

Windrider

Jack McDevitt

The Navigators towered over the desert. Unmoving, enigmatic, ominous, they thrust ribbed bowls at the sky. Moonlight filled the bowls, silvered the supporting beams and struts, and touched the network of ground rails that connected the giants with each other.

They shall be a sign of my promise to you.

George hunched forward on his horse. The wind was warm and dry out of the north. The breath of the Almighty. "God is good," he said.

Marty lowered his cowl, and reached into his saddle bag. He had to push the staff aside to get into it. He pulled out a pair of binoculars, pushed the staff back into place, and patted Bonker's neck. Then he raised the glasses to his eyes. "Amen," he said.

There were eighty-three of them, of identical dimensions, each approximately ten stories high from its wheeled base to the highest point on the bowl. Most of the Navigators pointed in the same direction, toward the southwest, at an elevation of about thirty-two degrees. A few, out of step, looked elsewhere, two or three toward Ayer's Rock, others away to the east, one toward Hammond as if it were contemplating *him*. Several had collapsed into the dry earth.

George could almost feel the presence of the Almighty. *Iris is gone to look for Eden. The Navigators showed her the way, as they shall one day show the way for you.*

"*There was a time when we sailed the twilight,*" said Marty, smiling at him, citing the line that was one of George's favorites.

George responded: "*And the greatest of those who rode the wind was Iris.*" They slowed and stopped. "It's always good to come here."

Marty moved in the saddle, and made a face. He was no longer young, and his muscles did not like long rides. He sighed and handed the glasses to George. "It is. And maybe tonight the old promise will be fulfilled." The wind pulled at his white hair.

George knew he didn't really believe that. Not for a second. He looked through the binoculars. The great sentinels stood silently. "God in his own good time," he said. *And when the sun grew deadly, Iris fled beyond the sea, to find a green, cool land.*

Marty frowned. "Let's hope so," he said.

"You don't believe a word of it."

"Wish I could."

"Even with the evidence in front of your eyes."

"George, just because you have a mystery that doesn't lend itself to easy explanation, you can't assign it to divine intervention."

"What else could explain them? Where do *you* think they came from?"

"Where'd the Melbourne Tavern come from? Somebody built them."

Marty was small and intense with angular features and a long nose and a tendency to scoff at everything. It was a bit unnerving to be out here with a guy who didn't hesitate to challenge the divine powers, who made no secret of his views. When the lightning came, George hoped he'd be at a safe distance.

"Truth is," Marty continued, raising his voice to get over the wind, "I suspect there never was an Iris, and there's no land except this one."

They were walking the horses forward. "But they've moved, Marty. How do you explain that?"

"Who says?"

"Everybody."

Marty laughed. "Well, maybe we'll find out today."

George felt the sting of his partner's skepticism. He looked around. The land was cold and dark. A few hills rose in the west. "It's been a long night," he said. "You want to quit until tomorrow?"

Marty stretched. "We're right on top of them. Let's go settle it."

George wished, in this region, he'd keep his voice down. It wasn't respectful. "Okay," he said. "If you're up to it." He knew that Marty didn't like being reminded of his age.

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They rode toward the nearest Navigator. George felt the power of God in its enigmatic lines, allowed it to flow through him. *Iris, pilot of the Almighty, show me the way.* The childhood prayer, grown mechanical by usage, had a special meaning here, in this ultimate sanctuary.

Its base was a thick flared shaft, enclosed by steel mesh and crossbeams. Marty rode directly up to it, reached out, and touched it. "It's been a long time," he said.

"Does anything look different?" George asked.

"Not as far as I can tell."

Most of the bowls were at the same angle, and those that were at the same angle also pointed in the same direction. A few were out of step, tilted up or down. One had been knocked off its base altogether.

Marty looked up at the Navigator. He shook his head and made faces and rode back a few yards and came forward again. Then he rode around the base, studying the bowl from all angles.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," he said. He climbed down from the horse, and pulled a binder full of pages from his saddle bag. He set it on the ground, near the base where it was sheltered from the wind.

"George —?" he said.

But George was already unhooking the lamp. He touched a match to it, settled the glass back in place, and held it to give Marty some light.

Marty got down on his knees, flipped pages in the binder, found what he wanted, and took a straight edge out of his pocket. He laid it against the paper. Then he shook his head, looked up at the Navigator,

and backed off a few paces. With George at his side, carrying the lamp, he circled the Navigator again, a few feet farther out this time, alternately raising and lowering his eyes. "Very good," he said. He rummaged in his saddlebag and produced a writing board and more paper. "Be easier to do this in daylight," he said.

"Keep going," George urged. "Let's find out."

The binder contained sketches of the Navigators, made years ago when Marty had been here with Josh Cooper. Cooper had always said he knew what the Navigators were, but if he did he forgot to tell anybody.

Marty looked at the drawings, looked at the Navigator.

"What do you think?" asked George.

Marty shook his head. "Don't know yet." He untied the staff from the horse. It had a sighting device at one end and a sharp point at the other. He walked off thirty paces, and planted the staff in the earth. George stayed with him. Marty checked the angle of the bowl against the line of the base. He compared the angle against the horizon. And against the small building at the far edge of the field. The place they called the Chapel. He wrote down all the results and went back to compare them with the drawings. Then he raised a fist in triumph. "It's true," he said. "It has moved."

George sank to his knees.

"How about that?" said Marty. Breathlessly, he paged through his charts, and laid more rods around the area.

George's own faith had lapsed in recent years, although he had never admitted it to anyone. Now, he felt the full power and thrust of its return. It flooded through him, and tears welled in his eyes. "Do you mean," he said, when he could trust his voice, "that it has moved on the track?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so, George." He was pacing off the distances between his markers. "Nothing has traveled on these rails for a long time. But the *bowl* has changed its position. Its angle. It's looking higher in the sky than it was the last time I was here. And it's turned more to the north." He bent down to take a line of sight. "Yes, there's no doubt about it." He marched from staff to staff, squinting and drawing lines on his writing board. "Very good," he told himself. And, "Yes, of course. Has to be." He sat down periodically and re-examined the binder. He prowled in circles. He stood tapping his pencil on the writing board. When he'd finished, he put everything back on the horse. Then he clasped George by his shoulders and squeezed, and George saw that his cheeks were wet. "Yes," he said, squeezing out the final consonant.

"It really happened?"

"Yes, it did. They all moved."

"Thank God," said George.

George was about middle height, thin, with features reddened and creased by long years on the desert. His hair was black and hung almost to his shoulders. He walked with a limp, imposed by a gunshot wound he had taken in one of numerous skirmishes during his youth. His smile was amiable, and his eyebrows bounced around when he spoke. He laughed easily, and heartily, and was a good traveling companion. Nobody knew the territory better, and he was a survivor. He could be moody when things weren't going well, but he always laughed at Marty's jokes. Marty could have brought any of several

dozen guides with him. But he'd picked George.

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The Navigators stood in their lines, silent, huge, massive, unsettling. "Did they really all move?" George asked.

"Yes. Maybe not all. Most."

Some had gone awry, abandoning the precision and symmetry that marked this curious army. Like those who lose their faith, George thought.

When the sun rose, it was going to get hot. They'd passed sheltered ground about a mile back, a hillside that would provide reasonable protection. "We should get under cover," George said.

Marty was examining the sky. The stars were beginning to fade in the east. "What do you suppose they're looking at?" he said.

It was a question that had no meaning for George. The bowls were only metal. How could they be looking at anything? He shook his head. "I have no idea, Marty."

The strangeness of the place stirred old feelings. George had not been here for a long time. But he had visited other strange places, near Adelaide and Melbourne, and along the coast, where the desolation of the great malls and the empty avenues left him feeling haunted. In this place, the sense of loss was particularly strong.

If one day Iris truly called them, *Come, follow me*, the sign would be given *here*. If there was any truth at all to the ancient promise, it would be given here.

Something appeared at the edge of his vision.

Light.

Several lights, in fact. Four of them. Clustered toward the north. Faint, but visible all the same. On the other side of the Navigators. But they had not been there moments ago.

He reached inside his shirt, and touched his pistol. It felt warm and reassuring. Marty was looking through his binoculars. The lights gave off a steady glow, unlike the sparkle and flicker of a campfire. "It's the Chapel," he said. "Someone's in the Chapel."

Religious services had been held there years ago. Not in George's time. But his father had described them. *Decades* ago. "Best we leave," he said.

"No, George." Marty stroked Bonker. "Not yet."

"It's dangerous," said George. "They're probably thieves. Cutthroats." Or dark gods. Things in the night. He didn't say that, of course, but he felt spooked.

Marty had gotten that look in his eyes that indicated he'd made up his mind. "I should have been thinking about that place," he said. "I'd forgotten about it."

"Why do you care? It's only a chapel. It isn't even that anymore."

Marty stared at the lights. "It might be more than just a chapel," he said.

"How do you mean, Marty?"

"Maybe it can tell us what these things are." He looked up at one of the Navigators. "Anyhow, we've come a long way to leave with our tails between our legs. Without taking a good look around."

"Okay," George said. "But don't forget I wanted you."

"George," he said, "where's your faith?"

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The structure stood bleak and dry. Its weatherbeaten front was pale in the gathering dawn. Stone walls were scored and blotched, unbroken by any decoration. In front, a fountain had long since gone to dust.

The lights were visible through four curtained windows on the third floor.

They sat and watched for several minutes, and saw no movement inside. "They could shoot us down," said George, "and we'd never know what hit us."

Marty nodded, but said nothing.

They dismounted and walked around front, stopping before a set of double-doors at the top of a wooden staircase. The stairs did not look safe. There were more windows, but they were all dark. The roof was a single large black panel, like a sheet of dark glass.

Such panels were a common feature of old buildings scattered across the Outback. Nobody knew why. There was a shed around back, and several devices that looked like (but were not quite) miniatures of the Navigators were mounted on its roof.

They saw no movement. No horses. No tracks.

George didn't like it. "Nobody's gone in or out in a long time," he said. His voice wasn't working right.

Dawn was beginning. "A mystery," said Marty.

George looked at the front doors. "Yes," he said.

The horses stood very still.

"What now?" asked George.

Marty hesitated. "How far to shelter?"

"Not too far."

"Why don't we use this place, since we're here?"

"Too dangerous."

"We have guns. And lights. And there are two of us."

"Yeah."

"Whoever's inside doesn't even have a horse."

"So what's your point?"

"George, there's nobody inside."

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The doors were locked.

George picked a window that looked into a small room. The glass was long gone, but the sash was badly split. Several wooden chairs were piled in a corner, beside a collapsed desk. The floor was littered with rubbish: shriveled pictures inside broken frames, a rusted metal pot, travel bags filled with rags. A plastic blind lay half-covered with sand.

He tried to extract the wood quietly, finally gave up and knocked it loose with his gun butt. "I'll open up," he told Marty, and climbed in.

One door opened into an adjoining room. Another, into a corridor.

George climbed over the sill. The floor was covered with sand. He checked the adjoining room to make sure he was alone. Then he went out into the corridor. Moments later he was at the two big front doors. Neither worked well, but he was able to force one open.

Marty strode in, thanked him, took the lamp from him and aimed it down the passageway. "Have you heard anything?" he asked.

"No. Nothing. Listen: I'll check the building. You wait here. If anything happens, clear out. Okay?"

Marty shook his head. "We'll go together."

"No. Two of us, we'd get in each other's way." Truth was he didn't think Marty would be worth much in a fight anyhow. More to the point, he didn't think weapons would help against whatever it was they faced. "I'll be fine," he said. He'd heard there were night things in the Outback that could steal a man's soul.

He was hoping Marty would call off this fool's errand. But he pushed past George and started down the passageway.

Several doors were ajar or open, and they peered into rooms that were the same as the one by which George had entered. A wide wooden staircase bisected the building. They looked again for prints, for evidence that anyone had passed through, and saw nothing.

They looked up the stairway. "Third floor," said Marty, and started up. The stairs groaned. Shadows moved, and the wind blew against the walls. It was warm and oppressive.

George peered both ways at the second floor landing. Another passageway, more doors, and a lot of trash. Some of the doors hung open. Outside, the horses were getting restless.

They climbed to the top.

This time, egress to the corridor was partially blocked by a big cabinet which someone had dragged out onto the landing and left. They edged around it, looked toward the front of the building, and saw the light they'd glimpsed from the ground. It was coming through a pair of half-open doors. Still there was no sound that should not be there.

George's pulse raced. He took off his boots, and moved quietly down the corridor. Moved up alongside the closer of the two doors. And looked in. The light was coming from two long panels in the ceiling.

There was some old furniture inside, and piles of trash. He eased in, holding his breath. Behind him, Marty said, "Nobody here."

He had never seen anything like the illuminated panels. There was no flame, no source for the light. "Demonic," he said. Marty clapped him on the shoulder but said nothing. He looked unnerved, too.

The room was long. Several tables supporting various kinds of metal boxes were set along the walls. Shelves circled the room, and these too were crowded with metal and glass *things* that looked like nothing in the workaday world. Cords snaked up the walls.

He looked out one of the windows. The desert was pale. The sun was over the horizon now. His fears drained away, in the golden light of the morning.

The second door, and all four windows, opened off this room. He stepped cautiously through the tangle of clutter and cables. Two pitchers and nine glasses, filled with dust, were set on a table off to one side. Several of the glasses were cracked.

He opened a cabinet, but became aware something was moving behind him. He leaped to one side and spun around with his gun cocked and shrieked. An *eye* was watching him.

It was suspended in a box mounted against a wall.

He got off a shot but it went wide. Something shattered across the room. Marty yelped but the eye did not move, did not blink, and George rolled under a table to escape its terrible gaze.

He saw Marty's feet come running. "Stay back, Marty," he called. His rich bass voice had gone south and it came out in a series of squeaks.

"What's happening?" Marty sounded annoyed.

He rolled clear of the table and squeezed off two more shots, three, and the third one went home and the eye shattered and vanished and left only a smoking hole and gray slate. Gray plastic. Something.

He saw another one, on a flat panel mounted on the wall beside the door by which he'd entered. It was behind Marty, who still didn't know what was going on. It watched him through a haze. "Behind you," George squeaked.

It was blue and cold and emotionless. Marty followed his eyes, saw it, and staggered back.

George raised his gun.

Marty had crashed into a cabinet, but he was on his knees, staring back at the *eye*. Now that he looked more closely, George could see that the object was a sphere rather than an eye. It was blue, with brown patches. The top and bottom of the sphere were white, *brilliantly white*, and wisps of haze clung to it. "Wait," Marty said. "Don't shoot."

George kept the gun aimed on the thing. But he waited.

Marty got to his feet and took a tentative step toward the sphere.

"Get back," said George.

Marty waved him aside. Moved closer to the apparition. George no longer had a clear shot.

Marty reached out, slowly, and *touched* the thing. It was the single most glorious act of courage George

had seen in his lifetime.

Marty started to laugh. "It's only a picture," he said. He waved George forward, and put an affectionate arm around his shoulders. "Look." He made a fist and knocked on it. *Bonk*.

How could a *picture* be so *real*?

"I don't think it can harm us," Marty said.

George kept a respectful distance. "I'll blow you up too," he told the image, "if you move."

Marty smiled indulgently. "I think we can assume we're safe here," he said. "If there were people in the building, the noise would surely have brought them." He glanced around. "What were they doing here?"

"What was *who* doing here?"

"Whoever built the place. Whoever put the bowls out there."

"You think this has something to do with the bowls?"

"I'm sure of it," he said. He drew his fingertips across the face of the image, leaving tracks in the dust.

Despite its three-dimensional appearance, the image was *flat*. The surface of the device was warm and hard. Marty used his sleeve to wipe away the dust. The haze remained. "What is it?" George asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before."

Marty found an unbroken chair, set it before the image, and sat down. George, feeling a need to keep moving, cruised through the room, looking behind cabinets, opening doors, peering under tables. He wanted no more surprises. He stuck his head out into the hallway. "Is anyone here?" he called.

"Anybody?"

His voice echoed through the building.

"I wonder," said Marty, "if it *really* is a picture, or if the sphere is actually in the *box*?"

George didn't know, and no longer really cared. This did not seem to him to be the work of the Almighty. The Navigators, yes. But not the narrow cramped devices and their unearthly images. "We still don't know who turned on the lights," he said.

"I don't know," said Marty. "But I think you were right. Look how dusty everything is. No one's been in here in a long time."

"What is it a picture of?" George asked.

"I don't know that either. A crystal of some sort, maybe." He seemed puzzled. Whatever he had expected to find, this was not it. "The Lord moves in mysterious ways," he said. And George knew he was being mocked. But Marty never stopped for breath. "Look here," he said. He pointed at a plastic panel fitted with rows of studs. "They're marked with numbers and letters. Maybe they're printing machines. This might be the way they made books." He touched them cautiously.

"Who turned on the lights?" persisted Hammond.

Jackson shook his head. "The building is old. The technology is advanced. Maybe it turns itself on. Maybe the wind blew too hard against the walls and ignited something. I've heard of such things. In any

case, I doubt we'll ever know for sure. But we have a story to tell when we get home."

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There were large meeting rooms on the first floor. Probably the areas that had been used for religious services in Pop's time. They were ideal for the horses. They brought them inside, out of the sun, put them in one of the rooms, and set out water and grain. George dug into his saddle bags for dried beef and nuts. When the animals were taken care of, Marty filled two cups with wine, and they toasted their good fortune.

Afterward, they went back upstairs, and set out to complete his task of exploring the building. The upper floors were filled with equipment whose use defied imagination. Much of it was caked with dirt. Chairs and desks and wall cabinets were scattered through the building. Most were broken. George dusted off some framed photographs. The images in them were mostly of elderly men. They wore a type of clothing that he had seen pictures of in books down at the library in Marbletop.

There were also pictures of the Navigators, brilliant beneath a bright sun. He looked carefully and saw none that had fallen over. And all pointed in the same direction.

The basement was filled with still more equipment and furniture, packed so tightly he could scarcely squeeze by.

In the end they went back to looking at the sphere. "I think it's getting bigger," Marty said.

By midafternoon, it had swollen beyond the dimensions of the box. Its roundness was now concealed. The white sections that had dazzled him yesterday were almost gone, squeezed out of the picture. The globe was mostly blue, and it was lovely, the blue of deep sky and the sea. The brown portions had acquired grays and yellows and split into a confusion of tones.

Marty prowled restlessly among the tables, poking at the studs with their odd symbols, trying to peer into the back of the box that supported the image, and pressing his ear against the image itself. He had cleared the dust off numerous pieces of equipment, and he explored these with great interest. He showed George how to get the machines to hum and lamps to come on. A second panel lit up, and they both laughed when strings of symbols appeared on it, and colors in abstract shapes. Marty kept pushing buttons and they got pictures of stars, pictures of the moon, and finally another picture of the globe. It was the same one they'd seen earlier.

"It makes me wonder," said Marty, "whether each box generates its own image. Or whether it's created at a central site. Maybe we're looking at something through field glasses. Of a sort."

The word 'menu' appeared often. "I don't understand it," said George. "A list of dinners?"

Marty shrugged. "Don't know."

"Magic," George said. "How did they do such things?"

*And how could they let it all slip away?* "They were good craftsmen," Marty said. "Wizards, in their way. But it did not help them."

George shrugged. "The sun became dangerous. Not much anyone could do about that."

*So Iris raced ahead, beyond the sea, to find a cooler land.*

The blue and brown sphere continued to grow. In fact, by sundown, one could literally *watch* it expand.

During dinner, while Marty admitted his bewilderment at what they were seeing, George began thinking he'd like to start for home. They hadn't been harmed, but he was spooked anyhow. And suddenly a message blinked on, superimposed over the globe. They were white block characters:

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IRIS: YEAR 372, DAY 212 // ALPHA CENTAURI III
Orbit:
    SIDEREAL PERIOD: 0.87 Standard Yr
    PERIHELION: 0.93 AU's
    APHELION: 0.96 AU'S
A/C III:
    EQUATORIAL DIAMETER: 15,300 km
    OBLATENESS: 0.004
    MASS (EARTH = 1): 1.06
    DENSITY (WATER = 1): 5.3
    ALBEDO: 0.44
    AXIS TILT (DEG): 18.7
    PERIOD (D/H/M): 1/1/17
ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION (ARTIFICIAL): None Noted
MEAN EQUATORIAL NOON TEMPERATURE (EST): 28 C.
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George stared. "What does it say?"

Marty's jaw dropped. "My God," he said. His voice was choked. "Look at the first word."

*Iris.*

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Marty copied the message down and puzzled over it through much of the evening. George took the horses out for water and a walk. He rarely noticed that he could not read, seldom had reason to regret the deficiency. But today he felt his limitations. He promised himself that he would make time to learn.

When he returned, he found Marty in a state of exhilaration. He was hunched in front of the panel, glowing with pleasure.

The image had changed dramatically. The sphere was gone, and they seemed to be looking deep into a patch of blue sky. But they were falling. White clouds swept *upward*, from the bottom of the picture. A new legend had appeared:

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SEPARATION COMPLETED 031143Z.
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"What's happening, Marty?"

"I'm not sure. But I think we're seeing the Windrider."

"How could that be? Where is it coming from?"

"Beyond the sea, I suspect." He wiped the back of his hand across his lips. He looked drained. "George, she is speaking to us. To us. To you and me."

George, obeying some deep, primitive reflex, fell to his knees. Elation and awe washed through him. His entire life, all the things he had known during his thirty-odd years, every moment, seemed to point to this instant. As if he had been given sudden sharp purpose, as if everything he had ever done had been intended to bring him here.

"She's found Eden. Somewhere out there, she's found a land where the sun is cool and the rivers are full. And she is using the technology of her time to show us. And to urge us to follow."

"Follow the Windrider?"

"Why not? The Navigators have shown us the way. All we need do is set our compass to the southwest."

"But she travels through the sky. We cannot go *there*." White clouds billowed, brilliant in the sunshine.
"How could we possibly do it?"

"A stout boat," said Marty. "There is nowhere we cannot go with a stout boat. And faith."

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Another message blinked on:

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ATMOSPHERIC ANALYSIS:
  NITROGEN.....79.114%
  CARBON DIOXIDE.....16.308%
  OXYGEN..... 2.395%
  ARGON..... 0.744%
  HELIUM..... 0.431%
  NEON..... 0.41%
  METHANE..... 0.261%
  KRYPTON..... 0.227%
  NITROUS OXIDE..... 0.082%
  XENON..... 0.028%
BIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS:          NEGATIVE
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Marty had no idea what it meant. But he understood he had been given hope.

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