it was over now, emotionally if not legally. Emery's thoughts turned gratefully from the puzzle of Aileen's captivity to that.

"I could toast you some bread in the fireplace," Brook offered. "You want ketchup? I like ketchup on mine."

"A fork," Emery told him, and sipped his coffee.

"Oh. Yeah."

"Was she lost?" Alayna demanded. "I bet she was!"

"I'm not going to talk about that." Emery had come to a decision. "Aileen can tell you herself, as much or as little as she wants."

Jan looked up at him. "I called the sheriff. The number was on your phone."

Emery nodded.

"They said they couldn't do anything until she'd been gone for twenty-four hours. It's the law, apparently. They -- this woman I talked to -- suggested we get our friends and neighbors to search. I told her that you were searching already. Maybe you ought to call and tell them you found her."

He shook his head, accepting a fork from Brook.

"You came back on foot? You walked?"

Aileen said, "From way down by the lake." She had taken off her bests, stockings, and snow pants; and was sitting on the floor rubbing her feet.

"Where's my car?"

"I traded it for Aileen."

Alayna stared at Aileen, wide-eyed. Aileen nodded.

"You *traded* it?"

He nodded too, his mouth full of corned-beef hash.

"Who to?"

He swallowed. "To whom, Jan."

"You are the most irritating man in the world!" If Jan had been standing, she would have stamped.

"He did, Mama. He said they could have the car if they'd give me to him, but they shot him anyway, and he fell down."

"That's right," Emery said. "We ought to have a look at that. It's pretty much stopped bleeding, and I think it's just a flesh wound." Setting his plate and mug on the hearth, he unbuttoned his mackinaw. "If it got the intestine, I suppose I'll have hash all over in there, and it will probably kill me. But there would have been food in my gut anyway. I had pork and beans for lunch."

"They *shot* you?" Jan stared at his blood-stiffened shirt.

He nodded, savoring the moment. *It's nothing, sir. I set the bone myself.* Danny



Kaye in some old movie. He cleared his throat, careful to keep his face impassive. "I'm going to have to take this off, and my undershirt and pants, too. Probably my shorts. Maybe you could have the girls look the other way."

Both twins giggled.

"Look at the fire," she told them. "He's hurt. You don't want to embarrass him, do you?"

Brook had gotten the first-aid kit. "This is stuck." He pulled gingerly at the waistband of Emery's trousers. "I ought to cut it off."

"Pull it off," Emery told him. "I'm going to wash those pants and wear them again. I need them." He had unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his trousers, and unzipped his fly.

"Just above the belt," Brook told him. "An inch, inch and a half lower, and it would have hit your belt."

Jan snapped her fingers. "Oil! Oil will soften the dried blood. Wesson Oil. Have you got any?"

Brook pointed at the cabinet above the sink. Emery said, "There's a bottle of olive oil up there, or there should be."

"Leen's peeking," Brook told Jan, who told Aileen, "Do that again, young lady, and I'll smack your face!"

"Emery, you really ought to make two rooms out of this. This is ridiculous."

"It was designed for four men," he explained, "a hunting party, or a fishing party. You women always insist on being included, then complain about what you find when you are."

She poured olive oil on his caked blood and rubbed it with her fingertips. "I had to get you to sign."

"You could have sent your damned paper to my box in town. I'd have picked it up on Saturday and sent it back to you."

"She couldn't mail me," Brook said. "Are we going to get the car back? My junk was in the trunk."

Emery shrugged. "They're stripping it, I think. We may be able to take back what's left. Maybe they won't look in the trunk."

"They're bound to."

Jan asked, "How are we supposed to get home?"

"I'll drive you to town in the Jeep. There's bus service to the city. If the buses aren't running because of the storm, you can stay in a motel. There are two motels, I think. There could be three." He rubbed his chin. "You'll have to anyway, unless you want to reconsider and stay here. I think the last bus was at five."

Brook was scrutinizing Emery's wound. "That bullet sort of plowed through your

skin. It might've got some muscles at your waist, but I don't think it hit any organs."

Emery made himself look down. "Plowed through the fat, you mean. I ought to lose twenty pounds, and if I had, she would have missed."

"A girl?"

Emery nodded.

Jan said, "No wonder you hate us so much," and pulled his bloodstained trousers free.

"I don't hate you. Not even now, when I ought to. Brook, would you give me my coffee? That's good coffee you made, and there's no reason I shouldn't drink it while you bandage that."

Brook handed it to him. "I scrubbed out the pot."

"Good for you. I'd been meaning to."

Alayna interposed, "I make better coffee than Brook does, Daddy, but Mama says I put in too much."

"You should have stitches, Emery. Is there a hospital in town?"

"Just a clinic, and it'll be closed. I've been hurt worse and not had stitches."

Brook filled a pan with water. "Why'd they shoot you, Dad?"

Emery started to speak, thought better of it, and shook his head.

Jan said, "If you're going to drive us into town in the Jeep, you could drive us into the city just as easily."

Setting his water on the stove, Brook hooted.

"You've got money, and you and Brook could stay at a hotel and come back tomorrow."

Emery said, "We're not going to, however."

"Why won't you?"

"I don't have to explain, and I won't."

She glared. "Well, you should!"

"That won't do any good." Privately he wondered which was worse, a woman who had never learned how to get what she wanted or a woman who had.

"You actually proposed that we patch it up. Then you act like this?"

"I'm trying to keep things pleasant."

"Then do it!"

"You mean you want to be courted while you're divorcing me. That's what's

usually meant by a friendly divorce, from what I've been able to gather." When she said nothing, Emery added, "Isn't that water hot enough yet, Brook?"

"Not even close."

"I shouldn't explain," Emery continued, "but I will. In the first place, Brook and the twins are going to have about as much elbow room as live bait in the back of the Jeep. It will be miserable for even a short drive. If we so much as try to make it into the city in this weather, they'll be tearing each other to bits before we stop."

Brook put in, "I'll stay here, Dad. I'll be all right."

Emery shook his head. "So would we, Jan. In the second, I think the women who shot me will be back as soon as the storm lets up. If no one's here, they'll break in or burn this place down. It's the only home I've got, and I intend to defend it."

"Sure," Brook said. "Let me stay. I can look after things while you're gone."

"No," Emery told him. "It would be too dangerous."

Emery turned back to Jan. "In the third place, I won't do it because I want to so much. If--"

"You were the one that gave those people my car."

"To get Aileen back. Yes, I did. I'd do it again."

"And you took it without my permission! I trusted you, Emery. I left my keys in the ignition, and you took my car."

He nodded wearily. "To look for Aileen, and I'd do that again too. I suppose you're already planning to bring it up in court."

"You bet I am!"

"I suggest you check the title first."

Aileen herself glanced at him over her shoulder. "I'm really hungry. Can I have the rest of your hash?"

Brook said, "There's more here, 'Leen. You said you weren't, but I saved--"

"I haven't had anything since yesterday except some bread stuff."

Jan began, "Aileen, you know perfectly well--"

Emery interrupted her. "It's only been a couple of hours since they caught you, honey. Remember? We talked about that before we got here."

"I was in there, in the sleep thing--"

Jan snapped, "Aileen, be quiet! I told you not to look around like that."

"It's only Daddy in his underwear. I've seen him like that lots."

"Turn around!"

Trying to weigh each word with significance, Emery said, "Your mama told you to be quiet, honey. That wasn't simply an order. It was good advice."

Brook brought her a plate of corned-beef hash and a fork. "There's bread, too. Want some?"

"Sure. And milk or something."

"There isn't any."

"Water, then." Raising her voice slightly, Aileen added, "I'd get up and get it for myself, but Mama won't let me."

Jan said, "You see what you've started, Emery?"

He nodded solemnly. "I didn't start it, but I'm quite happy about it."

Brook washed his wound and bandaged it, applying a double pad of surgical gauze and so much Curity Wet-Pruf adhesive tape that Emery winced at the mere thought of removing it.

"I might be a doctor," Brook mused, "big money, and this is fun."

"You're a pretty good one already," Emery said gratefully. He kicked off his boots, emptied his pockets onto the table, and stuffed his trousers into a laundry bag, following it with his shirt. "Want to do me a favor, Brook? Scrape my plate into that tin bowl on the drainboard and set it on the back porch."

Jan asked, "Are you well enough to drive, Emery? Forget the fighting. You wouldn't want to see any of us killed. I know you wouldn't."

He nodded, buttoning a fresh shirt.

"So let me drive. I'll drive us into town, and you can drive Brook back here if you feel up to it."

"You'd put us into the ditch," Emery told her. "If I start feeling too weak, I'll pull over and--"

Brook banged the rear door shut behind him and held up a squirrel. "Look at this! It was right up on the porch." The tiny body was stiff, its gray fur powdered with snow.

"Poor little thing!" Jan went over to examine it. "It must have come looking for something to eat, and froze. Have you been feeding them, Emery?"

"It's a present from a friend," he told her. Something clutched his throat, leaving him barely able to speak. "You wouldn't understand."

The Jeep started without difficulty. As he backed it out onto the road, he wondered whether the dark-faced women who had Jan's Lincoln had been unable to solve the simple catches that held the Jeep's hood. Conceivably, they had not seen the Jeep when they had been in his cabin earlier. He wished now that he had asked Aileen how

many women she had seen, when the two of them had been alone.

"Drafty in here," Jan remarked. "You should buy yourself a real car, Emery."

The road was visible only as an opening between the trees; he pulled onto it with all four wheels hub-deep in virgin snow, keeping the transmission in second and nudging the accelerator only slightly. Swirling snow filled the headlights. "Honey," he said, "your boots had ice on them. So did your snow pants. Did you wade in the lake?"

From the crowded rear seat, Aileen answered, "They made me, Daddy."

The road was visible only as an open space between trees. To people in a -- Emery fumbled mentally for a word and settled on *aircraft*.

To an aircraft, the frozen lake might have looked like a paved helicopter pad or something of that kind, a more or less circular pavement. The black-looking open water at its center might have been taken for asphalt.

Particularly by a pilot not familiar with woods and lakes.

"Emery, you hardly ever answer a direct question. It's one of the things I dislike most about you."

"That's what men say about women," he protested mildly.

"Women are being diplomatic. Men are rude."

"I suppose you're right. What did you ask me?"

"That isn't the point. The point is that you ignore me until I raise my voice."

That seemed to require no reply, so he did not offer one. How high would you have to be and how fast would you have to be coming down before a frozen lake looked like a landing site?

"So do the girls," Jan added bitterly, "they're exactly the same way. So is Brook."

"That ought to tell you something."

"You don't have to be rude!"

One of the twins said, "She wanted to know how long it would take to get to town, Daddy."

It had probably been Alayna, Emery decided. "How long would you like it to take, honey?"

"Real quick!"

That had been the other one, presumably Aileen. "Well," he told her, "we'll be there real quick."

Jan said, "Don't try to be funny."

"I'm being diplomatic. If I wasn't, I'd point out that it's twenty-two miles and we're going about fifteen miles an hour. If we can keep that up all the way, it should take us

about an hour and a half."

Jan turned in her seat to face the twins. "Never marry an engineer, girls. Nobody ever told me that, but I'm telling you now. If you do, don't say you were never warned."

One twin began, "You said that about--"

The other interrupted. "Only, it wasn't an engineer that time. It was a tennis player. Did you do it in your head, Daddy? I did too, only it took me longer. One point four and two-thirds, so six six seven. Is that right?"

"I have no idea. Fifteen is smaller than twenty-two, and that's an hour. Seven over, and seven's about half of fifteen. Most real calculations outside school are like that, honey."

"Because it doesn't matter?"

Emery shook his head. "Because the data's not good enough for anything more. It's about twenty-two miles to town on this Jeep's odometer. That could be off by as much as--" Something caught his eye, and he fell silent.

From the rear seat, Brook asked, "What's the matter, Dad?" He sounded half suffocated.

Emery was peering into the rear view mirror, unable to see anything except a blur of snow. "There was a sign back there. What did it say?"

"Don't tell me you're lost, Emery."

"I'm not lost. What did it say, Brook?"

"I couldn't tell, it was all covered with snow."

"I think it was the historical marker sign. I'm going to stop there on the way back."

"Okay, I'll remind you."

"You won't have to. I'll stop."

One of the twins asked, "What happened there?"

Emery did not reply; Brook told her, "There used to be a village there, the first one in this part of the state. Wagon trains would stop there. One time there was nobody there. The log cabins and their stuff was okay, only there wasn't anybody home."

"The Pied Piper," the twin suggested.

"He just took rats and kids. This got everybody."

Jan said, "I don't think that's much of a mystery. An early settlement? The Indians killed them."

The other twin said, "Indians would have scalped them and left the bodies, Mama, and taken things."

"All right, they were stolen by fairies. Emery, this hill looks so steep! Are you sure

this is the right road?"

"It's the only road there is. Hills always look steeper covered with snow." When Jan said nothing, he added, "Hell, they *are* steeper."

"They should plow this."

"The plows will be out on the state highway," Emery told her. "Don't worry, only three more mountains."

They let Jan and the twins out in front of the Ramada Inn, and Brook climbed over the back of the front seat. "I'm glad they're gone. I guess I shouldn't say it -- she's been pretty nice to me -- but I'm glad."

Emery nodded.

"You could've turned around back there." Brook indicated the motel's U-shaped drive. "Are we going into town?"

Emery nodded again.

"Want to tell me what for? I might be able to help."

"To buy two more guns. There's a sporting-goods dealer on Main Street. We'll look there first."

"One for me, huh? What kind?"

"What kind do you want?"

"A three-fifty-seven, I guess."

"No handguns, there's a five-day waiting period. But we can buy rifles or shotguns and take them with us, and we may need them when we get back to the cabin."

"One rifle and one shotgun," Brook decided. "Pumps or semis. You want the rifle or the scattergun, Dad?"

Emery did not reply. Every business that they drove past seemed to be dark and locked. He left the Jeep to rattle and pound the door of the sporting-goods store, but no one appeared to unlock it.

Brook switched off the radio as he got back in. "Storm's going to get worse. They say the main-part hasn't even gotten here yet."

Emery nodded.

"You knew, huh?"

"I'd heard a weather report earlier. We're due for two, possibly three days of this."

The gun shop was closed as well. There would be no gun with which to kill the woman who had shot him, and none with which to kill himself. He shrugged half-humorously and got back into the Jeep. Brook said, "We're going to fight with what

we've got, huh?"

"A hammer and a hunting knife against my thirty-thirty?" Emery shook his head emphatically. "We're not going to fight at all. If they come around again, we're to do whatever they want, no questions and no objections. If they like anything -- this Jeep would be the most likely item, I imagine -- we're going to give it to them."

"Unless I get a chance to grab the gun again."

Emery glanced at him. "The first time you tried that, she hadn't learned to use it. She was a lot better when she shot me. Next time she'll be better yet. Am I making myself clear?"

Brook nodded. "I've got to be careful."

"You've got to be more than just careful," Emery told him, "because if you're not, you're going to die. I was ten feet or more from her when she shot at me, and backing away. She fired anyway, and she hit me."

"I got it."

"When you dressed my wound," Emery continued, "you said that if her shot had been an inch or two lower it would have hit my belt. If it had been an inch or two to the left, it would have killed me. Did you think of that?"

"Sure. I just didn't want to say it." Brook pointed to a small dark building. "There's the last store, Rothschild's Records and CDs. It's pretty good. I used to have you drop me there sometimes when you were going into town, remember?"

Intent upon his thoughts and, the snow-covered road, Emery did not even nod.

"Those girls have got to be either camping or living in somebody's cabin out here. If we can find out where, we could get some guns when the town's open again and go out there and make them give our stuff back."

Emery muttered, "This is the last trip until the county clears the road."

"We're doing okay now."

"This is a state highway. It's been plowed at least once, most likely within the past couple of hours. The road to the cabin won't have been plowed at all, and we barely made it out."

"I'd like to look at the other car and see if they left any of my stuff."

"All right, if we can drive as far as the cabin, we'll do that. But after that, I'm not taking the Jeep out until the road's been plowed."

"They really were girls? I thought you and 'Leen might have been stringing Jan."

"Two of them were." Emery studied the road. "The one who shot me, and another one who was with her. I imagine the third was as well, she seemed to be about the same size."

Brook nodded to himself. "You never can tell what girls are going to do, I guess."



"Obviously it's harder to predict the actions of someone whose psychology differs from your own. Once you've learned what a woman values, though, you ought to be right most of the time -- say, seven out of ten." Emery chuckled. "How's that for a man being divorced for the second time? Do I sound like an expert?"

"Sure. What does a woman value?"

"It varies from woman to woman, and sometimes it changes. You have to learn for each, or guess. With a little experience you ought to be able to make pretty good guesses after you've talked with the woman for a few minutes. You've got to listen to what she says; and listen harder for what she doesn't. All this is true for men as well, of course. Fortunately, men are easier -- for other men."

"Okay if I throw you a softball, Dad? I'm leading up to something."

"Go ahead."

"What does Jan value?"

"First of all, the appearance of wealth. She doesn't value money itself, but she wants to impress people with her big car, her mink coat, and so on. Have I missed the turn?"

"I don't think so. We've been going pretty slow."

"I don't either -- I don't see how I could have -- but I keep worrying about it."

"Money has a poetry of its own, Brook. Women are fond of telling us that we don't get it, but the poetry of money is one of the things that they rarely get. One of a dozen or more, I suppose. Are you going to ask why I married Jan? Is that what you're leading up to?"

"Uh-huh. Why did you?"

"Because I was lonely and fell in love with her. Looking back, I can see very clearly that I wanted to prove to myself that I could make a woman happy, too. I felt I could make Jan happy, and I was right. But after a while -- after I lost the company, particularly -- it no longer seemed worth the effort."

"I'm with you. Did she love you too? Or did you think she did?"

Emery sighed. "Women don't love in the same way that men do, Brook. I said the psychology was different, and that's one of the main differences. Men are dogs: Women are cats -- they love conditionally. For example, I love you. If you were to try to kill me--"

"I wouldn't do that!"

"I'm constructing an extreme example," Emery explained patiently. "Say that I was to try to kill you. You'd fight me off if you could. You might even kill me doing it. But you'd love me afterward, just the same; you may not think so, but you would."

Brook nodded, his face thoughtful.

"When you love a woman, you'll love her in the same way; but women love *as*

*long as* -- as long as you have a good job, as long as you don't bring home your friends, and so on. You shouldn't blame them for that, because it's as much a part of their natures as the way you love is of yours. For women, love is a spell that can be broken by picking a flower or throwing a ring into the sea. Love is magic, which is why they frequently use the language of fairy tales when they talk about it."

"We're coming up on the turn." Brook aimed his forefinger at the darkness and the blowing snow. "It's right along here someplace."

"About another half mile. Throw your fastball."

"This woman that shot you. Why did she do it?"

"I've been thinking about that."

"I figured you had."

"Why does anyone, robbing someone else, shoot them?"

"No witnesses?"

Emery shook his head. "A thief doesn't merely shoot to silence a witness, he kills. After she had shot me she let me go. I was still conscious, still able to walk and to talk. Perfectly capable of giving the sheriff a description of her. But she let me go. Why?"

"You were there, Dad. What do you think?"

"You're starting to sound like me." Emery slowed the Jeep from ten miles an hour to six, searching the road to his left.

"I know."

"Because she was frightened, I think. Afraid of me, and afraid she couldn't do it, too. When she shot me, she proved to herself that she could, and I was able to show her -- by my actions, because she couldn't understand what I was saying -- that I wasn't somebody she had to be afraid of."

The road to the cabin was deep in snow, so deep that they inched and churned their way through it foot by foot. Caution, and speeds scarcely faster than a walk, soon became habitual, and Emery's mind turned to other things. First of all, to the smoothly oval face behind the threatening muzzle of his rifle. Large, dark eyes above a tiny mouth narrowed by determination; a small -- slightly flattened? -- nose.

Small and slender hands; the thirty-thirty had looked big in them, which meant that they had been hardly larger than the twins'. He did not remember seeing hair, but with that face it would be black, surely. Straight or curled? Not Japanese or Chinese, possibly a small, light-complexioned Afro-American. A mixture of Black and White with Oriental? Filipino? Almost anything seemed possible.

The coal-black hair he had imagined merged with the shadow of her hood. "Brownies," he said aloud.

"What?"

"Brownies. Don't they call those little girls who sell cookies Brownies?"

"Sure. Like Girl Scouts, only littler. 'Leen and 'Layna used to be Brownies."

Emery nodded. "That's right. I remember." But brownies were originally English fairies, small and dark -- brown-faced, presumably -- mischievous and sometimes spiteful, but often willing to trade their work for food and clothing. Fairies sufficiently feminine that giving their name to an organization for young girls was not ridiculous, as it would have been to call the same little girls gnomes, for example.

Stolen by fairies, Jan had said, referring to villagers of the eighteen forties.... He tried to remember the precise date, and failed.

Because brownies did not merely trade their labor for the goods they wanted. Often they stole. Milked your cow before you woke up. Snatched your infant from its crib. Lured your children to a place where time ran differently, too fast or too slow. Aileen, who had been gone for no more than two hours at most, had thought she had been gone for a day -- had been taken to the ziggurat and shown pictures she had not understood, had slept or at least tried to sleep, had been made to wade into the lake, where blue lights shone.

Where was fairyland?

"Why're you stopping?"

"Because I want to get out and look at something. You stay here."

Flashlight in hand, he shut the Jeep's flimsy vinyl flap. Later -- by next morning, perhaps -- the snow might be easier to walk on. Now it was still uncompacted, as light as down; he sank above his knees at every step.

The historical marker protruded above the blank whiteness, its size amplified by the snow it wore. He considered brushing off the bronze plaque and reading it, but the precise date and circumstances, as specified by some historian more interested in plausibility than truth, did not matter.

He waded past it, across what would be green and parklike lawn in summer, reminding himself that there was a ditch at its end before the ranch's barbed-wire fence, and wishing he had a stick or staff with which to probe the snow. The body -- if he had in fact seen what he had thought he had seen -- would be covered by this time, invisible save as a slight mound.

When he stood in the ditch, the snow was above his waist. His gloved hands found the wire, then the almost-buried locust post, which he used to pull himself up, breaching the snow like some fantastic, red-plaid dolphin.

The coyote lay where he had glimpsed it on the drive to town. It had frozen as stiff as the squirrel it had left him, its face twisted in a snarl of pain and surprise. Negotiating the ditch again with so much difficulty that he feared for a few seconds that he would have to call for Brook to rescue him, he stowed the body on the narrow floor behind the Jeep's front seats.

Brook said, "That's a dead coyote."

Emery nodded as he got back behind the wheel and put the Jeep in gear. "Cyanide

gun."

"What do you want with that?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

Brook stared, then shrugged. "I hope you didn't start yourself bleeding again, doing all that."

"I may bury him. Or I might have him stuffed and mounted. That sporting-goods dealer has a taxidermy service. They could do it. Probably wouldn't cost more than a hundred or so."

"You didn't kill it," Brook protested.

"Oh yes, I did," Emery told him.

What they could see of the cabin through the falling snow suggested that it was as they had left it. Emery did not stop, and it would have been difficult to make the Jeep push its way through the banks more slowly than it already was. The world before the windshield was white, framed in black; and upon that blank sheet his mind strove to paint the country from which the small brown women had come, a country that would send forth an aircraft (if the ziggurat in the lake was in fact an aircraft or something like one) crewed by young women more alike than sisters. A country without men, perhaps, or one in which men were hated and feared.

What had they thought of Jan, a woman almost a foot taller than they? Jan with her creamy complexion and yellow hair? Of Aileen and Alayna, girls of their own size, nearly as dark as they, and alike as two peas? The first had run from, the second fought them; and both reactions had quite likely baffled them. From their own perspective, they had crashed in a wilderness of snow and wind and bitter cold -- a howling wilderness strangely and dangerously inhabited.

"We could've stopped at the cabin," Brook said. "We can go look for my stuff tomorrow, when there's daylight."

Emery shook his head. "We wouldn't be able to get through tomorrow. The snow will be too deep."

"We could try."

Brook had presumably confirmed their worst fears, as he had himself; and although they'd had his rifle, they had fled at his approach. They had recognized the rifle as a weapon when they had entered and searched his empty, unlocked cabin -- empty because he had seen something flash high up on the hill across the creek....

"Is it much farther, Dad?" Brook was peering through the wind-driven snow into the black night again, trying to catch a glimpse of Jan's Lincoln.

"Quire a bit, I believe." Apologetically, Emery added, "We're not going very fast."

The flash from the hill had left a shallow burn on the oak back of his chair. Had it been a laser -- a laser weapon? Had they been shooting at him even then? A laser that

could do no more than scorch the surface of the chair back would not kill a man, surely, though it might blind him if it struck his eyes. Not a weapon, perhaps, but a laser tool of some kind that they had tried to employ as a weapon. He recalled the lasers used to engrave steel in the company he had left to found his own.

"Nobody's in that cabin back there now, I guess."

He shook his head. "Been closed since early November. There's nobody out here really, except us and them."

"What do you think they're trying to do out here?"

"Leave." His tone, he hoped, would notify Brook that he was not in the mood for conversation.

"They could've gone in the Lincoln. It wasn't out of gas. I'd been watching the gauge, because she never does."

"They can't drive. If they could, they'd have driven it away from the cabin the first time, when Jan left the keys in it. Besides, the Lincoln couldn't take them where they want to go."

"Dad--"

"That's enough questions for now. I'll tell you more when I've got more of it figured out."

"You must be really tired. I wish we'd stopped at the cabin. There won't be any of my stuff left anyhow."

Was he really as tired as Brook suggested? He considered the matter and decided he was. Wading through the snow past the historical marker had consumed what little strength he had left after losing blood and sloggng home with Aileen through snow that no longer seemed particularly deep. He was operating now on whatever it was that remained when the last strength was gone. On stubbornness and desperation.

"Your grandfather used to tell a story," he remarked to Brook, "about a jackrabbit, a coyote, and a jay. Did I ever tell you that?"

"No." Brook grinned, glad that he was not angry. "What is it?"

"A jay will yell and warn the other animals if there's a coyote around. You know that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, this jay was up on a mesquite, with a jackrabbit sleeping in the shade. The jay spotted a coyote stalking the jackrabbit and yelled a warning. The coyote sprang, and the jackrabbit ran, scooting past the mesquite and hooking left, with the coyote after it.

"The jay felt a little guilty about not having spotted the coyote sooner, so he shouted to the jackrabbit, 'You okay? You going to make it?'

"And the jackrabbit called back, 'I'll make it!'

"They went around the mesquite eight or ten times, and it seemed to the jay that the coyote was gaining at every pass. He got seriously worried then, and he shouted down, 'You sure you're going to make it?'"

"The jackrabbit called back, 'I'm going to make it!'"

"A few more passes, and the coyote was snapping at the jackrabbit's tail. The jay was worried sick by then, and he shouted, 'Rabbit, how do you *know* you're going to make it?' And the jackrabbit called back, 'Hell, I've *got* to make it!'"

Brook said, "You mean you're like that rabbit."

"Right." Emery put the transmission into neutral and set the parking brake. "I've got to make it, and I will."

"Why are we stopping?"

"Because we're here." He opened his flap and got out.

"I don't see the car."

"You will in a minute. Bring the flash."

They had to climb a drift before they found it, nearly buried in snow with its hood still up. Emery reached inside, took Jan's keys out of the ignition lock, and handed them to Brook. "Here, check the trunk. They may not have noticed the keyhole behind the medallion."

A moment later, as he leaned against the snow-covered side of the car, he heard Brook say, "It's here! Everything's still here!"

"I'll help you." He forced himself to walk.

"Just a couple little bags. I can carry them." Brook slammed down the trunk lid so that he would not see whatever was being left behind. A stereo, Emery decided. Possibly a TV. He hated TV, and decided to say nothing.

"You want the keys?"

"You keep them."

"I guess we'll have to call a tow truck when the road's clear. They've taken a lot of stuff out of here." Brook was at the front of the Lincoln, shining the flashlight into its engine compartment.

"Sure," Emery said, and started back to the Jeep.

When he woke the next morning, bacon was frying and coffee perking on the little propane stove. He sat up, discovering that his right side was stiff and painful. "Brook?"

There was no answer.

The cabin was cold, in spite of the blue flames and the friendly odors. He pulled

the wool shirt he had put on after Brook had bandaged his wound over the Duofold underwear he had slept in, pushed his legs into the trousers he had dropped on the floor beside his bunk, and stood up. His boots were under the little table, the stockings he had worn beside them. He put the stockings into his laundry bag, got out a clean pair and pulled them on, then tugged on, laced, and tied his boots.

The coffee had perked enough. He turned off the burner and transferred the bacon onto the cracked green plate Brook had apparently planned to use. The bacon still smelled good; he felt that he should eat a piece, but he had no appetite.

Had Brook set off on foot to fetch whatever it was that he had left in the Lincoln's trunk? Not with food on the stove. Brook would have turned down the fire under the coffeepot and drunk a cup before he left, taken up the bacon and eaten half of it, probably with bread, butter, and jam.

There was no toaster, but Brook had offered to toast bread in front of the fire the night before. That fire was nearly out, hardly more than embers. Brook had gotten up, started the coffee and put on the bacon, and gone outside for firewood.

Lord, Emery thought, you don't owe me a thing -- I know that. But please.

They had taken Aileen and had, perhaps, been bringing her back when they had encountered him. They might very well have taken Brook as well; if they had, they might bring him back in a day or two.

He found that he was staring at the plate of bacon. He set it on the table and put on his mackinaw and second-best cap. Had his best one -- the one that the women had not let him retrieve -- been on the front seat of Jan's Lincoln? He had not even looked.

Snow had reached the sills of the windows, but it was not snowing as hard as it had the day before. The path plowed by Brook's feet and legs showed plainly, crossing the little back porch, turning south for the stacked wood under the eaves, then retraced for a short distance. Brook had seen something; or more probably, had heard a noise from the cabin's north side; where the Jeep was parked. It was difficult, very difficult, for Emery to step off the porch, following the path that Brook had broken through the deep snow.

Brook's body sprawled before the front bumper, a stick of firewood near its right hand. The blood around its head might, Emery told himself, have come from a superficial scalp wound. Brook might be alive, though unconscious. Even as he crouched to look more closely, he knew it was not true.

He closed his eyes and stood up. They had taken his ax as well as his rifle; he had worried about the rifle and had scarcely given a thought to the ax, yet the ax had done this.

The dead coyote still lay in back of the front seat of the plundered Jeep. He carried it to the south side of the cabin; and where firewood had been that autumn, contrived a rough bier from half a dozen sticks. Satisfied with the effect, he built a larger bier of the same kind for his son, arranged the not-yet-frozen body on it, and covered it with a clean sheet that he weighted with a few more sticks. It would be necessary to call the sheriff if the telephone was still working, and the sheriff might very well accuse him of Brook's murder.

Inside, after a momentary hesitation, he bolted the doors. A calendar hung the year before provided the number of the only undertaker in Voylestown.

*"You have reached Merton's Funeral Parlor. We are not able to be with you at this time..."*

He waited for the tone, then spoke quickly. "This's Emery Bainbridge." They could get his address from the directory, as well as his number. "My son's dead. I want you to handle the arrangements. Contact me when you can." A second or two of silence, as if in memory of Brook, and then the dial tone. He pressed in the sheriff's number.

*"Sheriff Ron Wilber's office."*

"This is Emery Bainbridge again. My son, Brook, has been killed."

*"Address?"*

"Five zero zero north, twenty-six seventy-seven west -- that's on Route E-E, about five miles from Haunted Lake."

*"How did it happen, Mister Bainbridge?"*

He wanted to say that one of the women had stood against the wall of his cabin, holding his ax, and waited for Brook to come around the corner; it had been apparent from the lines plowed through the deep snow, but mentioning it at this time would merely make the investigating officer suspect him. He said, "He was hit in the head with my ax, I think. They took my ax yesterday."

*"Yes, I remember. Don't move the body, we'll get somebody out there as soon as we can."*

"I already have. When--"

*"Then don't move it any more. Don't touch anything else."*

"When will you have someone out here?"

He sensed, rather than heard, her indrawn breath. *"This afternoon, Emery. We'll try to get one of the deputies there this afternoon."*

If she had not been lying, Emery reflected, she would have called him "Mister Bainbridge." He thanked her and hung up, then leaned back in his chair, looking from the telephone to his journal. He should write up his journal, and there was a great deal to write. There had been a cellular phone in Jan's car. Had they taken it? He had not noticed.

He picked up the telephone again but hung it up without pressing in a number. His black sports watch lay under his bunk. He retrieved it, noting the date and time.

09:17 Jan came yesterday, with Brook and the twins. Three small, dark women in hoods tried to strip her car. There was a tussle with Jan and the children.



He stared down at the pen. It was exactly the color of Brook's blood in the snow.

Aileen ran away. I searched for her in Jan's car, which I was able to trade for her. One of the women shot me. They do not understand English.

The red pen had stopped.

His computer back home -- he corrected the thought: his computer at Jan's had a spell checker; this pen had none, yet it had sounded a warning without one. Was it possible that the women spoke English after all? On overseas trips he had met people whose English he could scarcely understand. He tried to recall what the women had said and what he had said, and failed with both.

Yet something, some neglected corner of his subconscious, suspected that the women had in fact been speaking English, of a peculiar variety.

*Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote*

*The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.*

He had memorized the lines in high school -- how long had it been? But no, it had been much longer than that, had been more than six hundred years since a great poet had written in a beautiful rhythmic dialect that had at first seemed as alien as German. "When April, with his sweet breath/The drought of March has pierced to the root."

And the language was still changing, still evolving.

He picked up the telephone, fairly sure that he remembered Jan's cellular number, and pressed it in.

A lonely ringing, far away. In Jan's snow-covered black Lincoln? Could a cellular car phone operate without the car's battery? There were bag phones as well, telephones you could carry in a briefcase, so perhaps it could. If the women had taken it to pieces, there would have been a recorded message telling him that the number was no longer in service.

He had lost count of the rings when someone picked up the receiver. "Hello," he said. "Hello?" Even to him, it sounded inane.

No one spoke on the other end. As slowly and distinctly as he could, he said, "I am the man whose son you killed, and I am coming to kill you. If you want to explain before I do, you have to do it now."

No voice spoke.

"Very well. You can call me if you want." He gave his number, speaking more slowly and distinctly than ever. "But I won't be here much longer."

Or at least, they do not speak an English that I can understand. I should have said that I was not hurt badly. Brook bandaged it. I have not seen a doctor. Maybe I should.

He felt the bandage and found it was stiff with blood. Changing it, he decided, would waste a great deal of valuable time, and might actually make things worse.

Brook and I took Jan and the twins into town. Before I woke up this morning, the women killed Brook, outside in the snow.

There was a little stand of black-willow saplings down by the creek. He waded through the snow to them, cut six with his hunting knife, and carried them back to the cabin.

There he cut four sticks, each three times as long as his foot, and tied their ends in pairs with twine. Shorter sticks, notched at both ends, spread them; he tied the short sticks in place with more twine, then bound the crude snowshoes that he had made to his boots, wrapping each boot tightly with a dozen turns.

He was eight or ten yards from the cabin -- walking over the snow rather than through it -- when his ears caught the faint ringing of his telephone. He returned to the cabin to answer it, leaving the maul he had been carrying on the porch.

*"Mister Bainbridge? I'm Ralph Merton."* Ralph Merton's voice was sepulchral. *"May I extend my sympathy to you and your loved ones?"*

Emery sighed and sat down, his snowshoed feet necessarily flat on the floor. "Yes, Mister Merton. It was good of you to return my call. I didn't think you'd be in today."

*"I'm afraid I'm not, Mister Bainbridge. I have an -- ah -- device that lets me call my office at the parlor and get my messages. May I ask if your son was under a doctor's care?"*

"No, Brook was perfectly healthy, as far as I know."

*"A doctor hasn't seen your son?"*

"No one has, except me." After a few seconds' silence, Emery added, "And the woman who killed him. I think there was another woman with her, in which case the second woman would have seen him, too. Not that it matters, I suppose."

Ralph Merton cleared his throat. *"A doctor will have to examine your son and issue a death certificate before we can come, Mister Bainbridge."*

"Of course. I'd forgotten."

*"If you have a family doctor...?"*

"No," Emery said.

*"In that case," Ralph Merton sounded slightly more human, "I could phone Doctor Ormond for you. He's a young man, very active. He'll be there just as soon as he can get through, I'm sure."*

"Thank you," Emery said, "I'd appreciate that very much."

*"I'll do it as soon as I hang up. Would you let us know as soon as you have a death certificate, Mister Bainbridge?"*

"Certainly."

*"Wonderful. Now, as to the -- ah -- present arrangements? Is your son indoors?"*

"Out in the snow. I put a sheet over his body, but I'd think it would be covered with snow by this time."

*"Wonderful. I'll call Doctor Ormond the moment I hang up, Mister Bainbridge. When you've got the death certificate, you can rely on Merton's for everything. You have my sympathy. I have two sons myself."*

"Thank you," Emery repeated, and returned the receiver to its cradle.

The cabin still smelled faintly of bacon and coffee. It might not be wise to leave with an empty stomach, was certainly unwise to leave with a low flame under the coffeepot, as he had been about to do. He turned the burner off, got a clean mug (somewhat hampered by his home-made snowshoes), poured himself a cup, sipped, and made himself eat two slices of bacon. Three more, between two slices of rye bread, became a crude sandwich; he stuffed it into a pocket of his mackinaw.

The maul waited beside the front door; he locked the door and started off over the snow a second time. When the snow-covered road had led him nearly out of sight of the cabin, he thought he heard the faint and lonely ringing of his telephone again. Presumably that was Doctor Ormond; Emery shrugged and trudged on.

The front door of the dark cabin seemed very substantial; after examining it, Emery circled around to the back. Drifted snow had risen nearly to the level of the hasp and padlock that secured the door. Positioning his feet as firmly as he could in snowshoes, he swung his maul like a golf club at the hasp. At the third blow, the screws tore loose and the door crashed inward.

Clambering through the violated doorway, he reflected that he did not know who owned this cabin now or what he looked like, that he would not recognize the owner he intended to rob if he were to meet him on the street. Robbery would be easier if only he could imagine himself apologizing and explaining, and offering to pay -- though no apology or explanation would be feasible if he succeeded. He would be a vigilante then; and the law, which extended every courtesy to murderers, detested and destroyed anyone who killed or even resisted them. He would have to find out this cabin's address, he decided, and send cash by mail.

Of course, it was possible that there were no guns here, in which case Brook's murderers would presumably kill him too, before he could do any such thing. They

might kill him, for that matter, even if--

Before he could complete the thought, he saw the gun safe, a steel cabinet painted to look like wood, with a combination lock. Half a dozen blows from the maul knocked off the knob. Two dozen more so battered the three-sixteenths-inch steel door that he could work the claws of the big ripping hammer he found in a toolbox into the opening. The battered mechanism was steel, the hammer-handle fiberglass; for a few seconds that seemed far longer, he felt certain the handle would break.

A rivet somewhere in the gun safe surrendered with a *pop* -- the sweetest sound imaginable. A slight repositioning of the hammer and another heave, and the door ground back.

The gun safe held a twelve-gauge over-and-under shotgun, a sixteen-gauge pump, and a sleek scoped Sako carbine; there were shot shells of both sizes and three boxes of cartridges for the carbine in one of the drawers below the guns.

Emery took out the carbine and threw it to his shoulder; the stock felt a trifle small -- the cabin's owner was probably an inch or two shorter -- but it handled almost as if it had been customized for him. The bolt opened crisply to display an empty chamber.

He loaded five cartridges and dropped more into a pocket of his mackinaw. Reflecting that the women might well arm themselves from this cabin too, once they discovered that the lock on the rear entrance was broken, he threw the shotgun shells outside into the snow.

From a thick stand of pine on the lake shore, he had as good a view of the canted structure that Aileen had called a ziggurat as the gray daylight and blowing snow permitted: an assemblage of cubical modules tapering to a peak in a series of snow-covered terraces.

Certainly not an aircraft; a spacecraft, perhaps. More likely, a space station. Toward the bottom -- or rather toward the ice surrounding it, for there had to be an additional forty feet or more of it submerged in the lake -- the modules were noticeably crushed and deformed.

Rising, he stepped clumsily out onto the wind-swept ice. A part of this had been open water when the women had brought Aileen from the ziggurat back to the road -- water that was open because the ice had been broken when the ziggurat broke through it, presumably. Yet that open water had been shallow enough for Aileen to wade through, although this mountain lake was deep a few feet from shore; such open water made no sense, though things seemed to have happened like that.

There were no windows that he could see, but several of the modules appeared to have rounded doors or hatches. If the women kept a watch, they might shoot him now as he shuffled slowly over the ice; but they would have to open one of those hatches to do it, and he would do his best to shoot first. He rechecked the Sako's safety. It was off, and he knew there was a round in the chamber. He removed the glove from his right hand and stuffed it into his pocket on top of more rounds and his forgotten sandwich.

He had wanted to die; and if they gut-shot him during the minute or two more that

he would require to reach the base of the ziggurat, he would die in agony right here upon the ice.

Well, men did. All Men. Every human being died at last, young or old; and he had already lived longer than many of the people he had known and liked in high school and college. Had lived almost three times as long as Brook.

To his right, the tracks of small feet in large-cleated boots left the ziggurat, tracks not yet obscured by snow and thus very recent. He turned toward them to examine them, then traced them back to a circular hatch whose lower edge was no more than an inch above the ice. It was dogged shut with a simple latch large enough that he manipulated it easily with his gloved left hand.

A wave of warmth caressed his face as he pulled the hatch open and stepped into the ziggurat. Heat! They had heat in here, heat from some device that was still functioning, though Aileen had complained of the cold. In that case, heat from a source they had been able to repair since the crash, perhaps with parts from Jan's Lincoln.

Almost absently, he closed the hatch behind him. Before him was a second hatch; beyond it, misty blue light and dark water. Here, then, was the explanation for the ice on Aileen's boots and pants legs; she had waded in the lake, all right, but here inside the ziggurat, where there seemed to be about a foot of water.

Sitting in the hatchway of what he decided must surely be an airlock, he unlaced his boots and tugged them off, crude snowshoes and all, then tied his bootlaces together. It would be convenient, perhaps, to leave boots and snowshoes here in the airlock, but without either he would be confined to the ziggurat; he could not risk it. He took off his stockings and stuffed them into his boots, rolled up his trouser legs, and stepped barefoot into the dark water, the boots and snowshoes in his left hand, the Sako carbine in his right, gripped like a pistol.

The walls and ceiling of the module were thick with dials and unfamiliar devices, and a tilted cabinet whose corner rose above the water promised more; he paused to look at what seemed to be a simple dial, although its pointer shimmered, vanished, and reappeared, apparently a conveniently massless projection. The first number looked like zero, queerly lettered; the last -- he squinted -- three hundred, perhaps, although he had never seen a 3 quite like that. Pushing a tiny knob at the base to the left increased the height of the numerals until each stood about five thirty-seconds of an inch; the pointer darkened and now seemed quite solid.

There was a slight noise from overhead, as though someone in a higher module had dropped some small object.

He stiffened and looked quickly around. An open hatch in the wall at the opposite side of the half-crushed module gave access to an interior module that should (if the slant of both floors was the same) be somewhat less deeply submerged. He waded across and went in, followed by the dial he had examined, which slid across the metal wall like a hockey puck, dodging other devices in its path, until he caught it and pushed the knob at its base to the right again.

A ladder in the middle of the new module invited him to climb to the one above; he did, although with difficulty, his boots and snowshoes slung behind his back and half choking him with his own bootlaces, and the carbine awkwardly grasped in his

right hand. The ladder (of some white metal that did not quite seem to be aluminum) gave dangerously beneath his weight, but held.

The higher module into which he emerged was almost intact, and colder than the one from which he had just climbed; the deep thrumming of the wind beyond its metal walls could be distinctly heard, though no window or porthole revealed the snow he knew must be racing down the lake with it.

"Fey," he muttered to himself. And then, somewhat more loudly, "Eerie." How frightened poor Aileen must have been!

Curious, he put down his boots and snowshoes and the Sako, drew his knife, and shaved a few bits of metal from the topmost rung of the ladder. They were bright where the sharp steel had sheared them, dull on the older surfaces. Tempted to guess, he suspended judgment. A somewhat bigger piece gouged from the floor appeared to be of the same material; he unbuttoned his mackinaw and deposited all his samples in a shirt pocket.

The rectangular furnishing against one wall looked as if it might be a workbench topped with white plastic. Two objects of unfamiliar shape lay on it; he crossed the cubicle, stepping over featureless cabinets and others dotted with strangely shaped screens.

The larger object that he took from the bench changed its form at his touch, developing smooth jaws whose curving inner surfaces suggested parabolas; the smaller object snapped open, revealing a convoluted diagram too large to have been contained within it. Points of orange and green light wandered aimlessly over the diagram. After a bit of fumbling, he shut the object again and put it in the chest pocket of his mackinaw, following it with several small items of interest that he discovered in the swinging, extensible compartments that seemed to serve as drawers, though they were not quite drawers.

Without warning, the face of an angry giantess occupied the benchtop and her shouting voice filled the module. Gongs and bells sounded behind her, a music grotesquely harmonious amplified to deafening intensity. For a half second that was nearly too long, he watched and listened, mesmerized.

She was five feet behind him, ax raised, when he turned. He lunged at her as the blow fell, and the wooden handle struck his shoulder. Struggling together, they rolled over the canted floor, she a clawing, biting fury, he with a hand -- then both -- grabbing at the ax handle.

Wrenching the ax away, he swung it clumsily, hitting her elbow with the flat. She bit his cheek, and seemed about to tear his face off. Releasing the ax, he drove his thumbs into her eyes. She spat him out (such was his confused recollection later); sprang to her feet, dashed away--

And was gone.

Half stunned by the suddenness and violence of the fight as well as the deafening clamor from the workbench, he sat up and looked around him. His stolen ax lay near his left hand; the brownish smear on its bright edgy was presumably Brook's blood. His own trickled from his cheek, dotting the uneven metal floor. His boots and

snowshoes, and the sleek carbine, lay where he had left them.

Slowly he got to his feet, stooped to reclaim his ax, then stood up without it; he could only carry so much, the carbine was a better weapon, and the ax had killed Brook.

He shook himself. These women had killed Brook. The ax was his ax, and nothing more: a good piece of steel mounted on a length of hickory, a thing he had bought for thirty or forty dollars in the hardware store in town -- as foolish to kick the stone you tripped over as to blame the ax.

He picked it up and wiped the blade on one rough sleeve of his mackinaw until most of Brook's blood was gone. The carbine was a better weapon, but if he left the ax where it was the women would almost certainly find it and use it against him. If he carried it outside, he might be able to chop a hole in the ice and drop it in; but dropping it into the dark water at the bottom of the ladder would probably be almost as effective and a hundred times quicker. Soon, perhaps very soon, the one who had just tried to kill him might try again.

The clamor of the bench continued unabated. Childishly, he told it to be quiet, and when it did not respond, chopped at the huge, female, shouting, shrieking face again and again, until silence fell as suddenly as a curtain and the benchtop was white plastic once more. Had it been a teaching device, as well as a repair bench? One that could, perhaps, instruct and entertain the mechanic while she worked?

He laid the ax on it, found a handkerchief, and pressed it to his cheek.

Curious again, he strode to the nearest wall and touched it; it was not as cold as he had expected, though it seemed distinctly colder than the air around him. "Insulated," he muttered to himself, "but not insulated enough." Did you need a lot of insulation for space? Perhaps not; astronauts stayed outside in their suits for hours. After a little reflection, he concluded that a space station could lose heat to space only by radiation, and a space station at room temperature would not radiate much. The ziggurat was losing heat by convection and conduction now, and convection was almost always the greatest thief of heat.

Retrieving the ax, he carried it to the floor hatch to drop it in, and saw the dead woman's body floating facedown in the shallow water of the cubicle below.

When he left, the marks of his snowshoes coming in were as sharp as if they had just been made, although it was snowing hard. So much snow had accumulated on the ziggurat's terraces already that it seemed almost a rock rising from the ice; if he were to point it out to someone -- to Brook, say, although it would be better perhaps to point it out to someone still alive. To Alayna or Jan, say, or even to Pamela, who had been Brook's mother. If he were to point it out to any of those people and say, *That rock over there is hollow, and there are strange and wonderful blue-lit rooms inside, where little brown women will try to kill you*, they would think him not a liar but a madman, or a drunk. For centuries, unheeded men and women in England and Ireland and any number of other countries had reported a diminutive race living in hills where time ran differently, although in Africa, where skins were black, the little people's had been white.

He had made the mistake of turning the dead woman over, and the memory of her livid face and empty, unfocused eyes came back to haunt him. Someone used to jet-black faces would have called that dead face white, almost certainly. He searched his mind for a term he had read a year or two before.

Members of that small, pale African race were *Yumbos*, the people from the hills who crept out to steal cornmeal. Aileen had said the women had given her only bread to eat. Rations were short, perhaps; or rations were being hoarded against an indefinite stay.

If its hood had not been up, Emery would have missed the Lincoln, thinking it just another snowdrift. Both doors were locked (he had locked them out of habit, it seemed, the night before) and the keys were still in Brook's pocket. He broke a window with the butt of the carbine and retrieved his best cap. Brook had left some possession, a TV or home computer, in the trunk; but he would have to shoot out the lock, and he was heavily loaded already with the loot of the ziggurat.

As he passed the lightless cabin he had burglarized, it occurred to him that he ought to find out whether the shotguns had been taken. After a few moments' thought, he rejected the idea. The other two women (if indeed there were only two left), might or might not have the shotguns, and might or might not have shells for them if they did. They were dangerous in any case, which was all he really needed to know.

His own cabin was as dark. He tried to remember whether he had left a light on, then whether he had even turned one on that morning. He had written his journal -- had briefly and crassly recorded Brook's death there -- so he must certainly have switched on the lamp on the table. He could not remember switching it off.

Would they shoot through the glass, and the Cyclone fence wire with which he had covered his windows? Or would they poke the barrel through first, providing him some warning? There might have been more shells in the other cabin, in some drawer or cupboard, or even in the pockets of the old field coat that had hung from a nail near the front door.

His own front door appeared to be just as he had left it; there were no footprints in the fresh snow banked against it, and its bright Yale lock was unmarred. Could they pick locks? He circled the cabin, careful to go by way of the north side, past his Jeep and the spot where Brook had died, so that he would not have to look at Brook's corpse. Brook was surely buried under snow by this time, as he had told the undertaker; yet he could not help visualizing Brook's contorted, untenanted face. Brook would never go to Purdue now, never utilize his father's contacts at NASA. Brook was dead, and all the dreams (so many dreams) had died with him. Was it Brook or the dreams he mourned?

The rear door looked as sound as the front, and there were no visible footprints in the snow. No doubt he had turned out the table light automatically when he had finished writing his journal. Everyone did such things.

He unlocked the rear door, went inside, stood the Sako in a corner, and emptied his



pockets onto the table. Here was the dial that had tracked him, the tool that displayed a diagram larger than itself, the oblong card that might be a book whose pages turned each time the reader's hand approached it, the octopus, of light whose center was a ceramic sphere no bigger than a marble. Here, too, were the seven-sided cube; the beads that strung themselves and certainly were not actually beads, whatever they might be; and the dish in which small objects seemed to melt and from which in a few minutes they vanished. With them, cartridges for the carbine, his checkbook, keys, handkerchief, and pocketknife; and the unappetizing sandwich.

Seeing it and feeling his own disappointment, he realized that he was hungry. He lit the gas under the coffeepot and sat down to consider the matter. Should he eat first? Bandage his cheek? Build a new fire? The cabin was cold, though it seemed almost cozy after the winter storm outside.

Or should he write his journal first -- set down a factual account of everything he had seen in the ziggurat while it was still fresh in his mind? The sensible thing would be to build a fire; but that would mean going out for wood and trying not to see Brook. His mind recoiled from the thought.

An accurate, detailed account of the ziggurat might be worth millions to him in a few years, and could be written -- begun at least -- while his food was cooking and the coffee getting hot. He opened a can of Irish stew, dumped it into a clean saucepan, lit the burner under it, then sat down again and pressed the switch of the small lamp on the table.

No light flooded from its shade.

He stared at it, tightened the bulb and pressed the switch twice more, and chuckled. No wonder the cabin had been dark! Either the bulb had burned out in his absence, or the wires were down.

Standing up, he pulled the switch cord of the overhead fixture. Nothing.

How did the old song go? Something about wires down south that wouldn't stand the strain if it snowed. These wires, his wires, the ones that the country had run out to the lake four years ago, had not. He found one of the kerosene lanterns he had used before the wires came, filled it, and lit it.

If the electrical wires were down, it seemed probable that the telephone was out as well -- but when he held it to his ear the receiver emitted a reassuring dial tone. The telephone people, Emery reminded himself, always seemed to maintain their equipment a little bit better than the power company.

His cheek next, and he would have to fetch water from the creek as he had in the old days or melt snow. He filled his teakettle with clean snow from behind the cabin. Washing off the dried blood revealed the marks of teeth and a bruise. You could catch all sorts of diseases from human bites -- human mouths were as dirty as monkeys' -- but there was not much that he could do about that now. Gingerly, he daubed iodine on the marks, sponged that side of his face with hydrogen peroxide, and put on a thin pad of gauze, noting that Brook had depleted his supply in bandaging his wounded side.

Had the woman who had bitten him and tried to kill him with his own ax been the one who had killed Brook? It seemed likely, unless the women were trading off

weapons; and if that was the case, Brook was avenged. Let the sheriff take it from here. He debated the advisability of leading the sheriff's investigator to the ziggurat.

He stirred his Irish stew, and decided it was not quite warm enough yet; he'd get it good and hot, and pour it over bread.

He wasn't quite warm enough either, and was in fact still wearing his mackinaw, here inside the cabin. It was time to confront the firewood problem. When he had done it, he could take off his mackinaw and settle in until the storm let up and the snowplows brought a deputy, Doctor What's-hisname -- Ormond -- and the undertaker.

Outside, on the south side of the cabin, he made himself stare at the place where Brook lay. To the eye at least, it was just a little mound of snow, differing from other graves only in being white and smooth; the coyote lay at Brook's head, his mound not noticeably smaller or larger. Emery found that oddly comforting. Brook would have gloried in a tame coyote. They would have to be separated before long, though -- in four or five days at most, and probably sooner. It seemed a shame. Emery filled his arms with wood and carried it back into the cabin.

Newspapers first, with a splash of kerosene on them. Then kindling, and wood only when the kindling was burning well. He set the kerosene can on the hearth and knelt to unfold, crumple up, and arrange his newspapers.

There were tracks, footprints, in the powdery gray ashes.

He blinked and stared and blinked again. Stood up and got the flashlight and looked once more.

There could be no doubt, although these were not the clear and detailed prints he would have preferred; they were scuffed, confused, and peppered with some black substance. He rubbed a speck of it between his thumb and forefinger. Soot, of course.

The prints of two pairs of boots with large cleats; small boots in both cases, but one pair was slightly smaller than the other, and the smaller pair showed -- yes -- a little less wear at the heels.

They had come down his chimney. He stood up again and looked around. Nothing seemed to be missing.

They had climbed onto the roof (his Jeep, parked against the north wall of the cabin, would have made that easy) and climbed down the chimney. He could not have managed it, and neither could Brook, if Brook were still alive; but the twins could have done it, and these women were scarcely larger. He should have seen their footprints, but they had no doubt been obscured by blowing snow, and he had taken them for the ones the women had left that morning when they killed Brook. He had been looking mostly for fresh tracks outside the doors in any case.

There had been none. He felt certain of that; no tracks newer than the ones he himself had made that morning. Why, then, had the women climbed up the chimney when they left? Anybody knowledgeable enough to work with the equipment he had seen in the ziggurat would have no difficulty in opening either of his doors from the inside. Climbing down the chimney might not be terribly hard for women the twins' size, but climbing back up, even with a rope, would be a great deal harder. Why do it

when you could just walk out?

He covered the ashes with twice the amount of newspaper he had intended to use, and doused every ball of paper liberally with kerosene. Should he light the fire first or wait until he had the carbine in his hand?

The latter seemed safer. He got the carbine and pushed off its safety, clamped it under one arm, then struck a match and tossed it into the fireplace.

The tiny tongue of yellow flame grew to a conflagration in a second or two. There was a metallic clank before something black crashed down into the fire and sprang at him like a cat.

"Stop!" He swung the butt of the Sako at her. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

A hand from nowhere gripped his ankle. He kicked free, and a second woman rolled from beneath the bunk Brook had slept in -- the one he had made up for Jan. Awkwardly, he clubbed the forearm of the woman who had dropped from the chimney with the carbine barrel, kicked at her knee and missed. "Get out! Get out, both of you, or I swear to God--"

They rushed at him not quite as one, the taller first, the smaller brandishing his rifle. Hands snatched at the carbine, nearly jerking it from his grasp; for a moment, he wrestled the taller woman for it.

The sound of the shot was deafening in the closed cabin. The carbine leaped in his hands.

He found that he was staring into her soot-smearred brown face; it crumpled like his newspapers, her eyes squinting, her mouth twisted in a grimace of pain.

The woman behind her screamed and turned away, dropping his rifle and clutching her thigh. Blood seeped from between her fingers.

The taller woman took a step toward him -- an involuntary step, perhaps, as her reflexes sought to keep her from falling. She fell forward, the crumpled face smacking the worn boards of the cabin floor, and lay motionless.

The other woman was kneeling, still trying to hold back her blood. She looked at Emery, a look of mingled despair and mute appeal.

"I won't," he said.

He was still holding the carbine that had shot her. It belonged to someone else, and its owner presumably valued it; but none of that seemed to matter anymore. He threw it aside. "That's why I quit hunting deer," he told her almost casually. "I gut-shot a buck and trailed him six miles. When I found him, he looked at me like that."

The big plastic leaf bags he used to carry his garbage to the dump were under the sink. He pulled down quilt, blankets, and sheet, and spread two bags over the rumpled bunk that had been Brook's, scooped her up, and stretched her on them. "You shot me, and now I've shot you. I didn't mean to. Maybe you didn't either -- I'd like to think so, anyway."

With his hunting knife, he cut away the sooty cloth around her wound. The skin at

the back of her thigh was unbroken, but beneath it he could feel the hard outline of the bullet. "I'm going to cut there and take that out," he told her. "It should be pretty easy, but we'll have to sterilize the knife and the needle-nosed pliers first."

He gave her the rest of his surgical gauze to hold against her wound, and tried to fill his largest cooking pot with water from the sink. "I should have remembered the pump was off," he admitted to her ruefully, and went outside to fill the pot with clean snow.

"I'm going to wash your wound and bandage it before I get the bullet out." He spoke slowly and distinctly as he stepped back in and shut the door, hoping that she understood at least a part of what he was saying. "First, I have to get this water hot enough that I'll be cleaning it, not infecting it." He put the pot of snow on the stove and turned down the burner under his stew.

"Let's see what happened here." He knelt beside the dead woman and examined the ragged, blood-soaked tear at the back of her jacket, then wiped his fingers. It took an effort of will to roll her over; but he did it, keeping his eyes off her face. The hole the bullet had left in the front of the jacket was so small and obscure that he had to verify it by poking his pen through it before he was satisfied.

He stood again, reached into his mackinaw to push the pen into his shirt pocket, and found the fragments of white metal he had taken from the ziggurat. For a moment, he looked from them to the newspapers still blazing in the fireplace. "I'm going to lay some kindling on the fire. Getting chilled won't help you. It could even kill you." Belatedly, he drew up her sheet, the blankets, and the quilt.

"You're not going to die. Are you afraid you will?" He had a feeling that if he talked to her enough, she would begin to understand; that was how children learned to speak, surely. "I'm not going to kill you, and neither is that wound in your leg, or at least I don't think so."

She replied, and he saw that she was trying to smile. He pointed to the dead woman and to her, and shook his head, then arranged kindling on the burning newspapers. The water in his biggest pot was scarcely warm, but the Irish stew was hot. He filled a bowl, and gave it to her with a spoon; she sat up to eat, keeping her left hand under the covers to press the pad of gauze to her leg.

The Voylestown telephone directory provided a home number for Doctor Ormond. Emery pressed it in.

"Hello."

"Doctor Ormond? This is Emery Bainbridge."

"Right. Ralph Merton told me about you. I'll try to get out there just as quick as I can."

"This is about another matter, Doctor. I'm afraid we've had a gun go off by accident."

A slight gasp came over the wire as Ormond drew breath. "*Someone was hit. Is it bad?*"

"Both of us were. I hope not too badly, though. We had a loaded rifle -- my

hunting rifle -- standing against the wall. We were nervous, you understand. We still are. Some people -- these people -- I'm sorry." In the midst of the fabrication, Brook's death had taken Emery by the throat.

*"I know your son's dead, Mister Bainbridge. Ralph told me. He was murdered?"*

"Yes, with an ax. My ax. You'll see him, of course. I apologize, Doctor. I don't usually lose control."

*"Perfectly normal and healthy, Mister Bainbridge. You don't have to tell me about the shooting if you don't want to. I'm a doctor, not a policeman."*

"My rifle fell over and discharged," Emery said. "The bullet creased my side -- I don't think that's too bad -- and hit..." Looking at the wounded woman, he ransacked his memory for a suitable name. "Hit Tamar in the leg. I should explain that Tamar's an exchange student who's been staying with us." Tamar had been Solomon's sister, and King Solomon's mines had been somewhere around the Horn of Africa. "She's from Aden. She speaks very little English, I'm afraid. I know first aid, and I'm doing all I can, but I thought I ought to call you."

*"She's conscious?"*

"Oh, yes. She's sitting up and eating right now. The bullet hit the outer part of her thigh. I think it missed the bone. It's still in her leg. It didn't exit."

*"This just happened?"*

"Ten minutes ago, perhaps."

*"Don't give her any more food, she may vomit. Give her water. There's no intestinal wound? No wound in the abdomen?"*

"No, in her thigh as I said. About eight inches above the knee."

*"Then let her have water, as much as she wants. Has she lost much blood?"*

Emery glanced at the dead woman. It would be necessary to account for the stains of her blood as well as Tamar's. "It's not easy to estimate, but I'd say at least a pint. It could be a little more."

*"I see, I see." Ormond sounded relieved. "I'd give her a transfusion if I had her in the hospital, Mister Bainbridge, but she may not really need one. At least, not badly: How much would you say she weighs?"*

He tried to remember the effort involved in lifting her. He had been excited, of course -- high on adrenaline. "Between ninety and a hundred pounds, at a guess."

Ormond grunted. *"Small. Small bones? Height?"*

"Yes, very small. My wife calls her petite." The lie had come easily, unlooked for. "I'd say she's about five foot one. Delicate."

*"What about you, Mister Bainbridge? Have you lost much blood?"*

"Less than half as much as she has, I'd say."

*"I see. The question is whether your intestine has been perforated--"*

"Not unless it's a lot closer to the skin than I think it is, Doctor. It's just a crease, as I say. I was sitting down, she was standing up. The bullet creased my side and went into her leg."

*"I'd wait a bit, just the same, before I ate or drank anything, Mister Bainbridge. You haven't eaten or drunk since it happened?"*

"No," Emery lied.

*"Good. Wait a bit. Can you call me back in two hours?"*

"Certainly. Thank you, Doctor."

*"I'll be here, unless there's an emergency here in town, someplace I can get to. If I'm not here, my wife will answer the phone. Have you called the police?"*

"Not about this. It's an accident, not a police matter."

*"I'm required to report any gunshot wounds I treat. You may want to report it yourself first."*

"All right, I can tell the officer who investigates my son's death."

*"That's up to you, but I'll have to report it. Is there anything else?"*

"I don't think so."

*"Do you have any antibiotics? A few capsules left from an old prescription?"*

"I don't think so."

*"Look. If you find anything you think might be helpful, call me back immediately. Otherwise, in two hours."*

"Right. Thank you, Doctor." Emery hung up.

The snow water was boiling on the stove. He turned off the burner, noting that the potful of packed snow had become less than a quarter of a pot of water. "As soon as that cools off a little, I'm going to wash your wound and put a proper bandage on it," he said.

She smiled shyly.

"You're from Aden. It's in Yemen, I believe. Your name is Tamar. Can you say *Tamar*?" He spoke slowly, mouthing the sounds. "*Ta-mar*. You say it." He pointed to her.

"Teye-mahr." She smiled again, not quite so frightened.

"Very good! You'd speak Arabic, I suppose, but I've got a few books here, and if I can dig up a more obscure language for you, we'll use it -- too many people know Arabic. I wish that you could tell me," he hesitated, "where you really come from. Or when you come from. Because that's what I've been thinking. That's crazy, isn't it?"

She nodded, though it seemed to him she had not understood.

"You were up in space in that thing. In the ziggurat." He laid splits of wood on the blazing kindling. "I've been thinking about that, too, and you just about had to be. How many were there in your crew?"

Sensing her incomprehension, he pointed to the dead woman, then to the living one, and held up three fingers. "This many? Three? Wait a minute."

He found a blank page in his journal and drew the ziggurat with three stick figures beside it. "This many?" He offered her his journal and the pen.

She shook her head and pointed to her leg with her free hand.

"Yes, of course. You'll need both hands."

He cleaned her wound as thoroughly as he could with Q-Tips and the steaming snow-water, and contrived a dressing from a clean undershirt and the remaining tape. "Now we've got to get the bullet out. I think we ought to for your sake anyway -- it will have carried cloth into the wound, maybe even tissue from the other woman."

Breaking the plastic of a disposable razor furnished him with a small but extremely sharp blade. "I'd planned to use the pen blade of my jackknife," he explained as he helped her roll over, "but this will be better."

He cut away what remained of her trouser leg. "It's going to hurt. I wish I had something to give you."

Two shallow incisions revealed an edge of the mushroomed carbine bullet. He fished the pliers out of the hot water with a fork, gripped the ragged lead in them, and worked the bullet free. Rather to his surprise, she bit her pillow and did not cry out.

"Here it is." He held the bullet where she could see it. "It went through your friend's breastbone, and I think it must have gotten her heart. Then it was deflected downward, most likely by a rib, and hit you. If it hadn't been deflected, it might have missed you altogether. Or killed you. Lie still, please." He put his hand on her back and felt her shrink from his touch. "I want to mop away the blood and look at that with the flashlight. If this fragmented at all, it didn't fragment much. But if it did, we want to get all of the pieces out, and anything else that doesn't belong." Unable to stop himself, he added, "You're afraid, aren't you? All of you were. Afraid of me, and of Brook too. Probably afraid of all males."

He found fibers in the wound that had probably come from her trousers and extracted them one by one, tore strips from a second undershirt, and tied a folded pad made of what remained of it to the new wound at the back of her thigh. "This is what we had to do before they had tape," he confided as he tightened the last knot. "Wind cloth around the wounded leg or whatever it was. That's why we call them *wounds*. If you were wounded, you got bandages wound around you -- all right, you can turn back over now." He helped her.

The flames were leaping high in the fieldstone fireplace. He took the metal fragments out of his shirt pocket and showed them to her, then pointed toward it.

She shook her head emphatically.

"Do you mean they won't burn, or they will?" He grinned. "I think you mean they will. Let's see."

He tossed the smallest sliver from the ladder into the fire. After a second or two, there was a burst of brilliant light and puff of white smoke. "Magnesium. I thought so."

He moved his chair next to the bunk in which she lay and sat down. "Magnesium's strong and very light, but it burns. They use it in flashbulbs. Your ziggurat, your lander or space station or whatever it is, will burn with a flame hot enough to destroy just about anything, and I'm going to burn it tomorrow morning. It's a terrible waste and I hate to do it, but that's what I'm going to do. You don't understand any of this, do you, Tamar?" He got his journal and drew fire and smoke coming from the ziggurat.

She studied the drawing, her face thoughtful, then nodded.

"I'm glad you didn't throw a fit about that," he told her. "I was afraid you would, but maybe you were under orders not to disturb things back here any more than you could help."

When she did not react to that, he took another leaf bag from under the sink; to his satisfaction, it was large enough to contain the dead woman. "I had to do that before she got stiff," he explained to the living one. "She'll stiffen up in an hour or so. It's probably better if we don't have to look at her, anyway."

Tamar made a quick gesture he did not comprehend, folded her hands, and shut her eyes.

"Tomorrow, before the storm lets up, I'm going to drag her back to your space station and burn it." He was talking mostly for his own benefit, to clarify his thoughts. "That's probably a crime, but it's what I'm going to do. You do what you've got to." He picked up the Sako carbine. "I'm going to clean this and leave it in the other cabin on the way, and throw away the bullet. As far as the sheriff's concerned, my gun shot us both by accident. If I have to, I'll say you bit my face while I was tending your wound. But I won't be able to shave there anyhow, and by the time they get here my beard may cover it."

She motioned toward his journal and pen, and when he gave them to her produced a creditable sketch of the third woman.

"Gone," he said. "She's dead too. I'd stuck my thumbs in her eyes -- she tried to kill me -- and she ran. She must have fallen through the hole in the floor. The water down there was pretty shallow, so she would've hit hard. I think she drowned."

Tamar pointed to the leaf bag that held the dead woman, then sketched her with equal facility, finishing by crossing out the sketch.

Emery crossed out the women in the ziggurat as well, and returned the journal and the pen to Tamar. "You'll have to live the rest of your life here, I'm afraid, unless they send somebody for you. I don't expect you to like it -- not many of us do -- but you'll have to do the best you can, just like the rest of us."

Suddenly excited, she pointed to the tiny face of the lion on his pen and hummed,



waving the pen like a conductor's baton. It took him a minute or more to identify the tune.

It was "God Save the Queen."

Later, when she was asleep, he telephoned an experimental physicist. "David," he asked softly, "do you remember your old boss? Emery Bainbridge?"

David did.

"I've got something here I want to tell you about, David. First, though, I've got to say I can't tell you where I got it. That's confidential -- top secret. You've got to accept that. I won't *ever* be able to tell you. Okay?"

It was.

"This thing is a little dish. It looks almost like an ashtray." There was a penny in the clutter on the table; he picked it up. "I'm going to drop a penny into it. Listen."

The penny fell with a clink.

"After a while, that penny will disappear, David. Right now it looks just a little misted, like it had been outside in the cold, and there was condensation on it."

Emery moved the dish closer to the kerosene lantern. "Now the penny is starting to look sort of silvery. I think most of the copper's gone, and what I'm seeing is the zinc underneath. You can barely make out Lincoln's face."

David spoke.

"I've tried that. Even if you hold the dish upside down and shake it, the penny -- or whatever it is -- won't fall out, and I'm not about to reach in and try to pull it out."

The crackling voice in the receiver sounded louder than Emery's own.

"I wish you could, David. It's not much bigger than the end of a pencil now, and shrinking quickly. Hold on--

"There. It's gone. I think the dish must boil off atoms or molecules by some cold process. That's the only explanation I've come up with. I suppose we could check that by analyzing samples of air above it, but I don't have the equipment here.

"David, I'm going to start a new company. I'm going to do it on a shoestring, because I don't want to let any backers in. I'll have to use my own money and whatever I can raise on my signature. I know you've got a good job now. They're probably paying you half what you're worth, which is a hell of a lot. But if you'll come in with me, I'll give you ten percent.

"Of course you can think it over. I expect you to. Let's say a week. How's that?"

David spoke at length.

"Yes, here too. The lights are off, as a matter of fact. It's just by the grace of God that the phone still works. I'll be stuck out here -- I'm in the cabin -- for another three

or four days, probably. Then I'll drive into the city, and we'll talk.

"Certainly you can look at it. You can pick it up and try it out, but not take it back to your lab. You understand, I'm sure."

A last, querulous question.

Emery chuckled. "No, it's not from a magic store, David. I think I might be able to guess where it's actually from, but I'm not going to. Top secret, remember? It's technology way in advance of ours. We're medieval mechanics who've found a paper shredder. We may never be able to make another shredder, but we can learn a hell of a lot from the one we've got."

When he had hung up, he moved his chair back to the side of Tamar's bunk. She was lying on her back, her mouth and eyes closed, the soft sigh of her respiration distinct against the howling of the wind beyond the log walls.

"Jan's going to want to come back," Emery told Tamar, his voice less than a whisper. "She'll try to kiss and make up two weeks to a month after she finds out about the new company, I'd say. I'll have to get our divorce finalized before she hears. They'll back off a little on that property settlement when she gets back to the city, and then I'll sign."

Tamar's left hand lay on the quilt; his found it, stroking the back and fingers with a touch that he hoped was too light to wake her. "Because I don't want Jan anymore. I want you, Tamar, and you're going to need me."

The delicate brown fingers curled about his, though she was still asleep.

"You're learning to trust me, aren't you? Well, you can. I won't hurt you." He fell silent. He had taught the coyote to trust him; and because he had, the coyote had not feared the smell of Man on the cyanide gun. He would have to make certain Tamar understood that all men were not to be trusted -- that there were millions of men who would rob and rape and kill her if they could.

"How did you reproduce, up there in our future, Tamar? Asexually? My guess is artificial insemination, with a means of selecting for females. You can tell me whether I'm right, by and by."

He paused, thinking. "Is our future still up there? The one you came from? Or did you change things when you crashed? Or when you killed Brook. Even if it is, maybe you and I can change things with some new technology. Let's try."

Tamar sighed, and seemed to smile in her sleep. He bent over her to kiss her, his lips lightly brushing hers. "Is that why the crash was so bad that you could never get the ziggurat to fly again? Because just by crashing at all, or by killing my son, you destroyed the future you came from?"

In the movies, Emery reflected, people simply stepped into time machines and vanished, to reappear later or earlier at the same spot on Earth's surface, as if Copernicus had never lived. In reality, Earth was moving in the solar system, the solar system in the galaxy, and the galaxy itself in the universe. One would have to travel through space as well as time to jump time in reality.

Somewhere beneath the surface of the lake, the device that permitted such jumps

was still functioning, after a fashion. No longer jumping, but influencing the speed with which time passed -- the timing of time, as it were. The hours he had spent inside the ziggurat had been but a minute or two outside it; that had to be true, because the prints of his snowshoes coming in had still been sharp when he came out, and Aileen had spent half a day at least there in two hours.

He would burn the ziggurat tomorrow. He would have to, if he were not to lose everything he had taken from it, and be accused of the murder of the dead woman in the leaf bag, too -- would have to, if he wished to keep Tamar.

But might not the time device, submerged who could say how deep in the lake, perhaps buried in mud at the bottom as well, survive and continue to function as it did now? Fishermen on Haunted Lake might see the sun stand still, while hours drifted past. Had the device spread itself through time to give the lake its name? He would buy up all the lakeside property, he decided, when the profits of the new company permitted him to.

"We're going to build a new cabin," he told the sleeping Tamar. "A house, really, and a big one, right on the shore there. We'll live in that house, you and me, for a long, long time, and we'll have children."

Very gently, her fingers tightened around his.