The author's latest Retrieval Artist novel, Paloma, was published late last year by Roc and she had stories in Analog and the North American Review around the same time. In her latest tale for Asimov's, a man's life-long obsession becomes both his life story and the story of…

Recovering Apollo 8

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Part One: 2007

Richard remembered it wrong. He remembered it as if it were a paint-ing, and he were observing it, instead of a living breathing memory that he had a part of.

The image was so vivid, in fact, that he had had it painted with the first of what would become obscene profits from his business, and placed the painting in his office—each version of his office, the latter ones growing so big that he had to find a special way to display the painting, a way to help it remain the center of his vision.

The false memory—and the painting—went like this:

He stands in his backyard. To his left, there is the swing set; to his right, clotheslines running forward like railroad tracks.

He is eight, small for his age, very blond, his features unformed. His face is turned toward the night sky, the Moon larger than it ever is. It il-luminates his face like a halo from a medieval religious painting; its whiteness so vivid that it seems more alive than he does.

He, however, is not looking at the Moon. He is looking beyond it where a small cone-shaped ship heads toward the darkness. The ship is almost invisible, except for one edge that catches the Moon's reflected light. A shimmer comes off the ship, just enough to make it seem as if the ship is expending its last bit of energy in a desperate attempt to save itself, an attempt even he—at eight—knows will fail.

Someone once asked him why he had a painting about loss as the focus of his office.

He was stunned.

He did not think of the painting, or the memory for that matter, as something that represented loss.

Instead, it represented hope. That last, desperate attempt would not have happened without the hope that it might work.

That's what he used to say.

What he thought was that the hope resided in the boy, in his memory, and in his desire to change one of the most significant moments of his past.

The real memory was prosaic:

The kitchen was painted bright yellow and small, although it didn't seem small then. Behind his chair were the counters, cupboards and a deep sink with a small window above it, a window that overlooked the sidewalk to the garage. To his left, two more windows overlooked the large yard and the rest of the block. The stove was directly across from him. He always pictured his mother standing at it, even though she had a chair at the table as well. His father's chair was to his left, beneath the windows.

The radio sat on top of the refrigerator, which wasn't too far from the stove. But the center of the room, to his right and almost behind him, was the television, which remained on constantly.

His father could read at the table, but Richard could not. His mother tried to converse with him, but by his late childhood, the gaps in their IQs had started to show.

She was a smart woman, but he was off the charts. His father, who could at least comprehend some of what his son was saying, remained silent in the face of his son' genius. Silent and proud. They shared a name: Richard J. Johansenn, the J. standing for Jacob, after the same man, the family patriarch, his father's father—the man who had come to this country with his parents at the age of eight, hoping for—and discov-ering—a better world.

That night, December 24,1968, the house was decorated for Christmas. Pine boughs on the dining room table, Christmas cards in a sleigh on top of the living room's television set. Candles at the kitchen table, which his father complained about every time he opened his newspaper. The scent of pine, of candle wax, of cookies.

His mother baked her way to the holiday and beyond; it was a wonder, with all those sweets surrounding him, that he never became fat. That night, however, they would have a regular dinner, since Christmas Eve was not their holiday; their celebration happened Christmas Day.

Yet he was excited. He loved the season—the food, the music, the lights against the dark night sky. Even the snow, something he usually ab-horred, seemed beautiful. He would stand on its icy crust and look up, searching for constellations or just staring at the Moon herself, wonder-ing how something like that could be so distant and so cold.

That night, his mother called him in for dinner. He had been staring at the Moon through the telescope that his father had given him for his eighth birthday in July. He'd hoped to see Apollo 8 on its way to the lunar orbit.

On its way to history.

Instead, he came inside and sat down to a roast beef (or meatloaf or corned beef and cabbage) dinner, turning his chair slightly so that he could see the television. Walter Cronkite—the epitome, Richard thought, of the reliable adult male—reported from Mission Control, looking seri-ous and boyish at the same time.

Cronkite loved the adventure of space almost as much as Richard did. And Cronkite got to be as close to it as a man could get and still not be part of it.

What Richard didn't like were the simulated pictures. It was impossi-ble to film Apollo 8 on its voyage, so some poor SOB drew images.

At the time, Richard, like the rest of the country, had focused on the LOS zone—the Loss Of Signal zone on the dark side of the Moon. If the astro-nauts reached that, they were part of the lunar orbit, sixty-nine miles from the lunar surface. But the great American unwashed wouldn't know the as-tronauts had succeeded until they came out of the LOS zone.

The LOS zone scared everyone. Even Richard's father, who rarely ad-mitted being scared.

Richard's father, the high school math and science teacher, who sat down with his son on Saturday, December 21—the day Apollo 8 lifted off—and explained, as best he could, orbital mechanics. He showed Richard the equations, and tried to explain the risk the astronauts were taking.

One error in the math, one slight miscalculation—even if it were acci-dental—a wobble in the spacecraft's burn as it left Earth orbit, a miss of a few seconds—could send the astronauts on a wider orbit around the Moon, or a wider Earth orbit. Or, God forbid, a straight trajectory away from Earth, away from the Moon, and into the great unknown, never to return.

Richard's mother thought her husband was helping his son with home-work. When she discovered his true purpose, she dragged him into their bedroom for one of their whisper fights.

What do you think you're doing? she asked. *He's eight.*

He needs to understand, his father said.

No, he doesn't, she said. *He'll be frightened for days.*

And if they miss? his father said. *I'll have to explain it then.*

Her voice had a tightness as she said, *They won't miss.*

But they did.

They missed.

Mission Control had a hunch during the LOS, but they didn't confirm the hunch with the astronauts, not right away. They asked for a few things, another controlled burn, hoping that the ship might move back on track, a few more reports than usual just to get the men's voices on tape while they were still calm (apparently), but nothing they did changed the tragic fact that the astronauts would not return to Earth.

They would float forever in the darkness of space.

And for a while, they didn't know. The ship itself had limited control and almost no telemetry. The astronauts had to rely on Mission Control for all of their orbital information—in fact, for most of their critical infor-mation.

Later, it came out that the astronauts deduced the problem almost im-mediately, and tried to come up with solutions on their own.

Of course, there were none.

Which was why Cronkite looked so tense that Christmas Eve, sitting in the area cleared for broadcasters in Mission Control. Cronkite had known that the three astronauts were still alive, would remain alive for days as their little capsule headed into the vast beyond. They stayed in radio con-tact for longer than anyone felt comfortable with, and because they were heroes, they never complained.

They spoke of the plainness of the Moon, and the beauty of the Earth viewed from beyond. Apparently, on a closed circuit, they spoke to their wives and children one final time. They belonged to the Earth, as long as the radio signal held. As long as their oxygen held. As long as their hope held.

That was what Richard remembered: he remembered the hope.

No one played the tape any longer of Lovell, Borman, and Anders, talk-ing about the future. The future had come and gone. What reporters and documentarians and historians played nowadays were the goodbyes, or, if they were more charitable, the descriptions of Earth—how beautiful it looked; how small; how united.

It's hard to believe, Lovell said in what would become his most famous quote, *that such a beautiful place can house so many angry people. From a distance, it looks like the entire planet is at peace.*

Of course it wasn't.

But that didn't concern Richard then.

What worried him—what frightened him—was that this failure of the space program would end the program.

It worried the astronauts as well. They made a joint appeal with what would be damn close to their last breath.

This is not a failure. We're proud to be the first humans to venture be-yond the Moon. Please continue the space program. Get us to the Moon. Get a base on the Moon. Send another group to explore the solar system—one who can report back to you. Do it in our name, and with our blessing.

Merry Christmas to all.

And to all, a good night.

That broadcast brought Richard's mother to tears. Richard's father put a strong hand on Richard's shoulder. And Walter Cronkite, that stalwart adult, removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes for a moment, and gathered himself, much as he had done five years earlier when a president died un-expectedly.

Cronkite did not say much more. He did not play the radio reports from the bitter end. He let Lovell, Borman and Anders' desired last statement *be* their last statement.

He did not speculate on the means of their deaths, nor did he focus on the failure.

He focused on the future.

He focused on the hope.

And so did Richard—

At least, he tried.

But while he worked toward the conquest of space, while he studied his physics and astronomy, remained in great physical condition so that he could become an astronaut at a moment's notice, he would look through his telescope into the darkness beyond the Moon—and wonder:

What had they seen in those last hours?

What had they felt?

And where were they now?

Nearly forty years later, they were coming home.

Or as close to home as they could get with a dead ship and a dead crew, and no one heading out to greet them.

Apollo 8 had ended up in an elliptical orbit around the sun, much as the experts predicted might happen. The orbit took just over sixteen months to complete, but kept the small craft far above the plane of the Earth's or-bit most of the time. The first time Apollo 8 had come home, or at least close to home, it had been just over eighteen years.

That first time they were discovered almost by accident. Sunlight, glinting off the capsule, drew the attention of amateur astronomers all over the world. Something small, something insignificant, reflecting light in an unusual way.

People speculated about what it was, what it might be. Giant telescopes from the Lowell Observatory to the new orbiting telescope began track-ing it, and pictures came in, pictures showing a familiar conical shape.

It couldn't be, the experts said.

But it was.

Everyone hoped it was.

Richard spent those heady days begging his friends at the University of Wisconsin's observatory to turn their telescope toward it—ruining re-search, he was sure, and he didn't care. He wasn't even an astronomy stu-dent any longer. He had done his post-grad studies in aeronautics and en-gineering and had just started the company that would make him the country's first billionaire.

But in those days, he was still a student, with little power and even less control.

In the end, he had to go to the outskirts of town, away from the light, and try to see the capsule for himself. He stood in the deep cold, the an-kle-deep snow, and stared for hours.

Finally, he convinced himself that he saw a wink of light, that it wasn't space dust or the space station the U.S. was building in Earth orbit, or even some of the satellites that had been launched in the last few years.

No, he convinced himself he saw the ship, and that fueled his obsession even more.

Perhaps that, more than the incorrect memory of the original loss, caused the wink of light on the capsule in his painting.

Perhaps that was the catalyst for it all.

Or maybe it was, as his mother claimed, his overactive imagination, held in place by his first experience of—his first real understanding of—death.

Only this didn't seem like death to Richard. It never had. In his mind, there was always a chance that the three men had lived. Maybe they had gone on, as their ship had gone on, exploring the solar system, seeing things that no man had ever seen up close. Or maybe they had encoun-tered aliens, and those aliens, benign like the ones in the *Star Trek* shows of Richard's childhood, had saved them.

He knew such things were improbable. He had been inside an Apollo capsule in the museum in Huntsville, Alabama, and he had been shocked at how small those capsules were. Human beings were not meant to live in such small places.

He also knew how fragile the capsules were. The fact that the capsule had survived for so many years was a miracle. He knew that. He also knew that his thoughts of the men's survival were a remnant of his child-hood self, the one who didn't want to believe that heroes died.

All his plans, all his hopes, for the next eighteen years after that first sighting, were based on the theory (the certainty) that the astronauts were dead. And that Apollo 8 would survive again and return.

The ships he had built, the missions he had planned during those years, were based on the idea that he was going after a death ship, a bit of history. He was going to recover Apollo 8, the way an archeologist would resurrect a tomb from the sand or a deep-sea explorer would record the remains of famous ships like the *Titanic.*

Richard had spent much of his fortune and most of his life finding ways to greet Apollo 8 on its next near-Earth return.

And now that the ship had been spotted on its odd elliptical orbit—on schedule, just like the scientists said it would be—he was ready.

And he was terrified.

Some nights he'd wake up in a cold sweat, wondering if a man should ever achieve the dreams of his childhood.

Then he'd remember that he hadn't yet achieved the dream. He'd only created the opportunity.

And sometimes he'd wonder why that wasn't enough.

The ship, which he had had primed and ready since the beginning of the year, was named the *Carpathia* after the ship that had rescued most of the survivors of the *Titanic.* He liked the metaphor, even though he knew deep down that there would be no survivors of Apollo 8. The com-mand module itself was the survivor; a manned ship that had gone far-ther and longer than any other man-made vehicle and had returned.

Mankind had sent craft almost everywhere in the system, from rovers on Mars to probes to Venus, and had greater knowledge of the solar sys-tem than ever. NASA planned to send more craft even farther out, hoping to go beyond the bounds of the solar system and see the rest of the galaxy.

Government funding was there—it had always been there—for space travel. The latter part of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first were called the Epoch of Space Travel.

Richard liked to believe humankind would look back on it all, and call it the Beginning of Space Travel. He hated to think that satellites and a large, fully equipped space station in orbit, a small base on the Moon, and some commercial traffic would be all that there was to space travel.

He wanted to see human beings on Mars; humans—not unmanned craft—exploring the far reaches of the solar system; humans boldly going, as his favorite childhood show used to say, where no one had gone before.

And that was why he started Johansenn Interplanetary, all those years ago. With a broader version of that speech, with a great marketing strategy, and with the best minds in the country helping him create the space vehi-cles, the prototype bases on Mars and beyond, and finally, just last year, the artificial gravity technology that would take mankind to the stars.

Much of this technology, primitive as it was, had military applications, so Richard got his money. His was the first private firm that specialized in space travel, even though he didn't achieve space travel for another few decades after his funding. Instead, he created subcorporations to handle the other scientific developments. Artificial gravity was just one compo-nent. He also corralled computer scientists to help him make computers small, so that the space craft wouldn't need bulky on-board computers. And one of his computer visionaries, a man named Gates, had proposed sell-ing those smaller computers to the business market.

That idea alone had made Richard a billionaire.

Others, from the freeze-dried food to the lighter-than-air space suits, simply added to his fortune.

Everyone thought he was the visionary, when really, all he wanted to do was the very thing he'd been too young to do in 1968.

Rescue Apollo 8.

So that was how he found himself wearing one of his own spacesuits, standing on the docking platform outside the *Carpathia,* looking up at its streamlined design. Up close, he couldn't see the scaled-back wings, which allowed the ship to glide when necessary. Nor could he see most of the portals installed for the passengers, since this thing had been de-signed as both research vehicle and luxury liner.

He could see the outline of the bomb bays underneath, added so that this ship design, like so many others, could be sold to the U.S. military for applications he wasn't sure he wanted to think about.

That the *Carpathia* had the bomb bays, he attributed to the paranoia of his chief designer, a man named Bremmer, who, when he learned what Richard really wanted to use this ship for, said, "You don't know what you'll encounter. Let's make sure this is a fully functional military vehicle as well."

Which meant that they had to have a military unit on board, astro-nauts who knew how to

use the guns and the bombs and the defensive technology that Richard only understood in theory. There was the mili-tary unit and the research team—real archeologists, excited that they got to practice at least part of their craft in space; a handful of space histori-ans and some medical personnel, in case something horrible came into the *Carpathia* through Apollo 8. Then there were the investors, the "tourists" as the real astronauts called them. Richard liked to call them "observers," partly because he was one, no matter how much he liked to pretend he wasn't.

The non-astronauts had trained to the best of their abilities. They were in the best physical shape of their lives; they could all handle zero-g like pros; and they'd even survived multiple simulated space walks without screwing up.

Richard could do all those things and more. He'd had astronaut train-ing in the 1980s, but had never gone into space because his business had taken off. Besides, he had hated NASA's regulations, many of them de-signed after the *Apollo 1* and *8* tragedies. He had a hunch the regulations would become even more restrictive after more tragedies, and he left be-fore they could.

Even so, his hunch had been prescient. After Apollo 20's spectacular crash into the Moon's surface, the regulations for astronauts had become so restrictive, it was a wonder anyone signed up for the program. Partic-ularly as the private sector began to make its own advances.

Despite his retreat from the NASA program, Richard kept up his train-ing. He was always a bit too thin. He trained on various exercise equip-ment for more than two hours daily—six on weekends. He became a marathoner. And, as the technology became available, he began to sleep in an oxygen deprivation tent, so that his lungs learned to be efficient with minimal oxygen.

He wasn't the most in-shape person on this mission—after all, he was nearly fifty—but he was the most in-shape observer. He could outrun two of the astronauts, and he could certainly out-perform all of the re-searchers.

Still, he felt nervous on the docking platform of the ship he'd helped de-sign. He'd been in and out of these ships hundreds of times over the years. He'd even been in low Earth orbit for several trips, so standing on the platform in a space suit wasn't new.

What was new was this sense of awe, this moment of surrealism: he had envisioned going into space on a rescue mission for almost forty years, and now here he stood.

He was crossing into new territory.

When Richard had mentioned this to Bremmer, Bremmer had laughed. *You've been in new territory all your life, boss,* Bremmer had said.

But it was imagined territory, not just by him, but also by his specialists.

This, this was new—to all of them.

And no matter how much he justified it, no matter how similar he claimed it was to recovering wrecks of historic ships or finding the tombs of the pharaohs, he knew it wasn't.

When he entered the *Carpathia,* he was becoming one of the first hu-mans to recover a space vessel. He was someone who both captured and created history at the same time.

Instead of being a billionaire or an inventor or a crazed eccentric—all of those media

portrayals that haunted him even now—he'd become what he always dreamed of.

He'd be an adventurer.

For the first time, he felt as if he were stepping into his own life.

The *Carpathia* was roomy. She was designed for longer trips with com-fort in mind. While her cabins were small, the fact that she had them at all separated her from other ships. Her public areas were large and comfortable: a lounge; two research rooms, which could double as equipment rooms or extra sleeping berths; and a cargo bay, which had its own sepa-rate environmental system, designed—ostensibly—to bring back things found on the Moon. Richard had watched over the specs himself. He made sure that the cargo bay was also large enough to carry one 1960s Apollo capsule, with plenty of margin for error.

Even though the ship's captain tried to give him the largest space, Richard insisted on the smallest berth. He also insisted on privacy—even though he had delegated as much as possible, he still had to conduct some business. And he had always been a loner. The idea of being in close quarters with a dozen people he barely knew made him shaky. He needed some privacy, a place where he could close the door and not see anyone else. This mission was of indeterminate length; he had to have a place that would keep him sane.

Before he left, Richard tried not to watch the press coverage, but he ab-sorbed it anyway: Richard Johansenn's vanity project, which would prob-ably get him killed; Richard Johansenn's pipe dream; Richard Jo-hansenn's dream.

Columnists accused him of grave robbing or worse. The scientifically il-literate among them felt that he was taking money from the mouths of children for his little space adventure, not realizing that even if he didn't recover the capsule, he—and the country—would learn what happened to vessels that spent almost forty years in space just from the photographs he got of the ship.

He tried not to have expectations of his own. He tried not to imagine—any more than he already had—what he would find.

Instead, he downloaded old memoirs from the Apollo and Gemini mis-sions as well as contemporaneous newspaper accounts and books written about those missions. He also scanned interviews with those crews, watching them, seeing what they had to say.

He barely paid attention to the ride into orbit; he'd done that so many times that it felt like old hat. Two of the archeologists had clung to their couches, looking terrified. The rest of the newbies had watched with great fascination as the *Carpathia* passed through the atmosphere and settled into an elliptical orbit that in three times around would swing them away from the Earth and on a path to match course and speed with Apollo 8.

Below, Earth was, as she always seemed, placid and calm—a deep blue planet with a bit of green, lots of cloud cover, the most beautiful thing in this solar system—maybe even in the universe.

It was home; oddly, it felt like home even as he rode above its surface. It felt like home the way going back to Wisconsin felt like home, the way snow on a clear moonlit night felt like home, the way pulling into his dri-veway felt like home.

Sometimes, when he was feeling spiritual and not scientific at all, he wondered if this sensation of home was inbred even when looking at the planet from space. Did the feeling

come from knowledge that he had sprung from this place? Or did it come from something more innate, something bred into every creature born on that blue-green surface? Had the astronauts of Apollo 8 felt it as they pulled away from Earth? Or as they soared away from the Moon? Had they looked back, somehow, and reflected on their own folly? Or had they felt like explorers, finally getting a chance to escape?

Richard mostly stayed in his cabin for the twenty hours it would take them to reach Apollo 8. He was nervous. He was worried. He tried to sleep, couldn't.

He wanted answers, and he wanted them now. Yet at the same time, he was afraid of the answers, afraid of what he would find. Finally, he had dozed, coming awake instantly with a call from Susan Kirmatsu.

Most of the flying was automatic; still, he had hired Susan, one of the best pilots ever, for this mission.

He quickly made his way to the cockpit, standing behind Susan to watch. She wore her black hair in a buzz cut that accented her shapely skull. The console dwarfed her small form, yet she controlled the ship as surely as he controlled himself. She watched the read-outs on the screen, ignoring the double-sheets of clear pane plastic windows that he had built into the nose of the ship.

Instead, he was the one watching the darkness ahead. Earth now had shrunk to the size of a large grapefruit. He had never been out so far before.

The co-pilot, Robbie Hamilton, sat at another console and also watched the instrumentation. Two more pilots in seats behind him followed the flow of information on their handheld screens as well, ready to jump in at a moment's notice.

"We have her," Susan said. "She's coming in on the proper trajectory."

Their plan sounded simple: They'd match Apollo 8's path, grab the ship, and pull her into the cargo bay.

They'd done this type of thing before; such maneuvers were familiar to the astronauts on board now. Two of them had helped build the space sta-tion. Another had gathered dying satellites as part of his work for one of Richard's companies. And Susan had flown half a dozen practice missions, bringing in everything from satellite pieces to bits of rock, just to make sure that Hawk-class designs like the *Carpathia* could handle this bit of trickery.

"Can I see her?" Richard asked.

"Over here." Robbie ran his fingers along his smooth console, and then, on the screen in front of him, a new picture appeared. Something small and cone-shaped appeared in the upper left.

Richard squinted. "Can we magnify?"

Robbie slid his fingers across the console again, and this time the ship appeared close. And it was tumbling slightly. That had been another wor-ry of his. If it had been tumbling hard and fast, they would have had to try to slow that down first.

Apollo 8 looked worn. Its exterior had dark streaks and lighter streaks, which Richard did not remember from any of the photographs. The nose cone itself seemed dented, but that might have been a trick of the light.

"How bad is she damaged?" he asked.

"Dunno," Robbie said. "Well find out soon enough."

Soon enough would be hours from now. It would take that long to match the speed and path of Apollo 8. Richard wasn't sure he could stand waiting in the cockpit.

He went back to the lounge.

The scientists were peering out the windows. The observers had dialed up the exterior view on one of the large screens and watched the changes the way someone would watch television.

Richard couldn't stand that either, so he went back to his cabin. The bed took up most of the floor space. He had strapped his clothing bag into its little compartment, but he hadn't needed to. Unless something hap-pened with the artificial gravity, everything would stay where he placed it.

He was too restless to lie down, so he closed the door again and reentered the hall. For a man who planned everything down to the smallest detail, he was stunned that he hadn't thought through these last few hours, that he hadn't planned some sort of activity to keep his mind awake, active, and off the rendezvous.

He returned to the lounge with a vague idea of reviewing the plans, but instead just sat silently in the corner, thinking about what he was about to do.

Or not do, as the case might be.

As the large screen showed a looming Apollo 8, Richard went back to the cockpit. He listened as Susan gave terse instructions, and watched through the windows he had designed as his ship—*his* ship—lined up with a ship he had only seen in his dreams.

Apollo 8 looked larger than he expected and appeared formidable in a rockets-and-rivets kind of way.

The capsule wasn't streaked, as he had thought at first; it was dam-aged with tiny holes blasted along its sides. The cone's nose was dented—something had hit it hard—but hadn't burst open. The small round por-tals had clouded over and appeared to be scratched.

Susan reported damage near the engines that had malfunctioned—flaring too early and too hard, was the speculation, but no one knew ex-actly what had gone wrong. Once his team had the capsule, they might be able to figure that out and solve that old puzzle.

Richard was shaking. He threaded his fingers together as the ship lined up next to the slowly tumbling capsule. The first thing they would do would be to stop the tumbling.

He came to himself long enough to make certain the live feed back to Earth had actually started. It had. One of the other astronauts and one of the observers were giving a play-by-play as they watched through a dif-ferent portal.

Alicia Kensington, the modern day Walter Cronkite, had asked Richard to do the play-by-play, but he had known he would be too nervous. Yes, he was the celebrity, but he hadn't wanted to be at this moment.

At this moment, he needed privacy.

Eventually, as they worked to carefully slow the tumble, he made his way to the back, to the entrance of the hatch, watching on small screens as he passed. The tumbling stopped, and, next, the grappler's metal fin-gers found purchase near Apollo 8's hatch.

He stood still as that happened, terrified. One of his greatest worries, one of the scientists' great worries as well, was that the old ship would disintegrate when touched. It had been through a lot, the theory went, and it might have been held together by next to nothing. A push from the grappler, a touch of the hooks, the grate of metal against metal, might cause the capsule to come apart.

And then his great adventure would be over.

But the capsule didn't come apart. It held. In fact, it looked sturdier than the grappler.

He turned toward the live feed, watching from one of the outside cam-eras, struck at the fact that the older ship looked so much stronger than the *Carpathia.* The *Carpathia* was built of lightweight materials, de-signed for maximum efficiency, both in space and in the atmosphere.

Apollo 8 had a thick sturdiness he associated with his childhood, the sense he'd learned from every adult back then from his teachers to his parents, that if something was overbuilt, it was better, it could survive more, it would be the best it possibly could be.

He smiled for the first time that day.

They had been right.

He stood outside the bay doors with Patricia Mattos, the chief archeologist. Her team waited behind them, shifting from foot to foot, obviously as nervous as he felt. They all wore their space suits, just in case there was a problem with the environmental systems when they went into the cargo bay, but at the moment, everyone held their bubble helmets. A few tucked their helmets under their arms, the way that the first astronauts used to as they walked to the rockets that would blast them into space.

No one spoke.

They watched the nearby screen, and listened to the scraping sounds within.

The scrapes did not go onto the live feed. Neither did the conversation of the astronauts out there working the grappler—the grunts, the single-sentence acknowledgments, the occasional curse. Live feeds with live as-tronauts were NASA's purview. No matter what Alicia Kensington want-ed, Richard was determined to keep some privacy here, some mystery.

The entire world could watch if it wanted to as Apollo 8 got loaded into the cargo bay. They just couldn't hear the discussions as the astronauts got it into position.

Susan had activated the cameras inside the bay as well, and started a second feed. The first came from outside the ship, showing Apollo 8 as it looked to the *Carpathia.* The second came from inside, showing, at the moment, the bay, and the backs of the astronauts, looking small against the vastness.

The cargo bay was spacious and empty. Even though it had its own environmental system, it had few other controls—just an extra door and an airlock for smaller items, and a series of overrides near the back of the room, in case something malfunctioned with the bay

doors.

At the moment, the doors were open. The two astronauts, guiding Apol-lo 8 inside, wore their space suits and gravity boots. They looked like slimmed down versions of the men who had first walked on the Moon. Their bubble helmets were smaller and more efficient, their suits form-fitting for ease of movement, the gloves less bulky. Even the oxygen units were different, threaded into the suit itself instead of hanging off the back like a pack a child would wear to school.

Accidents could still happen with the suits—the astronauts had to stay clear of the capsule and the grappler's metal fingers as much as possible—but they were less likely. Most people who died in space now did so because of their own carelessness, not because their suits ripped or malfunctioned.

Still, Richard watched this part nervously. This was the most danger-ous part of the mission. One small bump, a mishandling of the grappler, a momentary klutziness on the part of an astronaut, could result in disaster.

He would never admit to the others that for him, a disaster would be the loss of the capsule somehow, not the loss of life. He'd be willing to lose his own life to bring this thing in; he hoped the astronauts would too.

A darkness filled the doorway, and then the astronauts moved away. The view on the outside camera made it seem as if Apollo 8 had pointed herself into the *Carpathia* and gotten stuck. The view on the inside was a sort of darkness that could, when he squinted, resolve itself into, the cone of the capsule.

The astronauts, moving near the doors, gave it all a bit of perspective, but everything seemed large and a little out of control.

Richard held his breath.

Next to him, Patricia Mattos was biting her lower lip. Her second for this part of the mission, Heidi Vogt, watched with wide eyes. Her forehead was dotted with perspiration much as Richard's had been earlier.

Anticipation made them all nervous.

He turned away from them and watched the screen. The scrapings from inside grew even louder—that unbearable squeal of metal against metal.

"I hope nothing's getting ruined," Heidi muttered, and one of the other scientists, someone whose name Richard couldn't conjure, nodded.

Finally, the capsule disappeared from the view of the outside cameras. Two of the inside cameras only showed the capsule herself. The other two cameras had partial views of the bay doors, which were easing shut.

Richard's heart started to pound. He still had fifteen minutes before he could enter the bay—fifteen minutes for the environmental systems to reestablish the artificial gravity. The temperature would remain low, and the atmosphere would remain a special mix to preserve everything. Richard's biggest fear was that they'd thaw out the craft and the bodies it held too fast.

He didn't want three famous—legendary—astronauts to explosively decompress on a live feed heading back to Earth. He was already in trou-ble in some circles for messing with

a grave; he didn't want to be respon-sible for one of the most disgusting mistakes ever made.

He had promised America and, by extension, the rest of the world, that he would treat these men with respect.

He planned to honor that.

But first, he planned to free them from their decades-old prison.

He planned to be the first to greet Commanders Borman, Lovell, and Anders on the last part of their journey home.

Susan gave them five minutes' warning before she opened the cargo bay entrance. Richard and his team of scientists put on their bubble helmets, turned on the oxygen in their suits, and started the small heaters to keep their own bodies warm.

If he hadn't done this before, he would have protested the use of the heaters. He was hot enough at the moment; nervousness had made him sweat again. But he knew once inside the bay, he had only a few hours be-fore the deep cold would permeate his space suit. He wanted as much time with the capsule as he could get.

He helped Heidi strap on her helmet, then checked Patricia's. He gave the other three scientists a cursory glance, but they seemed more compe-tent with the equipment than the archeologists, which made sense. Archeologists usually didn't have to wear space suits to look at remains. They simply dug into the ground.

Here, they'd be opening a cold ship, preserving the scene, and beginning an intellectual voyage of discovery, one that could, hopefully, retrace everything that Apollo 8 had seen.

He could hear the rasp of his own breathing, and that reminded him to turn on the audio chips outside the helmet. The audio chips were an ad-dition for this mission. Most of the time, astronauts didn't need the exter-nal sound sensors.

But he'd had them added to all of the helmets. Even though the team would use their internal communications equipment to keep track of each other, he figured they all wanted to hear this process as well as see it.

He wanted as many of his senses engaged as possible.

Once everyone was suited up, and Susan gave the all clear, he opened the single door leading into the back of the cargo bay.

The bay looked different, smaller, with the capsule inside. It was also darker since the capsule blocked much of the light from the center of the room. The two astronauts stood near the side of the capsule. They weren't going to be active in this part of the mission, but he knew they wanted to be here, to see everything.

He handed one of them a video camera. Even though there were cam-eras inside the bay, and at least two of the scientists were filming the en-try, Richard figured he couldn't have enough film of this historic moment.

He straightened his shoulders and smiled at the team, even though they couldn't see his face. "Let's go," he said.

It was, all in all, a belated command. The archeologists were already filming, taking samples from the exterior, finding ways to preserve as much of the stuff surrounding the ship as possible.

As excited as he was, Richard knew this was important, just as he knew that proceeding methodically was important.

He had little to do in this early stage, so he walked around the capsule slowly, taking it in.

The dent in the cone was uneven, almost as if something larger had hit it with a glancing blow. The area around the dent was worn, and the met-al looked fragile. If he had to guess—and that was all he could do at this point—he would have thought that the damage there was quite old.

What he had originally thought were streaks were tiny holes all along one side. The holes were very close together, almost as if the capsule had been pelted with gravel. Only Richard knew that gravel would have done much more damage; more likely, it had gone through some sort of rock belt as fine as sand.

His stomach lurched—excitement now, not nervousness. The capsule had quite a story to tell. All these little details, the burn marks near the engine, the long score against the metal on one side as if someone had run a car key against it, the little holes and dents and divots, were records of everything that happened to this capsule.

In some of those dents and digs might be dust from civilizations long gone. Evidence of life from some other planet, or a bit of ore that no one had believed existed this far out. There might be as yet undiscovered chemicals, minerals, biological matter, things that boggled the human imagination.

They could all be on this capsule, smaller than anything he could see through the reflective plastic of his helmet, more important than any-thing he could imagine.

Finally, he rounded the capsule and stopped by the small hatch. He and his team on Earth had discussed the hatch several times. They had stud-ied the specs from the various capsules and had even visited the two that were in museums.

Since the fire on Apollo 1 that killed three astronauts, the capsule hatch opened outward. But it was designed so that in space it was sealed shut.

Richard and his team knew that they'd have to cut the hatch open, and they needed to do so in a way that would cause the least amount of dam-age. But, they agreed, he would try to open it by hand first.

The scientists had photographed and then cleared an area around the hatch. Richard's stomach lurched again—he was so glad he hadn't eaten anything—and he tried not to look at the light from one of the cameras that someone was pointing at his face. He knew they could only see him in profile, and even then they couldn't get a clear reading through the plastic in his helmet.

No one would know how close to tears he was.

He had waited a lifetime for this.

He wished the internal mikes were off. He wanted to whisper, "Wel-come home, gentlemen," but he was afraid that not only would his team hear him, but so would everyone

who watched on Earth.

Instead, he gripped the handle, and yanked.

To his surprise, the hatch moved. Just a little, but it moved all the same.

Some dust and particles fell off the capsule's frame.

He caught himself before he cursed.

He looked at the others and thought he saw surprise through their hel-mets. They pushed closer to him. The light from the camera was on his superfine white glove.

He braced his other hand on the capsule's side and then pulled again.

The whole capsule shook, but the hatch moved enough that he could see its outline on the frame.

"My heavens," one of the women said. "We aren't going to have to cut it."

Her voice held a mixture of shock, awe, and relief, precisely the same emotions that Richard was feeling.

He pulled with all his strength.

This time, the hatch fell open, banging against the capsule with a loud clang. Richard stumbled backward, freeing his hand at the last minute, narrowly avoiding being part of that bang of metal against metal.

He hoped he hadn't destroyed anything near the hatch.

The interior was shrouded in darkness.

The team, bless them, didn't move forward, but instead waited for him to get his feet beneath him. He stood upright, still feeling slightly off bal-ance from loosening the hatch, and then headed for the capsule.

He had to remind himself to breathe.

He might find anything in there, from skeletons (depending on how long the environmental systems survived) to carcasses exploded in their environmental suits to body parts strewn throughout the interior be-cause the capsule had somehow gone through explosive decompression.

He had ordered that no one film the interior until he gave the signal. He now hoped that the astronaut he'd given the camera to remembered that instruction.

Richard took a small flashlight one of the archeologists handed to him, then leaned through the hatch.

The interior was dark and, for a moment, his breath stopped in his throat. He couldn't see the astronauts. He braced himself, figuring he'd find parts of them all over the equipment and the metal interior.

He tried to keep his breathing regular, so that anyone listening wouldn't think something was wrong. He shined the light, saw frost on the panel displays, wondered how it got there, then remembered there had to be a lot of biological material in here, and that material had

had some time—he wasn't sure how much—to grow.

He hoped some of what he was looking at wasn't the astronauts them-selves.

Then he shone the light past the couches to the so-called computer dis-play to the flight equipment. He saw bags against the side, the pee-tube curled up against one side, and a crumpled food container near one of the storage units.

He stared at all that for a moment, knowing something was wrong, feeling that something was wrong. His subconscious saw it, but his con-scious brain hadn't caught up.

He shone the light one more time, registering how small the space was; he wondered how grown men could have survived in this small environ-ment for even a few days, let alone the rest of their lives.

Something had been braced under one of the couches, wrapped in some kind of metallic heat blanket.

Something had been placed there.

Then his consciousness caught up. He saw no evidence of explosive decompression. He saw no evidence of any kind of traumatic sudden end to Apollo 8's mission.

But he saw no evidence of a slow death either, aside from the food container and whatever it was stored under that couch. His hands were shaking, making the light shake.

He examined the interior one last time.

Nothing.

No men, no space suits, no evidence—except those bags and that food wrapper—that anyone had ever been inside this capsule.

"What do you see?" Susan asked from her vantage in the cockpit. The scientists, apparently, could wait him out, but the pilot couldn't.

"Nothing," he blurted.

"Nothing?" she asked. "What do you mean 'nothing?"

"I mean," he said, "they're gone."

The theories came in from all over. The scientific illiterates, the ones he called Flat Earthers, were convinced that friendly aliens had arrived and taken the crew somewhere special. Borman, Lovell, and Anders were now enjoying a new life on some unnamed planet or back on Earth in secret (and unknown) identities at Area 51. Or, Susan had stated sarcastically, they were in that zoo in the *Twilight Zone.*

Others believed that Richard was too hasty—that they had died in the capsule and he just hadn't seen it. Some wag suggested (and it got cre-dence on the 24-hour news channels for a while) that the astronauts had moved to another dimension, just like in some *Star Trek* episode.

In fact, much of the chatter that filtered to the *Carpathia* focused on old science fiction scripts, either from shows like the *Outer Limits* or *Time Tunnel* or *Land of the Giants.*

Apparently some of the most renowned sci-entists of the day were spouting off on the cable channels, and so were some of the better known science-fiction writers.

Richard ignored the chatter. Susan followed it as if it could give her the truth of her experience in space by filtering it through the talking heads on Earth.

The scientists spent days checking the interior for evidence of explosive decompression and found none of it. They did find the mission's carefully protected garbage, which included the feces that they hadn't discarded into space—clean to the last ("from that," Patricia said, "we can determine how long they lived.")

The scientists found evidence of vomit ("Someone had gotten space sick," Heidi said. "Probably Anders," Richard said. "It was his first experi-ence with zero g.").

But they didn't find much else; certainly not brain matter or blood or bits of bone.

They also didn't find evidence of alien arrival—"If it came," someone said, "it came in a form we don't recognize as living matter."

What they did find, carefully wrapped in a blanket and as much heat shielding material as possible, was the Hasselblad camera the astronauts had taken with them, plus rolls and rolls of film.

Richard would have the film carefully developed and preserved if pos-sible, but he knew, even without the scientists saying much of anything, that the chances of photographs surviving intact for so very long in the radiation and the extreme conditions were next to none.

The astronauts themselves had probably known that and had done what they could to protect it. Along with it were some letters to the fami-lies written on the few sheets of fireproof paper the astronauts had brought along. The flight plan was also wrapped with the camera, and on the back of that paper was careful handwriting.

Richard recognized the quote. It was from Genesis:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth; and the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good.

And God divided the light from the darkness.

And God called the light Day and the darkness He called Night.

And the evening and the morning were the first day…

It went on, quoting the entire passage. Whoever had copied it had done so in a clean hand. Although, looking at it, Richard wasn't sure it was copied. He wondered if someone had written it from memory.

He stared at it a lot as the scientists worked, his gaze always falling on the last few lines:

…And God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas.

And God saw that it was good.

And then a hasty scrawl:

God bless all of you, all of you on the good *Earth.*

Richard was the one who finally told the scientists what happened. He figured it out using four pieces of evidence: the scrawls on the back of the flight plan—"A goodbye note," he said—the missing space suits, the miss-ing bodies, and the unlatched hatch.

He gathered the entire team into the cargo bay and stood as close to the capsule as he could get. By now, days later, the temperature had returned to normal. The capsule had been scraped and examined and reviewed; most everything that had to be stored had been.

The crew still wore breathing masks—they had to, in case something in the particles caused allergic reactions or other kinds of reactions (and, the scientists insisted) to keep the particulate matter on a flat surface, so that it could be removed.

Richard held the flight plan, wrapped as it was in protective plastic, and stared at it before he even spoke to the team. When he did, he ex-plained his thinking.

"They wrapped up everything they considered important."

Or maybe, he thought to himself the last person alive had done that. Prob-ably Borman as captain of the mission; old nautical traditions died hard. Richard had seen Borman's handwriting and had a hunch it had been Bor-man who had written the passage from Genesis on the back of the flight plan.

"Then," Richard continued, "they put on their space suits, unlatched the hatch, and evacked."

"What?" Heidi said. They weren't being filmed now. The live feed to Earth had ended days ago. "Why would anyone do that?"

Richard glanced at the capsule. "They knew they were going to die."

"You think it was a blaze of glory?" Susan said.

He shook his head. "I don't think they were being dramatic. They were astronauts, for heavens' sake. They had a choice between dying in a tin can and dying in the freedom of the great unknown."

"They climbed out and pushed off into space?" Patricia asked. "Is that sane?"

"Does it matter?" Richard asked. "They had only two choices of how to die. They took the one they considered to be the best."

"But that took out all possibility of a rescue," one of the younger scien-tists said.

Everyone looked at him as if he were crazy.

"They knew they couldn't be rescued," Richard said. "Not with 1968 technology."

He thought of all the movies made in the 1970s, movies about astro-nauts being rescued from the Moon, astronauts being rescued from deep space, astronauts being rescued from orbit. The entire country—the entire world—had been haunted by their loss, never realizing that the men had taken the choice away from the rescuers' and their imaginations long ago.

"So they drifted into nothingness," Heidi said.

Susan smiled at her. "It's not nothing," she said quietly. "It's the great-est adventure of all."

Great adventure or not, Richard now knew that the *Carpathian* mis-sion was over. One of the archeologists asked him if the ship would go af-ter the bodies, and he had stared at her, trying to remember her specialty was ancient societies, not modern ones.

"Finding the capsule was a miracle," he said. "All three of them will be in different orbits, if they still exist. Finding a body in the vastness of space is like finding a needle in a haystack."

Maybe a needle in a galaxy's worth of haystacks.

Still, his own answer echoed in his head. And while his scientists grew excited about new discoveries made every day on the *Carpathian* bits and pieces of the Apollo 8 puzzle, he had already gone beyond that.

He needed to figure out how to find three needles.

How did a man search a galaxy's worth of haystacks?

And more to the point, how did he succeed?

Part Two; 2018

"We have something," the researcher said.

Richard pulled up a chair, letting the movement hide his irritation. Of course they had something. If they hadn't had something, he wouldn't have flown halfway across the continent to get here.

But he didn't say anything. The researchers in this wing of the Asteroid Collision Project knew that Richard wasn't really looking for asteroids on a collision path with Earth. He was looking for three bodies, jettisoned into space beyond the Moon sometime between December 27 and Decem-ber 31,1968.

This wing of the project—the secret wing—had its own equipment. The rumor in the ACP was that this wing, called ACP-Special (ACP-S), had military and spy satellite connections. The regular ACP employees fig-ured that the ACP-S were searching for bombs or weapons or materiel that other countries had launched into space.

ACP did have a military arm; it needed one, in case one of the asteroids on a collision course with Earth was large enough to threaten human life or was small but on a trajectory that might harm the transports to the Moon Base.

It had been a long time since he had been in this room. He hadn't been to the ACP since it had been built nine years before. This room, and the equipment inside, had layers of security protocols just to reach the interior.

As he arrived that morning, he had felt as if he were going into one of those *Dr. Strangelove* bunkers that he used to see on television as a child; it made him wonder just how paranoid he really was.

The young researcher sitting next to him was, according to his nametag, David Tolemy. Richard found his gaze going to that nametag over and over again. He'd heard the researcher's name mentioned sever-al times in the last twenty-four hours, but somehow he'd always expected the spelling to mimic the Pharaoh's—Ptolemy.

The researcher looked nothing like a pharaoh. He looked like a barely thirty-something man who spent most of his time behind dozens of sets of locked doors, staring through layers of equipment that led him to space. Tolemy had a special cart next to his equipment. It contained both a small refrigerator and a tiny gourmet coffee maker (although Richard's generation was the only one that called that stuff "gourmet" anymore; most people simply called the variety of drinks with cocoa beans in them "coffee").

As Tolemy's fingers fluttered over his flat-screen control panel, one hand would slip to the cart, grab a large soda/iced coffee container, and sip from the straw. It was an obsessive, unconscious maneuver, that Richard had seen a lot from his indoor techs.

He both hated it and felt powerless to do anything constructive about it. He hired the best minds of all generations, and if he'd learned anything in his decades of running the most creative corporations in the country, it was that the best minds came with more baggage than he'd ever thought possible.

When he'd mentioned it to his closest advisor after a visit to the Gates wing in Seattle, she'd laughed. *You have baggage,* she said. *Isn't that why you never married?*

He'd never married because he didn't have time for small talk, and he didn't feel right vetting women just to see if they were interested in his money. He had no desire to have children. His legacy, he knew, was these corporations and all the discoveries he'd made on his way to fulfilling his childhood dream.

He pulled the chair closer to Tolemy's wide screen, careful to stay away from the cart.

"I was warned not to waste your time," Tolemy was saying, "but I want to lay the foundation. Stop me if you know this."

He launched into a verbal dissertation about evac points and speed, about trajectories and distances in space. Richard knew this; he was the one who'd designed the program after all, but he listened just the same. He wanted to hear how Tolemy had come to his current conclusions.

After twenty-five minutes of illustrated monologue, what Richard learned was this: Tolemy guessed that the astronauts took the last possi-ble evac point. Their ship's oxygen was gone; they only had their suits left. Maybe they had put on the suits, and then realized they wouldn't even be able to see each other's faces as they waited for sleep to overtake them.

That last was Richard's fanciful addition. He'd been in the old suits; Tolemy hadn't. He knew how isolating they felt. Isolating and cramped.

"Add to that being inside a tiny capsule," Tolemy said, "with the win-dows already clouding, and who can blame them for leaving?"

Who could, besides Richard? And he knew that his blame was simply self-interest—the unwillingness of an obsessed man to lose his original vision, long after it had truly disappeared.

Unlike the other researchers, Tolemy hadn't tried to prove who evacked first. Borman to show it could be done? Or Anders because he was the ju-nior member of the team? Had Lovell gone first because he was more of a cowboy than the rest?

The original researchers had contended that it mattered, that mass, height, and the strength with which the astronaut pushed off determined where the others ended up.

Tolemy claimed that none of that mattered; that they were all weak and dying and that they would have pushed away with little or no strength.

"I figured that the first one would be the easiest to find, and that's what I concentrated on," he said.

He had planned to take the last possible evac point and work back-ward, after exploring each area from top to bottom. He computed maxi-mum speed and drift; he computed all the possible directions. He devel-oped a region of space where he believed the first evacuee would be, and he searched, painstakingly, for two years.

"I found a lot of possibles," Tolemy said, "but they didn't pan out."

He spoke of months as if they were moments. Richard leaned closer to the screen, feeling a respect for the young researcher that he hadn't felt before. Tolemy shared some of his obsession, whether he admitted it or not, or Tolemy wouldn't have sunk so much time into this, no matter how much he was being paid.

"Then I saw this one." Tolemy used a pointer to touch a small mark on the side of the screen.

He amplified the image, but, even at full magnification, Richard could-n't see what Tolemy had. It looked no different than all the other small space debris Richard had looked at over the years, some of it in the early months of this very project.

"Why is this one special?" Richard asked.

"The reflection," Tolemy said as if it were obvious. "Let me show you some time lapse."

He clicked on the image, then clicked on it again. It changed from a light mark against the blackness of space to a slightly brighter mark, but Richard really didn't see the difference.

"I guess I'm not trained well enough," Richard said.

"Okay," Tolemy said, lost in his own excitement. "Let me show you a few other things."

He opened up several more windows, all of them with astronauts build-ing the space station that was completed in orbit at the end of the 1970s. He would click on one astronaut and then shrink the image. When he was done, the astronaut's image looked like the one in the upper corner of the screen.

What Richard wasn't sure of was whether if you took an image of a me-teor and did the same thing would the meteor look like the tiny image in the corner too.

He said something to that effect—mumbled it, really, because he was concentrating and not paying attention to stroking the researcher's ego.

"Oh, no," Tolemy said. "They're all different. There are components in those early space suits—particularly the plastic in the helmets—that aren't used any more, and they don't occur naturally that we know of. When light reflects off those, it's distinct."

Richard's expression must have showed his skepticism, because Tole-my grinned.

"My bosses asked the same thing before they called you and so I showed them this."

It was a light spectrum chart, showing how various materials reflected the sun's rays outside of the Earth's atmosphere. According to the chart, the plastic in the helmet, particularly on the visor, did have its own sig-nature. And, somehow, young Tolemy had gotten a reading from the bits of light given off by the image in the upper corner of his screen.

"You have to understand," he said as he explained all of this to Richard, "I worked this out over weeks of study."

"You have to understand," Richard said. "If I take action based on your light spectrum analysis and your speculative equations, I'm going to spend millions of dollars, risk several lives, and take many months of time. You have to be sure of this."

Tolemy took his left hand off the console and pushed the cart away with his right. He turned slightly in his chair.

"I think you were the one who called this searching for a needle in a galaxy full of haystacks," he said.

Richard nodded.

"Well, I found something small and thin and made of metal. You gonna check it out?"

Richard smiled. 'When you put it that way," he said, "I think I will."

The trip toward the object that Richard now called the Needle took both more preparation than the trip to the capsule and less. More be-cause, deep down, Richard had never expected to find the astronauts, so he hadn't done some of the basic imaginings he'd done for the capsule trip, and less because modern ships were so much more efficient than they had been eleven years ago.

For one thing, cargo runs from Earth to the Moon base had become common. Trips out of the atmosphere were even more common, with wealthy and upper middle-class tourists opting to stay in orbiting hotels.

The Needle never even approached Earth orbit. He floated out there for fifty years, following a predetermined path of his own. At his closest point to Earth in exactly eight months and one day, he would still be a hundred times the distance from the Earth to the Moon.

Richard had ships that could easily go beyond the Earth/Moon run. One of his

companies was on the forefront of Mars development. NASA had bought several of his deep space ships (not an accurate name, Richard knew, but NASA liked the sound of it) for their first manned Mars missions, and several other companies had bought more of those ships to scout Mars locations for another base.

Richard had stayed out of most of that planning. He didn't really care about Mars. His interest was still in the needles and the haystacks and space itself, not in colonizing the solar system. He figured someone else could take care of that, and until his meeting with Tolemy at ACP-S, he had let them.

After that meeting, he'd seen his mistake. The ships his companies had designed were for transport—humans, cargo, materiel—not for maneu-vering or quick travel. To get to the Needle and match its orbit, he'd ei-ther have to design his own kind of ship or buy one from one of his far-sighted competitors.

And he only had eight months.

So he bought several of his competitors' ships—something that took more middlemen than he had thought it would. His competitors thought he was trying to steal proprietary information or at least copy proprietary technology, and while that might be a side benefit of this trip, it certainly wasn't Richard's intention.

Instead, he tried to make the ships as Richard-friendly as possible.

Deep Space Darts, as these ships were called, were designed for long travel at great speeds. All engines and fuel, little interior room. The ships' accommodations were cut down too much for his tastes. Richard exam-ined half a dozen from various international companies, and worried about how travel would feel—cramped and narrow and uncomfortable, not something he wanted to experience, even though he was an in-shape fifty-eight. He needed some kind of cargo area with a separate environ-mental system, and a good cabin.

In the end, he bought one of his competitors' largest darts and gave his own team two months to retrofit it. He made certain the ship was sup-plied with the right equipment—a state-of-the art grappler (complete with multiple hand sizes), automatic lifeboat technology, and an up-to-date medical unit. The dart had the cargo bay he needed, but not a large captain's cabin. Nor did it have a relaxation area for the crew.

Richard wasn't bringing a large team this time—just himself and a few astronauts to help him wrestle the Needle from space. He also brought a biologist and a forensic anthropologist with an interest in space. If he got the body, most of the tests would be conducted on Earth in one of his labs—no need to do the work in cramped conditions—but he'd be able to report a few breakthroughs while still in space.

No live feed this time. There was too big a chance for error. He didn't want to pull up beside the Needle only to discover that it was a bit of mislabeled space debris.

That's what he worried about most: discovering nothing. Some early ACP-S missions led him directly to space debris and, fortunately, he hadn't recorded those either. He hadn't been on a trip for an ACP-S identified project in eight years, and he worried about this one. He had other scien-tists double-check Tolemy's information, but they kept coming up with the same result:

They couldn't verify that it was a Needle. They couldn't guarantee any-thing.

In the end, he had to trust his own response. Tolemy's information was the first in almost a decade to convince him.

He wanted to give this one a chance.

On the ride out, he spent most of his time doing simulations with the grappler. He wouldn't run the grappler to bring the body in, if indeed what they'd found was a body. But he was going to help the team this time. He couldn't stay away.

His closest advisors had insisted that a single, multimedia reporter with impeccable credentials be included on the flight. If the dart didn't find a Needle, the reporter would write everything up as an experimental trip. She wouldn't know the real mission until it was achieved—if it was achieved.

She came along only with the agreement that she could talk with Richard on the way back. He would give her unlimited, exclusive access.. Any good reporter would jump at that, and one did. Helen Dail, a woman who had three Pulitzers for journalism, spent most of her time in-terviewing the crew. She also explored the dart—what little of it she had access to—and lived up to her part of the agreement by not interviewing the astronauts, science team, or Richard.

He could see her storing up questions, though. She was old enough—maybe forty—to make sure she had a paper back-up, but she was also heavily wired. She had digital cameras and PDAs and more notebooks than he'd thought possible. She had met her weight limit for the dart not with clothes or personal items, but with equipment.

She made him nervous. She was good enough to figure out what he was after, even if he never found it, even if no one ever told her what the mis-sion was.

He stayed out of her way as much as he could.

Ten days past the Moon, the dart had reached its target destination. The little ship wasn't equipped with many cameras or long-distance scan-ning equipment (not that any of it was yet at the level Richard wanted it to be). They were close enough to confirm that something was in the posi-tion that Tolemy had predicted, but not close enough to confirm that something was (or had been) human.

"Let's get close," Richard said to the pilot. He was in the cockpit along with the pilot and co-pilot. The science team was in the cargo bay, and the astronauts were suiting up. He would wait to suit up until the last minute.

He didn't want Helen Dail to know he cared enough about whatever this was to suit up.

Over the next long half hour, the pilot took the dart into camera range. The item appeared on the screen, large and whitish gray. It tumbled—a slow spin that seemed like something it had done for a long, long time.

It was long and slender, and could very well have been a human astro-naut. But Richard couldn't see a helmet, nothing obvious that told him what they had.

Richard manipulated the external cameras himself, trying to catch all sides of the object.

Finally he saw what he needed—a glint of sunlight off a thick plastic visor.

His breath caught.

"Well?" the pilot asked. "Should we scrub?"

"No," Richard said. "We have a go."

He hurried out of the cockpit, careful to close the door behind himself, wanting to keep Dail out. Then he hurried to the cargo bay where the as-tronauts waited. They were watching the same image playing over and over again.

"Shouldn't be hard," Mac McFerson said as he watched. "One of our simpler maneuvers, actually."

Richard slid into his space suit, his hands shaking.

"So long as we don't grab the thing too tight," said Greg Yovel. "Don't want to damage it."

"Maybe we should tether, do a walk, and guide it in," McFerson said. He was a bit of a cowboy, which was why Richard wanted him along.

Richard turned, helmet in hand, and looked at the slowly spinning Nee-dle. *Who are you?* he wondered. *Anders? Borman? Lovell?*

His heart was pounding. "Let's just bring it in as we planned and hope for the best."

McFerson made a small disapproving noise in the back of his throat.

They'd follow the procedures Richard had established with the cap-sule—keeping the bay cold once the body was inside, making sure that nothing in the process damaged the body outside of what had already oc-curred in space.

"Greg," Richard said, "you run the grappler."

"You and I will handle the door," he said to McFerson. "Magnetize."

Everyone pressed a button near the wrists of their suits to magnetize their boots. He felt a sharp tug on the bottom of his feet, tried to lift one, and felt the magnetic pull.

"It's a go," he said to the pilot.

The dart vented atmosphere from the cargo bay—away from the Nee-dle, so as not to push him off course.

Greg slipped his hands into the net that ran the grappler, his body tense. Richard stood behind him, watching the imagery on the screen.

First, Greg had to stop the Needle from spinning. Then he had to wrap the grappler's long fingers around the center of the Needle and slowly bring it toward the bay doors.

Once the Needle was close, the doors would open and Richard, along with McFerson, would grab the Needle and bring it inside.

The first part went according to plan. Greg managed to slow the spin—not stop it entirely, but bank it enough so that the Needle wouldn't turn hard and damage itself against the grappler's fingers.

Then he grabbed the Needle around what should have been its waist.

"It feels like this thing is going to slip," he muttered, the words coming through everyone's helmets. Rachel Saunders, the forensic anthropolo-gist, walked toward the screen, but the other scientist pulled her back.

Richard wanted to go there too—he wanted to slide his hands into the gloves that operated the grappler from a distance—but he knew he couldn't compensate for any errors.

The Needle—if indeed that's what it was—did look slippery and unsta-ble. The slipperiness came from its absolute rigidity; the unstable part from its tiny size. Richard had never seen anything so small in the grap-pler before.

Greg leaned into the gloves, his body as rigid as the Needle's. Richard could feel the fear coming off him in waves.

"Positions," McFerson said.

Richard jumped. He had forgotten to give that order. Rachel and the other scientist moved to the edge of the bay, grabbing onto the handles just in case. Richard took his spot near the door, holding a handle as well. It felt cold through his thick glove, but he knew that was just his imagi-nation; he couldn't really feel anything except the sweat on his palms.

"Open the door," Greg said, his voice taut.

McFerson hit the controls before Richard could reach them. Or maybe the pilot had done so from inside the cockpit. He wasn't sure.

The bay doors slid open, and there it was—the grappler—long bits of metal curving out toward the edges of the solar system, unfiltered sun-light reflecting off them, so bright that he wanted to look away.

But he didn't. Because in the center was something whitish gray. Whitish gray and long, like a man's body would be, only the knees were slightly bent and so were the arms.

Richard let out a small breath and it sounded like a sigh of relief. Or maybe he'd heard the sigh through his communications equipment, com-ing from someone else.

The grappler's arms came closer to the door than he would have liked. Richard swung out, as he'd been trained to do, keeping his magnetized boots on the floor and one hand on the handle. McFerson did the same from the other side.

The suit had pockmarks and one large hole that went through the mid-dle of one leg, but it was mostly intact. It faced away from them. Richard recognized the oxygen equipment, so bulky it made the original astro-nauts look as if they were about to topple over backward.

"Wow," McFerson said.

Richard didn't say anything. He had to be cautious as well. He was less worried about himself—he knew that if he lost his grip and his magneti-zation he would tumble into space, but someone would get him—than he was about breaking the Needle.

Someone, at the beginning of this mission, had called the Needle a corpsicle, and, while Richard vehemently objected to the characterization, it had some truth. This body was breakable the way ice was breakable. Grab it wrong, and a part would snap off.

Richard reached inside the grappler and slid a hand underneath the arm closest to him. Then he gently pulled backward. McFerson did the same.

The grappler moved with them—Greg was letting them control the speed. It had reached the mouth of the doorway when McFerson said, "Lift up."

There wasn't really an up—only an imagined up—but Richard didn't question. He'd done simulations and he knew, in this case, up meant to-ward the top part of the door.

He lifted just in time to get the Needle's bent feet past the lip of the dart.

"God," Richard breathed. 'That was close."

McFerson said nothing. He used both hands to hold the Needle. Richard did the same, keeping one hand on the Needle's chest, bracing it, and the other under the Needle's arm.

"Got him," McFerson said, even though Richard hadn't given him a go-ahead.

The grappler fingers loosened, and Richard held fast, using only his boots for balance.

The grappler slid out of the bay.

"Close doors," McFerson said, and he didn't sound as calm as he had be-fore.

The doors eased shut, and they were inside the bay, holding a man frozen in position fifty years ago.

Rachel hurried over, awkward in her magnetized boots.

She joined them, bracing the body, and helping them move it toward the center of the bay. Richard could hear her breathe. She was fright-ened—or maybe awed—he couldn't tell.

He couldn't tell how he felt either, except that somewhere in the mid-dle of this mess, the object he had called the Needle had become a body.

He was holding one of the astronauts from Apollo 8. His theory had been right.

They had evacked.

And he still had two more to find.

But this one entranced him.

It had a name, sewn onto the exterior of the space suit. Lovell. That made sense to Richard. Everyone else expected the first one out of the capsule to be the lowest ranking astronaut on the mission, but Richard knew better.

Borman wouldn't have gone first. He would have stayed with his ves-sel as long as possible. Lovell, the daredevil former test pilot, who saw himself at equal rank with Borman, would go first to show it could be done.

To show all three that fear could be conquered.

It wouldn't have been right to send the rookie out first.

The bubble-shaped helmet was intact. That was the first thing Richard looked for as he, Rachel, and McFerson eased the body away from the bay doors. The helmet was intact and the body inside had mummified.

It looked like the mummies that came from Egyptian tombs—after the poor things had been unwrapped. The face was hard and leathery, the eyes gone, the mouth open in some kind of rictus.

But worse than that, this one was burned.

Richard had been told to expect radiation burns, but he wasn't sure how they'd show up. They showed up in patches, holes in the skin.

"Good thing we got him," Rachel said. "I don't know how many more decades these suits would hold up."

Richard didn't respond. The suits would hold up as long as they re-mained intact. Obviously, the hole in the leg of this one came so late that there was no more oxygen, no more environment inside it.

When they reached the far wall and had the body face down over the examination table that would hold it, he said, "Now we can have gravity. Bring it up slowly."

"Roger," the pilot said.

Then Richard felt a buoyancy he hadn't even realized he had vanish. He was heavier, and his ankles ached from the boots. The body in his hands slowly settled onto the table, face down, the large backpack up-ward.

"Let's get him recorded," Richard said.

Recorded. Saved for posterity.

It was time to call in Dail.

Richard told the pilot to have Dail watch from the screens outside the cargo bay.

The recording and cataloguing was mostly a job for the scientists, and once Richard stepped back from the body, he would let them go at it. But he made some notes of his own.

The way the boots shone in the bay's lights. The still-bent limbs. The face, unrecognizable. And the suit, as familiar as the one he wore, because he used to stare at the ones in the Smithsonian.

Puffy and bulky, unbelievably difficult to maneuver, this suit had some-how protected Jim Lovell's body for half a century. The gloves made his hands look almost small.

The helmet with its thick plastic built to resemble glass. The old Amer-ican flag on the arm, with only fifty stars—no Puerto Rico yet—making this seem like a suit lost to time.

And yet so real.

Richard could feel the suit's solidness through his own gloves, knew that some of that came from the frozen corpse inside.

He thought of the outcries on the original mission, the fact that they were desecrating a grave. No one felt that way any more. He doubted any-one much thought of the Apollo 8 astronauts any more.

Yet here was one, big as life. They would think about them once again, at least for a while.

Richard hadn't carried Jim Lovell, still alive, from the capsule. Nor had he brought the man into the dart with a fireman's carry, hoping to re-trieve a long lost soul.

But he'd done the best he could.

Maybe the only thing he could.

The buoyancy Richard had felt just before the gravity had turned back on never really vanished. He felt buoyant still, as if something lifted him ever upward.

When they brought the dart back, and he'd finished all the interviews *(How had you known where the astronaut was, Mr. Johansenn? Is it worth the expense, bringing a long dead man to Earth? Why didn't you consult the families?),* he went back to ACP-S to consult with Tolemy.

"How hard do you think it'll be to find the other two?" Richard asked.

Tolemy shrugged. He looked a bit more haggard than he had before the mission. He'd had a lot at stake on the mission's success, but it didn't look as if the success had helped him. If anything it seemed to have depressed him.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," Tolemy said. "I'm pretty sure it'll be harder."

"Harder?" Richard hadn't expected that answer. He'd thought Tolemy would tell him it would be easier now that they knew what to look for. "In addition to the orbit we mapped for the capsule, you have two more points—the place where we found Lovell and the place where we found the capsule. You can make some kind of grid. We'll know in general what region of space the other two will be in."

"I've already done that," Tolemy said.

He ran his fingers along his console, brought up a new screen with the Moon and Mars and the rest of the solar system. An entire area between Venus and Mars was colored in red.

"That's the probable zone," he said. "But here's the problem."

He overlaid a green bubble, even larger, on top of the red.

"We made some assumptions to find Lovell. We assumed that we were getting the first astronaut at the last possible evac point. We assumed that they waited until the very end to evac. But what if Lovell waited un-til the end? What if the other two went days ahead of him? What if he planned to stay in the capsule and changed his mind at the last minute?"

Richard shook his head. "He wouldn't do that."

"You don't know that," Tolemy said. "Any more than I know which di-rection the astronauts went when they stepped out of the capsule. More than likely, it was tumbling slightly. They could have gone in any direc-tion, with any kind of speed. If anything, the search area is now bigger. Well defeat ourselves if we only look in the red part."

"It can't be bigger," Richard said. "We know some of the path now. That narrows it."

Tolemy shook his head. "I watched the vids you made of the rescue. You were worried about losing Lovell, about sending him off the small path you'd charted for him just by venting

atmosphere from your cargo bay. Imagine if some other ship had done that. Or if a small rock had hit with enough force to push him in a completely different direction without making a hole in his suit. Or if he had vented oxygen on purpose, pro-pelling himself in a particular direction to give himself a sense of control? We don't know. I don't think we'll ever know."

Richard leaned over and shut off the map on Tolemy's screen. This was not the man he'd seen before the mission. That man had been certain of his numbers, worried that he'd made the wrong assumptions, but sure enough of himself to insist that his bosses bring in Richard.

"What's changed?" Richard asked gently. He tried to control his impa-tience. He didn't like interpersonal relations—he'd never been that good at them. He usually let his staff handle that.

Tolemy glanced at him, about to say "nothing." In fact, the word had formed in his lips when something in Richard's face must have stopped him.

"It was just luck," Tolemy said. "Finding Lovell. It was luck."

Like the press had been saying. Like Tolemy's boss had said when the mission came back, mostly because he couldn't take credit for a mission he hadn't approved of.

"You said it," Tolemy said. "We found a needle in a galaxy full of haystacks."

"Because we looked," Richard said. "Most people would hear the odds and give up. But we looked."

Tolemy gave him a frightened glance. "It took ten years of round-the-clock work by some of the best minds, and it was me that found him. The new kid."

"The new kid who worked harder than everyone else," Richard said. "The kid who believed in himself."

Tolemy shook his head. 'That's the thing. After the mission left, I didn't believe any more. I was so convinced that all you would find was space debris that I nearly fell apart. If someone had died up there—"

"It would have been on my head," Richard said. "Not yours."

Tolemy nodded, but Richard could tell the young man didn't believe him. Tolemy wasn't willing to accept his success.

Richard stood, his patience nearly gone. He started to turn away, and then he stopped as an idea hit him.

"This has been part of your imagination for a long time, hasn't it?" he asked.

Tolemy looked up at him. Richard hadn't noticed before, but Tolemy was balding right at his crown. He didn't look quite so young any more.

"What has?" Tolemy asked.

"Finding one of the astronauts. You'd imagined it, you dreamed of it, you just didn't expect to do it."

Tolemy bit his lower lip, then shrugged one shoulder. "I guess I didn't."

Richard patted that shoulder. "Neither did I. And yet we did it, didn't we?"

Tolemy frowned, as if the idea were new to him. Richard walked away, hoping that little talk would be enough. Tolemy had a gift, whether he realized it or not. That imagination, that way of looking at the solar system, at the small details, was unique. Richard doubted he could find that combination again.

Part Three: 2020

And he didn't, at least not in the next two years. Tolemy tried to find Anders and Borman, but flamed out quickly. Six months after the success of the Lovell mission, as the press called it, Tolemy took an extended leave. Then he quit, citing personal reasons.

His staff asked Richard if he would talk to the young man. Tolemy had quite a talent, they said. It would be a shame to let him go.

But Richard knew better than to keep him.

Some men couldn't handle achieving their dreams. Tolemy was one of them.

Even men like Richard, who could handle it, had a difficult time. No one had ever told him that success—real personal success—carried its own stresses.

He'd always thought he'd understood that. After all, he'd bootstrapped himself into one of the richest men in the world. But those successes meant nothing to him. They were side issues on the way to his real goal—finding Apollo 8.

That success had been bittersweet. He'd found the capsule and not the men, and yet he had done what he had set out to do.

Just as he had done with Lovell.

Two successes. Two important successes.

But maybe he was insulated against those successes as he had been insulated against the earlier ones. Maybe he wouldn't have the same prob-lem Tolemy had until he discovered Borman and Anders.

If he could even find Borman and Anders.

The remaining researchers at ACP-S worked the grids that Tolemy had left and found nothing. A few worked outside those grids and found noth-ing.

They hadn't even found anything that was possible.

Richard was thinking of firing the entire team and installing a new one when he got a personal phone call from the Chinese ambassador to the United States.

"Mr. Johansenn," the man said in perfectly accented English, "we have some information we would like to trade."

His advisors told him to set up the meeting through the United States government, that going

around them to the country that former Presi-dent Rockefeller had once called the most dangerous nation on Earth might get Richard into legal trouble. If he ended up making an unapproved trade with them for secret technology, he might even be charged with espionage.

Richard didn't see China as the most dangerous nation on Earth. They were merely a larger and politically more repressive nation. He also knew that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1979, the United States had sub-stituted China for the U.S.S.R. in its foreign policy. The big evil super-power now was China, and nothing Richard or the Chinese did would change that.

He told only his chief of staff that he was going to the embassy in Wash-ington D.C. He decided to meet the ambassador there to prove to his own government (should they inquire) that he had nothing to hide. He could always say, with utter truth, that they had called him; he was just curi-ous enough to go.

The Chinese Embassy looked no different than the other embassies on Embassy Row. They were all stately buildings, with armed guards and formidable security. The only differences were the flags and the uniforms. The Chinese Embassy had its large red flag, that would have seemed fes-tive if Richard hadn't seen so many movies in which the flag had featured menacingly. The guards wore austere greenish uniforms that made him think of robots in early forties movies. They also wore small caps that hid the shape of their skulls, and carried AK-47s over their shoulders in a dis-play of force.

Richard had to go through three levels of security just to get into the building. Even then, he seemed to have acquired three guards all to him-self.

He wasn't even carrying a briefcase. There was nowhere to hide weaponry on his person, and besides, they'd searched him enough to find even the smallest bomb.

The interior made him feel as if he'd entered another land. The furni-ture was ornate and mostly wood, all of it antiques from various dynas-ties. Expensive vases were filled with cherry blossoms. Tapestries hung on the wall behind the vases.

Richard had been raised with the impoverished—and austere—Soviets as the Evil Empire. He wasn't used to the Chinese mixture of ancient beauty and hidden power within the embassy itself.

He was taken to a third floor reception room, and offered tea and little cakes. He accepted them with a small bow, feeling out of his element. He knew that diplomacy required a detailed understanding of a particular country. He didn't even know if the Chinese had a tea ritual that he might be violating, the way the Japanese did.

He'd been to most countries in the world, but somehow he had missed China.

After a few moments alone with the guards, a door nearly hidden in flow-ery wallpaper opened. A short man wearing a military-cut jacket over dark blue trousers entered. He nodded at Richard, who stood.

They shook hands. The man introduced himself as the ambassador, and Richard introduced himself as well, just to be polite.

"Forgive my pre-emptive invitation," the ambassador said. "It is just that I know your interest in the Apollo 8 astronauts."

Richard smiled. "The whole world knows of my interest, Ambassador."

"Yes." The man bowed slightly. He folded his hands together. "It is my understanding that your interest supercedes your government's."

"I wouldn't say that," Richard said. "We lost a lot of good men and women going into space. We couldn't afford to rescue them all."

"But these were the first lost in actual space travel, is that not correct? At least in America."

Richard nodded.

"I remember that time," the ambassador said. "I was but a boy. My country rejoiced in the failure of yours, but I asked my father why we cel-ebrated when brave men died. He had no answer."

Richard set his tea cup down. The ambassador hadn't touched his tea or the cakes.

"But you understand now," Richard said.

"I acknowledge the impulse to find joy in another's defeat. I still do not understand why the loss of brave men is a cause for celebration."

The ambassador's language was formal, his face unsmiling, but Richard had a sense that the man was sincere. Richard had to remind himself that a diplomat's job was to seem sincere, even when lying for his government.

But Richard wasn't sure what the ambassador had to lie about.

"I have been instructed to inform your government of our discovery. I am to ask for several things in trade in regards to the whereabouts, things I know your government will not grant. It is a propaganda ploy on the part of my government. They can go to the media in both of our coun-tries, claim criminal disinterest on the part of the United States, and say that your country is unwilling to bargain with the Chinese even when something valuable is at stake."

Richard threaded his hands together, mimicking the ambassador's po-sition. "The location, while a curiosity, isn't of value to my government."

"You and I both know this, and so does my government, but our people do not. The propaganda ploy would work in our favor."

Richard nodded. He could see that.

"I have come to you, *ex parte,* to see if you can make a real and valuable trade to my government for this information. A bit of technology, perhaps, or permission to study the blueprints of one of your larger ships. We would give you the coordinates of the lost astronaut and, should our gov-ernments agree, we would send one of our own people with you, to learn with you."

Richard felt unusually warm. His staff had been right and he had been wrong.

"Ambassador," Richard said, "I must clear any such trade through my government."

"They will deny you permission."

"Yes, I know. I'm not even supposed to discuss business with your peo-ple. We have no formal trade agreement."

The ambassador nodded. "We can keep this between us."

"We can't," Richard said. "Particularly if one of your people joins us on the mission."

"Perhaps we can drop that point," the ambassador said. "And work through mutual friends."

Mutual friends. Richard had heard of that kind of approach before. Working with a neutral country that would negotiate the deal on both sides.

"Why weren't you willing to take this to my government?" Richard said. "They could have contacted me."

"Ah," the ambassador said. "But I did. I went to the government first and asked them to contact you, claiming time was of the essence. At first they refused. Then they promised they would take care of things. When I did not hear from you within the week, I called you directly."

A drop of sweat ran down the side of Richard's face. "Whom did you contact?"

The ambassador named names.

"I'll see if they contacted me and somehow I did not get the message."

The ambassador smiled. "There is no need to save face for your govern-ment. We do not trust each other. I doubt they contacted you."

"Still," Richard said. "I'd like to check. I'd also like to work through offi-cial channels wherever possible."

"Do what you must," the ambassador said. "But we know where your man is now. We cannot guarantee knowledge of where he'll be six months from now. We have no real interest in tracking him."

"I understand," Richard said.

Time was of the essence. The ambassador had not lied.

Of course no one had called any of Richard's companies or had contact-ed his own personal staff. But then, Richard had only the ambassador's word that the man had even contacted the U.S. government. And while Richard had believed the ambassador about his memories, he was not willing to believe him in business.

Richard had an assistant track down the person whom the embassy had contacted within the U.S. Government. She was able to confirm that the contact had occurred and been ignored. She asked him if he wanted to make an appointment with the State Department Undersecretary who had handled (or at least received) the contact.

"No," Richard said. "Make me an appointment with the President."

The President wouldn't see him. She had pressing business elsewhere, probably aware of the fact that he hadn't contributed as much to her cam-paign as he had to her predecessor's.

Still, he was the richest man in the country. He couldn't be ignored.

So the next day, he sat in the office of the Secretary of State. The Na-tional Security

Advisor sat to his left. The head of NASA to his right.

Richard told all three about his meeting with the Chinese ambassador, and after hearing the expected rigmarole about protocol, they got to the heart of the matter.

"I am going to retrieve this astronaut," Richard said. "The question is whether or not I'll do it with your approval."

They had already jousted over the Espionage Act and the Favored Na-tions Agreements. Richard hadn't budged from his position.

The Secretary of State, a slender woman of Japanese-American de-scent, pretended sympathy. The National Security Advisor, a tough older woman with a touch of Margaret Thatcher in her bearing, had already decided Richard was an enemy of the state. And the head of NASA, a thin former astronaut who helped build the Moon Base, was, surprisingly, on Richard's side.

"What can you give them that's not proprietary?" he asked.

Richard shrugged. "They haven't really made a specific request. I fig-ured they would on my next visit."

"You can't give them any space-related technologies," the National Se-curity Advisor said. "And you most certainly can't have one of their peo-ple on board your ship."

"Even if they have the specs for that ship?" Richard asked. "What else could they learn?"

"Have you given them the specs for the ship?" she snapped.

Richard turned his chair slightly so that he wouldn't have to look at her. Instead, he focused on the Secretary of State.

"I'm not a diplomat," he said, "but the ambassador seemed sincere when he approached me. He—"

"They always do, Mr. Johansenn. That's their job," the National Securi-ty Advisor had a way of sounding extremely condescending.

He ignored her. "The ambassador said he had a memory of the day those astronauts were lost. He seemed intrigued by what I was doing. Maybe they have some astronauts of their own to retrieve?"

"They do," the NASA head said. "They lost several astronauts in the early 1980s, after they acquired the Soviet Union's technology and scien-tists at bargain rates. But they didn't have the trained astronauts and they lost a lot."

"How come we haven't heard of this?" the Secretary of State said.

"We did," the NASA head said. "It was in reports at the time, but it nev-er hit the media. You know how secretive the Chinese can be."

Suddenly the National Security Advisor was interested. She moved her chair forward. "How many did they lose?"

The NASA head shrugged. "I can get the exact figures for you later. But I'd wager they lost two or three dozen astronauts in those early years."

"Because they wouldn't ask for help." The Secretary of State tapped one long painted fingernail against her lips. "Do you think they're trying something new now?"

"The space race is, for all intents and purposes, over," Richard said. "They can buy their way onto our ships. They lost the Moon to us, and have to cooperate with us to get to Mars. They have their own program, but it's not as advanced as Europe's. Theoretically, China's is only de-signed for asteroid mining."

"I thought it was for defense," the National Security Advisor said.

"I said theoretically," Richard said. "That's what they claim. But yes, it's for defense."

"Rumors throughout the scientific community say they're planning their own Moon Base. They doubt we can stop them. We're not geared for a war on the Moon," the NASA head said.

Richard nearly sighed, but managed to control himself at the last minute. "What if what they want is as simple as it sounds? What if they want to see how we're recovering our own people?"

"If they've lost so many," the Secretary of State asked, "how do they know this is one of ours?"

"The suits are different," the NASA chief said. "They'd reflect differently."

"Or," Richard said, "they've already got a recovery program, and they've seen him up close."

"I wonder," the Secretary of State said slowly, a twinkle in her eye, "if they can bring him to us."

Richard argued against it. He wanted to be on the ship that recovered the next astronaut. But he had set the events into motion by being above-board.

When he left the White House, the Secretary of State had already called for a closed-door meeting with the congressional leadership to see if they could have a space-trade agreement with the Chinese, a short-term exchange of information that would allow space scientists to share as much knowledge as possible.

The National Security Advisor loathed the idea; she said the Chinese would get a lot more out of it than the Americans would. But the head of NASA wasn't so sure. His program had stagnated with the rise of private enterprise in space. NASA needed new ideas. Besides, he wanted to know if all the rumors about the various Chinese programs were true.

Richard didn't care about any of that. He had an astronaut to rescue, and he wasn't going to do it from a distance. He left the White House, and went to the Chinese Embassy alone.

The ambassador met him immediately. This time, they went to a more formal room, with red silk wallpaper and delicate carved chairs. No guards stood inside the room, and no one brought tea.

"I had heard you were on Capitol Hill," the ambassador said.

"I saw the Secretary of State," Richard said. "They don't want me talk-ing to you."

"And yet you are here," the ambassador said.

"I realized something while talking to them," Richard said. "I never asked how you knew where our astronaut was."

The ambassador smiled slowly. "They put you up to this."

"Believe me, they did not," Richard said. "If all goes according to their plans, someone will work with you on recovering that body. Only I won't be able to go along."

"And you feel you must go along," the ambassador said.

Richard nodded.

"So we are back where we began."

"Yes," Richard said. "What would you like in trade for the information about where our astronaut is?"

The ambassador smiled slowly. "This information is very important to you."

That was obvious. Richard had lost any negotiating point on that by re-turning so quickly.

"Yes, it's important," he said, "and time *is* of the essence."

It wasn't one of his better negotiations. Usually Richard was a shrewd businessman and a champion negotiator, but he was in new waters here. Not in dealing with the Chinese—he'd dealt with representatives of cul-tures he didn't entirely understand before—but because he really and truly wanted something.

In the past, he'd always had the ability to walk away.

This time, he could not.

He sold the Chinese government two of his own dart-like ships, the kind he designed after the Lovell mission, along with the specs. He didn't care if the U.S. government came after him for doing so. He had already informed his lawyers that he had chosen not to take the Secretary of State's advice. If the U.S. government wanted to try him under the Espi-onage Act or fine him for violating various Fair Trade Agreements, fine. He just wanted the time to get to the astronaut and back.

The lawyers had to tie the government up in court.

Then Richard put his P.R. people on the deal. They talked to the media, and suddenly he was the next world-class diplomat, a man who could ne-gotiate with the difficult Chinese and walk away with what he wanted. He broke the story through Helen Dail, promising her another exclusive on his trip to find the second astronaut.

Through it all, he finally understood how Tolemy felt. He hadn't even asked for proof. The great negotiator had missed one of the essential rules of negotiation: he should have made certain the item he desired was what he desired.

If the Chinese were lying—if this wasn't the second astronaut—they were playing him for a fool. They probably thought he was one already. He had given them proprietary technology. If the astronaut—the whatev-er they had found—wasn't from Apollo 8, they would have won.

From the moment he accepted the agreement, he had a knot in his stomach. He wasn't even looking forward to the trip, and the past two times he had.

On those trips he felt that even failure would be a success: at least he tried.

He didn't feel that way this time. Just scared and a little sick.

His mood colored the entire trip.

He took the same team that he had two years before. The Chinese gave him the coordinates when he was in orbit, knowing that he would inform the U.S. government when he had them. The Chinese were in a sector of space they shouldn't have been in if their technology was designed for as-teroid mining or defense.

Something else was going on, something the astronauts on his ship speculated about.

But Richard didn't. He'd felt a little relieved, able to give the U.S. gov-ernment something in exchange for this mission. He should have been even more relieved. His lawyers informed him that the Chinese had ve-hicles similar to the dart on their drawing board, meaning they had ei-ther gotten his or his competitors' proprietary information through some illegal back channel, but that didn't make him feel better.

He hadn't realized until this mission how truly single-minded he'd been. How great his focus was on these astronauts. It wasn't healthy.

He was no longer even sure it was right.

They were dead. Really and truly dead. There was no rescuing them, and what little he'd learned from Lovell and the capsule hadn't really made up for the effort he'd expended over decades to find them.

He wondered what they would have thought of him, these men who had launched themselves into space on a rocket, protected only by a tin can. Would they have thought he was foolish? Or would they have ap-plauded his audacity?

He used to think they'd understand, but not even he understood any more.

Fifty years was a long time to focus on one thing. Maybe it was time to focus on something else.

They discovered the object not far from the coordinates the Chinese had given him. That was a surprise, given the amount of time it had tak-en to get here. Clearly, the object was moving very slowly.

The reflection was right; the build was right; the position was familiar. It took Richard one look through the viewscreen and he knew that the Chinese had played fair with him.

He had another Apollo 8 astronaut.

The team cheered, and he cheered with them. He slid into the rescue as if he'd done it a thousand times before instead of just once.

This time, he braced himself properly as he guided the body into the bay. He smiled for Dail's camera—he'd allowed her to suit up and come inside as well—and he carefully

moved the frozen astronaut to the back of the bay to a berth designed for him.

McFerson hadn't complained about not operating the grappler. He'd laughed, as if he were having the time of his life. None of them were scared this time. Even if they damaged this corpse, they succeeded. They already had brought one intact astronaut to Earth.

This one was just a bonus.

Richard hated how his thoughts ran. Even as he held the man's arm in his gloved hands, he wasn't thinking of this astronaut as a person, as someone to be rescued, but as an item, as a commodity.

And wasn't that what he'd been? Something to be haggled over, an item for trade? Something that might cause a great loss or a great win?

Certainly not a human being, not any longer.

He tried to keep these feelings to himself—and managed to lose them only briefly, when he learned this one's identity. The name etched along the suit was almost gone, but he could still see its shape, and the first three letters. *B. o. r.*

Borman. The commander.

McFerson speculated about the order of evac, just as Richard had the last time, but Richard wasn't playing that game any longer. Borman was in a part of space that wasn't on Tolemy's map—not in the red section or the green section.

It was as Tolemy had said—impossible to predict where these men would be.

Borman was here, in a place that had no logic at all that Richard could see. And he doubted that anything on Borman's suit would give them real clues about how he got here.

Someone would try to map the trajectory. Someone would make semi-educated guesses, but it wouldn't be Richard.

He was, for all intents and purposes, done.

He didn't say that, of course. In public, he sounded the mantra: they still had one astronaut to find—the junior man on the mission, Bill Anders.

The Anders family got involved. They asked to help in the search. Pub-licity stunts—the Anders family looking through telescopes, viewing star charts—abounded. Newspapers carried headlines *Family Still Hopes Missing Astronaut Will Come Home,* and the twenty-four-hour news channels did specials. Websites appeared as amateur astronomers tried to figure out, based on all the points that Richard had discovered, where Anders would be.

Richard supported all of this and more. He kept ACP-S running, and he made sure that anyone with information about the last astronaut should feel free to come to him. He kept the best minds in the business search-ing, and he even tried to get Tolemy out of retirement.

But Tolemy's heart wasn't in it, and neither was Richard's. Something had changed for him at the last. Maybe he was afraid of success too—or afraid to complete the project. Maybe all that self-examination was just a way to prevent himself from finishing the job.

Because, if he found Bill Anders, what else would drive him? The entire crew of Apollo 8 would be home. The capsule was already here and on dis-play in the Smithsonian, with his private company credited for the dona-tion. Children climbed in and out of the couches where, essentially, three men had died.

After a few years, he stopped monitoring the program. He actually got what most people called a real life. He married, for the first time, to a woman half his age, a woman who could keep up with him in conversa-tion. They had three children—a daughter and twin boys—and while he found fatherhood interesting, it was not all-consuming the way most peo-ple claimed it would be.

His wife said that was because he was not most people. Others he mentioned this to told him it was because he had nannies and assistants who took some of the burden off the childrearing.

But that wasn't what he meant. He had expected raising children to be as focused an activity as searching for Apollo 8 had been. He expected to think about them each waking minute, get lost in their smallest deeds, praise their greatest accomplishments.

And while he paid attention, he did not think about them every waking minute. He barely thought of them at all. Once he learned who they were—how their personalities were forming—he treated them as he treated most people, with a casual coolness that he couldn't quite help.

His wife claimed she expected it, but he could see disappointment in her eyes. His children always sought his approval for everything they did, and yet when he praised them, it wasn't enough.

"They don't want your approval," his wife finally told him. "They want your love."

He thought about that. He wondered if he had ever loved anything. Re-ally loved it.

And eventually he came to the realization that he loved the dream of space. The dream that he had absorbed as a child—the one painted in the picture in his office—of possibilities and fears and greatness unknown.

That had been what he'd been pursuing with Apollo 8. Not a rescue, so much as a hope. A hope that the universe out there would be different than the world in here.

The realization calmed him, and he went back to work, much to his family's dismay. Once again, he checked on ACP-S, not because he had any hopes of finding Anders—he didn't, not really—but because that was part of what he did in the same way that he checked on all of his various projects the world over.

He grew older and he watched as the dreams of his youth—the dream of space flight and far-ranging exploration, of colonizing the solar system, and humankind moving beyond the confines of Earth—slowly came true.

He marveled at the way things went, and he was proud of his part in them.

Part Four: 2068

Which was how he came to be on the starliner *Martian Princess* on its maiden voyage from

the Moon to the newly opened Mars colony. The colony had existed on Mars for nearly thirty years, but it had expanded and now had a small resort for adventurous travelers who wanted to in-spect the area before they bought homes in Mars's second colony, which was under construction.

Richard had a stake in both colonies. He owned the resort. And he owned the *Martian Princess.* The starliners made him proud—not be-cause they were passenger ships like the old luxury liners that used to cross the ocean—but because they were really fast. And that ever-in-creasing speed was pulling in the outer system with each increase, mak-ing things seem closer, more possible.

People still had to commit upward of three months of their life to the journey, depending on where Mars was in relationship to Earth, but that was nothing like the years for a there-and-back journey in the 2030s.

He had the V.I.P. cabin near the front of the ship, but he made a point of visiting all the decks, being seen in the restaurants and the shops and even in the educational wing, where he conspicuously took lessons in Mandarin.

He moved slowly now. Even with all the advancements in medical sci-ence, his life had taken its toll on his health. He was 108 and frail. He had to be careful of his old bones. His daughter Delia, who was also on the trip, insisted on bringing a retinue of doctors in case Richard fell ill or tripped and hit his head.

If he had known that the girl was going to be this protective, he never would have made her head of most of his companies. He would have stuck with assistants. Although no assistant had half the intelligence and drive that his daughter had. At forty-two she reminded him of himself at the same age—focused, edgy, and successful in spite of herself.

The resorts were more her dreams than his. She could see past the so-lar system. She wanted to get to a time when human beings traveled the galaxy the way that they now traveled around the Earth.

That was a bit far for him. Even Mars seemed far for him. This would be his first trip to the red planet, even though he'd had property there for decades. He'd never wanted to commit to the trip.

He wasn't sure what had made him commit this time, either.

He suspected it had a lot to do with the conversation he'd had with his sons, when he told them they needed to be adventurers. They didn't un-derstand him, and he realized that they hadn't seen him in his adventur-ous years—going through astronaut training, all that risky travel into or-bit and beyond, his rescues of Apollo 8 and the two crew members.

His boys knew of that, of course—this was all part of their father's lore—but they hadn't seen it. And they were their mother's children. While bright, they didn't understand what they couldn't see.

They weren't dreamers the way his daughter was. They did strive, though, and they handled themselves well, unlike many children of the rich. They started charities with his excessive fortune, and were working to change the Earth, something he had never even thought of.

He had a hunch they did it as a rebuke to him, but he was proud of them for it. They had seen a gap and filled it, and while they weren't quite what he'd expected, they were good men with good hearts—a trib-ute to the woman who had raised them.

Certainly not a tribute to him. When he realized how limited they were, he focused on his daughter. She was his child 100 percent, and that fasci-nated him. She reflected his good and bad qualities—his single-mindedness, his coldness, and his casual way of coming up with a viable idea that somehow made millions.

Yet she was dedicated to him, more dedicated than he had been to his own parents in their declining years. He wasn't sure if that was socializa-tion, a difference in the culture, or if she had a slightly softer side than he had.

He wasn't going to figure that out, either. He was going to enjoy it, as he enjoyed her company when she gave it.

Mostly she spent the trip in her two cabins—the other V.I.P. suite, and the secondary suite she'd commandeered to keep the corporations run-ning. She ran from place to place, as he used to do, frustrated by the slow-ness of interplanetary communications, and worried that she was going to miss something by being so far away.

He tried to tell her that sometimes being far away was exactly what an entrepreneur needed, but she'd looked at him as if he'd insulted her in-telligence, and he vowed at that moment to stop giving advice.

Instead, he retired to his own cabin, which he loved.

He'd always insisted on luxury. The luxury suites on the *Martian Princess* were spectacular, but the V.I.P. suites took that luxury one step farther. He had his own living room, a dining room, and two bedrooms on the second story—not that he needed both—one of which he turned into an office. The bathroom had every luxury, and the functioning kitchen could cook some foods itself.

But what he loved the most was what the brochures called the back-yard—the deck outside the cabin with a floor-to-ceiling view into space. The material that the windows were made out of was so clear that it looked to Richard the way space had looked through the open door of the cargo bay on the dart.

Someone had furnished the yard like a formal living room. When he ex-amined the suite the week before the *Martian Princess* left, he had the formal furniture replaced with chaise lounges and wooden tables—the lawn furniture of his youth. The lights, scattered around the yard, looked like tiki torches. All that he needed was some green grass and some fire-flies, and he would be at home.

He spent most of his time on the deck, reading or listening to music. He didn't watch any programming or have holo performances on the yard be-cause he didn't want to get lost in them. He never invited anyone into his cabin. If he saw people, he saw them on the decks or in the restaurants.

The view was enough.

And it was the view that caught him, two days out from Mars. He was standing in the middle of the lawn, transfixed by the way the darkness of space wasn't really dark. There were hints of light in it. Sunlight went everywhere. The all-powerful star that was the center of this solar system had a greater reach than any human being ever could.

He tilted his head up, and saw a reflection in the distance, a flash of light off something white ahead of the ship. He blinked, certain he'd imagined that. But it came again, larger now, as if the object were spin-ning ever so slowly.

He went to the cabin, used the on-deck telescope for his particular suite, and turned the exterior lens on the object.

The very powerful telescope had an automatic computer tracking func-tion and he set it on the object.

His breath caught when he looked.

An astronaut in an old-fashioned suit.

His heart started to pound.

Anders. Could it be?

Richard wiped his hands on his pants, thought for a moment, and knew how everyone would react. They didn't treat him like a doddering old man—that kind of treatment disappeared as aging became a way of life for so many people—but a person who had passed one hundred still had achieved a milestone that made the younger generations dismiss him.

He wasn't in his prime any more, physically—that was obvious—and so many people thought that meant he wasn't in his prime mentally, either.

The ship would be past the object in less than a minute. He had to act, and act quickly.

His hand shook as he pressed the comm link. "Delia," he said to his daughter, "come here, please. Now. Quickly!"

Then he called the bridge. "I need your best pilot, with a few changes of clothes, to meet me in ten minutes."

"May I ask why, sir?' the Captain asked.

"No."

Richard shut down the comm link, then grabbed some of his own clothes, stuffed them inside a bag, and put the bag over his shoulder.

The door to his room glided open and his daughter entered, looking worried. She was trim and athletic with her mother's dark hair and eyes.

"I want you to see something," he said before she could speak.

He indicated the telescope. "Look quickly. It's more than likely almost out of sight."

She started to object and he held up his hand. "Quickly."

She sighed and walked over. She wrapped one hand around the viewer, and peered through the lens, then gasped. "This has to be some kind of joke."

"Possibly," he said. "But I'm still going after it, joke or not."

He knew that the liner couldn't just turn like a ship in the ocean. This ship was turning around only after it reached Mars orbit. And by the time they got there, Anders would be again lost.

The last astronaut. The last part of Richard's dream.

He had just passed it.

But he had no intention of losing it.

"Dad, what are you thinking?" Delia asked as she walked with him from his suite and headed down the hall.

"I'm going to go get him."

Delia looked at him as if he had suddenly lost his mind. "Daddy, there isn't any way to pick him up. We're already far, far past him."

"Not that far," he said. "I'll take one of the lifeboats. It's designed with more than enough range."

He'd insisted on the old-fashioned term when he'd approved the design of the starliner. He worried that such a large, grand ship would suffer the fate of the *Titanic*—that some sort of disaster would hit it, and hundreds of people would die because he hadn't prepared. He'd insisted on smaller ships, most of them two-man crew sized, a few a bit larger, all of them with enough power and supplies to last a year with a dozen people on board.

"They don't have grapplers," she said.

Richard gave her a surprised look.

"I studied your space rescues, Dad," she said. "They were miracles of efficiency."

They hadn't seemed like it at the time.

"I don't need a grappler," he said. "I need a lifeboat, a spacesuit, and a pilot."

"Daddy," Delia said, "this is crazy."

He ran a hand along her face, then smiled at her with the most affec-tion he'd ever felt.

"Yes," he said, "it is."

The pilot was a small woman named Star. He thought the name a good omen. Before she was hired as a tertiary co-pilot for this mission, she'd been with the U.S. military, flying orbital defense missions around the Moon colony. He looked up her record, saw the reprimands in the file for a bit too much cockiness, for a tad too much recklessness, and decided she was exactly what he'd needed.

He could have flown the ship himself—the controls were so simple that a child could fly it (he'd insisted on that, too)—but he chose not to. He need-ed the help.

The lifeboat didn't have a cargo bay like the ones he was used to—no separate environmental system, no real storage area—but it did have two doors, one inside, and one with an airlock out the side. That was all he needed. And it had six small cabins. He could put Anders in one and shut off the environmental systems to that cabin to keep him frozen.

"I'm going with you," Delia said as they reached the lifeboat entrance. Star had already gone on board and had the ship coming to life.

"No," he said. "You have to pull every string you can pull to get back here and pick me up, with a ship equipped to handle what I'm going to go get, and then get us all back to

Earth."

He then kissed her on the forehead and stepped aboard, closing the hatch behind him.

Star got the lifeboat slowed to a stop within six hours, and had them back to the area of Anders' position in another eight hours. The entire time Richard sat in the copilot's chair and stared ahead into the empti-ness of space. And every hour he had to calm Delia, tell her he was fine. He had no idea his daughter worried so much. That made him feel want-ed, and he liked that feeling.

The old ships that Richard had used on the first three missions never had this kind of speed or maneuverability. In fact, at the speed the liner was moving when they'd left it, the old ships wouldn't have even had the power to slow and stop, let alone go back.

It took surprisingly little searching to find Anders. The newer equip-ment on the ships also made that easier.

Star matched Anders' course and pulled in close beside him. The body was barely turning. It seemed to just float there.

"You take the controls," Star said, "and I'll get him."

"No," Richard said. "I will."

She gave him a sideways look.

"I'll be all right," he said.

It took him a little longer to climb into the new space suits. They looked more like a white tuxedo than an actual space suit, and the helmets were close-fitting and light. Everyone on the liner had been trained to put them on, but they still didn't feel right, as if he weren't wearing enough to protect him from the cold he was about to step into.

He climbed into the airlock and magnetized his boots. Then he vented the atmosphere.

He felt stronger than he had in years.

The tricky part, he knew, would be reaching for Anders. Star had gotten the lifeboat to a point where it nearly touched the man, but Richard had little to support him. He used the tether inside the airlock, and wrapped it around his waist, securing it tightly.

Then he opened the outer door.

Unfiltered light hit him, reflecting off the lifeboat's silver sides. He blinked in the glare.

Then his eyes adjusted.

Anders floated near him, just an arm's reach away.

Looking free. Almost as if he didn't want to be rescued.

For the first time, Richard understood the impulse that had led to the Apollo 8 astronauts evacuating their small ship. Why stay inside a tin can when the entire universe waited? What would Anders have said if he knew that his body would be found so very close to Mars? How would he have felt to know that he had spent a hundred years gazing blindly on the entire solar system?

Richard reached forward and grabbed Anders' cold, stiff arm.

It would be so easy to lock elbows and step into the darkness.

It would be so easy to choose this death. Eventually, he would just go to sleep. He would be unencumbered by anything, gazing at the vastness of space and of the future.

Yet he had no reason to step out. He still had years yet. Years of adven-tures.

He was going to Mars where he already had businesses. He had been traveling on a starliner, for heaven's sake, something that the original Apollo astronauts could only dream of.

Their sacrifices had brought him here.

Their courage, their loss, their dreams.

He had an obligation to keep living the future they'd always wanted, to continue to make their dreams of the stars even more possible for suc-ceeding generations.

Part of that was bringing Anders in, letting scientists see what hap-pened one hundred years out. To learn, as they had from Borman and Lovell, about the adventures these men had had, even after death.

"You okay?" Star asked.

"Fine," Richard said.

It took only a gentle tug to bring Anders to the door. Richard wrapped his arms around the hundred-year-old adventurer and pulled him gently so that his booted feet didn't hit the door's lip. Then Richard eased the body inside.

As he reached for the mechanism to close the outer door, he saw the vastness of the stars, as mysterious as the Moon used to be when Richard was a boy.

All his life, people accused him of pursuing death.

But he hadn't been. He'd been exploring possibilities, reaching toward a future he could only see in his imagination.

He'd gone after these men because they'd inspired him. But he'd never rescued them.

They were the ones who had been the heroes.

They were the ones who had always—always—rescued him.

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