

Escape Velocity

The Anthology

An aerial photograph of a volcanic crater on a reddish planet, likely Mars. The crater is a large, roughly circular depression with a dark, shadowed interior. The surrounding landscape is a vast, flat, reddish-brown plain. In the distance, a bright, glowing horizon line separates the dark ground from a black sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is desolate and otherworldly.

Edited by Geoff Nelder
and
Robert Blevins

Published by Adventure Books of Seattle

Escape Velocity, the science fiction magazine published by Adventure Books of Seattle, was host to some of the most talented writers in the genre. Presented here are many of the best stories from the magazine, as well as new ones specially submitted for this collection by authors from around the world.



**T.M. Crone - Sheila Crosby - Michael Anderson - Duane Byers - Simon Petrie
Ian Smith - Roy Gray - Bec Zugor - Barbara Krasnoff - Richard Jay Goldstein
Magdalena Ball - Kaolin Fire - Lawrence Buentello - Branden Johnson
Ben Bamber - Adam Colston - Karl Bunker - David Wallace Fleming
Gustavo Bondoni - Jaine Fenn - Rick Novy - Roberta Gregory
Joshua Blanc - Mark and Tony Ricca - D.J. Emry - Derek Rutherford
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Barry Pomeroy - Jonathan Pinnock - David Tallerman - Gayle Applegate
Ben Cheetham - Clyde Andrews - Mark Iles - William C. McCall
Robert Harke ss - Rosie Oliver - Ian Whates - Rebecca Latyntseva**

Escape Velocity: The Anthology

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www.adventurebooksofseattle.com

ISBN 13: 978-0-9823271-9-7

First edition in paperback

April, 2011

Images

Front cover – Artist's rendition of Mount Olympus on Mars

Back cover – Earthrise from lunar orbit, Apollo 11 mission

Courtesy of NASA

Kindle Reader version available at Amazon.com

Editorial by Geoff Nelder
Chester, Great Britain

A lump formed in my throat when we decided to put *Escape Velocity*, the innovative magazine of science fiction and fact, on ice after only a handful of print runs. However, many talented writers had sent us their gems to read for future issues and it was a privilege to read through them all. Some shone through, worthy enough for competition winners, all were excellent. I hated the notion of returning those stories without using them and so the idea of an *Escape Velocity* Anthology was born. Past contributors had suggested the best of their stories could also find their way into the collection. The anthology is a collector's item, a fabulous gift for any lover of science fiction and a significant brick in the cathedral of speculative writing.

Editorial by Robert Blevins
Seattle, U.S.A.

I sometimes say that *Escape Velocity* was an experiment that failed beautifully, like a shooting star streaking across the heavens. The magazine business is highly competitive, and it is much more difficult to do a magazine than to edit a book, for example. To produce a book you only need to prepare the manuscript, create a cover, and assign an ISBN and a barcode. To create a magazine, you have to work with multiple contributors, insert images, and many other things. It was rewarding, yet very difficult, especially with our small staff. However, these efforts resulted in several very good issues of the magazine.

Presented here are forty-eight great science fiction tales, one poem, and a cute cartoon. We certainly hope you enjoy them.

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Finding Farber

T. M. Crone

The early morning tram from East Park entered Station 12 ten minutes behind schedule. A lucky break for Banger Dunn. He hurried to catch the rail-runner, grabbed onto what was left of Farber's arm and shoved him through the tram door. Covered with blood, Farber's coat sleeve hung like a limp fire hose.

Banger thrust a token into the pockmarked metal depository and pulled Farber up from the floor, where he had fallen. Blood trailed behind them as they walked down the aisle. The tram moved onward, toward 39th Street.

Banger shoved a newspaper off the back seat and guided Farber into it, next to him. Farber's thin body trembled beneath the big overcoat. Banger moved him closer. Then he noticed the kid, the only passenger on the tram, sitting six rows ahead staring at them. Too early for the commuter crowd. This kid didn't look like the working type; he had that street-gang, hood look about him: hollow face with glossy eyes, strip of orange hair perched on top of his scalp. The kid would probably forget he ever saw Farber and him. Nothing to worry about.

Farber leaned over, his sullen face nearly resting on Banger's lap. Patches of hair had already begun to fall off Farber's head.

"We're almost there," Banger said. He rested his badly cut left hand on Farber's shoulder, being careful not to touch the sleeve of Farber's coat that concealed the stubble of muscle and bone. Banger looked at the kid, who now watched with a more alert gaze. No wonder. The way he and Farber dressed, both wearing brown pants tucked into heavy black boots and enormous matching gray overcoats stained with mud, blood, grease, and God knows what else, would invite attention anywhere.

Farber, with his white skin and black eyes that looked like they had just exuded his life right out of him, and a missing arm ... and now his hair.

Farber sat up and seemed to stare right at the kid, but Banger knew better. There was nothing left behind those eyes.

Banger felt Farber's body heave once, twice, and he inched away. "Farber, no! Not here." Farber opened his mouth, releasing the contents of his stomach onto Banger's lap, down his legs, into his boots.

"Aaahh, geeze, buddy." For the first time since he had met Farber,

Banger wanted to cry.

Too shaken to worry about the caustic puke seeping into his boots, Banger stared out the window, counting tile blocks on the tunnel wall as the tram slowed down through Station 25. Banger didn't see where Farber had gotten the syringe, but when he pulled his gaze away from the window Farber had already jabbed a needle into his own thigh.

A shiver cascaded down Banger's spine. "Farber, what are you doing? Oh, God." Banger jerked backwards, watching Farber's body coil and plunge to the floor. Farber trembled for a moment, and then went limp. A thick yellow liquid oozed from the pores in Farber's face and remaining hand, devouring his skin.

Banger's gaze locked onto the yellow goop that had once been Farber's body, the enormous overcoat he had worn sinking into its mists, melding with the tram's rusty metallic floor; Farber's existence erased from the world — just like what should have happened to that cliff-diver, Jekkie Lane, if only —

The kid must have activated the emergency signal, because the tram came to a sudden stop just outside Station 25. When Banger looked up, he saw the black "E" on back of the kid's tan jacket as the kid left the tram.

A wave of dread moved through Banger. He leaped over what was left of Farber and ran.

What had incited Molly Holden to stay in the soul-wrenching town after she passed the Bar exam eluded her. A bad decision. Corrupt political fruitcakes, street-gang hoods, serial-killer wannabes, and now she could add sick bastards to her list of clients. The closest thing she had to a friend was a floppy-lipped, over-fed precinct detective with a shocking disregard for fashion.

Fighting her desire to slump on the floor and curl up, Molly pressed her hand against the observation window. It had been another late night. She tried her best to stand straight.

"Doctor Nicholas Lorenzo Dunn III," said Detective Allen Parker, glaring at the detainee who sat behind the glass. "Brought him in early this morning. Found him wandering outside Station 25." He sipped his coffee and tucked his sweater into his trousers. His baggy retro pants rolled halfway down his butt and ejected the shirt right back out.

He leaned into her, his breath reminding Molly of the garbage truck she had passed on her way to the precinct. "Goes by the name of Banger,"

he said. “An astrophysicist, believe it or not, and two-time, silver-medal runner. Should’ve seen him when we brought him in. Wore a big bloody overcoat. A real sick-o. You wouldn’t believe the crime scene.”

Molly inspected the man who sat on the wooden chair behind the glass. He wore the red jumpsuit given to all suspects. Thin. Needed a shave. Hair like a half-breed Pekingese on a bad day. “Why would an astrophysicist want to kill Jekkie Lane?” she asked.

“Beats me,” replied Allen. “Look at the guy. How could someone that skinny overpower a guy like Lane, twice his size? He keeps mumbling something about galeapers and finding an orange-haired mohawk kid. Frankly, I think he’s nuts. But that’s for you to prove, counselor. He’s your client.”

“Thanks, Allen.”

Allen wrinkled his nose and turned to go, but hesitated. “Let me give you some advice, Molly. This creep killed a super star. Don’t try too hard.”

Wanting nothing more than to go home and crawl into bed, Molly squared her shoulders and entered the observation room. Doctor Dunn stood when she entered, his wrists in shackles. She hadn’t noticed the chains, or the bandage on his left hand. She kept her distance.

“Dr Dunn, I’m your attorney, Molly Holden. I’ve been asked to—”

“I didn’t ask for an attorney.”

“Doctor, you’re being held for murder. You *do* need an attorney.”

He sat back down on the chair and remained quiet, rotating his shackled wrists.

She walked closer, examining Dunn’s physique. It was hard to determine what musculature hid beneath the jumpsuit, but his posture indicated a lean build. No match for Jekkie Lane. She watched his eyes and asked, “What does the orange-haired kid have to do with this crime?”

“Orange *mohawk*,” he replied. “Like I tried to tell that other guy, I need to find him. I didn’t kill Jekkie Lane.”

“Doctor, yours was the only foreign blood found on the victim, and his blood was all over you.”

“I was with a galeaper. Ever hear of them?”

“No, but there’s a man dead with your DNA—”

“Galeapers’ blood is different. They don’t leave their blueprints on the body. They ordinarily don’t leave a body.”

She circled him, studying his saggy-faced expression. He didn’t look like a killer, but sick bastards usually didn’t.

He gazed at her with bloodshot eyes. “Farber said it had to be done.”
“Who’s Farber?”

“The galeaper. He’s dead. He melded himself with the tram because he was dying and couldn’t take the pain. His hair was falling out. That’s how galeapers die. They fall apart and then turn to dust.”

“What?”

“Farber injected himself with melding-blast in front of the mohawk kid. Then the kid stopped the tram and ran off. Then I ran off, and that’s when they picked me up.”

Banger blinked wet eyes. Then he continued. “It shouldn’t have happened that way. Farber was supposed to shoot Jekkie Lane with melding-blast and Jekkie Lane should’ve blended right into wherever he fell. We dressed like Lane’s agents, in overcoats and boots, so he’d think we were there to talk business — Farber’s idea. It didn’t work. Lane fought back, hard. Pulled off Farber’s arm. It turned to dust. Farber got a little crazy then. He killed Lane then we fled. I know this sounds outrageous. That’s why I have to find the kid.”

Molly began to think that Dunn *was* nuts. She played along.

“So, Farber was a galeaper. And *where* did he come from?”

Banger hesitated before he answered. “I found Farber in a black hole.”

“You’re an astrophysicist?”

“Right.”

“This black hole. It’s out in space?”

“Yes, that’s the kind I’m talking about. Farber’s matter was emitted from the hole along with Hawking radiation. His atoms cohered within the particle reaper I used to find the hole and somehow he transported himself through the beam and into my laboratory. It was either Lane or me. You see, I invented the technology to find black holes, but Lane’s descendent will take that knowledge to a formidable level.”

Dunn’s story garbled Molly’s balance, or was it latent effects of the previous night? “Doctor, I don’t understand all of this. What is Hawking radiation?”

“Black holes emit radiation and information about what had been sucked into them.”

After drinking a life-sized virgin Bloody Mary, Molly took the tram to a section of town called the “drudge,” where she hoped to find Sonlin, a former client. Sonlin knew all of the hoods in Graveton, and for a price

would do anything to help her.

The rain came down in icy sheets. She pressed her arms against her body, keeping her raincoat shut. Her head still spun from listening to Banger's crazy story.

"The idea of an alien race transforming planets into what they perceive as paradise is absurd, Doctor," she had said at the precinct.

"That's why they're called galeapers," Banger had replied. "They leap through time and galaxies, eliminating bloodlines that interfere with their plans. Jekkie Lane's descendant would do just that."

Genetic cleansing, or extreme justice; A spooky, preposterous story that Molly suspected was just another dark tale told by another sick bastard. Banger was either completely out of his mind or she was being set up.

Molly soon found herself staring at the third floor of the 'leaning house,' a name given to the building because of the illusion provided by missing red bricks along one of its sides. Plywood covered most of the windows, and wooden cartons served as front steps. The usual hawk-eyed lookout lingered by the doorway. He gave Molly a nod of recognition as she walked past him.

A spindly-looking doorman she didn't recognize let her inside Sonlin's third-floor dwelling. Sonlin sat cross-legged on the floor beside a plywood-covered window. A light-blue silk poncho draped his large body. A pile of clothing, an old mattress, and many small wooden crates packed with food remnants cluttered the room. The smell of cannabis drifted from behind her and mingled with a greasy odor of stale sweat.

Sonlin remained seated, delivering his blanket of warmth to her in a wide, compassionate grin. A contrast to his dark Asian skin, his synthetic teeth sparkled like sun off a pond.

"Ms. Molly," Sonlin said in a deep voice. He extended his arm.

Molly returned his smile and squeezed his hand. She pulled cash out of her raincoat's pocket and handed him a bill. "I need information, Sonlin."

He snatched the bill. "Anything for you."

"I'm looking for someone. He wears a tan jacket with a large black E on the back. Has an orange mohawk."

Sonlin's grin faded. "What he do?"

"Nothing. I just need to talk to him, for a client of mine." She handed him another bill.

Sonlin hesitated before taking the money, a wrinkle forming above

his brow. "Does this have anything to do with a tram?"

A jolt cascaded down Molly's spine.

"Percy, who you're looking for," Sonlin continued. "He only one with mohawk. He scared, Ms. Molly. Something's after him."

"This kid's for real? You've talked to him?"

"Yes. He say two men on tram in bloody coats. Sickly man melt on tram. Percy get off tram and run."

"Just how Banger had described it," Molly whispered. "Who is after Percy?"

"More funny little men. All have orange hair and dress like Edgly Gang."

"Edgly gang?"

"Percy's gang. But little men don't know Edgly Gang meeting sign, so gang know they not real thing and shoot them before they get too close."

"They killed some?"

"Yes, then little men turn to dust, blow away. Some just get shot, get real mad, throw things."

Molly took a long breath and reached for another bill. She felt like she had eaten live snakes that now slithered up her throat. "Where do I find Percy?"

Sonlin chuckled, declining the bill with a wave of his hand. "On Edgly Avenue. Where else?"

She stuffed the bill back into her pocket.

"Ms. Molly," Sonlin added. "Gang scared. One shot by little man and melt into alley. Nothing left of him."

She turned to go, swallowing hard as she faced the callous stare of Sonlin's doorman, who opened the door for her. She scurried down the steps and onto the street toward Edgly Avenue.

A clump of orange-haired hoods on Edgly Avenue stood out like kings and queens among beggars. Seven of them, but none had a mohawk. She shivered in the rain's aftermath and approached the Edgly Gang.

Molly returned to the precinct with good and bad news for Banger. The Edgly Gang verified the tram incident, but she didn't find the mohawk kid, Percy. Banger was released on bail and then took the tram to the abysmal 'drudge' to find the kid, without whom the law would think he was insane.

The stink of decay in the drudge reminded Banger to make tight fists. Wearing a polyester warm-up suit and running shoes, his skinny ass screamed *assault me* to any hood seeking fun. He wished he still wore the bloodstained overcoat and black boots the precinct held for evidence. One look at him dressed like that would keep away any thug.

He kicked through wet litter, his feet burning where Farber's guts had dribbled onto them, and the snug fit of the damp canvas shoes exacerbated the pain.

Peering between the cars that sped past, he scanned the hoods standing beneath a brown tattered awning over a diner across the street. None wore a tan jacket, or anything with an 'E' on it. No orange hair.

Gangs conducted most business in the alleys, so Molly had told him. After hesitating, he walked through a passageway between two shops. Something dripped from the flat roofs, splattering his face and leaving dark greasy spots on his clothes. He wiped the grime from his eyes and entered the alley when he thought he saw Percy half a block away. Banger stared hard as he approached. Lots of orange hair, not just a strip, and this kid was unusually small for a hood. He wore a huge tan jacket that looked like something was hidden beneath it. The kid leaned his head from side-to-side, blinking as if trying to bring Banger's face into focus.

Banger stopped, a sedating chill permeating his body. The kid was a galeaper! Was the little guy after him? Couldn't be. Banger had destroyed everything: notebooks, computer files, voice recordings, anything that might be used to reproduce his work or provide the first step needed to harness radiation emitted from a black hole. And Jekkie Lane was dead.

The galeaper took a step toward Banger, and Banger knew at once what was about to transpire.

Thankful now he wore his running shoes, Banger sprinted away. He had learned a few things hanging out with Farber: in Earth's gravity and atmospheric conditions, not only were galeapers' bodies as fragile as dried sea grass, they had slow reflexes and couldn't run.

Banger darted through the alley, hurling items in the path of his pursuer. A pulsating shrill sounded from behind: melding-blast! Avoiding the fatal blast, he tumbled to the ground, rolled, scrambled to his feet, and dashed through a passageway that led back onto the street. Flattening himself against a building, he picked up a brick from the pavement and held it firmly, waiting.

The galeaper had barely emerged when Banger swung SMACK! The galeaper flew backwards, with a guttural scream. Something fell from

beneath the galeaper's coat and hit the pavement: a translucent, crescent-shaped thing, with green iridescent liquid floating inside. It fizzled to nothing, just like Farber's makeshift melding gun had done when Jekkie Lane struck him.

Banger had been running, he had never run this fast, all the way back to his home on 39th Street and placed his key into the door lock. The key turned without the normal metal grinding resistance. Funny, he was sure he had locked it.

He walked inside and stepped backwards against the door, slamming it shut.

"Doctor Dunn, I presume?"

The mohawk kid, sat on his sofa with his feet on the coffee table. His face looked beaten and raw. He held a shotgun. Its barrel was pointed at him.

Banger raised his arms and said in a near whisper, "Percy."

Percy showed no sign of acknowledgement.

"I've been looking for you," said Banger, searching for words to appease the intruder. "How'd you find me?"

"Shut up and sit down. I've had a rotten day."

His hands still in the air, Banger sat on the chair opposite Percy, who studied him with dark, menacing eyes.

"I came here to kill you, Dunn, because you got me into this mess. Thought I might do you a favor before those freaks do it their way. They've been chasing my crew and me all over town."

"They're called galeapers."

"I know what they are."

"You do?" Banger leaned back against his seat. Percy's galeaper contacts couldn't have been chance encounters. The aliens were quick at popping in and out of time and place, thereby avoiding detection, so stumbling into them wasn't possible; they wanted Percy to find them.

"I couldn't believe what they told me."

"You've talked to them?"

"The ones we hurt were easy to capture, after a while. Nasty things when they get hurt. Had to kill them, though. They turned to ashes and blew away with the breeze, like a spent log. You teach them how to talk?"

Banger shook his head. "They've been on this planet long enough to learn our languages. Did they tell you why they're after you?"

Percy's eyes narrowed. "Because I saw one on the tram. Remember? I told my gang, and now the galeapers are after all of us. They said if their

identity is known it upsets their plan. If you ask me, they have a long way to go before they make Earth a paradise. They'll have to kill every last one of us."

Banger felt the blood rush from his face. He, too, knew of the galeapers' existence and their plan: Farber had never told him that knowing would be a bad thing. Had the galeaper he saw in the drudge been dressed like Percy on purpose, thinking he would be gullible enough to get close? Then, WHAMMO — before he realized it he would be wiped out by melding-blast. But Banger was on to them; he knew what they looked like and that they disguised themselves to attract their victims. And thanks to Farber, Banger knew their vulnerabilities.

Percy wagged the gun at him. "So tell me, Doctor, are they friends of yours?"

"Of course not. I'm an astrophysicist. I search for black holes, and when I found one, I also found Farber, the galeaper you saw on the tram. *He* killed Jekkie Lane."

"That freak? I saw the newscast. Real bloody scene. Why?"

Banger started lowering his arms, but changed his mind when Percy shook his head and aimed the barrel of his gun at his chest.

"Because Lane's descendent will harness energy from a black hole."

"What?"

"I invented the technology to find black holes. They emit Hawking radiation, and if that radiation could be harnessed into energy, well, the possibilities are..." Banger hesitated, realizing Percy wouldn't understand.

"Look," Percy said, "I don't have much education, but I'm not stupid. So what you're saying is that Lane's kid—"

"Great grandson."

"Yeah, whatever. This power-hungry dude will use the energy from the black hole for his own pleasure."

"Simply put, but the entire human race will be annihilated because of it."

"You're joking, right?"

"No, I'm not."

Percy bounced the handle of the gun between his palms, as if contemplating the truth to Banger's story. "But if Farber wanted to prevent that, why didn't he get rid of Lane's descendent? Galeapers can move through time, can't they?"

"Farber thought it best to stop the event at its infancy, so he journeyed through time, to the black hole, and waited for the first life

form to find him, which was me.”

Percy squished his face. “Wouldn’t he have gotten pulverized entering the black hole?”

“Yes, but galeapers can restore their molecular network under certain conditions. But he never fully recovered. Not all his matter entered my particle reaper.” A knot formed in Banger’s stomach as he remembered what Farber had looked like when he appeared in his laboratory. Bringing him home without raising suspicions was another story.

“Farber came *here* to kill *me*,” Banger continued, “to prevent humans obtaining knowledge that might be used to harvest that energy. We became friends, and he convinced me to destroy my data about finding the hole. But some of it had already been reported so he decided to eliminate Jekkie Lane, the perpetrator’s ancestor who lived in our era, before Lane had a chance to have kids. It was Lane, or another galeaper would have come for me. Farber couldn’t have done it himself because of his health. He needed me to carry the melding gun and to help him walk. Things got out of hand and Farber killed Jekkie Lane in a rage. We ran, and that’s when you saw us on the tram. Farber injected melding-blast into his leg, and you know the rest.”

Percy gave a slight chuckle. “So, you helped Farber commit murder to save your own ass.”

Banger felt a stabbing pain in his heart. Although he had been denying his reason, Percy had judged him rightly. But the thought of doing nothing, knowing that humans could be annihilated, sickened him more than the murder itself.

Percy lowered the gun, a crooked smile forming on his face. “Don’t look so glum. You’re a hero, Doctor, because you gave humans back their future.” He stood, and with a flick of his hand, he lowered his head in a surprisingly poised manner. “I bow to you. The entire world should bow to you.”

Banger had never thought of it like that. He certainly didn’t feel like a hero. He felt shameful, desperate, and scared.

Percy sat down and continued. “But you didn’t save your ass, because now they’re after us all because we know too many of their secrets. The way I see it, they’ve declared war.”

Banger realized his arms were no longer in the air. He breathed easier sensing Percy didn’t care.

“By the way, Doctor, you dropped this outside the tram station.” He tossed Banger a small billfold that contained his identification card. “If

you're going to commit a crime, don't leave your calling card."

Banger looked inside of the billfold. All the money had been taken out, but he said nothing.

"A galeaper took down my buddy," Percy said.

"Shot with melding-blast?"

Percy gave a sour expression. "What exactly is that stuff?"

"It converts organic matter into the surface it touches."

Percy's facial bruises turned a darker shade of purple. "So, my buddy's part of the asphalt now."

"Yes."

"Let's work together, Doctor." Percy placed the gun on his lap. "How can we out-smart them?"

Work together? Perhaps Percy had a good idea. If the kid testified on his behalf, and by chance the court believed the story, the 'war' would escalate, because more people would know about the galeapers.

"We beat them one by one," Banger began, "because they work independently. The only contact they have with other galeapers is when it's time for them to leave, but if a galeaper fails to kill its target within a short period of time he never goes home. That's their law and the reason Farber wanted desperately to kill Lane: he wanted to die at home. They don't live long here, because Earth's gravity and other factors greatly decrease their life expectancy. Disarmed galeapers are harmless after they throw a short-lived temper tantrum. Afterwards they can be captured and will tell you anything. Their reflexes are slow and their eyesight is poor. That's why they lure their victims, so they can fire at close range. And they never work at night."

Banger detected a spark of light in Percy's eyes. "Doctor, do you know how to make melding-blast?"

"I do," Banger said with pride. He pointed a finger at his head. "The recipe's right here."

"Then let's whip up the stuff and kick some galeaper butt, Doc."

"Call me Banger."

Molly arrived at the precinct minutes after she received Allen's call. "There's something here you need to see," he had said to her in an anxious voice.

It was dusk. The precinct was empty except for the attendant at the front desk. A cold silence engulfed the station as she stuck her head into Allen's vacant room. Then a cough directed her attention down the hall,

toward the observation room where Banger had been held earlier that day.

“Allen?” No response. She approached the observation window with some caution and peered through it. Allen sat on the floor, his back against the wall, a troubled stare on his face.

She entered the observation room and followed Allen’s gaze to a tan jacket, the type worn by the Edgly Gang, lying on top of what looked like ashes. Molly’s gut slammed against her spine. Unable to untangle the knot that impeded her speech, she turned sharply toward Allen.

“You’re too late,” Allen said in a quiet voice. He reached out a hand, gesturing toward the jacket. “It shut its eyes and seemed to fall apart. Then whatever it was, it turned into ashes.”

All doubts about Banger’s story vanished, replaced by a reality-jarring incubus that terrorized her insides.

“Got a call from a coffee dealer in the ‘drudge’ who said some hood was going nuts behind his shop. When I got there, the hood was passive. Stood up, let me cuff him, and then I took him to the precinct. I knew he wasn’t right. I don’t think he could see well. Had these weird eyes and a white, peanut-shaped face. He answered every question I asked. He claimed to be one of those galeapers Dunn talked about. Said he had been sent here to eliminate people who knew about them and their plan to make Earth an Eden.”

Molly experienced another internal body-slam.

“He told me the kids with orange hair destroyed his melding gun before he could use it. What the heck’s a melding gun?”

Molly didn’t answer.

Allen’s stare changed into a look of desperation. “These galeapers are killing innocent people, Molly. You need to leave town as fast as you can.”

“They can’t be after me. I didn’t do anything.”

“They *will* be after you, because you know about them.”

“I don’t get it. This Dunn character killed a man and now some strange little aliens are—”

“Banger didn’t kill anyone. Farber did.”

“Who the heck’s Farber?”

There was no sense explaining anything to Allen. It would take too long. One thing was clear: She must warn Banger about the galeaper threat, if he didn’t already know. She knelt and held Allen’s arm. He was shaking.

“Funny thing though,” he said, “I confused it when I took off my coat, and when I put on that yellow wig someone left behind at the

precinct's Halloween party, it didn't recognize me, like our clothes and the color of our hair is how they identify us."

Molly released her grip on Allen and rose to her feet. Her head throbbed, and for a moment she was sure she was about to throw up. As she stood there, her eyes lingering on the jacket, she realized things were different now. She had come to work that morning expecting to get a classic, gutter-nurtured client, but instead — Banger. And now weird aliens with a warped sense of humanity were hunting her down. Oddly, she felt a slight thrill.

"I better go," she said. "What about Jekkie Lane's murder?"

"Don't worry," Allen replied. "I'll make it look like he was framed."

It didn't take long for Banger to make melding-blast and fill syringes and laboratory flasks with the green iridescent liquid. Weapons. The syringe — Farber's idea. Using flasks — his. The mixing of the liquid with human blood catalyzed the cell-changing reaction. Ejected from a melding gun, the liquid would penetrate clothes and pierce the skin. But making a melding gun was time consuming, and the things were too bulky. For now, his weapons would only work at very close range.

Banger placed the weapons into an insulated lunch bag then removed his rubber gloves, which he tossed into the microwave along with the other items he had been using. He set the power on high and zapped any traces of melding-blast.

He glanced at his watch. He had better hurry to meet Molly and the others. She had called earlier. Then Percy left to assemble his gang and any others who knew of the galeapers' existence.

Banger wanted to stay in Graveton and fight the galeapers there. But Molly and Percy had convinced him they should all leave town and formulate a good plan.

With the lunch bag's strap draped across his chest and a backpack around his shoulders, Banger arrived at the tram station ten minutes ahead of schedule. Through the dim lights, he studied shadowy faces near him. *Humans, all of them.* But he had nothing to worry about, because galeapers didn't work at night.

A cold sense of loss spiked through him as visions of Farber invaded his thoughts. In all the years he had been studying black holes; never had he thought his quest would lead to the little guy. Finding Farber had been a great scientific achievement, one he must conceal forever, and because of it, he might spend the rest of his life running.

Regrets? Not really. Not yet. After all, he had saved humanity.

Finally, the tram arrived. Banger entered and dropped a token into the metal depository. A rush of heat greeted him. Then he noticed the galeaper sitting in the back seat.

Banger stopped dead, holding onto the ceiling rail as the tram took off. The crater in his stomach grew wider, and he stared at the galeaper, perhaps the one who had chased him in the drudge. Still wore a tan jacket. Orange hair. A face like lumpy mashed potatoes with the skins left on. He, or someone else, had done a number on this galeaper.

Odd as the galeaper looked, why would anyone suspect he wasn't human?

Banger pulled out a syringe from the lunch bag, uncapped it, and walked toward the galeaper. This inhumane creature had seen his last day on Earth. He reached the back of the tram and peered down at the galeaper, almost feeling sorry for the dejected little thing: nowhere to go, out of work; just like him. The galeaper looked at the syringe, then at Banger, his black eyes piercing through Banger, the way Farber's eyes had. Banger detected a slight discolored wrinkle between the little guy's eyes, as if he were in great pain.

Banger reminded himself why the galeapers came to Earth. Inhumane. But Farber had been Banger's friend, and Farber *was* humane, he just had had a strange political agenda. It was clear to Banger that the galeaper before him now had missed its target and would never try to harm a human again. Banger decided to spare him. The little guy would be dead soon anyway, and Banger had many questions to ask him before that happened.

He recapped the syringe and tucked it back inside his lunch bag. Then he removed his backpack, sat beside the galeaper, and pulled him close. Banger thought he heard him cry, the way Farber once had done.

The tram stopped in the drudge and Banger escorted the battered exile off. As they emerged from the station, he spotted Percy and his orange-haired gang and a few other undesirables lingering beneath a street lamp. Upon seeing Banger, they pointed glossy weapons at the galeaper tucked under his arm.

Banger shielded the galeaper. "No," he said. "He's harmless now. We're going to ask him a few questions."

Banger searched the group as they lowered the weapons, looking for Molly. A large, dark-skinned Asian man with a bright smile stepped in front of him. Molly appeared from behind the Asian man, and Banger's

heart soared. For a moment he had thought that the galeapers had got to her. But she was safe, and he hoped she brought the hair dye, because it was time to end the war.

Zuggyzu and the Humans

Sheila Crosby

“No. Absolutely not! It's far too dangerous.” The Controller threw Zuggyzu's report in the recycling bin. Zuggyzu's spots turned black with disappointment. “It's not that dangerous, sir. The air's breathable, the gravity's weak.”

“And the dominant species are blundering giants who could squash you flat and not even notice. Half the exploration team vanished, and yet you say it's not that dangerous?”

“We've learnt so much since then! I can disguise myself, sir. I understand humans. It's easy to fool them because they only see what they expect to see.”

“You're obsessed, Zuggyzu. I'm sending you on compulsory leave before you become as irrational as those humans.”

“But, sir! They're destroying their planet.”

“I want your leave application on my desk in fifteen minutes.”

Zuggyzu trailed along the null-grav strip back to his perch. Humans fascinated him. He was amazed by their family units, their loyalty to one another; and the democracy thing. Now, if his kind had democracy, he could appeal when the Controller told him where to go. The idea hit him so hard that he crashed to the floor and bruised one of his corners. The Controller hadn't told him where to take his leave. His spots pulsed with scarlet determination.

The sun was setting as Zuggyzu landed in the Canary Islands. He could see two humans pointing up at the sky. No doubt they thought the lens shaped cloud was a flying saucer. Didn't they know that this hill constantly formed such clouds? It was so easy to fool humans.

He hid the spaceship with vegetation, and unloaded his planet-rover. He had morphed it, and now it should be well disguised on Earth. He was right. The lovers were so mesmerised by the cloud, they never noticed the battered soda can rolling past their feet. Zuggyzu headed for the observatory, which was perched on top of the island's highest mountain. If anyone could understand his message, it would be astronomers.

Pedro opened the dome of the William Herschel Telescope and gazed at the perfect royal blue sky. If only it would cloud over so he could go to

bed early! After four years of operating telescopes for the English, the glamour had worn thin. Still, another year of it, and he could buy his girlfriend a cow. She'd like that. They agreed that agriculture didn't pay as well as science, but it was a lot saner.

The night's observers arrived. "Sorry we're late," said the man with a pink pony-tail and wrinkles. "I'm Dr. Kaz Reid. This is my student, Anne Grey."

Pedro shook hands, trying not to stare at Dr. Reid's *Legalise Cannabis* T-shirt and psychedelic trousers. Most observers came for just three nights, and many had their heads in space, but this was the first time he'd seen one with his body stuck in the sixties.

"I am Pedro. The telescope will be ready when I fill the cryostat."

"Cool. I'll leave Anne with you while I find the staff astronomer." Dr. Reid waved and vanished. Visiting astronomers were supposed to arrive by 4pm. Pedro shrugged. It wasn't his problem. He started down the stairs. "Your first time here?"

Anne nodded. "It's much bigger than I expected."

"Everyone says that." It was one thing to read that the telescope was eighty feet high, and another to see it. They reached the observing floor, and Pedro pulled the tank of liquid nitrogen the last few yards.

"It looks like R2D2," said Anne.

Pedro smiled. "Not so clever." He slid the nozzle into the cryostat and opened the valves. The tube furred with frost, fog tumbled and rippled over the floor, and finally liquid nitrogen spat out. "Finished," said Pedro.

He turned off the valves, removed the probe, and released the pressure. A yard of fog roared sideways, like a dragon's sigh.

"I'm cold," said Anne.

"Yes. Is nice you don't have to sit in here looking through an eyepiece. Is much warmer in the control room, no?"

Anne smiled. Her strawberry blond hair and twitchy movements reminded Pedro irresistibly of a hamster. He'd hoped she'd be as nocturnal as a hamster too. They were supposed to work all night, but sometimes the astronomers snored. As they went through to the control room, Pedro saw something fly into the dome. Odd. None of the local birds flew at night. He must have imagined it.

Zugyzy shut his eyes as he flew into the dome in his pop can, fifty feet above the ground. He told himself these vast heights didn't count on a

low-gravity planet; it was the thin air that made him dizzy. He flew down to the metal boxes hanging below the main mirror, and turned on his echo sounder. It all made sense. The collected light went through a maze of mirrors and lenses to produce an image, like a photo. He thought it seemed a bit primitive for such a huge telescope. The light detector was cooled by liquid nitrogen, for goodness sake, and it was a mere inch across! He saw they still converted the light into electricity like an antique digital camera. Maybe building an eighty-foot high telescope wasn't so remarkable when you were six feet tall yourself, and the gravity was only 9.8m/s. This giant could barely spot a candle on their moon!

Zuggyzu's heart sank. If humans were stupid then his plan wasn't likely to work. But he'd come too far to give up. He'd get more data and improvise. A hundred and sixty tons of telescope swooped 'round, sending Zuggyzu scurrying. The vast dome rotated to align the open shutter with the telescope. Everything was moving, and without a fixed frame of reference, Zuggyzu felt giddy.

When the telescope settled down, Zuggyzu flew back to the instruments and continued his investigation. Those wires leading from the detectors must go to whatever passed for a computer in this backwater. With such primitive detectors, they might even store their data on magnetic tape.

Dr. Reid bounded into the control room. "Ready?"

Pedro sighed. All this enthusiasm was tiring. "I finish the calibrate now. What is your first object?"

Anne handed him a list. "This one. Then we do a blind offset to our colliding galaxies."

Pedro typed co-ordinates into the computer. Soon the telescope was tracking the galaxies across the sky, as the Earth turned on its axis.

Dr. Reid typed busily into the instrument control computer. "We'll take a one hour exposure. Right, what shall we talk about while we're waiting?"

Anne said, "While we were coming up the mountain, the taxi driver told us that aliens visit the observatory all the time."

Pedro nodded. "Montana Matos down in Garafia, it makes clouds formed like a lens. People think they are flying saucers."

Dr. Reid raised His eyebrows in mock astonishment. "You mean it's not true? Shame!"

Pedro smiled. *I wonder which planet you come from*, he thought.

Dr. Reid put a Beatles CD in the stereo unit.

Zuggyzu had it all worked out. He would unplug the wire from the detector and send his own message to the computer instead. Once the humans decoded it, they'd understand how close they were to runaway global warming. Even better, they'd have the formulas for nice clean, safe nuclear fusion. It was so easy to save a planet.

Pedro thought it wonderfully appropriate when the astronomers bawled out the chorus from *The Fool on the Hill*.

Finally, Dr. Reid's computer beeped and he displayed the image they'd just taken. "Blue meanies!"

Pedro and Anne came over. Instead of a pretty image of two colliding galaxies, the screen was covered with random dots.

"I never see this before," said Pedro. "I call the duty engineer, yes?" He picked up the house phone and punched in a number.

Claire, the engineer, arrived five minutes later. "What's up?"

Dr. Reid pointed at the screen. "What is that?"

Claire's eyebrows went into orbit. "Mind if I have the keyboard?"

Dr. Reid moved over and Claire checked the detector. Temperature in range, responding to network messages – all completely normal, except for an image that resembled a piece of modern art. "I'll take a look in the dome," Claire said.

As Zuggyzu struggled to reconnect the cable, something grabbed him round the middle. His appendages recoiled into his spots in his startle reflex. *Oh no*, thought Zuggyzu. *Oh no!*

Zuggyzu felt himself lifted up, and carried along. He seemed to be in a human hand, but he didn't dare poke his eyes out to look.

Pedro was relieved when Claire came back so quickly. She said, "Some joker's been playing around with the instruments and left this behind." She lifted up something furry, but Pedro didn't bother to look closely. "And a Coke can I can recycle. Anyway, I fixed a loose cable, so let's try another exposure. How about Saturn?"

Pedro moved the telescope again. Saturn blazed on the screen, and only needed a ten second exposure. Everyone stopped breathing while the data read out and displayed ... one pretty picture of Saturn. Pedro had never enjoyed the rings so much.

Dr. Reid said, "So it's fixed. Ok, back to our galaxies, Pedro. Anne, delete the duff file. Pity it wasn't a message from the aliens. I could fancy

the Nobel Prize.”

“Right,” said Claire, “I’ll go hang this up in my car.”

Zuggyzu felt sick. He had failed. He was trapped. He was going to die.

The hand carried him, swaying in great arcs. They seemed to be going down steps. He heard a door creak, and then felt cold air flowing past, so he must be outside. Another door, metal this time, and the hand left him dangling in space. He heard the human leave.

“It’s OK. She’s gone,” said a voice. He poked his eyes out. A female of his species dangled beside him, along with something green.

His companion said, “Are you the rescue team? I’ve been here for months.”

“But what do you eat?”

“This,” she said, pointing at the pine-tree car-freshener hanging beside them. It smelt delicious.

“Why have they hung us here?”

“I don’t know.” Her spots turned a puzzled violet. “They call us fuzzy dice. They don’t seem to realise that we’re sentient at all.”

Zuggyzu sighed. “No. Humans only see what they expect to see.”

A Smaller Step

Michael Anderson

The two astronauts waited patiently in the main corridor on the west side of the station, dressed in pressure suits and carrying helmets.

One of them sat on a metal bench; the other stood at the door to the Ready Room and peered through the glass porthole, watching the activity inside.

“What are they doing?” asked Matthews.

“They have a lunar map spread out on the table. They’re studying it and talking about something.”

“Talking about what?”

“Hell if I know, Rick. I don’t speak Russian.” Walt Davis peeked through the window again.

Matthews sipped from a small container of orange juice and shrugged. “They probably want to go on a rock hunt. This is the first time Russians have been allowed up to Lunar One since it opened. They don’t have too many moon rocks.”

Davis gave up spying on the cosmonauts and joined his partner on the bench. “Maybe we should take them over to site R-6. There’s a good representation in that area. They can collect all the friggin’ rocks they want.”

“They don’t look like geologists to me.”

“Who do you think they are, then?”

“Could be your typical black-bag types,” said Davis. “Probably sent up here to check out the base.”

“Should we do anything?”

“No. If they got this far, they passed the security clearances. Just keep an eye on them.”

“Good idea. Those two give me the creeps.”

A few minutes later, the two Russians finally emerged from the Ready Room. They were dressed in dark blue coveralls with the initials of the Russian Federation stitched on the pockets. Both were about thirty years of age and wore serious expressions.

One of the Russians offered his hand. “I am Alexei Gordonov, and this is Mikhail Greshchenko. I can speak English fairly well, but I will have to act as interpreter for Mikhail.”

Matthews returned the handshake firmly. “Rick Matthews. I’m your

rover driver. This is Walt Davis from the lunar science team. We have orders to take you out from the base, but no one has said where you want to go.”

“It is about sixty kilometers from here,” said Gordonov.

Davis interjected. “Are you joking? Sixty kilometers! No one has been more than ten clicks from this station since it went operational!”

“He's right,” said Matthews. “What you ask is dangerous. If we drive out that far and have a problem with the rover, rescue could be impossible. It's extremely risky.”

“I am told your lunar rovers can travel over two hundred kilometers on a full battery charge.”

“Well, yes...”

“That's not the point,” Davis interrupted angrily. “He said that if something went wrong we could be in serious trouble. We've been out in the rover more than twenty times in the last three months. We buried our axles in some loose dust on one trip. We had to wait for the B-team to pick us up. When they finally found us, we were down to our last fifteen minutes of oxygen.” He paused, and then added, “We were only six kilometers from the base that time, too. You want to go ten times that distance. Impossible.”

The four astronauts stared at each other in silence. Finally, Greshchenko said something to Gordonov in Russian. It sounded like a question.

Gordonov nodded to his partner in response.

“What is it?” asked Matthews. “What are you two talking about?”

Gordonov took an envelope from his pocket and held it out reverently. “Mikhail reminded me to show you this.”

Matthews opened the letter.

Office of the President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Please provide cosmonauts Mikhail Greshchenko and Alexei Gordonov any assistance they require and the full use of all resources at Lunar One Research Station/NASA. This matter has been designated Top Secret. You are expressly forbidden to disclose any facts or discuss anything concerning this project, under penalty of law.

“What does it say?” asked Davis.

“It’s an order from the White House,” said Matthews. He thrust it to Davis. “It’s signed by the President.”

Davis read it quickly and groaned. “Told you it was black bag stuff.”

The cosmonaut plucked the letter from Davis’ hand and tucked it away. “We need to reach a certain site. And we are not spies, Mr Davis.”

“All right,” said Matthews. “Where the hell do you guys need to go?”

The Russian held up a palm-sized computer. A series of numbers showing lunar surface coordinates scrolled across the tiny screen. “Here,” he said. “Do you know of it?”

“Of course I do,” said Matthews. “Okay, so you know people in high places. And the President says we have to help you. But he didn’t order us to throw our lives away, either. We’ll take you out, but if it’s rocks you want, you will have to limit the load. We’re going to pack as much oxygen as we can cram into that rover. If something happens, we’re not sitting out there waiting to die with our asses hanging in the breeze.”

“Carry all the oxygen you wish,” replied Gordonov. “We are not seeking geological samples.”

Conversation was brief and uncomfortable as the four astronauts moved steadily across the stark landscape. The Rover was fully pressurized and rolled through the lunar dust at fifteen kilometers an hour. Thick windows comprised much of the upper section of the Rover, providing stunning views in all directions.

Matthews drove in silence.

Davis sat in the passenger seat with the Russians behind him in the rear section. He turned and faced the cosmonauts. “So are we allowed to ask why we’re going out so far from the station?”

“It is allowed,” Gordonov said. “I am surprised you did not ask sooner. We are headed for the site where a Russian spacecraft crashed many years ago. We are to take pictures and cut off samples of the spacecraft.”

“What kind of spacecraft?” said Matthews.

“A sample-collection lander. It failed to return to Earth.”

“I remember that,” said Davis. “The Luna missions, right?”

“Yes, it was called Luna, I believe.”

“I thought none of them made it to the moon.”

“This one did. The engine failed to re-ignite and it remained on the surface.”

The two Americans glanced at each other for a moment. An unspoken thought passed between them. *Bullshit.*

It was several hours later when Matthews stopped the rover at the edge of a steep hill. “Well, this is as close as we can get,” he announced. “According to your coordinates, that lander is down in a canyon on the other side of this hill. Looks pretty steep to me.”

“Yes.” Gordonov said something in Russian to his partner and they began gathering up equipment and putting on their helmets. “We must try anyway.”

The two Americans followed suit, sealing their helmets so the Russians could exit. After everyone was secure, Matthews shut down the oxygen pumps and vented the atmosphere from the rover. White crystals of suddenly frozen air poured from the vehicle and trickled slowly to the ground like snow.

The Russians opened a rear door and climbed out, shutting it behind them firmly. They walked to the base of the hill and began to climb hard for the summit.

They made good progress.

“Look at that,” said Davis. “Those two are in good shape.”

As they watched in fascination, the cosmonauts used short hiking poles to work their way up the hill. Occasionally, a rock would dislodge from under their feet and roll down, but they continued steadily upward. It was obvious they had been in training for the mission a long time.

Within a couple of minutes, the Russians had reached the top and disappeared over the other side.

“Gordonov,” Matthews called out over his suit radio. “Do you read me?”

“Affirmative. Everything is good.”

“Do you need any help over there?”

“No. We can see the spacecraft now. We are going down to it. The terrain is suitable. We do not require assistance.”

“Roger that.”

Fifteen minutes later, Matthews looked at his partner. “What do you think?”

“I think we should go up there, buddy.”

“So do I. Get your helmet on.”

The two Americans struggled up the rocky hill. When they reached the summit, they found themselves above a steep and narrow canyon.

They had turned off their helmet radios to avoid alerting the Russian cosmonauts to their presence. Davis pointed into the darkness below and gave a thumbs-up. They started their descent cautiously. Boulders the size of cars were scattered at the bottom of the canyon. At first, they could see nothing, and then a silvery glint from one of the cosmonauts' suits flashed near some of the boulders.

Matthews switched on his suit radio. "Gordonov?"

"I read you. We are fine. We do not require assistance."

"Too bad. Look up. We're already on our way into the canyon."

A soft sigh came over the radio. "So be it. Do you see me? I am waving at you."

"I see you."

"The largest boulders. We are working behind them."

As Matthews and Davis made their way into the canyon, they spotted the very top of a large spacecraft that had landed among the gigantic stones. Rounding the last of the massive obstacles, both men stopped and stared in shock at what they saw.

It was not an unmanned lander, or a sample-return craft. It was a spacecraft sitting on four legs, similar to an old Apollo Lunar Module.

Alexei Gordonov snapped a picture and moved to his right for another shot from a different angle.

Greshchenko was standing at the top of the access ladder on the lander and peering into a circular window built into the hatch door. He said something in Russian and Gordonov replied with a grunt.

"What the hell is this thing?" Matthews gasped.

Gordonov snapped another photograph. "It is an LK, the lunar lander section of a LOK system. It was launched from Earth by an N-1 rocket."

"This isn't for sample returns," said Davis. "It's almost as large as an Apollo LEM!"

"Yes. The LK was designed to carry one person to the lunar surface."

"Is there someone inside?"

"Yes. He is dead, of course."

Matthews was suddenly angry. "I don't understand!" He approached Gordonov as quickly as his bulky moon suit would allow and grabbed him by the arm. "What the hell is this all about? I've studied your lunar program. All the N-1 heavy-lift rockets exploded on the pad. The LOK

system never made it to the moon.”

Alexei Gordonov answered the agitated Matthews calmly. “Try to understand. This is a historical site. Please stand aside and let us finish our work. I will explain everything afterward.” The cosmonaut pulled himself free of Matthews’ grip and continued snapping pictures from different angles.

Greshchenko, standing at the top of the access ladder, spoke in Russian and pointed at the porthole.

Gordonov waved in response.

“What did he say?” Matthews demanded.

“The cosmonaut inside the craft is holding a notebook. He wants to retrieve it.”

“Baloney.” Matthews walked toward the spacecraft and stopped at the bottom of the ladder. “Greshchenko! Come on down from there!”

The cosmonaut looked to his partner for advice.

Gordonov waved for him to come down and motioned to let Matthews take his place.

The cosmonaut shrugged and started down. As soon as he reached the ground, Matthews took the rungs in his hands.

Greshchenko grabbed Matthews by the arm and spoke angrily in Russian. Matthews shook him off brusquely and started up the ladder. “What did he say now, Gordonov?”

“He says you should be more respectful of the dead. I agree with him. The man inside that spacecraft was a person of great courage.”

Matthews continued climbing.

Walt Davis pointed to the ground. “Look at that. You can still see the ejector blanket from the descent engine throwing dust.”

“Yes,” said Gordonov. “The pilot was extremely lucky during the landing. You can see he had to put down between these boulders. He was our best pilot at the time.”

“Why didn't he just fire his ascent engine and go home? Did something go wrong?”

“Not exactly. The engine was operational. He chose to stay.”

“Why?”

“He knew we would come for him someday.”

“That doesn't make any sense,” said Davis.

“Of course it does,” said Gordonov.

Rick Matthews peered through the thick round glass. He adjusted his helmet light to maximum and shined it into the spacecraft.

He saw a figure lying on its side dressed in a pressure suit with the head down. Matthews could not see a face. "There's something in there. It could be a dummy in a suit. I can't tell."

"It is a *man*," said Gordonov.

"How do you open the hatch? I'd like to see for myself."

"As you wish. Do you see the four small handles at the corners?"

"Yes."

"Turn each one to the left until you feel a solid click. Grasp the larger handle and pull it toward you."

Matthews did as he was told and opened the hatch. He reached inside and grasped the arm of the suited figure, rolling it over on its back. It was like moving a stone statue. As the front of the helmet became visible, he saw the face of a man with his eyes closed as if he were asleep. The man's features were still recognizable, although the skin on the skull had dried and given him a mummified appearance.

"Oh, my God..." Matthews let the body roll back onto its face and backed out of the hatch. *This isn't possible*, he thought. *That man was killed in a jet crash*. He started down the ladder, nearly losing his grip.

"Carefully now," said Gordonov.

Matthews joined the other astronauts and stood side-by-side with them. All four stared at the spider-legged craft in awe.

"It's Yuri Gagarin, isn't it?" Matthews finally asked.

"Yes. He was supposed to test the LOK system in Earth orbit," said Gordonov. "Everything was going flawlessly until Ground Control discovered the heat shield for the reentry capsule had been seriously damaged during liftoff. He could not return to Earth."

"And he asked if he could try for the moon..." Davis whispered.

"That is correct. The LK does not need a heat shield to land on the moon. Ground Control said yes, so he fired the rockets on the LOK and reached lunar orbit four days later. He disengaged the LK from the LOK and made his descent. He could have fired the ascent engine, but it would have served no purpose. He kept up a running commentary for another eighteen hours until his oxygen was exhausted."

"How long has he been here?" said Matthews.

"Since June twenty-ninth, nineteen sixty-eight."

"No..."

"Yes," said Gordonov. "More than a year before Neil Armstrong."

About the Editors

Geoff Nelder is from Chester, England. Mr. Nelder is a Post-Graduate Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society and the author of a reference book on the weather. His previous works include the novels *Escaping Reality* and *Exit, Pursued by a Bee*. He is the senior proof editor and co-founder of Adventure Books of Seattle.

Although he is modest about it, Mr. Nelder is also a former computing teacher and the holder of several degrees.

Robert Blevins is from Seattle, U.S.A. His previous works include the sci-fi novel *The 13th Day of Christmas* and the controversial non-fiction book, *Into the Blast – The True Story of D.B. Cooper*, which alleged that Kenneth Peter Christiansen, a former U.S. Army paratrooper and airline employee, was the famous skyjacker. The book was the subject of a recent episode on the History Channel program *Brad Meltzer's Decoded*.