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Caravan

Stephen Goldin

**Parsina
PRESS**


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CARAVAN

Chapter 1

WASHINGTON—International meetings on the economy opened here Monday with tones of gloom and distress over higher oil prices and the threat of world depression.

H. Johannes Witteveen, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, predicted continuing recession and inflation around the world, along with unprecedented financial strains.

World Bank President Robert S. McNamara forecast mass starvation in the world's poorest countries, containing populations totaling one billion, unless industrial

Stephen Goldin

and oil-exporting nations alike sharply step up their aid—a move few of these countries seem likely to make.

Los Angeles Times
Tuesday, October 1, 1974

* * *

We sit on the lip of a precipice, daring the force of gravity to pull us into the pit. The bottom is unfathomable because we've climbed so high we've lost sight of it. It is nothing so trivial as a recession; even a depression similar to the one in the 1930s would pale by comparison. What we are facing as we stare down into the abyss is nothing less than the total destruction of our present civilization—and most of us, through a fear of heights, have shut our eyes....

If you climb only a little way up a hillside and slip, you probably won't be hurt too much. Falls from greater heights can be fatal. We have climbed so high on the hillside of Progress that a fall will shatter us like a glass dropped from Mt. Everest....

Peter Stone

World Collapse

* * *

The sign over the desk read “Granada Hills Security Checkpoint,” but that did not disguise the fact that this building was actually a deserted supermarket at the edge of a deserted shopping center. Aisle upon aisle of denuded shelves gave mute testimony to the bad times that had befallen the community. In fact, the empty cavern of a building seemed to Peter to symbolize the entire Collapse of civilization.

The guard behind the desk looked at him suspiciously. Peter didn’t know much about guns, but the one in the guard’s shoulder holster looked big enough to stop a herd of rampaging elephants. Peter coughed nervously and cleared his throat. “I... I’d like to join your community, if I could,” he said. “I’m thirty-two and a good worker. I can do almost anything that needs to be done.”

The guard’s scowl was skeptical. “What did you say your name was?”

“Peter Smith,” he lied. His own name, Stone, had acquired too many bad connotations in recent years, and he never gave it out any more. He had trouble enough going unrecognized without advertising himself further.

“Smith, eh? Can anyone in Granada Hills vouch for you?”

“Uh, no, I just got in. I’ve been bicycling down from San Francisco these past few months, and this looked to be a good place to settle.”

“How are things up there?”

“Bad,” Peter said. “It’s bad all along the coast. From what I’ve seen of it, your area looks about av-

erage.”

The guard grunted. “I’m afraid, Mr. Smith, that we can’t accept you here. We’ve got too many people already without adding strangers. There’s plenty of willing hands to work but limited resources to keep them fed, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure,” Peter nodded. The story was all too familiar to him. “In that case, I was wondering if I might buy some food from you. I’ve got money—”

“Granada Hills is on barter until the money situation settles down again. Unless you’ve got something to trade, you’re out of luck. Got any bullets, batteries, candles, tools or copper wire?” Peter shook his head. “What about your bike? We can always use another bike.”

“Sorry, I need it myself. Things aren’t too safe for a man on foot; the bike gives me a slim edge, at least.”

The other nodded. “Things are rough, all right. I never thought I’d see the day when this sort of thing would happen to us.”

“Look, is there any place in this area that does take cash?” The sun was sinking and Peter wanted to settle in somewhere before nightfall. He’d had too many scary experiences in the dark lately.

“You might try San Fernando; last I heard, they were still taking money. You’d better watch them, though—they’ve got a rowdy bunch over there.”

“How do I get there?”

“You take this street over here, Balboa, and go north about a mile to San Fernando Mission Boulevard, then east a couple of miles. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” Peter started wheeling his bike out of

the supermarket.

“Good luck,” the guard called after him. “I wouldn’t want to be a stoner now for all the gold in Fort Knox.”

Peter wondered idly as he pedaled along whether there was still any gold left in Fort Knox. There probably was, he decided; gold was not worth stealing at the moment. People had more immediate needs, like food, water, gasoline and electricity. *Somewhere, he thought, the U.S. government may be trying valiantly to carry on as though nothing unusual were happening, guarding that gold and the wealth it supposedly represents like a virgin dinosaur guarding a nest of infertile eggs. And if they think about the Collapse at all, they probably blame it on me—as if I were anything but the messenger who brought the tidings of disaster.*

Being a prophet of doom is not a rewarding career.

As he pedaled up Balboa Boulevard, Peter looked around him and tried to imagine how the neighborhood must have looked ten years ago, before the Collapse really got underway. On his left was another shopping center and a tall building that had once, according to a sign, been a hospital; currently it was being used as a series of apartments. On his right were more expressly designed apartments, once luxurious but now worn down and ugly. Rubbish that could not be burned had been dumped outside, lining the street and giving the air an unpleasant odor.

He passed another deserted supermarket as he crossed Chatsworth Street and continued north. There were houses on both sides of him, the ticky-

tacky boxes that had been very popular in suburban communities at one time. They had little front yards that now contained gardens instead of lawns—lettuce, radishes, tomatoes and melons all seemed popular. The gardens were surrounded by fences—and some of the fencing, he noticed, had come from the center divider of a freeway. A stop sign had been stuck in one garden and dressed in tattered clothes to form a makeshift scarecrow. A couple of houses appeared to have been razed to make room for corn fields. The green stalks swayed proudly in the breeze.

Dogs roamed the streets and patrolled in front of the houses. They barked at him as he went past, but didn't bother to chase him when they saw he was no threat to their masters' gardens. There were several goats standing around and a large number of chickens, but Peter could see no cats running loose—they and rabbits would be penned up and used for food. Pets were no longer an affordable luxury. Birds, too, were scarce; no doubt the neighborhood children were improving their aim with slingshots.

Peter wondered what it was that made him hang around urban centers. The cities, he knew, were deathtraps, due to collapse of their own weight in the immediate future, and anyone caught in them would share in their destruction. It was the relatively small number of people living in the country who would fare the best, though they would be scarred as well. Any sensible person should see that and try to grab himself a piece of farmland before total havoc settled on the nation. But Peter was, and always had been, a city boy and was drawn to the cities even

though he knew it might mean his death at any moment.

My problem, he decided, is that I give good advice but, like everyone else, I refuse to follow it.

Perhaps it had even been too late to do anything seven years earlier when his book, *World Collapse*, had hit the stands and fueled the controversy. Already the vast global forces he had foreseen were working to destroy civilization. Shortages of materials had become noticeable as early as the 1970s, yet the series of small crises kept escalating without any serious steps being taken to prevent them. The divisiveness of society, with group pitted against group, had shorn humanity of the cohesion it needed to deal with its problems. Inflation had crippled the economy and strikes had weakened people's confidence in the predictable.

Many books had been written previously predicting that conditions would become critical before the end of the Twentieth Century; they had all been dismissed as doom-crying and overly pessimistic by the vast majority of people, who had retained a naive faith in the abilities of Mankind to rise, Phoenix-like, from its own excrement. Then *World Collapse* had come along, with the most forceful and frightening arguments to date. The then twenty-five year old Peter Stone proved beyond doubt that civilization was doomed in just a couple of years unless radical steps were taken immediately. He even outlined what those steps were: mandatory euthanasia, mandatory birth control, immediate redistribution of wealth, immediate decentralization of society, an end to single family dwellings, an end to raising non-food ani-

mals as pets, forced movements of people to equalize population distribution, strict rationing of food and water, complete government takeover of industry and labor, complete government control of transportation, and a multibillion-dollar crash program for farming and colonizing the sea beds.

It was, to him, amazing that he could antagonize ninety-five percent of the country virtually overnight. While a few intellectuals hailed him as “one of the greatest minds of our time,” the nicest thing most people could find to call him was “that damned socialist.” Some were convinced he was the devil incarnate for simply stating the obvious truth. But the book sold, millions of copies. It was ironic, Peter thought, that his book would be one of the last bestsellers; shortly after the book’s twentieth printing, most of the printers’ unions had gone out on strike. For all Peter knew they were still striking.

He had amassed fame and fortune when both commodities were fast losing their rewards. He had appeared on numerous television talk shows, explaining and debating his beliefs that civilization, not just in the U.S. but around the world, was crumbling. He kept telling people that he didn’t like his solutions, either, but that something drastic would have to be done to avoid an even worse fate. Nobody listened. His enemies called him an opportunist, making money off the world’s misfortune, profiting on disaster. He was painted as a villain and branded a radical and a traitor.

In the meantime, everything he had predicted was coming true. Strikes by municipal workers brought about a breakdown of city services. The

gasoline shortages he had foreseen were made even more acute by the final Israeli War, which devastated ninety-three per cent of the Arab oil fields. Overnight, the world faced its most severe energy crisis. Lacking power, radio and TV stations went off the air one by one. Lacking gasoline, truckers could no longer distribute materials, supplies and finished goods with their former efficiency. Everything was in short supply and getting shorter. Communication, transportation and distribution—the “Big Three” that Peter had listed in his book—were deteriorating with each passing day.

Peter turned right on San Fernando Mission Boulevard and continued riding. Telephone poles were spaced sporadically along the sides of the street; most had been chopped down for firewood. As he passed the houses he saw plenty of people working in their gardens. They would probably continue wrapping themselves in minutiae right up until the day the water stopped being pumped into their taps. Peter shuddered as he thought about the panic that was building under the surface, like a malevolent genie waiting for the inevitable day it would be set free.

He went under a freeway overpass, crossed a major street and finally came to an area that had once been a park. It was about three city blocks in length and one in width. An attempt had been made to grow corn here, too, but it was thwarted by the crowds that had moved in. The park was jammed with broken old cars that people had pushed there and were using as living quarters. At first, Peter wondered why they had bothered—housing was the least severe

of the shortages at the moment. Then he saw what was across the street from the park.

It was the San Fernando Mission, one of the sanctuaries established in the Eighteenth Century by Father Junipero, Serra along what came to be called El Camino Real. As a Catholic church, it represented one of the few organizations still operating in the world today. The mission was acting as a food distribution point, probably feeding the indigent as part of its charitable work. The charity was what had caused the swarms of poor people to move into the park across the street.

Peter had mixed feelings about the churches. Not being religious himself, he tended to distrust them. True, they were doing very good work now, providing not only temporal care—such as food distribution—but also tending to people's spiritual needs and keeping up morale. As the situation got progressively worse, people would turn increasingly to religion as a source of comfort. That was fine as far as it went, but Peter could not help recalling how the medieval Church had grown into a mind-numbing monolith, encouraging superstition and ruthlessly crushing all individuality. If Mankind were to rise and grow again, freedom of thought would be an absolute necessity. Peter was afraid the churches were bringing short-term relief and long-term oppression.

He stopped outside the mission and dismounted. This looked like his best prospect for spending the night. He could be fed at the mission and then sleep through the night sitting up against the wall. The nights could be chilly in Los Angeles but usually weren't unbearably cold. One of his few possessions

—aside from money, which was only occasionally useful—was the blanket tucked in his knapsack. That would be enough to keep him warm tonight.

He started to walk his bike over to the mission when he noticed something going on down a side street just to the west of the building's wall. A black man with a motorcycle was being hassled by a pack of young whites.

"I think he's from Pacoima," one of the rowdies was saying. "Coming over here to spy on us, find out where our soft spots are. Probably him and his buddies want to make a gas raid tonight. Come on, shine, where'd you get that chopper?"

The black was young, tall and angular; in happier days, he might have been a college basketball player. He wore a red tanktop shirt, blue pants and a red bandana around his forehead. His face was adorned with a crisp black goatee and mustache, and was topped with a short mane of curly hair. He bore an expression of smoldering dignity. "You touch that cycle," he said, "and I'll carve the Gettysburg Address in your lily-white ass." His voice was so quiet as to be almost inaudible, yet carried a feel of power with it.

The pack was startled for a moment, then the fellows laughed nervously. They outnumbered the stranger nine to one. "Who do you think you are, nigger, coming around here and giving orders?" asked the leader, moving a step closer. The rest of the pack did the same.

In one swift motion, the stranger reached into his pants pocket, whipped out a switchblade and flipped the knife open. His hand moved in a little circle in

front of him, giving the appearance that the blade was floating on its own. “Not orders,” he said. “Just sound advice.”

The rowdies stopped again. The stakes were getting higher, and they were uncertain what to do. The leader was in the worst position—he didn’t dare lose face in front of his buddies. So, after eyeing the switchblade for a moment, he calmly reached down to his belt and pulled his own weapon, an army surplus bayonet mounted on a wooden handle. “If you want to play games, we can do that too—right, fellas?” Inspired by his behavior, the others drew their knives.

Peter looked around. No one else in the park was in a position to see what was going on—or, if they were, they were doing a good job of ignoring it. He felt a queasy sensation in his stomach and the spit in his mouth tasted sour. He checked that his own knife was loose in its scabbard, should it be needed.

The pack was circling in on its prey, but with less confidence than it might ideally feel. The prospective victim was not some helpless stranger frightened by their bullying, but a powerful-looking man with a sharp knife and an apparent knowledge of how to use it. The gang moved in cautiously.

The black stood his ground, turing slowly to keep an eye on the people behind him as well as those in front. His knife hand stayed limber and pointed directly at the leader’s throat

With a loud, bull-like bellow, the leader charged. The black sidestepped him easily and flicked his wrist in what seemed an effortless motion—yet, when the leader straightened up again, Peter could

see that a deep slash had been cut across his left ear and was bleeding profusely. "Next," said the black, laughing.

Three others came charging from different directions. One received a quick kick to the groin that doubled him up in a hurry; the second found himself stabbing air as the victim had whirled away and brought a slashing blow down on the hand of the third. "Come on," yelled the gang's leader from the sidelines. "What are we, a bunch of chickens? Let's get him!"

They all converged at once, though showing a great respect for their victim's prowess. The black had a longer reach than most of them and was able to keep them momentarily at bay with his slashes, but he couldn't last forever against their superior numbers.

Peter was not a very good fighter, though he'd had more than his share of practice over the last year. He usually avoided fights if he could, but this was one he couldn't ignore if he wanted to live with his conscience. Drawing his knife and emitting a loud whoop, he rushed forward.

The gang was startled by this attack from a new direction and froze momentarily, giving Peter an advantage he badly needed. He incapacitated one of the foe with a quick stab to the side, under the ribs. Turning to the next man, he lashed out across the face, cutting just above the eyebrow. Blood streamed out of the cut and into the eye, blinding the fellow and making him think his eye had been put out. He dropped to the ground, screaming.

The black had not hesitated when the attackers

did. His knife was busy slashing away at his opponents, making them put up their guard and fight defensively. But now they had recovered from the surprise of Peter's attack, and were launching a counter-offensive of their own. Peter found himself facing two big menacing types with murder in their eyes. Without the element of surprise on his side, the other two were undoubtedly the better fighters. Peter backed slowly away from them until he found that his back was right up against the wall of the mission. The other two kept closing on him, evil grins on their faces.

The one on his left lunged at him. Peter tried to twist away, but wasn't quick enough—the attacker's knife cut across the top of his left arm, sending a shot of pain through Peter's body. Blood poured out, staining his already grubby shirt, but he had little time for worrying about that—he was fighting for his life.

His twisting had put him in a bad position, because now he had his left side outward and his right side—along with his knife hand—towards the wall. He had to duck rapidly as the second attacker, seeing the opening, made a vicious swipe at his head. The blade whistled barely a quarter of an inch over Peter's hair.

In making that slash, though, the youth had left himself open. Peter charged forward and thrust his knife into the attacker's gut. The man let out a cry of pain and crumpled slowly to the ground. Peter pulled his blade out quickly, fell to the ground and rolled to get away from the first attacker, who was coming at him again.

When he got to his feet, he saw the man facing him in a low crouched stance. They circled one another for a long second, then the fellow charged. Peter tried to play matador, sidestepping the charge and parrying the thrust, but he was only partially successful. The other's knife cut through his shirt and scratched the ribs on his left side. Peter turned and backed away again.

The other, sensing a quick kill, charged again. He got only halfway to Peter, though, before he screamed and fell forward. A switchblade was embedded in his neck.

Peter looked around, surveying the battlefield. Seven bodies were scattered around the ground, most of them alive but severely wounded. The remaining two gang members were fleeing down the street. In the middle of most of the devastation, the black man calmly admired his handiwork. He appeared unscathed. With a grin at Peter he walked over and pulled his switchblade out of the throat of his last victim, wiped it off on the man's shirt, folded it up and stuck it back in his pocket. Then he walked over to his motorcycle, prepared to drive off.

"Hey," said Peter, "aren't you even going to thank me?"

The other turned. "Thank you? For what? Doin' something that anybody with any guts should've done?"

"But it wasn't anybody, it was me, and I'm bleeding."

The black ambled over, grabbed Peter's wounded left arm roughly and examined it. "Sheeyit, man, that ain't nothing but a flesh wound. It'll heal up,

'less it gets infected." He stopped as an idea occurred to him. "You live around here?"

Peter shook his head.

"Oh, a stoner, huh?" Peter hated that expression. Since the Collapse had begun, a lot of people had left their homes and taken to roaming, looking for someplace better than the one they'd left. Supposedly the term "stoner" had come about because these people were described as "rolling stones," but Peter had more than a little suspicion that the word was also a play on his name.

"Look," the man continued, "how'd you like to settle down somewhere that's peaceful, where there ain't no shortages and everybody works together?"

Peter eyed him warily. "Sure, who wouldn't? Only where are you going to find a place like that? Your back yard?"

"Don't get cute, man, I asked a legit question."

"And I said yes."

"What's your name?"

"Peter Smith." The lying came by reflex now.

The black extended his hand. "Kudjo Wilson." They slapped palms instead of shaking. "Listen, if you really want to go on to somethin' better than all this," and he waved his hand to include the park crammed with junked autos, "I think you'd better have a talk with my man."

Peter shrugged. "It can't hurt, I suppose. Where is he?"

"Oh, he's a few miles away yet. If you want, you can hop on the back and hold on, and I'll take you to him right away."

Peter shook his head. "Sorry, but I've got a bike

that I'd rather not leave behind—and we can't readily take it with us on that cycle."

"Right you are." The other thought for a minute. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll ride on ahead and tell him about you. He's going to be coming through here anyway, or damn close. Why don't you wait up alongside the freeway, the one over there." He pointed further east. "It's a couple of blocks that way. You wait just before the bridge of the overpass, southbound side. Do you have a watch?"

Peter shook his head again. "It was stolen a month and a half ago."

"Well, anyway, he'll be along in a couple of hours. It'll be after dark, if that doesn't bother you."

"Well...." Peter began.

"Be there," the other advised. He started his motorcycle. "We won't wait." And he drove off.

Holding his sore left arm, Peter went back to his bicycle. After the fight with those toughs, the mission might not be the best place for him to spend the night, after all—they might come back with friends, looking for revenge. His stomach was rumbling from not having been fed since breakfast, but it would be better to stay alive than to try for a free handout here and later be murdered in his sleep.

He pedaled further east along San Fernando Mission Boulevard and eventually came to the overpass that Kudjo Wilson had mentioned. The sun had just set and the sky was getting ominously dark. He paused at the bridge and looked up at it. Should he believe what the black had said? He had long ago given up believing in fairy tales, and that story had sounded suspiciously like a modern-day El Dorado. A

place of peace and plenty would be very hard to come by, and invitations to it just wouldn't pop into his lap so casually. Besides, how could a black man hold the key to Utopia? It didn't make sense. If there were such a place, what was that Kudjo Wilson doing *here*?

But then again, what did he have to lose? If this were an ambush, what could they take from him besides his bicycle, a blanket and some practically worthless money? It would be little enough loot for such an elaborately planned trap. Besides, Wilson could have robbed him of all that right on the spot if he'd wanted to. The whole affair was very puzzling.

Peter wheeled his bike up the on ramp and parked it by the side of the bridge.

He sat there in the dark, waiting. Traffic on the freeway was virtually nonexistent due to the lack of gasoline—only two cars in over an hour's time, and they whizzed by him in the fast lane without even slowing. He wondered whether the people he wanted had passed him by without even seeing him, or whether they would ever come at all. This whole thing could be an elaborate and incomprehensible practical joke.

You're a fool, he told himself sternly. *Listening to stories of Never-Never Land at your age. You'd probably buy the Golden Gate Bridge if someone offered it to you right now.* But he stayed, because there was nowhere else to go.

After what must have been another hour, he saw some headlights approaching from the north. These were traveling much slower than the cars that whizzed past, and as they came closer Peter could

make out a whole string of cars in a procession. The leading vehicle stopped just before getting to the bridge and pulled off to the side of the road. The cars behind it followed its example.

A spotlight stabbed out at him from the top of the vehicle, blinding him with its glare. "Mr. Smith?" called out a strange voice.

"Yes," he answered.

"Come on in, we've been hoping you'd be here. Would you like some dinner?"

Chapter 2

“First-Class mail service is now the worst in memory,” contends the *Wall Street Journal*. An example of the problem occurred last month when a bag of mail disappeared in Prince George’s County, Md., causing headaches for a number of residents. Mrs. Ernest Drumheller, who lives in Clinton, Md., says she returned from a vacation to find that her telephone had been disconnected because her check for her bill hadn’t reached the phone company. It cost her \$10 to get the service reinstated. Several customers of the People’s National

Bank in Clinton stopped payments on checks that they feared were in the missing bag...

Los Angeles Times
Wednesday September 11, 1974

* * *

Communication is one of the Big Three of any civilization. People and organizations can only interact to the extent that they can communicate with one another. Little or no communication means suspicion, hatred and conflict. As communications increase and improve the foreign becomes less fearful, and peaceful interaction becomes feasible...

In the time of the Greeks the manageable political unit was the city-state, and its size was determined by how far a man could walk in a day. This ensured that everyone would be no more than one day out of touch with current events. Neighboring city-states, with whom communication was far less frequent and far more out-of-date, were treated with distrust.

Communications today are practically instantaneous anywhere on the globe. That fact has enabled us to develop a global civiliza-

tion. But, in building this network so quickly, we may have stretched ourselves too far. Like a rubber band extended past its breaking point, the snap backwards will be sharp and painful...

Peter Stone
World Collapse

* * *

As Peter approached the first vehicle, he was startled to see that it was an armored truck, the type that used to carry money to banks and stores. It sat squat and ominous, its square gray shape impassive before him. The spotlight from its roof stung his eyes, which were accustomed to the darkness, but he could make out that the second vehicle in the train was also armored. The rest of the cars behind it were just dim shapes in shadows; Peter could not tell how many there were or what they looked like.

A lean figure got out of the second truck and came over to meet him at the door of the first. It was Kudjo Wilson. "Glad you could make it," he said, opening the door on the passenger side of the truck's cab. "Let me make the introductions."

He stuck his head inside the cab. "Honon, this is my man Peter. Peter, may I present to you the honorable, the distinguished, the inestimable Israel Baumberg."

There was a small battery-powered lantern glowing inside the cab, and it cast sufficient light for Peter to make out the man he was being introduced to. Even seated, Israel Baumberg was a big man, with

broad shoulders and powerful arms. Standing, he must easily have been six foot three or four. His hair was straight and black, cut short in almost a bowl haircut. His face was lined and weathered, looking more like finely tanned leather than flesh. It was hard to distinguish skin tones in the feeble light, but from the structure of the features Peter would have guessed that this man was dark-complected. An automatic rifle and a machine gun were propped casually beside him.

“Welcome to our caravan, Mr. Smith. Come on in.” As Peter entered, the other peered at him through the faint glow. “Or should I say Mr. Stone? This is an unexpected honor.”

Peter grimaced. The recognition was unwelcome; too many people harbored bad feelings toward him. But he climbed into the cab and sat in the passenger’s seat.

“Let me see your arm,” the big man continued. “Kudjo told me you’d hurt it.” He examined the wound tenderly. “Well, it doesn’t look too bad, but we don’t want any nasty surprises along the way so we’d better have it tended to. Kudjo, could you go back and see if Sarah’s free? And while you’re at it, check on how they’re coming with dinner.”

“Yassa, Boss,” Kudjo grinned in a parody of the old-time subservient blacks. He moved down the line of cars to carry out instructions.

“Good man, that Kudjo. You were lucky to run into him. He used to be an undercover narcotics officer for the St. Louis police. They don’t make them any better. As for myself, before you start asking questions, my father was Jewish and my mother was

an Indian, and I prefer to go by my Indian name, Honon, which means 'bear.' That's enough about me for the moment. Any questions?"

"Yes—what's this all about?"

"This," Honon spread his hands to include the entourage behind his truck, "is a caravan that Kudjo and I are leading. We are in the process of going from here to there."

"I know where here is, but where's 'there'?"

"That's a long story, which I'll begin in just a minute. We started in San Francisco this time, and have been working our way down the California coast. You're very lucky to have met us; we were coming down route 101 and would have missed this area completely, except that an earthquake wrecked the road just south of Ventura. We had to backtrack up to 138 and across Santa Paula to Interstate 5, which is where we are right now. We'll probably camp here for the night and move on tomorrow."

At this point a woman stuck her head through the open doorway of the passenger side. She looked to be in her forties, with gray-blond hair and a slightly chubby face. "I hear you've got someone who needs looking at," she said to Honon.

"Right. Peter, this is Dr. Sarah Finkelstein, who will be ministering to our ills this trip. Sarah, I'd like you to meet the notorious Peter Stone."

Peter winced again at the introduction. The doctor looked him up and down critically. "Well, well, well. The Man Who Turned Out To Be Right. Is it any consolation?"

"It never was."

"I suppose not. Well, let's see what you've got?"

She examined his wound, clucking silently to herself. "Is your tetanus shot current?" she asked.

"Haven't had one in years."

"It was a silly question, I know, but old habits die hard. You won't be getting one from me, either; I'm out of vaccine. It doesn't look too bad, though. I'll clean it and bandage it for you. You'll be a bit stiff, but you'll survive. As to my next question, it'll sound a little personal but it's necessary. Do you have any venereal disease?"

Peter was startled at her bluntness, but answered no. "Good," she said. "We must try to keep our breeding stock pure." Without further elaboration, she went to work on his arm quietly and efficiently, then left Peter and Honon alone.

"Before I begin my full story," Honon said, "there are a couple of facts needed as preludes. You are familiar, no doubt, with the advances in the field of cryogenics and suspended animation."

Peter nodded. "I mentioned them in my book."

"Yes, that's right. Excuse me, I had forgotten; it's been a while since I've had the time to reread it. As I recall, you didn't have anything complimentary to say about them."

"They were a wasted effort, a futile grabbing for immortality. What possible advantage could there be in freezing someone to be awakened fifty years from now, when all indications were that the world at that time would have difficulty supporting even the few people it would have left? People from the past would be totally helpless in a new world wracked by famine, drought, war and plague. The money and talent that went into that research could have been

used better elsewhere.”

“Perhaps,” Honon said, “but there might have been some ramifications that even you did not foresee.”

“Such as?”

“Not so fast. Have you ever heard of a star called Epsilon Eridani?”

“I’m afraid astronomy was never my field.”

“Nor mine. But fortunately there were a few people who took an interest in it. A couple years back, before the space program disintegrated completely, they conducted an experiment in what they called satellite parallax—don’t ask me to explain it, I can’t—and they found that Epsilon Eridani had a whole series of planets, just like our own sun. It was an interesting find, but the world had more pressing problems and paid it little notice.

“At about that same time, a man wrote a book. It was a big book, a powerful book, and it scared a lot of people. It talked about an end to civilization and a return to barbarism because of overpopulation, depletion of raw materials and a general breakdown of cohesive forces. Most people became angry at this because it was a fact that they were afraid to face—“

“You’re telling me,” Peter muttered.

“—but a few people actually became thoughtful. The author’s contentions were unarguable, but these thoughtful people still did not want to see the end of civilization. So they began thinking of alternatives.”

“So did I, and I was hated for it. Sure, my suggestions were radical, but I was dealing with a crisis situation. My plans might not have worked, but they couldn’t have been any worse than the hell we’re go-

ing through now.”

Honon shrugged. “Who’s to say? At any rate, these thoughtful people saw the resentment aimed at you and decided to do their own work secretly. They included some people with a lot of influence, some with a lot of money, and a few with both.”

“That always helps.”

“So they built their starship—”

Peter gasped. “Hey, wait a minute. I think I missed a step in there. What’s this about a starship?”

“Think about it; use that incisive mind of yours. If the Earth is used up, then civilization would stand a better chance elsewhere if it’s to continue and grow, correct? Where else is there? Certainly no other planet in our solar system is capable of housing a colony without an enormous technology to back it up. So that leaves us the stars—in particular, Epsilon Eridani.”

Peter was about to say something when a little girl knocked on the door of the truck. She was dark-haired, and couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old. “Mister Honon,” she said, “I’ve got some dinner for you and the other man.”

“Thanks, Mary.” Honon reached out his window and grabbed two bowls from her. “Careful,” he said to Peter, as he handed one of them over. “They’re hot.” The little girl left to go back where she had come from.

The liquid in the bowls was of a consistency halfway between soup and stew. It had potatoes, peas, beans, carrots, soybeans and even small pieces of chicken—practically a smorgasbord by today’s stan-

dards. Peter's stomach was screaming to him that he hadn't had anything to eat since a very skimpy breakfast this morning. He accepted the spoon that Honon proffered and put some of the mixture in his mouth, savoring the combination of tastes. "You eat pretty well," he said.

"Thank you. As I mentioned, we're trying to keep civilization alive, and one of its more enjoyable aspects is good food. We do what we can while we're traveling, but even this is far from a balanced meal."

"There are people who would kill for some of this."

Honon sighed. "Yes, I know there are. They've made a couple of attempts already, which is why we prefer to use armored vehicles to lead this procession. Traveling these days is not something you do on a whim."

Both men ate silently for awhile, realizing that their meal was literally a treasure in this depleted world. Peter finished first and leaned back contentedly.

"Thank you very much. That was the best food I've had in weeks."

"Would you like some more? I could send back for a refill."

"I don't want to make inroads on your supplies—"

"We'll be okay for awhile. The whole back of that second truck is crammed with freeze-dried stuff."

Peter was sorely tempted but decided to refrain. "I don't want to get too used to rich living," he said. "Situations can change so abruptly."

Honon nodded. "That's true, but it doesn't stop me from living well when I can. I learned when I was

riding herd that you survive the bad times and live it up in the good times.”

“You were a cattleman, then?”

“I’ve been pretty much of everything, at one time or another. Lumberjack, truck driver, forest ranger, farm hand, carpenter, dishwasher—I like doing something new all the time.”

“And now you’re a wagonmaster.”

“Yep. You see, the way I figure it, you’ve always got to be moving toward something. Traveling isn’t enough; you’ve got to have a goal in mind.”

“And your goal is the stars?”

“Not immediately. First I have to get this party to the Monastery.”

“The what?”

“That’s what we call our little colony. Since it was the monasteries that kept knowledge alive during the first Dark Ages, we thought we’d name our base after them. It has no religious significance, I assure you; we’re all pretty tolerant. It’s hard enough surviving today without reviving old prejudices.”

“That doesn’t stop most people. Bigotry seems to have reached a high point,” Peter said bitterly.

Honon shrugged. “I don’t really care if they kill themselves off. The way I see it, the race can only be improved by the removal of bigots from the gene pool.”

“Where is this Monastery of yours?”

“Oh, it’s out there somewhere.” Honon waved his hand in a general easterly direction. “I can’t be more specific, I’m afraid. It is secret, and with good reason. We live too well to suit most people on the outside. If they knew where we were, they’d come and

tear us down. That's why I can't tell the people in the caravan exactly where we're going—in case they drop out or get separated from us, they won't be able to tell anyone else.”

“But if you're planning an interstellar colony, you must have an awful lot of people—”

“Nearly five thousand, at last count.”

Peter whistled. “But it's impossible to hide that many people.”

“We manage,” Honon smiled.

“But getting that many people off Earth would be a major problem in itself. How do you propose to do it?”

“For one thing, not everyone is going. Some of us have a sentimental attachment to this old world, and we'd like to stick around and rehabilitate it if we can. Only about three thousand will be making the trip.”

“But even so, the fuel requirements—”

“In the last year or so of the space program a development slipped right past the press, who were busy covering wars, shortages and the like: nuclear propulsion, which lets you lift large payloads with small outlay. It's unproven in manned flight, but ground experiments are very promising.”

“I don't pretend to be an astronautical engineer, but I do remember seeing a planetarium show once that said that it would take thousands of years to get from here to even the nearest star. You can't expect the colonists to live that long—and the food alone for three thousand people would fill several ships.”

“Those quickie figures, I'm told, were based on constant velocity. What the nuclear drive gives us,

instead, is constant acceleration—one ten-thousandth of a ‘gee,’ to be precise. I know that doesn’t sound like much, but it adds up. The latest estimates are that you can make the trip in only six hundred and fifty years.”

“But even so—”

“Remember what I was saying earlier about the coldsleep techniques? Colonists will be frozen just before takeoff and, except for the ship’s crew, won’t wake up until they’ve landed on their new home. It will save on supplies and on room, since we won’t have to allow space for that many people to be walking around.”

Peter sat still for a moment, thinking and considering the possibilities. “You’re either crazy,” he said at last, “or the most hopeless dreamer I know.”

“A little of both, I hope. We’re living in a very sane, very dreamless age, and look at the mess it’s in. There is nothing more sane than trying to stay alive, which is what everybody out there is struggling to do. For them, it’s a full-time business. They have no time for dreams. As a result, they’re living lives of borderline survival, and it’s getting worse. As for me, I insist on looking up at the sky every so often and wondering whether things could be better. Fantasy may be slightly insane, but no intelligent creature can last long without it.

“Besides,” he added, pointing an accusing finger at Peter, “you’re a fine one to criticize. Don’t think I can’t see behind that mask of the cynic you wear like a Greek tragedian. Mark Twain, when accused of being a pessimist in his old age, remarked rather that he was ‘an optimist who did not arrive.’ If you did

not idealize, if you did not see the world as it should be, you never could have packed into your book all the fire and anger you felt.”

“Really?” Peter asked, raising an amused eyebrow. Many people had tried to psychoanalyze him through his book, with varied success.

“A cynic is just a frustrated optimist. You have to have ideals in the first place to be disappointed that they aren’t achieved. You, Peter Stone, are a builder of utopias without a good supply of timber.”

“And that’s why you want me to come along—because I’m a failure here and you want to give me another chance? Excuse me for being a cynic, but I don’t believe that.”

Honon shook his head. “Not at all. I want to give Humanity another chance, and I think you could be of help. You think about social phenomena. You see the alternatives where other people are blind, and you’re not afraid to talk about them openly. We’ll need a good alternatives spotter and social critic if we’re going to make it. There you have it—the ground rules and the job description. I’ll need an answer, a commitment from you now, because I won’t be back this way again. Do you want the job?”

Peter didn’t even hesitate. “Well, the pay’s lousy but the fringe benefits seem okay. If you cut me off a piece of that dream, I think I can swallow it.”