

SAND AND IRON

by Michael F. Flynn

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Illustration by John Allemand

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Sometimes there are higher priorities than understanding....

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It began on an unnamed planet around an unnamed sun, in an unnamed region distant from the Rift. That was a bad sign to begin with, for what can come from nameless places but something unspeakable? It was a bad place to break down, a bad place to be, far off the shipping lanes, on a little-used byway of Electric Avenue known as Spider Alley. But it was just the sort of place where a baling-wired, skin-toothed tramp freighter might find itself. When there is little to lose, there is much to gain, and the secret shortcuts of the Periphery have a way of finding profit.

And this at least can be said about such forgotten corners: it is in such places that the flotsam and the jetsam of the galaxy wash up. It is there that treasures and horrors are hidden away, for safekeeping—or for safeguarding.

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One such bit of flotsam was the free trader *New Angeles*, out of Ugly Man and bound for the Jenjen Cluster with a cargo of drugs and exotic foodstuffs that the folk there do not make for themselves. The jetsam had been there much longer. How much longer, no man could say.

There were contractual dates, penalty clauses, maintenance budgets. It was the sacrifice of the latter on the altar of the former that had brought the ship to this place. Something had blown—it doesn't matter what—and *New Angeles* had drifted into a side-channel and into the subluminal mud.

...and alfvens aren't really designed to entangle at Newtonian speeds. One hard yank on the fabric of space to slide off the ramp of Electric Avenue without becoming a aerenkov burst, a few more tugs to get below

the system's escape velocity. Past that, engines tend to smoke and give off sparks. Here on the edge of nowhere there was no Space Traffic Control, no magbeam cushions to slow them, and the unwonted deceleration strained *New Angeles* to the limit. The twin alfvens screamed like tormented souls until the ship finally entered the calm of a Newtonian orbit.

By the grace of physics, every strand of Electric Avenue is tied to a sun, but there is no guarantee of planets to go with it, or at least of useful ones. As the ship shed velocity circling the star, the crew imaged the system from various points, searching anxiously for parallax, until ... There! A planet! Hard acceleration to match orbits; and a long, slow crawl across Newtonian space, during which each crewman could blame another for everything that had gone wrong.

The planet was the sort called a marsbody: a small world of broad, gritty plains and low, tired hills that barely interrupted the eternal westerlies. The winds blew at gale force but, the air being thin, the storms were but the ghosts of rage. Orbiting the planet, the ship's instruments detected sand and iron, and with silicon and heavy metals, a man could make most things needful. So a downside team was assembled, equipped with backhoe and molecular sieve and sent below in the ship's jolly-boat while the engineers and deck officers waited above in various states of patience.

In one state was the chief engineer, Nagaraj Hogan, who whiled his time in certain recreations based on the laws of probability—to the benefit of his assistant, who had found those laws highly malleable.

In the other state fidgeted Captain Amos January, who, like a sort of anti-Canute, spent his time not sweeping back the tide, but urging it forward. He was the orifice through which all the pressures of budget and schedule were concentrated and directed at the crew—though with little more consequence than the spiritless wind on the planet below. January owned that most treacherous of countenances, for he was a hard man with a soft man's face. Who could take seriously anything he said? The lips were too full, the cheeks too round, the laugh lines too prominent. They belied the harshness with which he often spoke.

There comes a time when fatalism conquers logic and conquers even common sense. The crew of *New Angeles* had reached that point, and perhaps had reached it long before. They *ought* to have worked with more passion on the repairs, but why hustle to meet the next disaster?

Because the ship would miss the delivery date, January fumed. Micmac Anne, his Number One, thought that if the folk in the Jenjen had

sent all the way to Ugly Man for the drugs, they would hardly return them because they were a trifle stale.

January turned to her from the ship's viewer, his cherub's face flushed with anger. "The groundside party has shifted the dig!"

Anne verified the mining party's location. "Two hundred double paces to the west-southwest," she acknowledged. She did not see that it much mattered, but the captain was given to fits of precision. "I'm sure they had a good rea—"

"They're digging in the wrong place! The mass densitometer showed the ore closest to the surface *here!*" His finger stabbed the map projection on the viewer. "Greatest benefit, least work."

"The least work," she reminded him, "was to cannibalize part of the ship. That's what Hogan recommended."

"Cannibalize the ship! Oh, that's a wonderful idea!" January cried, and for an instant Anne almost believed he meant it, so happy was his countenance. "And after a few rounds of that," he continued, "there'd be no ship left to repair."

Anne thought it might also mean less ship to break down, but she forbore expressing that thought.

"Someone should put a bug up their asses," January said. "Hogan can't spend his whole life playing cards."

Anne sighed and turned away. "All right ... I'll just—" But January stopped her.

"No, you stay up here, keep on top of things. I'll have Slugger take me planetside in the gig."

His Number One, who had been turning toward the radio and not toward the boat davits, hesitated. Amos had decided that the Personal Touch was needed. This was a mistake, in her opinion. On the radio, his voice, pure and hard, might have transmitted some of his urgency. Delivered in person, it never would.

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Slugger O'Toole grounded the gig near the jolly-boat, and January

was out the hatch before the sand beneath had even cooled. It was the sort of planet where skinsuits will do. The air was thin and cold, but could be gathered into breathable quantities by the suit's intelligence. The breather made talking difficult, and gave the voice a squeaky texture—not a good thing, under the circumstances.

Striding across the gritty plain, he saw that the work party had moved the backhoe and sieve over into the lee of the low ridge that bordered the sea of sand. Further, having seen the gig land, they had stopped to watch the captain's approach. This was one more straw on January's personal dromedary. Did they think they could dally here forever?

The backhoe had been digging in a drift just below a cleft in the face of the ridge. Atop it, half-turned in her seat, Maggie Barnes waited. The engine hummed in idle. Every now and then, its insulators twitched a little to follow the world's sun. Maggie—she liked to be called Maggie B.—was a short, thick woman with unwomanly strength in her shoulders. Her skinsuit was a sky-blue, but of a different sky on a far-off and almost forgotten world. Here, the sky was so pale it was almost white.

Tirasi, the system tech, tall and thin and with the look of a cadaver awaiting its tag, stood by the smelter with his arms crossed. The molecular sieve had already processed the needed silicon—mining sand had been no problem—and awaited now only some heavier metals. Occasionally, he tweaked a knob, as if fearful that the settings would otherwise all run amok. The deckhand Mgurk waited with a shovel planted in the sand, hands draped over the handle-tip, and his chin resting upon the hands. His dull-red skinsuit nearly matched the oxide sands, and he wore his hood pulled so tight that the goggles and breather mask were all that could be seen.

The sight of so much work not being done further aggravated January, who greeted them by squeaking, "You were supposed to be digging over there!"—indicating the vast open and featureless expanse of the desert.

Maggie B. had not known why the captain had dropped planetside—Anne had stayed out of it, and *New Angeles* was now below the horizon—and a variety of possible reasons had suggested themselves, chief among them that Hogan had aroused himself and found another source of metal and, therefore, no further work was needed by the surface party. To be told she was digging *in the wrong place* was so unexpected that she laughed aloud.

It must be a joke, right?

No, it wasn't. So she threw up her first line of defense. "Over there, it itches!"

Itches! Yes. The constant winds carried fines of sand and, while the air was too thin to carry much force, the continual spray on the skinsuit tickled.

"Tickled," said January, suspecting some trick.

"Over here, we're in the cliff's wind-shadow."

"But the ore body is buried deeper here!"

Now, by this time, it would have meant more work and more time to return to the original site and start over. The hole was by now already half-dug. Maggie snapped at him. "Makes no damned difference where I dig!"

Now, that may have been the last moment of sanity in the universe, because it should have occurred to all of them that if it made no difference, why had she moved in the first place? In fact, it did make a difference, and a damned one at that. But that came later. In truth, she had simply felt an urge to move the machine.

"You're wasting my time, captain," she snapped and, as if to prove this point, she put the backhoe into gear.

One more scoop and the claw tips of the bucket made a peculiar, almost musical screech that set their teeth on edge. Even Mgurk roused himself, lifted his chin, and peered into the pit.

Something dull and metallic lay beneath the sand.

"The ore body," said Maggie in quiet satisfaction, and gave January a triumphant look.

"Must be a meteorite," said Tirasi. But January knew immediately that was not right. This close to the surface? With no sign of an impact crater?

"Who cares?" Maggie said, and drew the backhoe for another scoop. Again, that singing note called out. Mgurk cocked his head as if listening.

"It's smooth," said January when more of the body had been

revealed.

"It's bloody *machined*," said Tirasi, who had abandoned the smelter to kneel at the pit's edge. Maggie Barnes hopped off the backhoe and joined him.

"Nonsense," January said. "Rivers will smooth a stone the same way."

Tirasi swung his arm wide. "See any rivers nearby?" he demanded. "Water ain't flowed here in millions of years. Nah, this here's a made thing." He pulled pliers from his tool belt and tapped the object. It rang, dull and hollow, and the echoes went on longer than they should have.

January squeaked, "Johnny! Bring that shovel over and clear this out a bit. Johnny? Johnny!" He looked up, but Mgurk was nowhere in sight. "Where has that lazy lout gone now?"

It was a fair question, given that for many leagues in any direction lay nothing but gritty, open desert. Johnny had an aversion to hard labor and showed wonderful imagination in its avoidance; but where in all those miles could he have hidden himself? January used the all-hands channel on his radio. "Johnny, get your lazy carcass over here and help us dig!"

He heard static on the bounceback—a burst of noise that might have had a voice in the center of it. It seemed on the very edge of forming words.

O'Toole answered from the gig. The sudden excitement of the group at the site had attracted his attention. "Johnny's after wandering off t' the cleft," he told them. "What's going on?"

Maggie Barnes told him. "We found us a prehuman artifact!"

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What else could it be, a machined object, buried under the sand on a forgotten world? The works of man are wondrously diverse and widely spread, but where you find them you generally find men as well; and none had ever ventured here. "Let's not count chickens," January chided them. But for once his Santa Claus countenance did not lie. There might be riches here, and he knew it as well as they did. Yet caution led him to say, "Not every prehuman artifact—"

But he was talking to the wind. O'Toole was already clambering down

the ladder from the gig, and Tirasi had leapt into the pit to brush sand away from the buried object. "Big," the system tech muttered. "Big."

Too big, January noted of the portion thus far revealed. The boats would never lift it, not all of them combined. "Not every prehuman artifact," January tried again, "has made money for its finders. House of Chan had the Ourobouros Circuit for most of a lifetime and could never make it do anything. After Chan Mirslaf died, they sold it as a curio for half what they spent experimenting on it."

"Hey," said Tirasi. "This thing's translucent!"

"And the Cliffside Montage on Alabaster sits in the middle of a plain, visible for leagues, so the Planetary Council can't even fence it off and charge an admission fee." January sighed and crossed his arms.

"Well, cap'n," said Maggie B., proving someone had been listening, "we won't know till we know what it is, will we?"

O'Toole arrived from the gig and paced round the circumference of the pit, whistling and exclaiming. A big, blocky, thick-fingered man, he always moved with unexpected grace and dexterity, even when—or especially when—he had hoisted a few pots of beer.

"So let's not get our hopes up before we know what we have," January said. "How many prehuman discoveries have been nothing more than empty chambers or the shells of buildings?"

"There was an entire city on Megrnome," Maggie recalled. "And, near as we could figger, it was formed as a single structure, with no seams or joints. We used to go over there when I was a kid and play in the ruins, pretending the prehumans was still there, hidin' 'round the next corner." She laughed, then turned suddenly, as if startled, and her gaze swept the open desert. "Wonder where they all went to. The prehumans, I mean."

January shrugged. "Who cares? No matter."

"We usta call 'em 'the folk of sand and iron.' Nobody knew why. Makes our reason fer stoppin' here a little weird, don't ya think?"

"Stuff and nonsense," said January. "They were gone long before humans went to space."

O'Toole had finished his circuit of the pit and had returned to where

they stood. "Don't ye believe it, cap'n," he said. "They tell stories. On Die-Bold, on Friesing's World, 'specially on Old 'Saken. Hell, half the Old Planets have stories o' th' prehumans."

Maggie B. nodded vigorously. "Some of them old legends are so old they been forgot."

January snorted. "Myths, you mean. Legends, fables. I've heard them. If any two of them describe the same creatures—if any two stories even fit together logically—they'd be the first two. We don't know when the prehumans were around, or for how long. We don't know if they ruled this quarter of the galaxy or only roamed through it. There's probably a tall tale to cover every possibility. People can't tolerate the inexplicable. So they tell a story or sing a song. All we've ever found were their artifacts. No human ever saw them in life."

"They mayn't been even life as we know it," said Maggie B. "Mebbe, they was fluorine life or silicon life or somethin' we ain't never figgered on."

"Silicon, eh?" said O'Toole. "Now, I'm not after hearin' that one. Hey, maybe they nivver disappeared. Maybe, they just crumbled into sand and..." He waved his arm over the surrounding desert, "...and maybe that's all what's left o' th' fookin' lot uv 'em." The quickening wind stirred the sand, lifting and tumbling granules as if they were dancing.

"And maybe," said Tirasi from the pit, "you can jump down here, Slug, and help me dig the bloody thing out!"

Tirasi always managed to slip under O'Toole's skin, not least of all by abbreviating the man's nickname. Physically opposite, they were much alike in spirit, and so repelled each other, as a man spying himself in a fun-house mirror might step backward in alarm. From time to time, they debated whether "Slugger" or "Fighting Bill" was the weightier epithet, with the question still undetermined. Slugger was a bull; Fighting Bill a terrier. The pilot leapt into the pit with the system tech, and they both dug and brushed the sand off the artifact using their hands.

January shook his head. "And Mgurk has the shovel, and he's not about. Maggie, you dig some more around that thing. See how big it is and—maybe—you'll find that ore body while you're at it." This last was intended sarcastically, to remind them why they were beached on this forsaken world in the first place. The artifact wasn't going anywhere and, if they didn't complete the repairs, *New Angeles* wasn't, either.

Maggie moved the backhoe a little farther off and began to probe for the edge of the artifact. Her digger came down too hard into the sand and struck a still-buried portion of it. It rang like a great bass bell, a little muffled, but loud enough that the two men in the pit clapped their hands to their ears. January, who had been searching for some sign of Mgurk's dull red skinsuit, noticed the sand vibrate into ridges and waves half a league away.

About where the mass detector had located the "ore-body's" closest approach to the surface.

January had a sudden vision of the artifact as a buried city, like the one aboveground on Maggie's home world, all of one piece, honeycombing the entire planet, and that Tirasi and O'Toole would grub about it forever, brushing the sand from it, inch by inch.

"We ought to go look for Johnny," he began uneasily, and then stopped with his words in his throat, for three dull clangs reverberated from within the buried shell. Tirasi and O'Toole started and scrambled back from it. Maggie made the sign of the wheel across her body and muttered, "The Bood preserve us!" After a few moments, the clangs were repeated. "Ye turned it on somehow," O'Toole told the system tech.

"Or you did," Tirasi answered. He began to brush furiously at the sand that covered the thing, clearing a space. Then, shading his eyes with his hands, he pressed his face to the translucent surface. "I can see inside, a little. There are shapes, shadows. Irregular, ugly. Can't quite make them ... Aah!" He scrambled back in alarm. "One of 'em moved! It's them! This is where they all went to! Holy Alfven help me!" He began to clamber out of the pit, but O'Toole grabbed his arm. "You were right about the 'ugly,'" he said, pointing.

And there, with his face pressed to the inner surface of the shell, was Johnny Mgurk and the shovel with which he had been beating the walls.

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The entrance was in the cleft, of course, obscured by the shadows in a fault in the southern face—a darker opening in the darkness.

New Angeles had come back over the horizon by then, and January informed Micmac Anne what had happened, cautioning her not to tell Hogan and Malone lest, transfixed by visions of easy wealth, they abandon ship and drop planetside in the lighter.

January thought at least one of his crew should stand guard outside the entrance. In case. In case of what, he couldn't say, which did nothing to win their assent. The others thought he wanted to cut them out of a share in the treasure, which by now had in their minds achieved Midas-like proportions. All was decided when Mgurk appeared in the entry and said, in his execrable Terran argot, "Hey, alla come-come, you. Jildy, sahbs. Dekker alla cargo, here. We rich, us." And so they all hurried after him.

January was the last to enter, and the clambering footsteps of the others had faded before he reached the point where the cave became a tunnel with a flattened footpath. He passed an enormous white stripe on the wall, three man-lengths high and a double-arm's-length wide. January had barely registered the peculiar dimensions when it struck him that it was the edge of a sliding door nestled into a slot in the rock. Yes, there was the matching slot on the other side of the passage. Pulled out, the door would seal off the entrance. January was impressed. That was one thick door.

And made of marshmallow.

No, not marshmallow, he decided, pressing it experimentally, but some highly resilient material. He pushed, it yielded. He released, and it sprang back. Elastic deformation. He pushed as hard as he could, and his arm sank into the door up to his elbow. It would submit to a chisel or a drill bit in exactly the same way, he decided. A jiu-jitsu material, strong because it yielded.

As soon as he relaxed, the material snapped back, ejecting his arm with all the stored energy with which he had pushed and nearly dislocating his shoulder. Jiu-jitsu material, indeed, he thought, rubbing his shoulder. Best *not* try chisels, drills, lasers, or explosives. It would absorb all the energy, and then give it back. His curiosity ran high; but not that high.

Whatever had required such a barrier must be of inestimable value. He rubbed his hands in anticipation of the wealth waiting below.

Yet, one thing troubled his mind. A door so thick had been meant to bar entry against the most determined explorer. He could not imagine that little Johnny Mgurk had simply rolled it aside. Perhaps the lock had failed over the eons and the system had been designed to fail-open.

But why design a "fail *open*" mode into an impassable barrier?

As he continued deeper inside, the rough rock walls smoothed out into an off-white ceramic. Faint veins of pale yellow ran through it, though

whether decorative or functional, he couldn't say. Here artistically sinuous, there fiercely rectangular, they could be either, or both. But if decorative, he thought, prehuman eyes had been attuned to finer color contrasts than humans.

Or they'd had lousy interior decorators.

The passage wound down a spiral ramp and some freak of geometry cut off the sounds of the crew's voices, leaving a radio silence within which a persistent static hiss rose and fell irregularly, like a snake trying to speak. The dry air, the constant, sandy wind ... The planet must be an enormous ball of static electricity.

He came at last to the chamber that the backhoe had uncovered. Through the translucent ceiling drifted the light of the pale sun. It was an oval room of gray sea-green accented with undulating curves of slightly darker shade. The walls seemed to swirl about in unending stillness. Had the effect been meant for beauty, January wondered, or just to make people dizzy? But if prehuman technology was unknowable, their aesthetics were unfathomable.

Arranged irregularly about the room, eleven pedestals emerged seamlessly from the floor. All but one were faerie-thin, and all but four were empty. In a separate chamber, entered as through the languid petals of a fleshy white lotus, a twelfth pedestal, also empty, swept in a graceful exponential arc from the floor. Amidst this peculiar corn-field his crew darted with great exclamation.

At the farther end of the room, but offset from the tip of the oval, another white, spongy door sat half-open. Through this opening, January could make out a long, dim corridor receding into the blackness.

"You try lifting the bleeding thing, you think you're so strong!" That challenge, issued to O'Toole by Bill Tirasi, drew January's attention. His four crewmen stood before the first pedestal, upon which a single, jet-black egg the size of a clenched fist balanced precariously.

It seemed made of glass, but glass so deep that light could not make it to the center, for it appeared much thicker than its size would warrant. Myriad pinpricks gleamed within. Perhaps light had tried to penetrate the blackness, had given up, and scattered into its component photons.

O'Toole was not given to such fancies. Smirking over Tirasi's failure, he laid hold of it and lifted. His muscles bulged, his eyes stood out. But it

did not move. He grunted, gripped it in both hands and still it would not budge.

Yet the balance was so delicate, it ought at least to roll.

It did not. Pushing and pulling had no more effect than lifting. Tirasi scoffed. "Heavier'n it looks, eh, mate?" O'Toole's glower deepened. "Sure, it must be bolted to the fookin' stand."

"I'd bet your whole year's share of profits," Terasi said, "that thing's made of neutronium. Compressed matter..." He sighed. "Imagine the profit potential in *that!* A bloke could get stinking rich once he learned the secret."

"Then he'd have to spend his life here," January said, and the others started, for they hadn't seen him enter. "There's not a ship on the Periphery that could lift a neutronium egg."

"That egg, big-big," said Mgurk.

"Nah," O'Toole mocked him. "That egg, small-small."

"That egg, full of galaxies," Mgurk answered. "Yes, yes."

"Oh, right," said O'Toole. But Tirasi scowled and, because he was an instrument tech and carried on his person a wide and wonderful assortment of instruments, pulled out a magnifier and studied the egg with it. "Bloody hell," he said after a few moments. "Those light spots are made of millions of smaller lights." He upped the magnification. "They must be the size of molecules, arranged all in swirls and clusters to look like galaxies. You got good eyes, Johnny."

Maggie B. borrowed the magnifier from him and studied the egg. "That's right purty. Those prehumans must've had eyes as good as Johnny here to enjoy something so hard t'see."

"If they had eyes," said Tirasi. "Maybe they had other senses to appreciate it."

Maggie B. scratched her head. "So, this here place was what, a museum, an art gallery?"

Behind vault doors thick enough to defy all creation? January did not think this a gallery, though it might have been a vault to safeguard priceless treasures. The proudest possessions of the prehuman empire? Assuming

the prehumans had had empires, or possessions, or pride. Four treasures only, and one too heavy to take away. Yet the building seemed to extend far out into the sea of sand, and might penetrate deeper into the world. Treasures beyond number might lie elsewhere in the complex.

And they could spend a lifetime searching for them.

January turned to the pedestal beside him and studied what at first seemed to be a pale red brick sitting on end, about a forearm high and just over a hand-grasp around. Of the many things which on this world might be rare, January did not think to number sandstone. Unlike the Midnight Egg—they had named the first treasure already—this was nothing more than a geometric slab whose proportions were, to human eyes, the least bit off. Yet, what made one combination of height, length, and breadth pleasing, and another unsatisfactory? The prehumans may have apprehended matters from another perspective, and esteemed this the most beautiful object in the room.

He rubbed the side of the stone and was surprised that, despite its rough appearance, it was smooth, and cool to the touch.

"Maybe," said O'Toole, "if we can't lift the fookin' thing, we can chip off a wee slice, something small enough to take. Even a chip could make us all rich."

"Hey," said Mgurk. "You-fella, no break him. No diamonds, those." And the Terran put his left hand in front of his face and wagged it side to side three times quickly, a gesture that the crew had learned to read as vigorous defiance.

O'Toole balled a fist. "You gonna stop me, Johnny? You and what management company?"

"Johnny," said Maggie B. "If them ain't diamonds, what are they?" O'Toole rolled his eyes. As if a Terran would know!

"Galaxies," the deckhand answered. "Whole universe in a ball. Story, they tell ut in Corner of Abyalon, when me a kid. King Stonewall, he want alla-alla galaxies, *jildy*. So his bhisti science-wallahs press universe small-small. But Stonewall fear touch ut. An he smash ut, universe ends." Mgurk pointed to O'Toole. "You chip, you break sky. Big trouble." And he arced his arm over his head.

"Aaah! Those old stories ain't worth shit." O'Toole was unimpressed

by tales of an imaginary pre-human “king.” But he stepped away from the pedestal.

January raised his eyebrows. “A whole universe compressed into a ball that small? No wonder it’s so heavy.”

Tirasi snorted. “Rot! It’s too damned *light* to be a whole universe. I don’t know what stories they tell in the Terran Quarter on Abyalon, Johnny, but that just doesn’t make sense.”

Mgurk shrugged. “Pukka tale. Here ball; just like tell story.”

Maggie B. pursed her lips. “How can the universe be inside a ball inside the universe? That’s like finding *New Angeles* inside a cargo hold of *New Angeles*! It ain’t...” She hesitated, searching for a term to express the *ain’t-ness* of it. “It ain’t *topological*!”

O’Toole made a disgusted sound. “I thought we come down here to get rich, not stand around discussin’ kiddy stories and fookin’ philosophy. C’mon, Bill, there’s three more things to check out here.”

Tirasi took one more look at the Midnight Egg, captured an image of it, and folded his magnifier. “If we can’t take it with us, it doesn’t matter what it is.” He announced this as if excuses were needed, and followed the pilot to the next pedestal. Mgurk said something about foxes and grapes that January did not catch.

January was about to follow the others when he noticed that the sandstone block beside him seemed now twisted into a half-spiral. Curious, he took it off the pedestal—it proved lightweight and comfortable to hold—and tried untwisting it; but it was “rock solid” and had no give to it. And yet, imperceptibly, the thing had altered its shape, like a dancer turning his upper body while leaving his feet planted.

Whatever, it wasn’t moving now. He increased the sensitivity of the skinsuit’s perceptors, but could detect no movement in the thing. January took some comfort that the stone was not actually squirming in his hand.

The next artifact was what they finally called the Slipstone. It seemed to be a chunk of blue coral, irregularly shaped into tendrils and cavities, and about the size of a man’s head. Like the Midnight Egg, the Slipstone seemed to go on forever: each tendril, each cavity, when magnified, resolved into further tendrils and cavities. “Fractal,” was how Maggie B.

described it and, since she was the ship's astrogator and Electric Avenue was a fractal network, they accepted her word for it.

They could not pick it up, either.

It proved immovable, not because of its weight, but because it was frictionless. They could get no grip on it, not with hands, not with tongs, not even by first covering it with the sandy grit that they had tracked with them into the chamber. How could something so irregular be so slippery?

"It doesn't make bleeding sense," Tirasi complained. "If it's frictionless, how does it stay put on the pedestal?"

Maggie B. shrugged. "Same way that other pedestal could support an entire universe."

A *joke*, thought January as he watched their hapless efforts with a growing sense of his own frustration. (Had they forgotten there was also a ship to repair?) The Slipstone was a joke like the Midnight Egg was a joke. One was very small, but very big. The other was very rough, but very smooth. Was this place the repository for prehuman practical jokes? A collection of alien whoopee cushions and joy buzzers?

Even the door was a paradox. Soft and yielding, but impenetrable.

Neither Maggie B. nor Johnny could recall a prehuman legend involving anything like the Slipstone; and the others came from worlds where such fables were never told, or at least never mentioned. "Oh-for-two," Tirasi grumbled, finally conceding defeat in his effort to grasp the Slipstone. "What's the point of finding a bleeding treasure trove if—" He waited out a burst of static on the radios. "—if you can't pick any of it up?"

His answer was a sudden howl of pain from O'Toole, who was dancing away from the third object, holding his right hand. "Sunnuvabitch!" he cried. "Sunnuvabitch, sunnuvabitch, sunnuvabitch!"

"Heard you the first time," Tirasi laughed, reaching for the golden object, cupped on a pedestal of pure white. "But we've known that about you for ... Bloody son of a bloody bitch!"

Now it was Tirasi nursing his hand and dancing a little. Mgurk cocked his head, "Hey, that piece one budmash lotah."

Maggie B. pursed her lips. "I wouldn't touch that, cap'n, was I you."

January bent close to study the artifact. It was shaped like a discus bisecting an oblate sphere. Saturnoid, was how he would describe it. Many gas giants were saturnoid, some with quite spectacular rings. January wondered if this were a compressed gas giant. *At least it won't be as heavy as the Midnight Egg...*

The surface had a cool metallic look, whether actually metal or not, and was smooth and shiny and golden. It seemed to glow from within, and waves of yellow and red and orange passed through it. "Those look like flames," January said. "Was it hot?" he asked the two men, but another static discharge covered his words. "Did it burn you?" he asked when he could.

O'Toole had calmed down somewhat. "Like a million needles sticking my hand." Tirasi pulled a pyrometer from his scrip with his left hand and gave it to Maggie B., who examined the object's surface.

"Ambient temperature," the astrogator announced.

That made the object rather more cold than hot. "It looks like it's burning up inside," January mused aloud. But fire was a chemical reaction. It could not have continued for eon upon eon without consuming eons of material. *Of course, maybe this pot is all that's left.* There were chemical reactions that oscillated between different colors, and the appearance of roiling flames might be a consequence of such a reaction. But could such oscillations remain undamped over so long a time as these objects must have sat here?

They called this one the Budmash Lotah, which Johnny explained meant an evil-doing brass pot in the Terran patois.

January gave up. He could not grasp the natures of these objects. There was nothing in his experience from which he might analogize. Each was beautiful in some manner, but the only other thing they had in common was that they could not be moved.

That's why all the other pedestals are empty, he suddenly realized. Whatever else was once here could be removed, and so they had been. But when? And by whom? Leaving, what? A display of ... immovable objects? Earth, water, fire...

He wondered where the irresistible force was.

“Hey,” cried Mgurk, “come-come, look-see.” The Terran was standing by one of the empty pedestals and passing his hand slowly through the air above it.

“Now, what?” Tirasi complained. He and O’Toole joined the Terran.

Maggie B. turned to the captain, who had not moved. “What is it?” she asked.

January waited out a growl of static. “Something’s missing.”

“Holy Alfven!” said Tirasi, and O’Toole turned to the captain. “It’s a fookin’ ghost.”

“You have to look at just the right angle,” Tirasi explained when the captain and Maggie had joined them. “Johnny, stand away. The light has to be ... *There*, do you see it?”

January nodded slowly. He could make out the billowing of yellowed clouds against a ruddy background, as if a slice of orange sky many leagues deep had been captured and set on a pedestal. “It’s a whole-gram,” he guessed.

“Yah?” said Tirasi as he viewed his gauge in disgust. “A projected image *with mass*?” He showed January the readout. “*And with a temperature and*”—passing his hand through the image—“with a texture. Cool, smooth, and I can feel that it’s hollow.”

“You can feel it,” Maggie B. said, “but you can’t pick ‘er up.” Tirasi nodded. “Like grabbing smoke.”

“Why am I not fookin’ surprised?” said O’Toole. He was answered by another outbreak of static.

The second chamber was right beside the pedestal and January idly felt one of the soft, spongy leaves that ringed the entry. It seemed made of the same material as the door of the vault.

At that point, Tirasi and O’Toole noticed their captain’s possession of the sandstone block. “Well, now,” said O’Toole with a glower. “And are ye cutting us out on the only bit of loot we can actually walk off with?”

January, surprised, looked at the sandstone block in his grip. It had fit

his hand so comfortably that he had quite forgotten he was holding it. The stone was thicker at the ends now, and curved in a slight arc—and he had not felt even the smallest movement.

It was an exceptional piece, he realized. An exception not only to the beauty of the other items, but also to their immobility. A cuckoo in the nest. *And why wasn't it taken when the rest of this vault was plundered?*

Tirasi nudged the pilot. "Greedy sod, ain't he? C'mon, Slug, let's explore the rest of this place. Might be there's more stuff in the next room."

January suddenly knew. Those fleshy "leaves" were not the petals of a decorative flower that ringed the entrance to the second chamber. They were segments of another of those marshmallow doors. Something had pierced the door in the center, and it had peeled outward in pie-slice sections. From the arrangement of the pieces, the door had been pierced from *inside* the chamber. And there was nothing inside the chamber but an empty pedestal.

"Wait!" he said, and to his surprise the others stopped and turned expectantly. January looked again at the shredded door. What had sat on that pedestal, sealed off from the other objects? The irresistible force? How long had the door resisted it? Millennia? Eons? But it had failed at last.

Where was it now? It could not have gotten off-planet, surely. No, it must still be loose somewhere on this world.

Waiting for a ship to happen by.

"You're absolutely right, Bill," he said. "There may be other relics somewhere in the complex, but for all we know that corridor..." Pointing toward the half-open door at the end of the room, half enticed by the dark at the end of the tunnel, half expecting *something irresistible* to come pouring through it. "...for all we know that corridor leads nowhere but to a dead end deep inside the planet. That would fit, somehow. But we need to get off this world, now."

O'Toole scratched his ear, cast an uneasy glance at the corridor, and said, "Sure thing, cap'n. But I hate to leave without getting *something* out o' this."

The lack of objection surprised January. "Something's happening," he told them. "Have you been listening to the static on the comm channels?"

It's getting stronger. There's a storm brewing, and a big one. Look." He wanted desperately for them to understand. "We can't take these other things with us, but we can still cash in. Think what people would pay to come see them. They have to come through the tunnel, so we can control admission. But..." And here his voice became lower, more urgent. "We must leave *now*. We don't have the supplies to stay and explore every pocket in this entire complex. We need to get a stake, so we can come back and do this proper and controlled."

Maggie B. pursed her lips, thinking. "Who you thinking might stake us?"

January took a deep breath. "The Interstellar Cargo Company..." He hesitated, waited for the objections; then, when none were forthcoming, stammered on, "The ICC's a damned pack of jackals, and ships like ours only get their leavings; but we may be able to work out a deal with them. If we're going to do a seismic survey, map the complex, conduct a grid-by-grid search in an orderly manner, document our discoveries, we're going to need more resources than the poor old *Angel* can earn in our lifetimes."

A moment of silence passed. Then Maggie B. said, "Right, then. There'll be time between here and the Jenjen to cook up a plan to protect our rights."

Tirasi nodded. "An' we'll be able to show 'em that thing—" He indicated the now S-curved sandstone block in January's hand. "—and the videos we took of this place."

"But if ye show 'em yer rock," O'Toole warned him, "be fookin' careful, or they'll be taking it off ye. That bein' yer honor's very own stone, not theirs."

The display of unanimity and agreement was so unexpected that January waited a moment longer for the objections. Then Johnny Mgurk cried, "Chop and chel, sahbs. We go jildy. Hutt, hutt! Big dhik." And the spidery little man led them up the tunnel.

January half-expected to find the main door now shut, trapping them inside, but it was still rolled into its slot in the wall. The five of them tumbled out into the rocky cleft, blinking at the light, noticing that it was already dimmer.

Through the growing static on the radio, he heard Micmac Anne

calling. "...swer me! *Angel* ca ... Jan...! C ... in, Amo...!"

January flipped the responder. "Tell me thrice," he said three times. The ship's intelligence could create a coherent sentence by splicing the fragments that got through the random static.

"Amos!" said the reconstructed Anne. "There's a storm coming your way, a big one. It started over your eastern horizon, and we've been tracking it since ... There's lightning. Lots of lighting. Lots of *big* lightning. I've never seen anything like it. It's coming right down on you. Amos, get out of there now!"

They had already reached the excavation site. Maggie B. began to mount the backhoe, but January said, "Leave it. You heard Anne. The wind won't be much at this pressure, but the sand can clog our breathing masks. And the lightning..."

He could hear it now. Thunder like galloping hooves. Underneath—a steadier tympani of deeper booms, like the lumbering gait of a giant. Black dust clouds loomed on the eastern horizon and lighting flashed within them like fireworks. The clouds seemed a-boil, rolling toward them. Johnny began to run toward the jolly-boat. "Shikar storm!" he wailed. "Hutt, hutt!"

"Shut yer food-hole, ye Terry slob!" O'Toole cried, bounding past him to the gig. Terasi had fallen behind, staggering with the molecular sieve in his arms. "Drop it," January ordered him. "Drop it and run for the jolly-boat." The system tech threw his precious machine to the sand and sprinted.

Maggie was already firing the jolly-boat's engines when O'Toole and January reached the gig. O'Toole popped the hatch and clambered in. January paused at the foot of the ladder and looked behind. Terasi and Mgurk were sealing up the jolly-boat. He nodded and entered the gig.

"We'll worry about our orbit after we have one," he told O'Toole, as he slid into the number two seat. "Lift! And lift now!"

So, they did.

Both boats reached the stratosphere ahead of the advancing storm front. Lightning crackled below them. Yet part of the storm had broken through the tropopause—lowering thunderheads looking for all the world like billowing giants made of smoke. A tremendous bolt arced *upward* into space. O'Toole cursed.

"Climb, Slugger," January told the pilot. "Climb as fast as you can. Climb, even if you dry-tank the gig. Annie will pick us up in the lighter if she has to."

"Aye, cap'n." Sweat was pouring off the man. His fingers might leave dents in the pilot's yoke. "We're heading east to west, an' that's a bad climb f'shure; but we're stayin' ahead o' those sand clouds. 'T isn't ourselves I'm worrying over, y' follow, but what that jolly-boat is a slow climber."

"Where are they now?"

"So far, so good." O'Toole gusted a sigh and seemed to relax microscopically. "But that's what Wheezer Hottlemeyer said whan he was after passin' the second floor, and him falling out av a noine-story buildin' at th' toime."

And a skybolt turned the viewports blue. The gig shuddered, and one of the panels sparked and died.

"Are we hit?" January cried, half rising in the two-gees. "Did it get us?"

O'Toole laid a beefy hand on January's wrist, touching the sandstone as he did. "Don't ye be worryin', cap'n darling'." And January relaxed, weirdly comforted, confident now in the pilot's abilities to see them through. "Aye, an' there's the jolly-boat, too!" the pilot cried, a triumphant shout, finger stabbing the 360-sensor display, piercing its ghostly green wireframe images. "Hoigh, th' Roger. All bristol, down there?"

"Hoigh, *A/oe*," Maggie replied. "Skin of the teeth here, Slugger. There was one bolt, I thought it was gonna peel the paint right off the skin, and leave its autograph. Hell, mebbe it did. Storm's well below us now. Looks like we made it, you damned Paddy! Now we gotta find the *Angel*."

"Shure," said O'Toole, "an' ut'll be a story for to tell our grandkids."

"I don't even have kids yet," Maggie said.

"Well, then, let's you an' me make some while there's still time!"

The pilot and the astrogator instructed their respective boats to lock onto the *New Angeles*, plot a suite of orbits, and report back with projected transit times and air and fuel usage. When the engines cut out and the gig entered low orbit, O'Toole grinned and turned about to face January.

And the smile faded. Slugger clasped his fists together into a ball and shuddered. “*She* can joke, but I know how close that was.” He sucked in a deep breath. “It weren’t normal, cap’n. That storm. It was coming at us east t’ west, an’ that’s against th’ prevailin’ winds. Yessir, ‘t was, and I nivver heard tell uv a storrum doin’ that. An’ maybe a planet dry like that an’ all can work up a monster static charge, but, Jaysus, cap’n, that storrum was bigger’n the planet, I’m thinkin’.”

January glanced at the prehuman artifact in his hand. It was twisted along its length like a screw. He had ordered the others to abandon backhoe and molecular sieve, but he had hung on to this. It really was quite pretty when you got used to it.

“I’m guessin’ th’ toorist attraction notion is off th’ table now.”

January laughed with nervous release. “By the gods, yes. But, maybe we can sell this ... this dancing rock for enough to replace the gear we abandoned. Looks like Hogan’ll have to cannibalize the ship after all. I don’t think we should go back and try to salvage the equipment.”

“Jaysus, no! I’d rather be back home on New Eireann awaitin’ for th’ Big Blow. Our equipment’d be all lightning’ed over by now, anyways, the backhoe and Bill’s toy. Nothing lift uv thim but slag. But I shure hope the storrum didn’t hurt those other things—the Midnight Egg, the Slipstone, the whatever heathen name Johnny gave the pot...”

“The Budmash Lotah.”

“Yeah. I don’t know for why Johnny don’t speak fookin’ Gaelactic like th’ rist uv us.”

“I don’t think they were hurt, the Unmovable Objects. And, Slugger? I don’t think that was a natural storm, either. I think the prehumans made something they had second thoughts about and they locked it away forever, but...” The gig’s orbit, looping around the planet had brought them back up over the site, but January saw nothing out the viewport but a black, writhing mass covering a quarter of the planet. Maybe, it was fading, settling out now. He couldn’t tell.

“But?” O’Toole prompted him.

“But even forever ends.” And he relaxed in his harness, stroking the lovely sandstone, thankful that they had escaped the Irresistible Force.

