

**Scout's Honor**  
by Terry Bisson

*On the morning of July 12, 20\_\_\_, I got the following message on my lab computer, the only one I have:*

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**Monday**

Made it. Just as planned. It's real. Here I am in the south of France, or what people think of now (now?) as the south of France. It seems to the north of everywhere. If the cleft is at 4200 feet, it means the ice is low. I can see the tongue of a glacier only about 500 feet above me. No bones here yet, of course. It's a clear shot down a narrow valley to the NT site, about 1/2 mile away. I can see smoke; I didn't expect that. Wouldn't they be more cautious? Maybe they aren't threatened by HS yet and I'm too early. Hope not. Even though it's not part of the protocol, I would love to learn more about our first encounter (and last?) with another human (hominid?) species. I do like to see the smoke, though. I never thought I would feel loneliness but here I do. Time is space and space is distance (Einstein). Heading down for the NT site. More later.

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*The subject line was all noise and so was the header. I was still puzzling what it was all about, for excepting the Foundation's newsgroup, I get no messages at all, when another came through the very next morning. The dates are mine.*

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**Tuesday**

It's them all right. I am watching about 20 NTs, gathered in the site around a big smoky fire. Even through binoculars, from 50 yards away, they look like big moving shadows. It's hard to count them. They cluster together then break apart in groups of 2 or 3, but never alone. I can't tell the males from the females, but there are 4 or 5 children, who also stay together in a clump. Wish I could see faces, but it's dim here. Perpetual overcast. I have been watching almost four hours by the clock on my com, and none have left the site. Separating one out may prove a problem. But I have almost 5 days (-122) to worry about that. Tomorrow I'll observe from a different position where I can get a little closer and the light may be better; above, not closer. I know the protocols. I helped write them. But somehow I want to get closer.

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*I began to suspect a prank, to which I enjoy a certain deliberate and long-standing immunity. But I do have a friend—Ron—and naturally I suspected him (who else?) after the next and longer text came through, on the very day we were to meet.*

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## **Wednesday**

Totally unexpected change in plans. I am sitting here in the cleft with "my own" NT. He's the perfect candidate for the snatch, if I can keep him here for 4 days (-98). They are nothing like we thought. The reconstructions are far too anthropomorphic. This is NOT a human, though certainly a hominid. What we thought was a broad nose is more of a snout. He's white as a ghost, which I guess is appropriate. Or am I the ghost? He is sitting across the fire staring at me, or through me. He seems oddly unconscious much of the time, thoughtless, like a cat. What happened was this: I was heading down to observe the site this morning when I dislodged a boulder that fell on my left leg. I thought for sure it was broken (it isn't), but I was trapped. The rock had my leg wedged from the knee downward, out of sight in a narrow crevice. I couldn't help thinking of that turn-of-the-century Utah dude who sawed off his own arm with a Swiss army knife. I was wondering when I would be ready to do that, for I was in a worse spot than him: unless I made it back to the cleft in less than 100 hours, I was trapped here, and by more than a stone. By Time itself. The numbness scared me worse than pain. It was starting to snow and I was worried about freezing. I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I remember, "my" NT was squatting there looking at me—or through me. Quiet as a cat. Oddly, I was as little surprised as he was. It was like a dream. I pointed at my leg, and he rolled the stone away. It was as simple as that. Either he was immensely strong or had a better angle, or both. I was free, and my leg was now throbbing painfully and bleeding but not broken. I could even stand on it. I hobbl

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*Ron is a sci-fi writer who teaches a course at the New School. We meet every Wednesday and Friday, right before his class at 6. This is not by his plan or mine. It's a promise he made to my mother, I happen to know, right before she died, but that's OK with me. No friends at all would be too few, and more than one, too many.*

*"What is this?" he asked, when he finished reading the printout.*

*You oughta know, I said, raising my eyebrows in what I hoped was a suggestive manner. In accord with my own promise to my mother, I practice these displays in front of the mirror, and for once it seems to have paid off.*

*"You think I wrote this?"*

*I nodded, knowingly I hoped, and listed my reasons: who else knew that I was studying Neanderthal bones? Who but he and I had savored the story of the Utah dude so long ago? Who else wrote sci-fi?*

*"Science fiction," he said grumpily (having made that correction before). While we waited for his burger and my buttered roll, he listed his objections.*

*"Maybe it's a mistake, not intended for you. Lots of people knew about the Utah dude; it was a national story. And I am a little insulted that you think that I wrote this."*

*Huh?*

*"It's crude," Ron said. "He, or maybe she, uses 'oddly' twice in one paragraph; that would never get by me. And the timeline is all wrong. The escape comes before the danger, which deflates the suspense."*

*You didn't send this, then?*

*"No way. Scout's Honor."*

*And that was that. We talked, or rather he talked, mostly of his girlfriend Melani and her new job, while the people walked by on Sixth Avenue, only inches away. They were hot, and we were cold. It was like two separate worlds, separated by the window glass.*

*Thursday morning I went in eagerly, anxious to get back to my bones. I scanned the Foundation's newsgroup first (rumors about a top secret new project) before opening the latest message.*

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## Thursday

Sorry about that. I stopped transmitting yesterday because "my" NT woke up, and I didn't want to alarm him. Since my last truncated message, we've been snowed in. He watched me build a fire with a sort of quiet amazement. God knows what he would think of this thing I'm talking into. Or of the talk itself. He only makes 3 or 4 sounds. I wait until he's asleep to use the com. After the NT freed me, he followed me up the hill. It was clear that he didn't intend to harm me, although it would have been pretty easy. He is about 6 feet tall if he stood straight up, which he never does. Maybe 250 lbs. It's hard to judge his weight since he's pretty hairy, except for his face and hands. I was in a big hurry to dress my leg, which was bleeding (OK after all). We found the cleft very different from the way I had left it. Something had gotten into my food. A bear? The follow box was smashed and half the KR's were gone. Luckily the space blanket had been left behind. I spread it out, and he laid his stuff beside it: a crude hand axe, a heavy, stiff and incredibly smelly skin robe, and a little sack made of gut, with five stones in it: creek stones, white. He showed them to me as if they were something I should understand. And I do: but of that later. He's starting to stir.

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*On Fridays I skip lunch so I will have an appetite in the restaurant. I wasn't surprised to find yet another message, and I printed both Thurs. and Fri. to show to Ron. At the least, it would give him something to talk about. I think (know) my silence is awkward for him.*

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## Friday

It's snowing. The stones are his way of counting. I watched him throw one away this morning. There are 3 left: like me, he's on some kind of schedule. We've been eating grubs. Seems the NTs hide rotten meat under logs and stones and return for the grubs. It's a kind of farming. They're not so bad. I try to think of them as little vegetables. Grub "talks" a lot with his hands. I try to reply in kind. When we are not talking, when I do not get his attention, he is as dead, but when I touch his hands or slap his face, he comes alive. It's as if he's half asleep the rest of the time. And really asleep the other half; the NT sleep a *lot*. His hands are very human, and bone white like his face. The rest of him is brown, under thick blond fur. I call him Grub. He doesn't call me anything. He doesn't seem to wonder who I am or where I came from. The

snatch point is still 2 days away (-46), which means that I get him to myself until then. An unexpected bonus. Meanwhile, the weather, which was already fierce, is getting fiercer, and I worry about the com batteries, with no sun to charge them. More later.

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*Ron and I always meet at the same place, which is the booth by the window in the Burger Beret on Sixth Ave at Tenth St. Ron shook his head as he read the messages. That can mean lots of different things.*

*He said, "You astonish me."*

*Huh?*

*"Don't huh me. You wrote it. It's very clever, considering."*

*I couldn't say huh again, so I was just very still.*

*"The vegetarian business is what tipped me off. And no one else knows that much about Neanderthals. Their counting, the limited speech. It's what you told me."*

*That was common theory, I said. There was nothing new in it. Besides, I don't make stories. I write reports.*

*Even I could see that he was disappointed. "Scout's Honor?"*

*Scout's honor, I said. Ron and I went to Philmont Scout Ranch together. That was years ago, before he had entered the world and I had decided to keep it at arm's length. But the vows still hold.*

*"Well, OK. Then it must be one of your colleagues playing a joke. I'm not the only one who knows you do research. Just the only one you deign to talk to."*

*Then he told me that he and Melani were getting married. The conversation sort of speeded up and slowed down at the same time, and when I looked up, he was gone. I felt a moment's panic, but after I paid the bill and went up to my apartment, it gradually dissipated, like a gas in an open space. For me a closed space is like an open space.*

*The newsgroup was silent for the weekend, but the scrambled-header messages kept coming through, one a day, like the vitamins I promised my mother I would take.*

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## Saturday

The KRrs are gone, but Grub drags me with him to look under logs for grubs. He won't go alone. Third day snowed in. One more to go. I have to conserve our wood, so we stay huddled together against the back wall of the cleft, wrapped in my space blanket and Grub's smelly robe. We sit and watch the snow and listen to the booming of the icefall—and we talk. Sort of. He gestures with his hands and takes mine in his. He plucks at the hair on my forearms and pulls at my fingers and sometimes even slaps my face. I'm sure he doesn't understand that I am from the far future; how could he even have a concept of that? But I can understand that he is in exile. There was a dispute, over what, who knows, and he was sent away. The stones are his sentence, that I know: Grub *feels* that about them. Every morning he gets rid of one, tossing it out the door of the cleft into the snow. His sense of number is pretty crude. 5 is many, and 2—the number left this morning—is few. I assume that when they are gone, he gets to go "home," but he's just as desolate with 2 as he was with 5. Perhaps he can't think ahead, only back. Even though I'm cold as hell, I wish the snatch point wasn't so near. I'm learning his language. Things don't have names, but the feelings about them do.

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*Saturday and Sunday I spend at the lab, alone. What else would I do? When else could I be alone with my bones? I am the only one who has access to the Arleville Find, which is two skeletons, an NT and an HS found side by side, which proves there was actual contact. The grubs confirmed my study of the NT teeth. Of course, this was just a story, according to Ron. Or was it? Sunday I found this:*

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## Sunday

Change in plans: I want to alter the snatch point, put it back one cycle. I know this is against the protocols, but I have my reasons. Grub is desperate to get rid of the stones and return to the site and his band. These creatures are much more social than we. It's as if they hardly exist, alone. I'm getting better at communicating. There is much handwork involved, gesture and touch, and I understand more and more. Not by thinking but by feel. It's like looking at something out of the corner of my eye; if I look directly, it's gone. But if I don't, there it is. It's almost like a dream, and maybe it is, since I am in and out of sleep a lot. My leg is healing OK. Grub is down to one stone, and he's happy, almost. I am feeling the reverse: the horror he would feel at being separated from his band forever. Are we going to create an

Ishi? What desolation. I am convinced we will wind up with a severely damaged NT. So we start our count at 144 again. Some peril here, since the com is getting low. But I have a plan—

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*Monday is my least favorite day, when I have to share the lab (but not the bones) with others. Not that they don't leave me alone. I scrolled down past the newsgroup, looking for the daily message and found it like an old acquaintance:*

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## **Monday**

Made it. I am speaking this amid a circle of hominids, not humans, squatting (rather than sitting: they either stand, lie, or squat but never sit) around a big smoky fire. I quit worrying about what they would think of the com; they don't seem curious. Since I arrived with Grub, they have accepted me without question or interest. Maybe it's because I have picked up Grub's smell. They lay or squat silently a lot of the time, and then when one awakens, they all awaken, or most, anyway. There are 22 altogether, including Grub: 8 adult males, 7 females, and 5 children, 2 of them still nursing; plus 2 "Old Ones" of indeterminate sex. The Old Ones are not very mobile. The NTs grab hands and "talk" with a few sounds and a lot of pushing and pulling, plus gestures. Their facial expressions are as simple and crude as their speech. They look either bored or excited, with nothing in between. Lots of grubs and rotten meat get eaten. They put rotten meat under logs and rocks, and then come back for the grubs and maggots. It's a kind of farming, I guess, but it has all but spoiled my appetite. Perhaps any kind of farming does, seen up close.

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*All of this was interesting, but none of it was new. Any of it could have been written by my colleagues at the lab, but I knew it wasn't. They're in another world, like the people on Sixth Avenue on the other side of the glass. Most of them didn't even know my name.*

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## **Tuesday**

Something is happening tomorrow. A hunt? I sense fear and danger, and lots of work and lots of food. All these imprecise communications I got from the group as a whole. This afternoon they burned a bush of dry leaves and inhaled the smoke, passing it around. It's some kind of herb that seems to help in NT communication. Certainly it helps me. Between the "burning bush" and the grunts and pulling of hands, I got a picture (not visual but emotional) of a large beast dying. It's hard to describe. I'm learning not to try and pin things down. It's as if I were open to the feelings of the event itself instead of the participants. Death, defeat, and victory; terror and hope. A braided feeling, like the smoke. All this was accompanied, I might even say amplified, by one of the Old Ones (more mobile than I thought!) spinning around by the fire, brandishing a burning stick. Later I amused the little ones (more easily amused than their elders) by cooking some grubs on a stick. Like cooking marshmallows. They wouldn't eat them though, except for one small boy I call "Oliver" who kept smacking his lips and grinning at me as if it were me he wanted to eat. Even the little NTs have a fierce look that belies their gentle nature. The men (Grub, too) have been sharpening sticks and hardening the points in the fire. Now they are asleep in a big pile between the fire and the wall, and I am staying apart, which doesn't bother them. I can take the smell of Grub, but not of the whole pile; that is, band.

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*Wednesday was a long day. I printed out the last four (including Wednesday) to show Ron. For some reason, I was eager for a little "conversation." Maybe mother was right, and I need to maintain at least one friend. Mother was a doctor, after all.*

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## **Wednesday**

This morning we were awakened by the children pulling at the space blanket. Grub had joined me during the night. Is it me or the space blanket that he likes? No matter; I am glad of his company and used to his

smell. He was part of the hunt and dragged me along. He understood that I wanted to go. The others ignore me, except for the children. The party consisted of 7 men and 2 women. No leader that I could tell. They carried sharpened sticks and hand axes, but no food or water. I don't think they know how to carry water. We left the children behind with the Old Ones and the nursing mothers and spent most of the morning climbing up a long slope of scree and over a ridge into a narrow valley where a glacial stream was surrounded by tall grass. There I saw my first mammoth, already dead. It lay beside a pile of brush and leaves, and I "got" that they had baited it into this narrow defile. But something else had killed it. It lay on its side, and for the first time I saw what I thought might be sign of HS, for the beast had already been butchered, very neatly. Even the skull had been split for the brain. Only the skin and entrails were left, with a few shreds of stringy meat. The NTs approached fearfully, sniffing the air and holding hands (mine included). I could feel their alarm. Was it the remnants of the smoke or my own imagination that gave me a terrified sense of the "dark ones" that had killed this beast? Then it was gone before I could be sure. The NTs went to work with their sticks, driving away 3 hyena-like dogs that were circling the carcass. Their fear was soon forgotten with this victory, and they started carving on the carcass, eating as they went. The kill was new, but pretty smelly. The NTs piled entrails and meat in a huge skin, which we had brought with us. By late afternoon we had a skin full, which we carried and dragged over the ridge and down the long scree slope. We were within a half mile of the site when the sun set, but the NTs hate and fear the dark. So here we are holed up under a rock ledge, in a pile. A long, cold, and smelly night ahead. No fire, of course. They whimper in their sleep. They don't like being away from their fire. Me neither. I am beginning to worry about the com, which is showing a low power (LP) signal every time I log on. Not as much sunlight here as anticipated. None at all, in fact.

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*"Scout's Honor?" Ron asked again after he had read the printouts, and I nodded. "It must be one of your colleagues, then. Who else knows this Neanderthal stuff, or calls them NTs. Did they really eat grubs?"*

*I shrugged. How would I know?*

*"Cave men are full of surprises, I guess. And I have a surprise of my own. Friday's my last day of class. We're moving to California. Melani has an assistantship at Cal State. We're getting married in Vegas, on the way. Otherwise I would invite you to the wedding. Even though I know you wouldn't come."*

*I stayed home sick Thursday. And so I didn't check my emails until Friday morning, when I had two, after a lot of Foundation Newsgroup gossip about a new project, which I skipped. It was mostly rumors, and I don't like rumors. That's why I became a scientist.*

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## Thursday

Dawn finally came, sunless. Something was wrong. I could feel it as we went down the hill, holding hands. The cave was filled with shadows, as before, but these were different in the way they stood and the way they moved. Then NTs saw them too, and fell to their knees, clutching one another with little cries. I was forgotten, even by Grub. The Dark Ones had come. The fire was less smoky, and the shadows moved like humans, like us, and chattering. Quarrelling, too. Many blows exchanged. They were butchering something. I drew closer before realizing, to my horror, that I was alone. The NTs had all fled. Before I had time to look around and see where they were gone, I was noticed by the dogs. The NTs don't keep dogs, but the HS do. Perhaps they smelled the meat the NTs had dropped when they fled. They were barking all around me, nasty little creatures. Food or pets? Two of the HS came out of the cave toward me. They started to shout, and I shouted back, imitating their sounds, hoping they would perceive that I was one of them. No such luck. They moved closer, shaking their spears, which were tipped with vicious stone points. Shake-spear: they were acting, I realized. They were only interested in scaring me away. I took a step toward them, and they shook their spears harder. They are completely, unmistakably human. Their faces are very expressive. Their skins are hairless and very black. I think they thought I was an NT because I was so white, at least compared to them. Nothing else in my gait or face or speech seemed to matter. I saw over their shoulders what the others were butchering. It was the boy who had dared to eat the cooked grubs, Oliver. His head was laid off to one side, opened for the brains. NTs have big brains, even the kids. I was almost sad, but didn't have the luxury. The two HS were shaking their spears, coming toward me one step at a time. I stepped back, still trying to talk, hoping that they would recognize me as one of their own, when something grabbed me by the ankle. It was Grub. He had come back for me. Come! Run! I scrambled after him, through the bushes, up the scree, toward the rocks and snow. The humans didn't follow us.

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## Friday

Snowing again, harder than ever. We're in the cleft, Grub and I. I'm trying to save the batteries for the snatch connection (-21). No sun. Haven't seen the sun for a week. After my last (too long) com, we circled up into the high country, careful to avoid the HS—me as well as Grub. It's ironic that even here, at the beginning of human history, skin color trumps everything. Logical, I suppose, since it is the largest and most evident of the organs. The band has gone over the glacier; we found the tracks leading up onto the ice. Grub wanted to follow them, but I can't get too far from the cleft and the snatch. Luckily, he won't go anywhere without me. I maneuvered him back to the cleft, which was mercifully empty, and built a fire which seemed to comfort him—the building of it as much as the fire itself. I sat down beside him, and he quit shivering, and we slept under the space blanket, plus the skin. All we have to do is hole up here for another day and we will both be gone. Grub doesn't know that, of course. He is shivering and whimpering in my arms. His desolation floods me as if it were my own. And his fear. The Dark Ones! The Dark Ones! What would he think if he knew I were one of them?

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*"I really don't need to read any more," Ron said, tossing the printout aside. "Didn't you say that Homo Sapiens had originally come up from Africa?"*

*I nodded and shrugged. Nods and shrugs are "piece of cake" for me.*

*"So there they are, your dark ones. There will be a fight, and the Neanderthals, the NTs, will lose. It is clearly an amateur time-travel story. If you ask me, and I suppose you have no one else to ask, I think it just bounced in off some anomaly in the Web. The Web has released all sorts of wannabe writers, sending stuff to one another and to little amateur sites. This is a piece of a sci-fi story that got misaddressed in cyberspace."*

*SF, I said, but he didn't get the joke. There are ways to indicate that you're joking but I have never mastered them. Why me? I asked.*

*"I'll bet it's because you're on the Foundation server," Ron said. "The one in New Mexico. Doesn't it use that new quantum computer, the one that received a message a few milliseconds before it was sent? I read the story in Science News. Some kind of loop thing. But hey, it makes it the perfect receiver for a time travel yarn. Speaking of time—"*

*He looked at his watch, then stood up and shook my hand. For the first time I understood his relief in saying good-bye. I tried to hold on, but he pulled his hand away.*

*"I'll stay in touch," he said.*

*The people on the street were hurrying by. Sixth Avenue is one-way for cars but two-way for people. I didn't mind them through the glass. Scout's Honor? I asked.*

*"Scout's Honor."*

*I tried to take his hand again, just to be sure, but he was gone. My mother had finally set him free.*

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## **Saturday**

Disaster. We missed the snatch, both Grub and me. We've been run off from the cleft. We were awakened—or rather, I was awakened by Grub. I was dragged out of the cleft and onto my feet, past the 3 HS with long spears at the cave door. Grub had smelled them before he had seen or heard them. They seized our supplies and the fire, and of course, the cleft, as we scurried up the rocks toward the ice above. They had no interest in following or harming us, just scaring us away. I can now see what happened in the Encounter: the HS didn't kill off the NTs: they only grabbed their sites, their food, their

fires, and ran them off; and ate those of their children who fell into their hands. That was enough. Meanwhile, it is getting dark, and Grub is counting on me to build a fire. I will make it a small one, to be sure.

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*I used to love Saturdays, I think, but now they felt sad, even at the lab. I wondered where Ron was, in the air somewhere. He likes to fly. Of course it was none of my business, not anymore. I almost wished my mother were still alive. I would have somebody to call. There are lots of phones at the lab. Sunday was the same.*

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## **Sunday**

There was no snatch. Nothing happened. The HS who ran us off are still in the cleft, 2 of them. If I had left the com behind, you would at least have them. To their surprise. It was all I could do to drag Grub close enough to see. He's terrified. Me, too. We're 144 hours from a new snatch, if it can be accomplished. I am going to try and keep these coms down to keep the batteries functioning as long as possible. Haven't seen the sun since I got here.

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*On Monday I had a personal eyes-only message from the Foundation. Attached was an e-ticket for a flight to New Mexico to discuss the new project. Don't they know I never fly? I scrolled on down and there it was, my next-to-last message, from the distant past and near future:*

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## Monday

This morning Grub and I found 4 of his band, fireless and frozen in a small cave high on the ridgeline, above the ice. We buried them with great effort. No sign of the others, no more than 5 or 6. I have a dreadful feeling that they are in fact the last band, childless now. When the HS took their fire, they signed their death warrant, unless the NTs luck upon a lightning strike or a live volcano. Perhaps such events are not as rare "then" as they are "now." We'll see.

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*On Tuesday I went to the Bagel Beret alone for the first time. It felt weird. Don't think I'll go back. Today's message, my last, cleared it all up. I now know who the messages are from. I also know that I will fly to New Mexico. I will have to "suck it up" and go. It is only one stop on a longer journey.*

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## Tuesday

This may be my last, since even the LP light on the com is dying. Giving up the ghost, I think is the term. We have other worries anyway. More HS have arrived in the site below. We see them in 2s and 3s, out hunting. Us? We aren't about to find out. Tomorrow we are going to cross the ridge and see if we can pick up tracks. Grub sleeps now, but it was hours before he stopped shivering. His hands wouldn't leave hold of mine. Please don't leave me, he said with that NT mix of gesture and touch and speech, and I said I wouldn't, but I could tell he didn't believe me, and who could blame him? He was alone in the world, more alone, I suspected, than he knew. If his band is alive (and I doubt it) they are somewhere above us, childless, fireless, slowly dying of heartbreak and cold. I shiver to think of it. You won't leave me? he asked again, tentatively, all fingertips, right before he went to sleep. I put his fingertips on my lips so he would understand what I was saying and know that it was for him, Grub.

Scout's Honor, I said.

The End