

THE CALDERA OF GOOD FORTUNE

by Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us that inspiration for the following story came “a couple of summers back. My family and I went to Estes Park, in Colorado, on vacation. It’s a small town on the Front Range, and since there’s no big snow in winter, the tourists arrive only in summer. We were riding the local cable car up a mountainside, and some fellow in his thirties—a local, I gathered—bummed a free ride. I pieced together that he was a rock climber of some fame. The old mountain goat was telling stories, working hard to impress a high schooler with his casual daring. Later, at an outdoor concert, a pair of summer police officers strolled past. They were young women, probably in their earliest twenties, and, without question, they were the prettiest cops I have ever seen. Every man in the crowd watched them pass. Then my wife quietly muttered, ‘You can feel the intimidation, can’t you?’ ‘Caldera’ rolled around in my head until I decided to put it on the Great Ship. And then it proved exceptionally easy to write.”

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1

The hamlet was forbidden to wear any name, and, by decree, its population and borders were never allowed to grow. Tucked inside a high valley, the tiny community was flanked on three sides by walls of dense, ancient rock—a black rock flecked with white and dubbed “granite” because of a passing resemblance to the bones of Old Earth. Stunted forests of cold-adapted, light-starved trees grew wild on those slopes, while the caldera’s rim was reserved for native life forms. Visiting the rim required special permission from the Luckies. Exceptions were allowed when one of the hamlet’s permanent citizens acted as an Honored Guide. Twenty-five hundred humans, aliens, and AIs lived permanently in the nameless hamlet. On the strength of an address, even the laziest among them made good livings. Passengers came from the far reaches of the Great Ship, eager to walk the high rim and gaze into the caldera’s magnificent lake. But when the prolonged winter was finished—when the signs pointed at catastrophic change—the fattest of the fat times began. The lake began to simmer and bubble, and news quickly spread among the wealthy everywhere. Suddenly tens of thousands of strangers would ride the tram into the high valley, dressed for the brutal cold, happily paying insane fees for the chance to sleep in somebody’s cellar or attic, or stacked like logs in the back of a little closet. The hamlet was transformed by these bright cheery souls who sang

drinking songs and spent fortunes on the overpriced food, all while watching vapor rising from behind the towering rim. Guests were constantly searching out the natives, asking them when the caldera would finally erupt. Soon, was the standard reply; unless of course the Luckies decided otherwise. But how long would the eruption last, if it actually began? Ten Ship-days was the average—time enough for the entire lake to boil skyward and freeze solid. And how big and beautiful would the new mountain be? Enormous and gorgeous, the residents promised. And that wasn't just because they wanted to peel more money from these prosperous souls; even the most jaded, sun-starved citizens looked forward to the spectacle of fragile, moon-washed ice hanging over their drab little home.

Narrow trails crisscrossed the valley walls, eventually leading to the rim. But hiking was thankless work and a considerable investment of time. Cable cars offered quicker, easier journeys. For thousands of years, tourists had gathered inside the spacious, overheated cable car station, and locals who wanted work sat with their backs to the caldera, gossiping with one another, waiting patiently for the first worthwhile offer.

Crockett had planned to do nothing that day but sleep. The lake had been steaming for weeks, and he'd already made plenty. But then a friend mentioned that today only, a certain pair of security officers was patrolling in and around the cable car station.

As it happened, those officers were very beautiful and very human.

At the end of winter, when the hamlet was jammed with strangers, outsiders were hired to help fill critical jobs. Included in their ranks was a platoon of security officers, human and otherwise. Judging the age of immortals was difficult; modern flesh and bone endured the ages as well as any granite could. But those two women carried a palpable, delicious sense of youth. They smiled constantly—weightless, untroubled grins common to barely grown people. In their walks and the secure tilt of their heads, they looked unaffected by responsibility. Their skin was as smooth and clear as any Crockett had ever seen, which was another clue: After a few centuries of life, most humans cultivated wrinkles near the eyes, hinting at wisdoms that might or might not be present. If appearances could be believed, those two girls were thrilled to be living in the hamlet, however briefly. They always patrolled together, whispering to each other constantly, and they shared giggles and various knowing looks. Several times, Crockett had watched them standing in the middle of a crowded street, ignoring the shoving bodies, holding gloved hands as they gazed up at the distant rim of the caldera and the curtain of fresh steam that rose into the gloom and then froze, falling where the winds let it fall as this spring's first snow.

Those girls were the reason Crockett walked to the cable car station and sat with his neighbors, making small talk while deflecting the tourists: He was waiting for that moment when he would see the objects of his affection.

“Is my offer not enough?” asked a lumbering Tamias.

“Your offer is most generous,” Crockett replied, examining the alien’s rodent-like face with an appropriately indirect gaze. “But my ass is comfortable, and I will leave it where it is for now.”

Next came a Hippocamus that shuffled forwards—a pregnant male, by the looks of its belly. The creature took a deep breath and held the rich air inside his long neck, assessing the captured odors. Then he bowed to Crockett, but before he could speak, the human warned, “I am claimed by others, my friend. At present, I am helpless to help you.”

Without complaint, the alien stepped down the line and took another defining breath, and after a few moments of conversation, hired a little Janusian couple to be his Guides.

Human tourists happened to notice the rebuff. Judging by appearances, they looked like a married couple, and married for a very long time. The wife was less pretty than her husband, carrying quite a few millennia on her bones. Both of them had stepped off a cable car that just returned from the rim, wearing smiles and heavy, self-heating coats and tall boots that had recently walked in the snow. The pretty man approached Crockett. “We wish we could have stayed longer,” he confessed. “But our guide was tired, and we had to ride back with her.”

Crockett shrugged. “The Luckies won’t let you stay up there alone.”

The old woman offered a respectable fee.

Crockett was tempted, but only to a point.

“Not enough, is it?” her husband asked.

“I’m a little nervous,” Crockett lied. Then he glanced over his shoulder, mentioning, “This eruption is late. It could come any time now.”

“Are you certain?” the woman asked.

“Maybe,” Crockett conceded with an amiable laugh. “The lake’s been simmering longer than usual, and eventually, all that warm water has to leap into the sky.”

He had no real predictive skills. Only the Luckies knew when a full eruption was imminent, and they never gave clues.

“Is this your job?” the pretty man asked. “Warning away the innocent?”

“It would be good noble work,” Crockett allowed.

Then the wife tugged on her husband’s elbow. “Maybe we should go back to our room, dear.”

Crockett liked to believe that he understood women. One of the attractions of living in this nameless place was the parade of wealthy, carefree ladies. This particular old woman gave every sign of wanting attention, and, for a few moments, Crockett imagined that he was her husband. She seemed like an elegant creature, accustomed to money but not spoiled by the stuff. He appreciated that old-fashioned face and build, and maybe there was an old-fashioned address in her past. Could she have come from the Old Earth? That was a fascinating prospect, and watching the amorous couple stroll off into the darkness, he promised himself that he would find them tomorrow. For a modest fee, he’d offer his services as an Honored Guide ... just to spend a few hours with them, testing his guesses against whatever they revealed about their lives....

Besides Crockett, the only Guides remaining were a pair of rubber-faced AIs and a fiery little vesper. But the little sun had just set, and, as often happened when night began, tourists grew more interested in dinner than a walk in the cold. The vesper soon rose and danced his way home. The AIs plugged into each other, vanishing in their own unimaginable ways. Crockett was alone, and the two objects of interest—those delightful security officers—had yet to pass through the station. Were they delayed? Did some criminal business ruin their timetable? Crockett turned in his chair, watching the banks of steam illuminated by moonlight; and then he heard a sound and looked forward again, exactly at the moment when the two lovelies strode into the almost empty room.

He offered a smile and soft sigh.

Effervescent as always, the officers responded with as much of a glance as he could have hoped for. They were delightful young ladies, each

lovely in her way. The shorter one was muscular, with meaty breasts and a buoyant ass. By contrast, her companion was tall and elegant, blessed with a lip-rich mouth and eyes that couldn't have been brighter.

"Hello," Crockett managed.

Giggling, their hands met for a moment.

Not for the first time, he wondered if they were lovers. That was the rumor most often heard during these last weeks. But his favorite gossip was that yes, they were passionate toward one another, but with room and the grace to invite a third party into their passion.

"Everybody else is home or on the rim," he mentioned.

Really, couldn't he find something more memorable to say?

"We should visit the rim sometime," said the taller girl. With a flip of that pretty head, she declared, "You know, we could make it up there and back again before our dinner break is done."

They must have a very long break, Crockett thought.

Since the officers weren't permanent residents, the Luckies—the unseen aliens who owned this realm—wouldn't allow them close without a Guide. Crockett saw his opportunity. In an instant, he came up with an amount that would make him the perfect companion: Not too much, but then again, not so cheap that they'd think he was begging for the honor.

For a long, delightful moment, those two lovely faces stared at him.

Then together, without a word being said, they approached the twin AIs, alerting them of their presence with a pointed finger and a spark of static electricity.

Moments later, a cable car pulled out of the station, four passengers rising silently into the darkness.

This hadn't worked out at all. Crockett waited a few moments, and then he stood, putting on his hood, preparing for the sad walk home.

A lone figure stepped into the vacant station.

Countless aliens were passengers on the Great Ship. According to

official counts, thousands of species were among the wealthy, exceptionally important souls onboard, and some aliens took a multitude of physical forms. Of course not every entity wished to visit the Caldera of Good Fortune. But Crockett had never met the species standing before him. Even a rapid search of reliable databases came up with nothing but a few similar creatures. The entity was humanoid and small, with a tiny sucking mouth and smoky white eyes large enough to nearly fill its elliptical face. Those odd eyes regarded Crockett for a contemplative moment. And then, through its translator, the creature asked, “What would be a fair price to ride with me? Up to the top...?”

Crockett sliced what was fair in half.

He would have done it for free, happily. But then again, he was still a little upset that his girlfriends had so brazenly ignored him.

* * * *

2

During those years and decades while the caldera slept, tourists arriving at the hamlet were as likely to gaze at the sky as to stare at the Luckies. Onboard the Great Ship, every habitat wore an elaborate disguise—false horizons painted on cavern walls, with suns and stars wheeling overhead on what was only rock and timeless hyperfiber. But most of these illusions demanded pragmatism over accuracy. A green sky might show clouds and two lovely suns, and then the suns would set, revealing stars by the thousands aligned in a pattern that matched a cherished view some thousand light-years in the past. But modest telescopes focused on any of those stars would reveal the fiction: This artificial cosmos was composed of simple, bland specks of light. Only the brightest few pretended to spit out flares and gas. Only the nearest few were accompanied by the faint glows of other worlds. The universe was rendered accurately enough to fool both casual and lazy eyes—the familiar, indolent vision common to those who have lived for eons inside the same house. Even the most attentive species had limits to their skies. Point telescopes at the blackness between any two stars, and a thousand dimmer suns should be waiting to be found. And if you built even larger mirrors out of polished glass and photon traps, and then peered between the intricate dusts or out toward some galaxy floating on the edge of Creation, there always came a point—that well-defined and inevitable line of exhaustion—where the stars and dim galaxies that should be visible were missing. Were not.

It was the same for the Luckies. But their ceiling was managed by an

army of dedicated AIs working with the best available squidskin—an intricate medium that produced light and darkness on a near-atomic scale. Seeing where the illusions broke down ... well, that kind of telescope was far beyond what most tourists could carry or drag up to the hamlet, much less all the way to the high ridge.

“I love this view,” Crockett allowed, hoping to generate conversation. Or even just a neutral comment.

But the alien seemed to cherish its silence.

Luckies loved their sky, and with reason. Their home world was tucked inside a thick bright arm of the Milky Way, not far from an active star nursery. Gaze north, away from the ridge, and the false sky had a beauty and majesty that even the shallowest soul would notice. But the local space was even richer: Five massive moons orbited a substantial brown dwarf, and the brown dwarf was dancing with a quiet little K-class sun, each orbit taking years to accomplish. The Luckies lived on the third moon, tidally locked and constantly massaged by its hefty neighbors. The inner neighbors were volcanic superstars, baked in radiation and their own fierce internal heat; while the outer moons were originally ice-clad and exceptionally cold, but with deep seas waiting beneath their surface.

Crockett liked the illusion of this sky more than the illusion of the landscape. Distant cavern walls were decorated with images of a frigid, bleak and deceptively bland terrain—a slow-moving illusion showcasing volcanoes and stubborn glaciers and wide expanses of lifeless, inert stone.

The Honored Guide turned, and not quite looking at those enormous white eyes, he introduced himself by name.

His companion offered no sound or visible motion.

“Luckies have rules,” warned Crockett. “A resident like myself ... I’m allowed to live here because ages ago, I won a lottery. I’m exceptionally lucky, for a human. And with my address comes the understanding that only my friends can be brought up to the ridge....”

The alien offered a soft chirp.

“Let’s go through the motions,” Crockett suggested. “For the sake of law and custom, tell me your name.”

A moment passed, and another. Then the alien chirped again, and its

translator said, "Doom."

"Doom?"

The translator spoke for itself. "That is my best approximation. But it is imperfect, and I apologize."

"What language does the creature use?"

"I cannot say."

"You aren't free to name it?"

"Perhaps I am. But my expertise feels incomplete."

The cable car had been accelerating since leaving the station, riding on a nanowhisker too small to be seen. Once and then twice again, descending cars sped past them, brightly lit and filled with visitors and their newfound friends. Crockett waved at his neighbors. Then he shut down his car's lights, allowing the full effect of the sky to work on odd, silent Doom.

The brown dwarf was a flattened disk barely visible through the vaporous clouds. But an inner moon lay far enough to one side to be visible—a rough orange and black blister of a world, chunks of its crust melting and exploding outwards with a violence that only looked impressive.

"You know," Crockett began. "All the computing power that goes into these stars, the brown dwarf, and every major and minor moon..."

Then he consciously stopped talking.

After a long pause, his companion said, "I am listening."

"The Luckies have peculiar personalities. And a unique biology, as I understand it. They're an old species, yet it took them a long time—a billion years, nearly—to build starships. Not that they weren't interested in their own sky. You see, their preferred habitat are these hot caldera lakes. Each caldera had its own vantage point, its unique and distinct view of the stars. And whenever different populations spoke, they spent a great deal of time explaining what they could see—star for star; moon for moon."

Doom did not speak. But the big eyes were gazing upward, at least accidentally showing interest.

“You probably know all this,” Crockett continued, “but during their entire history, the Luckies have built only a handful of starships. Elaborate ships and very reliable, but exceptionally difficult to piece together.” Then he held up his hand, squeezing two fingers close together. “A single Lucky is only this big.”

The size of a dust mite, in essence.

“But of course, they’re never found as individuals. Autochemotrophic metabolisms. Low energy, minimal complexity. Not only aren’t they particularly bright creatures, when taken alone, but they’re pretty much helpless, too.”

Was he interesting his client, or boring it? Either way, Crockett was enjoying his impromptu lecture.

“A few million Luckies are about as sharp as one average human brain,” he mentioned. “But they aren’t happy until they number in the hundreds of trillions. That’s what lives on the other side of this mountain. A nation of tiny entities all tied together. Together, they build giant eyes that float on their lake home, catching every wandering photon. And when enough of the Luckies think hard on one subject, they can dream up the greatest thoughts imaginable.” He shrugged, adding, “So what if it took millions of years to accrete a workable starship out of hot ores and salty, acidic water? They had time, and the patience. Really, if you want my opinion, they’re incredible, wonderful organisms.”

Several more cable cars passed by, looking like gaudy balloons quickly losing altitude. Without exception, the faces inside the balloons were happy, either glad for their adventure or glad to be returning home again.

“Wonderful creatures,” he repeated.

Doom was certainly alien, but Crockett sensed emotion. The eyes were jumping inside their sockets now, and the mouth was cocked in a way that didn’t look comfortable. It was nervous. *He* was nervous. Plenty of species lacked a sense of gender, but Crockett had spent most of his life riding inside these cars with aliens, and that gave him a healthy respect for his own intuitions.

“Luckies have a weird, interesting model of reality,” Crockett continued. “I’m sure you know this. But the idea enjoys repetition.”

A tight little breath was audible over the cold hum of the wind.

“Our universe is nothing more, or less, than a very pretty and intensely busy picture. An image that happens to exist on the wall of someone else’s living room.” With a sweeping gesture, Crockett explained, “If we had some eye that could reach out far enough—into those realms hidden by the Grand Inflation—then the stars would cease to be. The galaxies and quasars and dark-matter masses ... all those magnificent illusions would simply vanish....”

“Nothing is real,” Doom whispered.

“To the Luckies, everything and everyone are fictions. And existence is simply the oldest, finest illusion.”

Crockett’s new friend whimpered. That was the best description for the mournful little sound. Then the big eyes closed, the lids rising from below, and he said, “Well, perhaps we should hope these little creatures are correct.”

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3

Regardless of origins and no matter the vagaries of physiologies, trees adapted to severe cold and darkness often shared physical traits. Large, almost weightless leaves, mirrored and spread wide in the daylight, gathering the glow of the weak illusionary sun, bouncing it into a central bud or vein that was always black or purplish—a spherical receptor encased within an organic crystal, transparent but heavily insulated, clinging to every trace of useable heat. What was living inside any tree was tiny. Think of a man’s dead body with a busy heart still beating in the chest; those were the normal proportions. Trees growing in the hamlet had the richest, easiest environment. Warmth leaked from the homes, and the streetlamps were blessings. But it took even the most vigorous Gany-mede pine a hundred years for its bulb to expand as much as a good heart filling with hot, living blood.

Perhaps there were other ways to build cold trees. But Crockett had no experience with them. Since coming to the hamlet as a young boy, he had never left. He couldn’t afford to go anywhere, since that meant losing his cherished resident status. But he was free to travel by virtual routes, which he did on occasion—witnessing habitats inside the Great Ship and across the galaxy. In general, Crockett preferred hot bright places where

trees grew tall as hills and left behind the beautiful wood that he would buy with a tiny portion of his savings, using it to add accents and warmth to the walls of his own tiny house.

Beneath the cable car, the meager local forest was vanishing.

And a moment later, it was gone.

Half a dozen cable cars were sliding past, and with a rough calculation, Crockett decided that only one or two more remained above. The security officers hadn't given up. Smiling, he let himself imagine the girls waiting for him. He pictured them standing side by side, their pretty faces obscured by the layers of heated clothing, but their breath coming quickly with anticipation, emerging into the gloom and mixing and rising into the rising steam and the falling snows.

The eruption would come today, or next week. Or after several more months of patient bubbling, the heat would dissipate, the artificial magma allowed to cool until this carefully regulated hazard was past.

Eruptions were much the same on the Luckies' home world. Quakes and rising plumes could burst free anywhere. A new volcano might build and then later explode, leaving a gaping wound. Then the heated groundwater would percolate through the fractured crust, filling every hole with a fresh young lake. The first colonists to arrive inside a new caldera were the fortunate ones. They and their descendants ruled until the next eruption. Hence the name: Luckies.

Most cold worlds were sterile, or, at best, had stunted forests incapable of feeding the slowest bug. But the Luckies' home world enjoyed its own good fortune. The soggy, constantly shifting crust was filled with microbes using every metabolic trick. They danced with energetic irons and sodiums, carbon monoxides and nitrates. But the real producers were root-like giants—underground forests that choked every crevice, every pore, feasting on piezoelectric reactions and the physical flexing of the ground, even pumping water into the magma pools, creating steam that powered elaborate, turbine-like organs.

Every eruption was preceded by a season of rapid, joyous growth.

The Luckies riding the Great Ship had just this one caldera. Cataclysmic eruptions weren't possible, much less sought after. But the general rhythms of their old life held sway: Their lake simmered and then boiled, and their crystalline bodies separated and grew tough spore-like

shells. Then the volcano erupted, flinging the water skyward as a scalding cloud, and trillions of tiny bodies were flung high by that carefully calibrated blast. Most of the tiny aliens fell outside the caldera, and they were dead. But those that found their way home again were blessed and knew it, and within a few months, they would be well on their way to rebuilding the society from Before.

Even locals referred to the rim community as a forest. But except for a passing resemblance to dead, leafless trees, the landscape had more in common with leaf litter, or better, with compost. The pale gray remains of dead roots had been pushed out of every hole, expelled by what was still living underground. Unlike the mirror-forests below, this realm had animal life—small crawlies and bigger crawlies, everything cloaked in fur and fat and tough genetics and variable metabolisms. But instead of the usual chirps and drummings, Crockett heard only silence. This was new. Yesterday the forest was still jabbering away; but now, for the first time, he found himself wondering if the eruption was imminent.

The cable car slid into its empty berth.

Only one other berth was filled, its passengers probably on the far side of the ridge, gazing down at the bubbling, seemingly bottomless lake.

The car stopped, a polite voice warned everyone about the cold to come, and then the main door slid open.

But the chill wasn't awful. Crockett guessed the air wasn't worse than seventy below—much warmer than the hamlet on any sun-scorched day. He stepped out onto the wide porch where tourists normally paused to acclimatize themselves, investing a few moments in consideration of witty things that he might say.

His client remained in the car.

Puzzled, Crockett stepped back inside. Doom was standing where he had always stood, but now his eyes were closed.

"Have you changed your mind?" asked Crockett.

The alien didn't speak.

"You're worried about the eruption," Crockett decided. "Well, you shouldn't be. It's a surprisingly peaceful event. I've known plenty who stayed up here while it happened. Keep inside the shelters, or even in a

likely hole, and your body won't die for more than a few hours."

Quietly, his friend said, "I will not be returning."

Crockett blinked. "What was that?"

"You may go, if you wish."

"I can't. Not and leave you here."

"But I need to be here," Doom said. "And besides, I do not require your presence. Since I have their permission."

"The Luckies, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Then why bring me at all?" Crockett asked.

Doom had six fingers on each hand, arranged three-and-three. One of his hands had just reached inside his heavy coat, digging deep while the white eyes opened, scanned the Luckies' false-forest.

"Maybe I should go home," Crockett allowed.

"You will have to walk," Doom warned. "Neither car is operational. I am certain they will have seen to that detail."

"Who saw to what?"

The creature's gaze fixed on a distant point.

Crockett asked the car door to close, but nothing happened.

Then Doom began to retrieve his hand, and with a firm, half-loud voice, he said, "My good friend, I am sorry for your involvement in this."

"Sorry—?" Crockett began.

And then the world turned to fire and a searing golden light.

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Drifting back into consciousness—in that instant when misery and clarity were roughly balanced—Crockett decided that the caldera had erupted. Where else would the flash of light come from? How else could his body have been flung hard against the floor? But then he gently set his gloved hand against his worst ache—the top of his head—and discovered that the insulated hood was missing, and his long golden hair was missing, and a palm-sized patch of the scalp had been burnt down to the hard bone. A thousand emergency systems were awake, throwing their talents into protecting the brain and knitting new flesh. Adrenalin and fancier stimulants enlarged his senses, slowing time to a contemplative crawl. Crockett wasn't scared, much less panicked. He felt alert and focused and incapable of fear, absorbing his surroundings with curiosity and a powerful, intoxicating detachment.

A focused blast had punctured the cable car, destroying the door and then the far end. The wind blowing up the valley was drifting through the gutted car and then out again, carrying away the final traces of smoke and burnt flesh. Doom lay in a corner, limp and headless. Whatever had knocked Crockett to the floor had struck the alien with its full force, evaporating tough tissues and the skull, and whatever lay beneath.

Was the brain lost?

Was his client dead?

A pragmatic voice asked how this was possible. The slow wet eruption of the caldera couldn't produce the energies necessary to kill. Maybe the rising steam and falling snow had produced some exotic species of ball lightning. But even the most murderous species of meteorology couldn't produce this kind of disaster, he told himself.

Really, this resembled a military-grade weapon—

Yes, a plasma gun. Someone higher on the ridge could have taken the shot, gutting the car this way. Except who would own such a device, and why would they, and what conceivable reason would make anyone shoot at Crockett?

But he wasn't the target.

If he were, he would be dead. Plainly.

At long last, a useful terror emerged. Crockett managed a deep

breath and dropped down, throwing both arms over his wounded head. Yet a second blast wouldn't be impressed with a few obscuring limbs. He needed to move, to hide. But he discovered that in these few moments, his terror had swollen out of control. He couldn't move, even to save himself. He lay there like a scared, whimpering boy, expecting another flash and the sudden removal of his existence.

Then the corpse sat up.

The six-fingered hand continued the motion begun before death, revealing some kind of ballistic weapon with a wide stubby barrel that lifted now—a blind hand aiming by memory or by unsuspected senses. There was a soft, almost musical report. An object flew out of the shattered car, and a moment later, a muscular blast rolled across the slope above them.

The corpse stood and began to walk, its free hand digging into a new pocket and the first gun falling on the floor beside Crockett. Brandishing a second weapon, the blind corpse fired twice again and ran through the open door, momentarily knocked off its feet when the next blasts shook the ground. But it was a determined apparition, rising once more and breaking into a run; and Crockett sat up for no other reason than to keep watch on what seemed to be the most unexpected, incredible sight of his sheltered little life.

From behind, a voice said, "Help me, my friend. My Crockett."

He turned, and the fighting corpse was forgotten.

A spider as wide as a dinner plate rose high as it could, on six jointed black legs. The body was thick and solid, fashioned from some tough species of bioceramic alloy. A mouth built only for speech was in front, and with a familiar voice, it said, "I will pay you ... all I have left..."

"Doom?" the human muttered.

"All that remains of my wealth, yes."

Crockett had heard about such tricks: Organisms in the most dangerous circumstances would peel off their bodies, and sometimes even the bone or gelatin surrounding their living minds. Then their minds were secured inside a lifeboat, tough and temporary, able to weather all but the worst abuses.

"What do you want?" Crockett asked.

More blasts peppered the slope, followed by the sizzle of a second plasmatic bolt.

“I must reach the lake—”

Crockett interrupted. “You want to get to the Luckies, don’t you?”

“I have no help but yours,” said the spider, with feeling.

“And if I don’t?” he had to ask.

“I apologize, but these ladies are professional murderers,” Doom warned. “And since you are a witness to their attempted crime—”

Another blast, higher up the slope this time.

Crockett snatched the alien gun and stood.

“My friend—?”

“We aren’t friends,” Crockett spat.

“But you will help me?”

“Yeah, that too,” he promised. “I’ll help both of us, if I can.”

* * * *

5

Some visitors to the hamlet didn’t require local guides. Diplomats representing various distant worlds had received permission, or they were scientists intrigued by the robust biosphere. But a few souls had no obvious qualifications. They were peaceful, profoundly focused individuals who preferred not to ride the cable car to the ridge, but instead would walk the steep trails, investing time and some effort into the last moments of normal life.

The hamlet residents might discuss their fate, but not often and rarely with much feeling. Free sentient entities could do any fool thing they wished, so long as no one else was hurt. And besides, there was always the chance that somebody would come looking for those who were lost, and there was money to be made from that very peculiar work.

One day, a human woman arrived on the tram. She was handsome and queenly and reserved and alluring. Rumors swirled about her desires, and Crockett managed to put himself in the position where he could impress an old lady with his professionalism and strong back.

She hired him, promising ten days of constant labor.

The first six days were spent loading the cable car with equipment that was lifted to the end of the line, then carried over foot worn trails, up to a rocky shelf on the far side of the caldera's ridge. The lake lay below them. In the middle of winter, the deep water was barely warm enough for a bath, and it was spectacularly clear—a vertical realm filled with swimming shapes and flexing tendrils and the delicate, rib-like reefs where the communal Luckies enjoyed their easy times. Alien eyes covered nearly a quarter of the lake surface—thin, profoundly black disks made of light-sensitive neurons. They were lidless and unsleeping eyes, missing nothing that happened in the sky. By comparison, the woman's telescope was tiny, feeble, and perhaps even laughable.

Crockett laughed, but only when he reached home again.

Six full days were needed just to bring the pieces of the machine up to the high shelf, and another three days were spent standing in the brutal cold. The two worked in clumsy partnership, assembling and calibrating all the components and photon traps and the generator and its backup, struggling to meet the deadline that came on that last, tenth day. By then, the Luckies' weak sun had dropped beneath the illusionary horizon. A sky that had been suffused with soft purple tones fell into total darkness. Bright stars became brilliant, and thousands of unseen stars leapt out of the night. Glancing through the viewfinder, Crockett saw more detail than he had ever imagined possible. Each one of those minuscule stars was nothing more, or less, than a colorful mark painted on an otherwise invisible ceiling. And not painted once, but endlessly—a succession of tiny, intense images that if examined closely would reveal flares and sunspots and perhaps the occasional, endlessly consistent transit of worlds. And by the same inherent logic, each tiny round patch of blackness, smaller than a bacterium, was itself imbued with a thorough, finely rendered map, invisible oceans and mountains and twisting rivers running unseen between the two.

Always, the Luckies had to feel comfortable with their sky.

Crockett understood that logic, the alien mind ... or at least he accepted the creatures' strangeness well enough to make them familiar,

and in the fashion of a tapestry hung for too long on a wall, forgettable.

But his client didn't care about stars, bright or otherwise.

The vagaries of orbits had brought both of the outer moons into view. The outermost moon was sold to humans as payment for passage onboard the Great Ship. Colonists had rapidly terraformed the prize, transforming the ice crust into a blue ocean where millions of humans lived in floating cities and submerged cities and walked along beaches designed to be idyllic. Sometimes, in a mocking mood, Crockett would tell neighbors, "I wouldn't mind visiting that place." And everybody laughed, enjoying his weak humor even as they secretly wondered how walking that sand would really feel.

The nearer moon was half-full, and following the orbit of its namesake, on that day it reached opposition with the Luckies' home moon. The two celestial bodies couldn't have been closer. That icy neighbor was as large as possible, big as a big palm riding on the end of the short arm; and while it wasn't near enough to touch, at least it managed to look genuine and immediate, even when the eyes knew it was a smear of light.

A picture.

Nothing.

Except for his presence as an Honorable Guide, Crockett wasn't needed anymore. His client told him to step away, which he did willingly. For the next few hours, he staved off boredom by watching the caldera's lake. He studied the banded face of the old brown dwarf. Then with eyes closed, he imagined sleeping with this woman with whom he had shared effort and time and very little else.

The telescope was a broad, blunt machine focused hard on one of the cities of that nearby moon. With limited success, Luckies had colonized their neighbor's natural hot springs. Starships had brought other species, and later, the Great Ship brought even more. With the available resolution, the woman found a certain building, and when the light was good, she could make out a solitary figure standing on its roof. Then with a laser barely strong enough to throw its beam across a very large room, she sent a message, and after the appropriate delay, she received an answer that made her laugh quietly and then sob to herself.

Hours passed while she conversed with that dead person.

Crockett never learned who it was. Human? Alien? Was it a former lover, or just some lost friend? In a roundabout fashion, he made inquiries. But his client pretended not to hear him, and later, she mentioned that perhaps this was none of his business, thank you.

“I was just curious,” he muttered. “Sorry, never mind.”

In the Luckies’ sky, no object was so thoroughly rendered as that neighboring moon. Knowledgeable voices claimed that not even the Ship’s captains had the computing power that was being focused on that one illusionary body. Every city on the visible hemisphere was real, as were the cities on the far side: How else could the entire organic world be maintained? Each city had its population, and every citizen had a name and address and life and loves, including the fierce hates and passionate disinterests and all the other untidy, inelegant, and wonderful hallmarks of existence. Some self-declared experts claimed the vast imagery was so thorough that every mote of dust had its own label. Every snowflake knew its place; every gust of wind had its story. And that was why the Luckies could demand fortunes from those souls who were desperate enough or odd enough to have themselves killed: Killed so those strange mite-sized creatures could tear their minds apart, revealing every memory, every cherished secret, and then slather whatever they learned to the plaster on their busy ceiling.

Finished at last, the woman turned away from the telescope and wept again.

When her grieving was finished, she called Crockett over, and, together, they dragged the telescope to the edge of the shelf and gave it one shared push. An apparatus worth plenty tumbled into the warm water. And alien bodies instantly tore it apart—the rare metals and hyperfibers most likely part of her payment.

Together, the two strangers returned to the cable cars.

In silence, they rode back down to the hamlet—a tiny place full of warm homes and real people and organisms that were as good as any person.

Only in the station, at the end, did Crockett suggest to his client that she might enjoy an evening spent with him. He meant sex, but he didn’t say it. He meant to sound friendly and fun, and that was exactly how he came across. But she reacted instantly, decisively. A knife in the belly wouldn’t have made her straighten up any faster, and with a tight, small voice, she

asked, “Why would you ever think such a thing would be half-possible?”

He blinked, too startled to react.

“You’re the one living a dream,” she informed him.

This was not the first time, nor was it the last, that Crockett wondered if perhaps he didn’t know women quite as well as he believed.

* * * *

6

The two AIs were sitting together in the false-forest, in the middle of the main path, a thin coat of new snow obscuring their faces and their high functions removed and burnt to ash.

Six mechanical legs had wrapped themselves around Crockett’s waist, the tip of each leg fused with its mate. Doom was riding him, the spidery body snug against the small of his back. The lifeboat weighed almost nothing, and sometimes it was almost possible to forget about the alien. Crockett could run naturally, long legs slicing through the deep fresh snow. He carried the bomb-throwing gun in one hand, then the other. There were moments when he almost forgot why he was running. Then the plasma weapon discharged somewhere in the Luckies’ forest, and he heard fire and saw a flash of light, followed by the stink of burning wood.

“Who are they?” Crockett whispered.

“Hired killers.”

“I know. I mean...” What did he mean? “They were security officers. Ours. Children, nearly—”

“They aren’t young,” the alien warned.

“Okay.” Crockett was following the narrow, unpopular trail that he once used to carry the telescope to the high shelf. “The women aren’t what I guessed. But I want to know—”

An explosion shook snow off the gray roots.

“My body has expired,” Doom reported. Then with a curiously buoyant joy, he added, “But it did earn us time and distance.”

Crockett stumbled.

“Careful,” said his companion.

“I want to know,” Crockett managed as he stood. “Who hired your killers?”

“My enemies.”

“Well, yes...”

“If you learned their identities, perhaps you would know too much.”

“So what are you?” Crockett asked. “And why did you deserve this—?”

“I am nobody, and I did nothing.” The alien adjusted his grip as the trail began to climb. “Nobody and nothing,” Doom repeated.

Crockett glanced at the weapon. Could his hands use this thing?

“I boarded the Great Ship to escape my enemies.”

“That happens a lot,” Crockett agreed.

“But they came with me, my enemies did. They hate me that much.”

From behind and far below, a woman’s voice shouted out a single word:

“Tracks.”

Crockett muttered, “Shit,” and ran harder.

“Eight centuries, I have been onboard this wonderful starship. I have made a habit of regularly changing identities and habits. But my enemies always find me, and three times before, they have sent agents to put an end to me.”

“Go to the captains,” Crockett suggested. “Can’t they help?”

Silence.

“They won’t, will they? Why now? Are you some kind of criminal?”

“If I was,” the alien pointed out, “then my enemies would invite the captains’ aid in finding me.”

Probably so.

“This is a private, difficult concern.”

The trail angled to the right, flattened and then lifted steeply again. A single plasmatic round passed overhead, near enough that the air warmed, and with the brilliant yellowish glare, the surface of the snow turned to fresh vapor.

“I am sorry to involve you, my friend.”

“We aren’t friends,” Crockett gasped.

“Of course not.”

“Will this be the end?” he asked. “If you reach the Luckies ... will it put an end to everything...?”

“I believe so.”

“Because you’ll be dead.”

Silence.

How much farther? Crockett had walked this path thousands of times, but never in these awful circumstances. Never this fast, and never this slow. He felt as if he was in a nightmare, the snow growing deeper for no reason other than to fight every stride. He was aching and sick with fear, and sometimes he caught himself wondering what would happen if he just dropped the damned bug. It would probably crawl after him, he guessed. So then he’d turn and give the creature a good finishing kick.

Crockett tried to sprint, stumbled and slid backward a few meters.

As he struggled to rise, the legs around his belly tightened. “No,” said Doom. “Remain where you are.”

Crockett could taste the steam rising off the boiling lake—a rich, acrid scent created by shredded organics and heavy metals. “Why?” he

muttered.

“Here you are invisible to them.”

“But they’re coming,” he pointed out. “They’re going to find us—”

“Please wait.”

The runaway terror had returned.

A very tiny eye lifted high above the spider’s body. “Below us stands a substantial rooting body,” Doom explained. “He is parabolic in shape, and much taller than any of his neighbors.”

“What do you want?”

“With both hands, grasp the weapon’s trigger mechanism. Yes, that is the technique. In a few moments, I would like you to sit up and aim at that large root ... and please, twist the trigger until the magazine is empty...”

“Will that stop them?”

“With luck, you will earn us more time,” Doom replied.

Crockett took a deep breath, fighting to clear his head. “Letting the Luckies kill you...” he began. “Is that a reasonable solution...?”

“I am living in death now,” the creature pointed out. “By doing this, I will simply be exchanging one afterlife for another.”

Crockett breathed again.

“Now, my friend. Turn. Shoot. And then, please run...!”

* * * *

7

Explosions tore apart the dead wood, and secondary charges ignited the airborne chunks and splinters, creating a rolling blaze that pushed its way down the slope, melting and searing all that lay in its brilliant orange path.

Crockett threw down the empty weapon and sprinted uphill, his frantic shadow leading the way. For an instant, from out of the firestorm, he heard

what might have been a single voice screaming in misery. Or it was random noise. Then the voice vanished within the boiling crackle of sap, and he reached the crest of the ridge and gratefully started down the other side.

In a few steps, there was no snow underfoot.

The air turned blacker and denser, choked with moisture and a miserable heat. A quick succession of hard shocks sprang from some deep, angry place. Crockett stumbled. He stood and then stumbled again. From his left came the ominous rumblings of a thick, newborn geyser. Finding his feet and balance, he warned, "The eruption's starting."

"Run," the alien kept advising.

"Where?"

"To the lake."

"But the eruption—"

"It has not arrived," Doom replied. "My saviors shared with me the moment of the Birth Catastrophe, and we have several minutes remaining..."

Crockett discovered that the air was less awful when he bent low, and that was how he ran—a clumsy pitched-forward stride—and when he could see nothing useful, which was most of the time, he would close his burning, tearing eyes, navigating by a mixture of feel and panicked memory.

The trail suddenly flattened out.

Here was the high rock shelf where he and that odd woman had assembled the telescope. But the sky was stolen away. Stars and the elaborate moons were hidden behind a growing flume, superheated vapors rising from the lake's center, lifting countless spores with them. Crockett took a step and coughed and managed two more steps before his windpipe began to scald. Then he paused, kneeling forward for what was supposed to be a brief, brief rest. But without oxygen, his body was descending into emergency metabolisms. Energies were dipping, and his eyes refused to stop weeping, and when he tried to rise it was too soon, and he tripped and fell again, losing all sense of direction.

The spidery machine deployed more eyes.

“Let go of me and run,” Crockett advised.

“Quiet,” said Doom.

“I’m slowing you down,” Crockett argued.

Then his companion yanked the jointed legs, threatening to cut his body in two. And very softly, Doom said, “One is with us. The tall one is here.”

With both fists, Crockett wiped at his eyes. Then he forced the lids to open, but he saw nothing except for the perfect blackness. The universe was him and this apparition that refused to release him, plus nothingness without end or purpose, comfort or hope. But at least his anaerobic metabolisms were awake now. He had enough strength to stand, and from that new perspective, he realized that he could hear the boiling lake lying straight ahead.

He took three increasingly small steps, feeling for the edge.

Each motion caused Doom to pull his legs in close again, but the creature didn’t offer so much as a whisper of advice.

With the third step, a new shape appeared before Crockett—a geometrical simple shape composed of dark lines joined together, each line moving slowly according to its own desires. Too late, he understood what he was seeing. The beautiful tall killer was standing directly in his path, probably fully aware of his presence and his hopelessness. Yet Doom chose that moment to speak again—in an abrupt, rather loud voice—telling his companion, “Run. Past her, and jump over the edge—”

“I’ll die,” he interrupted.

“My saviors will not let that happen. I promise.”

Even if the alien was telling the truth—if the Luckies would willingly digest his brain and volunteer their computing power to let an extra illusion walk their nonexistent moon—this wasn’t what Crockett wanted. Never. With both hands, he grabbed the encircling legs, hard tugs accomplishing nothing while he cried out, “Get off me. Drop!”

The alien refused.

Crockett sucked in the hot black air and screamed. “Here I am! I’ve

got him here. Here!”

Doom pulled his legs close, crushing the human guts.

The tall girl stepped closer, and then she set off a floating flare that lifted several meters overhead, throwing a hard bluish glare across the black rock of the shelf. A transparent mask lay over her pretty face, allowing her to breathe slowly and naturally. As always, she looked like a supremely happy soul. With a warm joyful smile, she watched Crockett fighting with his companion. She seemed utterly amused by the situation. Without question, she had won, but why didn't she use the plasma gun riding in her long left hand? Then another figure emerged from the fumes—a short strong human, badly burnt but already beginning to heal.

The second killer said “Hello” to her partner.

She wasn't wearing a breathing mask. It was lost or destroyed, or maybe she didn't feel it was necessary anymore.

“I was waiting for you,” the tall girl allowed.

“Thank you.” That beautiful face had been destroyed, eaten to the bone by the firestorm. A sloppy mouth remained, withered lips and the stump of a tongue barely able to speak. “You almost made it,” she managed, studying Crockett with a pair of freshly grown eyes. But she was speaking to the alien. She said, “Mr. Doom,” and broke into a mocking laugh.

Too late, Crockett stepped toward the lake.

The tall girl had a second weapon—a tiny kinetic gun that neatly shattered both of his shins, leaving him sprawled out on his right side.

“You want your friend pulled off ?” the tall girl asked.

The short girl fell to her knees. For a moment, she teased Crockett with that brutalized mouth, threatening to give him a dry, sooty kiss. Then she reached around back and used a special tool, and the machine-spider released its grip and fell helplessly onto its back.

“Make sure,” the short girl advised.

The tall girl deftly opened the armored carapace, and what she saw made her pause. Crockett couldn't see the lovely face against the glare

directly overhead, and perhaps she couldn't see anything well enough because of her own shadow. Then she rocked backward, letting the full light of the flare fall into the cavity—a cavity designed to carry a mind that was most definitely missing.

“The crafty shit,” the tall girl muttered.

“A second lifeboat,” her partner muttered. “There must have been, and I didn't notice—”

“You didn't,” the tall girl agreed testily.

From the beginning, Crockett realized, he had been carrying an empty vessel—a package of programs and contingencies that was masquerading as a poor miserable soul facing death.

“He lied to me,” Crockett complained.

The short girl laughed at him, or herself.

“The shit,” said the tall girl once again.

Then the two of them traded glances, and the short girl climbed to her feet and moved out of the way. And her partner said, “Nothing personal,” and pointed her plasma gun at Crockett's cowering face—

The empty spider flinched and leaped high.

When it detonated, the six long legs were driven hard into both women, cutting through spines and bones, leaving them in mangled wet piles ... and allowing Crockett just enough time to crawl into a crevice where he wedged his own battered body, the next moment or two spent thanking his own considerable luck.

And with that, the caldera exploded.

* * * *

8

Watching the eruption from below, various neighbors recalled having seen three friends accompanying clients to the ridge. Did they return in time? No? Well, incidents like this always seemed to happen, and usually more bodies were involved. But neither the hottest water or deepest snow could

kill, and from experience, they understood that it was best to wait several days, letting the new mountain build itself to where its foundation was stable and as predictable as could be hoped for.

The deep lake continued to explode upwards, and the thick white steam cooled, falling again as waves of snow and delicate formations of ice. Gas bubbles and volcanic soot complicated the complex, ever-changing layering. No two mountains were ever the same, and this particular eruption built the tallest peak in memory—a lofty, single-vent ice volcano that looked as if it was willfully reaching for the ceiling, and with that, trying to touch the painted stars.

Steam was still pouring upwards when the rescue party found the burnt-out cable car, and shortly after that, the two dead AIs.

What had seemed routine was not.

More volunteers joined in the desperate efforts. Portable heaters cut half a dozen tunnels up the ridge and down the other side. Two more days passed before the next body was discovered: One of the temporary security officers, horrifically maimed but conscious enough to point at her colleague. “It was the alien,” she managed to say with her frozen, half-healed face. “Watch for him, and be careful,” she warned. Then someone asked about Crockett’s whereabouts, and she paused for a moment, in thought, before directing them toward the shelf’s edge, into the scorching depths of the caldera itself.

“The poor bastard,” was the general consensus.

The other officer’s body was dug out of the ice, and both victims were carried back down to the hamlet; and after a full day of intense medical care, the two ageless women got out of bed and grabbed each other by the hand, and a few moments later, they walked to the tram and rode away, leaving the habitat for places unmentioned.

A few hours later, one of the local vespers was hired to bring a married couple into the temporary ice tunnels. It was the woman, Queen Lee, who discovered Crockett’s mangled body. With her husband’s help, she dragged the lucky man into a convenient chamber. The vesper wanted to leave Crockett there and chase after help. But the humans decided to feed the man their modest dinners, and by keeping their patient warm and comfortable, it took only a few hours for him to recover to where he could stand on his own and walk slowly.

Crockett told them what had happened. He claimed that he wanted to go home immediately, but at the last moment, standing inside an empty car, he had a sudden change of mind.

“But I wish to leave now,” the vesper snapped.

“I’m staying here for a while longer,” said Crockett. Covering his head with a makeshift cap, he turned to his saviors, adding, “You’re welcome to walk with me.”

“What’s the fee?” asked the husband, with a suspicious tone.

“Perri,” his wife snapped. “Does it matter—?”

“For nothing,” said Crockett. Then he smiled weakly, adding, “For the fun of it. How would that be?”

Tourists were exploring the new landscape—a giant gray-white dome of ice and air pockets and vantage points that would never exist in quite this way again. In another few weeks, the residual heat of the eruption would begin melting the mountain’s bones. Small quakes and a few large ones would cause spectacular avalanches. Eventually the caldera would fill with slush and dirt and the sleeping Luckies too, and the lake would be reborn, and a civilization that was already ancient when Earth was ruled by single-celled life would gracefully begin all over again.

But for this particular moment, three humans could walk safely on the face of the mountain.

Again, Crockett told his story.

Slowly, carefully, Perri and Quee Lee asked little questions, forcing him to explain those points that were hardest to explain. The sun was down, as it happened. And the nearest moon had risen just an hour ago—an almost full circle of ice and warm villages and unreal cities and teeming millions. Assuming that he had reached the lake, Doom was living there now. Or at least some elaborate bottle of intelligence, with his name and identity, believed that it was living on that spot of light cast up on that finite sky.

“He isn’t safe,” Crockett muttered.

His companions listened patiently.

“His enemies ... they won't stop just because of this ... inconvenience...” A keen sorrow ran through the voice. Quietly, he said, “One year from now, or in a thousand and one years ... somebody will pass through the hamlet, pretending to be like all the others who want the Luckies' tricks. The stranger will want to make his family rich, or maybe he won't have anything else to lose. The reasons don't matter. All that counts is that he'll walk up a trail and surrender his body to the aliens, and the Luckies will put him up on that moon there, and in another year, or fifty thousand years, he'll finally accomplish what he was hired to do.” Crockett sighed, gesturing at that patch of cold light. “One way or another, Death is going to find its way there.”

“It's the same for all of us,” Perri whispered.

Crockett glanced at him. For a moment, his face twisted with genuine horror; but then the horror slowly faded, replaced by a strange, bright expression that looked like pure wild joy.

During the eventual cable car descent, Crockett asked his new friends if they often traveled around the Great Ship.

“Sometimes we stop wandering,” Quee Lee replied with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Name your hundred favorite destinations,” said Crockett. Then he added, “The warm, bright places, I mean. Alien and human both.”

Perri quickly supplied a list of more than a hundred habitats.

The car slid into its berth, and Crockett thanked both of them for everything, and then he walked out of the station, past his home and the little party of friends and neighbors who were waiting inside to surprise him ... past them and out of the hamlet entirely, stepping onto the first tram available, and without one backward glance, leaving behind the unreal for those things that truly had to matter.