

Polar 44

Ring 5

A Novel

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Dedicated to the men and women who served our country in the Arctic during the Cold War.

ONE

Second Lieutenant Kenneth Milton James, Jr., AO 2234462, mashed his B-4 bag into the overhead rack and dropped into his seat in what could be termed an attitude of soldierly relaxation. The Pennsylvania used older cars on the half-fare runs from New York City to Camp Kilmer, but age had not relaxed the austere angle of the red plush seats. This wasn't bothering Ken James—in fact, the Pennsylvania station for all its filth and noise was something familiar to hold on to. It would be a long time before he set eyes on that impersonal masonry, and his mind strived to absorb the minute details—everything from the flattened chewing gum irrevocably squashed on the platform to the cast iron designs on the side railings of the stairway. Before he had hobbled down the steps to the train level with his bag, he had studied the red and gold sign that announced the departure time of the Lehigh Valley's passenger train, The Black Diamond 1055.

On that very train four and one half years before, he had launched his college career as a nervous freshman. The university had taught him a great deal, but when he had first looked out upon the Jersey meadows he had had no idea of what collegiate life would require. From this same railroad station he was now beginning another time of trial that was not destined to be commonplace.

The train staggered forward with a series of short jolts. Coal dust dropped from some of the old-fashioned lights in the middle of the car, but nobody complained or even noticed. The passengers were all servicemen whose thoughts clung to everything that was remotely familiar and whose eyes swallowed up as much of this parting as they could. Even the darkness of the tunnel under the Hudson River seemed friendly compared to the void of the unknown which was the only marked characteristic of the future. The coach burst into the sunlight and rolled through the greatest melange of industrial smells in the world. Each of a thousand chimneys added a different waste product to the air of a clear morning in February. On this particular morning the scent of the Seecaucus Pig Farms and the essence of burning rubber predominated. The New Jersey Turnpike with its gentle slopes and lengthy crossovers smiled upon its congested predecessor, the Pulaski Skyway.

The Newark station cut off the view, but through the circular windows across the platform on Ken's left, the sunlight drew an elliptical pattern on the cement.

This carload of G. I.'s was more quiet than most. They weren't celebrating anything; rather, they were like a group of sea shells set afloat by the tide on a calm day. As soon as the hot wind of war rippled the surface they must either sink or go on to survive. Korea was a hot war and the question now was where next?

Ken studied the terrain and wondered whether his four years of collegiate training as a major in geology would be of any conceivable use in his new assignment. This thought and several others danced around the gnawing subconscious question: Would he ever see this friendly countryside again? This trite idea lurked in the dark recesses of the busiest mind. The Air Force printed orders that allowed the recipient a minimum of information: 2nd Lt. Kenneth M. James, Jr., was assigned to the 6033rd Air Base Group. The grapevine information placed this station in Northern Greenland.

A few pairs of silver rails branched off to the right and on to South Plainfield, Allentown, Bethlehem, and eventually to Buffalo. Ken had never gone as far as Buffalo, but he knew the stops by memory. The other set of rails pointed to Philadelphia, Washington, Harrisburg, Altoona, Pittsburgh, and Youngstown. He had been farther west than Youngstown on that road, but his thoughts stopped at a hospital where in a plain room a girl shifted the position of her pillow so that she could read more easily a letter written in a long slanting hand.

She was not beautiful yet she was strikingly pretty. Ken thought of their first meeting and recalled that it had been as unique as the two participants.

A brilliant moon bucked the clouds that rushed forward with the October wind, carrying the scent of woodsmoke and apples on the ground, as Ken and his roommate, Cal, pushed open the cumbrous door to the Lakeside Club and joined the students who were waiting in line for food. The club which hugged the shore of Haven Lake served hot sandwiches and soft drinks to those who could spare the time from their studies. In the rough-beamed dining room, laughter and light talk overflowed from the groups around the wooden tables in the middle and filtered around the tables for two that overlooked the ruffled reflections of the lake.

Ken scanned the coeds with casual thoroughness. In his wallet were two tickets to the Boston Symphony Concert and, up to that moment, he had found no sweet young thing who wanted to hear serious music.

“Let’s bother Brother Kodell over there.”

“Where is he, Cal?”

“Behind that post... . Get a load of the girl he’s with...” Ken stepped sideways to get a better view, and in one short glimpse he saw a face that he liked immediately. He followed Cal closely. “Friar Kodell, may we join you?”

“Well, if it isn’t the closet case twins. Cal Fenway and Ken James, Miss Jane Worth.” The how-do-you-dos were perfunctory, but Jane’s low, warm voice resonated in Ken’s memory. The symphony tickets seemed too insignificant to win the prize of her company, but they were his only advantage. After a while he withdrew them from his pocket and placed them carefully on the table as if he were showing a royal straight flush.

“What you got there, Ken?”

“A couple of Boston Symphony tickets—anyone want to go?” He looked directly at Jane.

“Oh yes, I would... What day is it?”

“Thursday night.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Kodell changed the subject rapidly but Ken had scored successfully.

When he returned to his room, his whole being was charged with anticipatory pleasure.

Cal fumbled his way over to his desk near the window. “That was a little stratagem of the first order you just executed.”

“Thought it was pretty clever myself.”

“For once you faked out the opposition with unusual poise, but it was a lousy trick.”

“You’ve got a date for the concert, haven’t you?”

“O.K.. I read you so don’t go any further. I’ll have to pick her up for you... oh, say around 6:30.”

“Stop the black beauty in front of the field house. I’ll be out of the locker room by seven.”

“That’s going to be a heck of a run to get to the Memorial Auditorium by 8:15. I’ve got to play by ear to find it.” Cal unbuttoned his shirt and looked into the closet for a hook.

“You know, Brother Ken, I kind of admire that little number myself... but then, that would be too much effort. Anyway I’m runnin’ out of white shirts,”

Ken climbed the stairs to the dormitory and stopped momentarily at the landing to watch the cumulus clouds gather way and cruise across the moon. The dormitory was unheated as usual, and the northwest wind passed freely in one window and out the other across the center aisle but the cold sheets felt good. He lay back and listened to the muffled breathing of his fraternity brothers while his thoughts probed the future. She was a magnificent creature.

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The evening song lingered in the dark blue of late sunset after library chimes were still. At this time of evening the University paused to listen to what would someday recall memories grown more bright with age.

Football practice continued under the lights and faded red jerseys steamed with sweat until the trainer had finished the last wind sprint.

Ken looked up at the locker room clock. He had ten minutes to take off his uniform, shave and dress for the concert. The wet cloth of his practice jersey clung to corners on his shoulder pads like tentacles. One of the competes moved quickly.

“Unhook this thing.”

“Got a hot date?”

“You might say that.”

“Better save the speed for Saturday.” It was ironic that the compet should say that. The varsity hadn’t needed him on Saturday afternoon for two whole seasons and the chances were excellent that they would never need him. He played with the Rinky Dinks as the J.V.’s had dubbed themselves,, and their practice consisted of scrimmaging against the varsity defense, using the expected attacks of future opponents.

The varsity defensive platoon played with rough confidence in cleanly mashing the Rinky Dinks into the frozen turf. Ken had seen the arc lights seemingly whirling around his head many times. He didn't like the smell of ammonia, but it usually brought the world of reality back into focus. He could always hear the trainer yelling, "Get up off that ground:"

The Rinky Dinks ran a new set of plays every week which ranged from Columbia's innumerable pass patterns to Princeton's buck—lateral series, but they never were really accomplished at any of them. This educational system seldom allowed pride to reach unnatural proportions.

One minute and thirty seconds since he had burst through the locker room door, his uniform lay in a wet pile on the concrete floor. Eight minutes later, he looked into the mirror that was nailed to the blackboard and combed his hair carefully. As the minute hand reached the one in twelve, he grabbed his coat and ran out the door. The black Chrysler was parked close to the front door in one of the slots marked "Coaches." He fullbacked his way into the back seat and slammed the door as the vehicle jerked forward.

"Congratulations, you made it."

"Thanks, Cal."

"Jane's back there somewhere."

Ken could see her sitting primly in the corner of the back seat, "Here's your dinner." She held out a shapeless lump wrapped in wax paper.

"Thank you. Did you bring this for me?"

"Cal's responsible for that."

"It was the best I could do at the house," said Cal over his shoulder. Ken unfolded the paper and found a leg and breast of fried chicken.

"This is going to be quite an operation. You didn't happen to bring a napkin or two?"

"Doctor, I suggest rubber gloves." Ken looked at Jane.

"Nurse,—scalpel! —"

"I'm sorry, Doctor, my knife is in my pocket book, and you're sitting on it."

"Oh,—yes—er—do you always carry a knife?"

"Not unless I'm out with a football player. It's for cutting chicken, of course."

Ken began his meal in the sporadic light from passing cars. Where the highway straightened out, he could feel the Chrysler tremble. He couldn't see the speedometer from where he was sitting, but he didn't care to look. It took an hour to reach the sodium lamps at the beginning of the descent from the escarpment outside town.

The clock over the door to the Auditorium read 8:14 as he removed the tickets from his wallet. They reached their seats seconds before the conductor strode to the center of the stage and mounted the podium.

Previous to this moment, Ken had regarded the Egmont Overture merely as an example of stark Beethoven orchestration. Now he wanted to remember the moment in all its

particulars. He concentrated on each phrase and sensed a heroic grandeur in the passages that contrasted the deep rhythmic beats of the strings with the woodwinds' flowing melody. He wanted the music to describe the girl sitting at his side. There was an urgency in this that he could not understand. He felt like a man rushing about in his burning home, trying to save things of value.

The second half of the program featured a tone poem by Richard Strauss, and the performance was brilliant. As a gigantic wave of applause began, Ken looked at Jane and was surprised to see a tear run down beside her nose.

"Anything wrong?"

"No, I guess it was the music."

Now they both were struggling in wars of survival. Hers was a private war against the tubercle bacillus. His was a public war in the defense of a nation. In both wars the risk was high.

two

"New Brunswick!" Duffle bags and their owners plugged the aisle as the whole mass inched toward the door. Ken lugged his bag over the platform and down the stairs that led to the underpass beneath the tracks. The tide of khaki-colored humanity carried him through the station and to the bus stop. The buses to Camp Kilmer were lined up in a single file that disappeared around a corner to his left. After a minute's pause he was swept into the nearest bus and jammed between two corporals. This group of men was more raucous than those who had stared out the train windows.

The Air Police at the main gate gave up the identification routine as an impossible task and waved the full buses through without delay.

Ken tried to remember the turns and avenue letters but he felt like a man lost in a cave. He did grasp the fact that Avenue C branched off the main drag but that was all. After climbing up a slight incline, the bus stopped and deposited its load in a new environment.

His orders said to report to the Commanding Officer of the 2225th Personnel Processing Group. As in all things remotely military, he knew that the next step was to follow the crowd. The busload of G.I.'s proceeded slowly around the corner of the barracks and up the street to form a line outside another cream-colored barracks which displayed the 2225th in yellow letters on a blue background. It didn't matter where he went, there was inevitably a mass of men who had to pass through an administrative orifice one by one. He stepped up to the end of the officers' line and decided to wait his turn. The sergeant at the sign-in desk handed him a sheaf of literature and told him to proceed to Building 303 for billeting. He walked outside and followed his instructions mechanically, —two blocks over and one to the right. Building 303 looked like all the other cream-colored barracks that squatted on the red clay. The bulletin board outside the entrance was covered with alert notices. He wondered how long he would stay before they found space for him on a plane bound for Pitugfik. The billeting clerk handed him two more pages of practical information which included the following statements in the lower left-hand corner, Sir. Your BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters) is number 342 Your bed is A-14.

Everything was by the numbers and was bound to stay that way. Barracks 342 was located about one hundred yards farther down the street, but Ken had doubts as to whether it was worth the effort. He opened the screen door to Barracks 342 and stepped inside. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he could see that almost every bed in the two rows of double-deckers was occupied by a lieutenant. Some were sleeping off that last fling, others were reading anything that they could get their hands on, and still others lay on their backs and stared at the raw beams in the ceiling.

Ken dragged his bag up the center aisle until he was opposite A-14. It was an upper, but this was just what he had expected. Nobody seemed inclined to talk and the sound of his bag hitting the floor was quite alone. He hung his trench coat and blouse on two twisted wire hangers and raised himself into the upper. Reading through the various mimeographed sheets that had been handed out so freely was heavy going. He read about the pleasant day rooms for the use of transient officers, about the rules of the officer's mess, about the rules governing activities in New Brunswick, in addition to reading a great deal of information that was only vaguely related to his situation. He noted that chit books had to be bought for all items purchased at the Officers' Club and figured that they were not losing money. Even in the few minutes he had been in the barracks, he was already restless.

After dinner at the Officer's Mess, Ken wandered over to the Officers' Club. He checked his cap with the Master Sergeant at the door and strolled into the main ballroom. Couples seated on the couches chatted aimlessly as though waiting for some event. On the second floor balcony that encircled the ballroom there were five phone booths that were in constant use. A line of officers waited impatiently to tell their wives that they had been alerted and were scheduled to leave at 0800 the next morning. The bar was surrounded by another group who were trying to forget that they were leaving the security of their homeland. Out in the halls, second lieutenants wandered around like loose electrons, never seeming to find a place that would quiet their incessant thoughts.

At 1900 sharp, a swarthy major mounted the platform at one end of the ballroom and invited those present to buy cards for a bingo game. The game got under way, but it seemed that very few people were really enjoying themselves. The young couples who were trying to cram their hours before separation with happiness were learning that it can neither be bought, nor sold, nor hurried. The atmosphere was charged with hurt, despite the outward hilarity, and no one could change it by gulping down martinis or by telling off-color jokes.

Ken picked up his garrison cap and walked wearily back to Barracks 342, bed A-14. As he raised himself up to his bunk, he discovered why the uppers were even more undesirable than he had supposed; 200-watt bulbs were installed at regular intervals directly above the bunks. The only switch was located near the door, and every man who staggered in at various hours turned on all the lights. He solved his immediate problem by unscrewing the bulb over A-14 and ignoring the lights on either side. Morning in the barracks proved to be any time from 4 a.m. until noon.

Each individual owned an alarm clock which by itself could wake up a battalion. At 4:00 a.m. the alarm bells began to chatter at five-minute intervals.

It was at Camp Kilmer that Ken began to get a preview of the small and apparently inconsequential items that can either make life comfortable or miserable. Paragraph 3 of one of the pieces of paper handed to incoming transients declared. "We are desirous of making your stay as comfortable and pleasant as possible." This was undoubtedly true but someone had their signals crossed. At 6:00 a.m., he walked to the shower room with the idea that a warm shower was one pleasure they would not deny. He was learning, however, that all such assumptions are usually invalid. Fresh clean air from a February morning blew through a broken window pane on one side of the shower room. The hot knob when turned on full produced ice water. There was no doubt that this was a good indoctrination for Greenland. A few minutes later he discovered that the shortage of hot water was matched only by the shortage of toilet paper.

He returned to the double-decker and saw that the man in lower A-14 had given up the quest for sleep.

"Don't bother takin' a shower. There's nothing but ice cubes."

"Yea, I know."

"Say, I'm Ken James."

"Brad Nielson." They shook hands warmly.

"If you've got some spare sheets of toilet paper, now's the time to break 'em out."

"I take it they're out of that too."

"Say, have you been around this place long enough to know where all these places are?" Ken pointed to the processing sheet.

"I got here just yesterday myself—I'm as cold as you are."

"You couldn't be; you haven't had your shower yet."

"We can feel this processing thing out together then; two heads are better than one."

Ken waited until his new-found friend returned from the latrine and together they walked to the Officers' Mess. Everybody who serves in the Armed Forces must one day become accustomed to the ground meat sauce spread on top of toast and the Officers' Mess was no exception. Ken was sure that this particular meal, better known as S.O.S., was an invention that was unique to military life. He could not deny that it was filling.

By evening he had completed his financial clearance, his 1-D card, his security clearance, his overseas shots, his personal history record, and had listened to the prescribed lectures.

Lt. Nielson took a train to New York to see a relative and left Ken to walk alone up and down the streets of New Brunswick. His steps led him aimlessly from one main street to the next until he arrived at a corner that seemed familiar, looked up and saw that the building was a triangular-shaped hotel. Now he remembered he had stayed there when his team played Rutgers. He pushed into the cocktail lounge and sat down on a stool at the end of the bar. He had sat in that same spot before, but this time he did not have Tom Tesord at his elbow. He remembered nursing along a bottle of beer and listening to Tom talk quietly. Tom had played quite a game for the university. The boys at Rutgers and Princeton would never forget him, but this was all past now.

Ken scratched his head as he recalled how improbable the whole sequence of events appeared to be. He stared into the mirror and watched four Rutgers seniors who were seated at the table behind him as they exchanged witticisms over a half-empty pitcher of beer. The sophisticates of elbow bending had confidence and poise in familiar surroundings. He wondered what would happen if these men were transplanted swiftly into a new and unfamiliar environment.

Outside in the fresh air he found the street crowded. Thousands of servicemen trying to forget the past or the future were jamming all places that would serve them anything that contained alcohol. New Brunswick was not the place he wanted at this moment. He got into a filled bus and returned to Barracks 342. He wanted to think and then perhaps to dream, but, as he lay in his upper berth staring at the unscrewed 200-watt bulb, he listened to the new arrivals across the aisle.

“It’ll be six lousy months before I see my wife again.”

“Yea, I’ve got the same pitch, but I don’t think it’ll be as bad for me; I’m going to England and you’re heading to Germany.”

“Look at the damned climate you’ve got in England—all that fog.”

“You’re right, but when my wife gets there I don’t care what it’s doing outside.” The speaker chuckled quietly. “She’s sure going to get tired of looking at that ceiling.”

“It’s going to be tough to wave good-bye to the old U. S. of A.”

“Cheer up troops; things could be worse.”

“Not much.”

“Forget it.” Ken turned over on his stomach.

“Say, Bud, I suppose you think it’s easy to leave your wife and kids.”

“No, I guess it isn’t.” The conversation stopped, but the air was damp and heavy. It was a poor night for sleep. He rolled over and stared up at the wooden beams trying to run the fingers of his inner mind over the keys of his memory.

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The main portion of the rambling hotel bordered the shores of Tomonk Lake, spreading its wings over the flatter ground. From the windows that faced the west, one could see that the darker leaves of August made the distant Catskills appear blue-black against the sky.

Ken opened the door labeled Athletic Director and moved inside. “We’ve got problems, Ted.” Ted placed his feet on top of the desk and leaned back in the swivel chair.

“What’s the beef? I’m in my thinkin’ position.”

“We’ve got to find some new caves. The guests are getting tired of going through the same caves Sunday after Sunday.”

“O.K., my boy, we’ll attack that problem immediately. According to my schedule here... let’s see...” Ted ran his pencil along the calendar in front of him. “You took the kiddies

on their hay-ride this morning and there's no lawn bowling this week so that leaves the afternoon free... Take the keys to the closet and get the candles and rope."

"You want a couple of pairs of cover-ails, don't you?"

"O.K. I'm about to call the old man to tell 'em what we're up to." Ken opened the closet and pulled out the supplies.

"Take lots of candles and matches. This'll probably take all afternoon. Ken stuffed his breast pocket with candles. "Which one are you going to hit first?"

"The Narrows."

"That's the one that some guest got stuck in a few years ago, isn't it?"

"Roger—but he panicked."

"Cut the bull—I know that you had to drill 'em out with a jack hammer."

"He was a pretty big guy though."

"Let's go."

The caves were located in a talus pile at the end of an escarpment. Blocks of rock forty to fifty feet on a side left winding passages and little rooms between them that were large enough for a man to crawl through. On Sundays Ken led caving trips for the guests who were slender enough and strong enough to negotiate the tortuous labyrinths in stone.

It took half an hour to reach the irregular opening to the Narrows.

"Leave the rope here, Ken."

"I've never been in this one, so I'll take your word for it."

"The problem here is size and limberness. There's one spot in here that usually causes trouble. You'll see what I mean when we get there."

Ted lit a candle and then climbed agilely into the darkness. The first fifty feet consisted of two good-sized rooms which were simple to negotiate. Ted reached the far end and stopped.

"You know, every time I get to this spot, I wonder where in hell to go from here."

"You lost already?"

"Oh no. I know where we're supposed to go, but I'll be damned if I know how I get through—it's that crack over there."

"You can't get through there—"

"I've done it before."

"That's not more than eight inches wide at the most."

"Just you watch, Ted." He began to lower himself into the opening.

"I'm darned if I see how you do it, Ted." In a matter of a minute, Ken could see only the top of Ted's head in the crevice. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yea, I'm through. You goin' to try?"

“I can do it if you can.”

Ken lowered his legs into the opening and began to slide. His whole body stopped as it wedged between two unyielding walls of stone. “Ted—I’ve been had!”

“What’s the matter?” His voice drifted up from what seemed to be twenty feet beyond.

“I’m stuck, damn it!”

“Where’s the bind?”

“On my chest.”

“Can you get a grip on the edge of the crack?”

“My arms can’t bend!”

“Wait a minute. I’ll put my back under your feet. Maybe you can push up on that. Doesn’t work!”

“I guess I’ll have to go through and come at it from the other side. Take it easy! I think I can do the rest of this in about twenty minutes,”

“Take it easy: It feels like the whole mountain is pushing on me.” Ted didn’t answer. The wax from the candle covered the fingers on his left hand but it didn’t make much difference. The weight of a hundred tons seemed to be squeezing his chest ever so slowly. His breathing was hard and the sweat dribbled down his nose as every muscle writhed and squirmed. The more he moved, the tighter the vice became.

He rested now. The candle was getting too close to his hand. The stub dropped and bounced down the side and rolled out of sight. His eyes bulged, trying to penetrate the complete darkness, but he could detect neither light nor sound. A complete aloneness like that of a miner who is trapped beneath mantle that he had tried to exploit clung to the cool quiet. The panic that protects wild animals when all hope of survival is gone closed in slowly. In that moment Ken prayed in a barely audible whisper. He hung motionless and limp in time. —Then he felt the force on his chest move higher. His body edged downward and plummeted into the small space below. He lay on the rock and tried to acknowledge his indebtedness to the Creator, but no words came, “Hey—are you O.K.?” Ken could see the flickering candle above his head.

“Yea, I’m O.K., Ted.”

“How’d you get through?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’d better have some light down there.” Ken reached into his breast pocket and withdrew the candles which were bent and slightly flattened on one side.

“Body heat must’ve made ’em soft...”

“What’s that, Ken?”

“Oh, nothing,”

The memory was as clear now as it had been the day after, and he wondered if Providence would continue to light his way with good fortune.

three

At 0500 the alarm clocks began their intermittent chatter. In the lower berth of the double-decker next to A-14, a first lieutenant whose medical knowledge was required by the Air Force rolled out with the first bell. Though dressed in Air Force blues Doc Lee was a general practitioner whose speech and mind would always remain civilian. He peeled the covers off the lieutenant in the top bunk and with a happy Louisianian laugh, “Get up and smile at the morning.”

“Drop dead.”

“Aw, come on.”

“And while you’re at it, tell the flies on the ceiling to tiptoe,—say, Doc, have you got anything for a king-sized head?”

“I’ve got some pills for morning sickness.”

“I’ll take anything—don’t look so surprised—it’s morning, isn’t it?”

“Well, I guess you got a point there, Jim.” Doc rummaged around in his little black bag and pulled out a bottle of A.P.C. tablets.

“Oh come now, Doc, you can’t fool an old Air Force man with that routine.”

“Well, what do you want—a shot in the ass with Novocain?”

“In the left cheek, please.”

“Boy, you must have a beauty.” Doc picked out a very large syringe with a needle almost two inches long and began to wipe it with cotton as if in preparation.

“Put that sword down!” Jim vaulted to the wooden floor and staggered toward the shower room.

Doc leaned over to Ken and said, “That usually cures ’em.”

“Do you ever use that needle?”

“Oh no, it’s for horses mostly.”

“You look like you’re all packed, Doc. Are you headin’ out?”

“My wife and I are going to stay in New York tonight. I haven’t been alerted yet so I’m takin’ advantage of it.”

“Have fun.”

“Don’t worry—I’m Join’ up the town.”

As in most barracks, the latrine facilities seemed to accommodate one quarter of the morning rush. In the battle for room to wield a toothbrush, the most noisome offenders disposed of unsightly blackheads and combed their hair with meticulous care while the mob behind them scratched and fumed.

After breakfast Ken strolled past the bulletin board and looked at the names and assignments mechanically. This time his eyes stopped cold on the following:

AE -- E656A (2)

34th Inc

Reg 6033rd Air Base Gp. (NEAC) P/L RELD ASGD

A Pr NC - US - 2D 8216 AFO 2

APO 13 MAILING ADDRESS PROV. SQ. 1717 APO 13

6 James, Kenneth M. AO 2234462 2Lt. W.

AFR/A 6421 30

NEAC. FEB P03 L012 Y/NF 4 oct,

In more than telegraphic brevity, the Air Force had condensed practically his whole life into a few symbols. Like the hand of adversity, orders to ship out were a shock even though he had expected them.

At 0800 the next morning a group of officers and enlisted men fidgeted impatiently around the cleared ground in front of Barracks 301. Ken placed his bag next to the others and listened to the artful comments.

Two buses pulled up at 0830 and opened up all the doors on the sides to swallow up the mountainous pile of baggage. When all the personal equipment had been mashed into place, the passengers filed into their seats like so many well-trained animals. The bus pulled forward and, after a series of stops and turns, it left the Camp Kilmer gate behind in a swirl of blue exhaust.

The passengers were once more cramming their memories with detailed pictures of Americana. The white Frozen Custard stands, the Ford and Mercury assembly plant, Standard Oil's Linden refinery, its catalytic crackers and towers burning waste gas were all parts of a New Jersey impression that would have to last many months. The bus bullied its way through Elizabeth, past the General Motors Plant, past the Newark Airport, and on to the Pulaski Skyway. The Skyway, stained and marred as its buttresses were, withstood the constant vibrating and grinding of hundreds of thousands of vehicles which ranged in size from motorcycles to seven and a half ton tractors with full trailers. The Lincoln tunnel swallowed the steady drizzle of traffic and disgorged it on Manhattan. The wind gathered the odor from the nearby slaughterhouse and left it clinging to the walls inside the tunnel. Ken could not tell whether law or custom required the drivers to follow Route 1 from New York City to Westover, but he watched with interest as the driver struggled to navigate the maze of narrow streets. At one place the driver made a wrong turn and was carried farther and farther away from his objective by a baffling series of one-way streets.

"What this kid needs is a gyro."

"Hell, just a good road map will do," said the driver.

"Navigator to pilot, navigator to pilot, where are you going?"

"Pilot to navigator, I'm open for suggestions."

"Navigator to pilot, let's stop for coffee."

"Pilot to navigator, it sounds like you guys aren't so anxious to get to Westover."

“How much would you want to turn this tub around and head for Palm Beach?” The rest of the passengers enjoyed the major’s suggestion.

“And have you guys all show up A.W.O.L.? I wouldn’t think of it.”

“At least he’s honest, even if he can’t find his way out of the city.”

After several intricate maneuvers, including backing out of a dead-end street, the bus returned to Route 1 and ploughed straight through New Rochelle, Mamaroneck, Larchmont, Rye, and on into Greenwich, Connecticut. Ken knew this ground intimately from the stone spire of the Old North Church which years ago had guided mariners on Long Island Sound to the stone steps that General Putnam had ridden down on horseback in his flight from the British. Cos Cob, Stamford, Darien, Norwalk, Westport, New Milford, and New Haven. All had their own monuments to that time when the nation fought its earliest battles for survival. Ken had been born in these undulating hills. The rounded rock walls, the ice-covered ponds, Long Island Sound with its gray November wrath and its June calm were scenes he could not forget.

The passengers began to rebutton their battle jackets and pull up their ties as the bus neared Westover’s main gate. On the taxiway, a C-124 Globemaster nosed up into the wind. The overseas contingent pressed to the windows of the bus with increasing interest.

The bus circled by Base Operations and finally stopped in front of the check-in point for officers. The side compartments were opened, and the ranking mob gathered around like suckling pigs. Inside the check-in point, Ken signed the register, received his key and towel, and recorded the weight of his baggage plus himself. Next he was herded into another room where the baggage was dropped and each man began stripping down to his rolled-up shirt sleeves. One medic worked swiftly charging hypodermic needles while another quickly grasped arms and jabbed deeply. The flu serum stung at first; then Ken felt a slow sickening feeling and his breath became short.

“Why did they wait until now?”

“It’s got quite a kick, hasn’t it?”

“It’ll wear off in an hour,” added one of the medics.

“Is it enough to keep me from goin’ to Algeria?” asked one airman with a smile.

“Nothing short of death’ll get you out now,” said one of the officers. Ken picked up his bag and pushed through the door into the cold evening wind. The bulletin board with the record of passengers and destinations showed a flight to Pitugfik at 0700—wake up time 0500. He didn’t care about sleep now. His stomach demanded refueling and no amount of red tape was going to stop him.

The Westover Officers’ Club had limited cafeteria space, but by the time Ken arrived the bulk of the crowd had adjourned through the swinging doors into the television room. The drift carried others to the rounded wooden-topped bar where dimly-lit customers passed the remaining hours before takeoff time. After dinner Ken strolled past the television room and bar and into the ballroom where an Hawaiian dancer provided entertainment to the syncopated beat of drums. After she had received her round of applause, another girl in a filmy white gown walked deliberately up to the microphone and soothingly told a story sprinkled with salacious wit. Ken left the officers’ club and

bowed into the northwest wind that cut through his trench coat. The cot in the transient officers' barracks looked good to him.

An Army second lieutenant shared the same room but, when Ken returned, his roommate was out on the town. The shoulder patch on the battle jacket hanging in the closet indicated that this man had been in Korea. Over on the bedside table, a brown pocket-sized pamphlet with the United States crest showed that Germany was the next stop. Ken wondered what peculiar set of circumstances sent this man around the world at such a furious pace.

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"Lt. James, you have two hours to take-off time, sir. Sign here please, sir. It's now 0500."

"Thank you." Ken wasn't sure what he had signed for in the darkness of the corridor, but he assumed that it was an acknowledgment of his being awake. At 0630 he boarded the blue Air Force bus and was brought to the terminal. The Military Air Transport Service took charge of the Pitugfik-bound personnel efficiently. A WAF convinced each passenger that an in-flight lunch was a seventy-five cent necessity while the baggage clerk tagged each bag before tossing it into a pickup truck. A belligerent public address system commanded the passengers for flight 41 to file through Gate 4. Another blue bus took charge of the human cargo and belched it onto the ramp and into the cavernous underslung maw of the C-124. Two by two they mounted the separate ramps that were normally used for vehicular cargo. The inanimate freight had already been strapped down, leaving a small aisle which led to the canvas strap wall seats around the cargo elevator. Ken found a seat opposite a large steel tank that was marked for the airmen's barracks at Goose Bay, Labrador. Mail bags, crates of fresh eggs and cases of urgently needed supplies made up the rest of the load.

The pilot kicked over the number one engine, and the whole aircraft shivered, causing the cargo lift to sway back and forth on the aluminum tracks which held the heavy mechanism in place near the ceiling. There was room for another deck, but it had not been installed for this trip, leaving nearly ten feet of headroom.

By the time number four was warm, the passengers had given up any idea of conversation. The bulbous 124 moved gently forward and then taxied evenly toward the end of the runway. Ken looked over his shoulder and watched the hangars and control tower glide by the circular port. The cabin turned and the pilot locked his brakes and began his final tuneup. The roar of four reciprocating engines at almost full throttle filled the cabin like a continuous explosion.

Ken could not suppress the idea that this might be the last time he would see Westover and he wondered if the sober faces on the other side of the steel tank entertained such morbid thoughts. Airmen third class, majors, and second lieutenants were all forced into the same risk. In its own way, the Military Air Transport Service levelled ranks and station by merely taking passengers in the order of their priority and time of arrival at the check-in point. Ken checked his safety belt but wondered what good it would do if the steel tank broke the seemingly ineffectual fiber straps that bound it in place.

A major in the next seat listened attentively to the dissonant display of mechanical power and seemed satisfied that all was in order.

“Sounds OK.,” he said out of the corner of his mouth. The senior pilot’s wings on his chest left little doubt as to his qualification, “I haven’t been able to find any parachutes tucked away anywhere,” said Ken. The engines were throttled down as the pilot waited for clearance from the control tower.

“And you probably won’t,” said the major. “In the Arctic you stay with your plane. If you parachuted you’d be alone and away from all equipment.” He waved his hand in the direction of a trunk-sized yellow box that was strapped down to the rear of the cargo elevator. “You find the emergency gear in that box.” He paused to look over the cabin carefully. “I remember one time when the Germans jumped from a plane without parachutes. I think they got down to a hundred and fifty feet, slowed the ship down to a hundred and twenty or so and aimed for a snow bank. They got away with it.”

The pilot raised the RPM and released the brakes. The 124 surged forward like a running sea gull. The tires, which were partially flattened under the weight, gradually expanded and left the surface of the runway. At about five hundred feet the rough air dropped the aircraft and raised it before the passengers could react. It seemed to Ken that this boxcar was rising and falling with sine curve regularity to the sound of pounding percussion. The air continued to be rough even after the pilot had throttled down at the cruising altitude.

As soon as the passengers uncoupled their safety belts, they grabbed the white cardboard boxes that contained the in-flight lunches and unwrapped the ham and cheese sandwiches with the anxiety of starved survivors.

“It looks like they’re trying to pile more on top of breakfast to hold it down,” said the major. “Incidentally, my name’s Totter.”

“How do you do, sir. Ken James.”

“Those boys across the aisle have got the right idea, Lieutenant, so let’s dig in.” Ken leaned forward and grabbed two of the white boxes that were piled up against the water tank. He didn’t feel as if he could eat or even think of food, but he stuffed away the ham and cheese sandwich in the hope that it might forestall a reversal of his digestive tract.

“You’d better take a good look out that port, boy. It’ll be a long time.” New England’s wavy countryside was marked by the brilliant white of the new snow on the rectangular fields. Weathered rock walls delineated each boundary and the darker roads twisted up to the individual farm houses.

He managed to keep his lunch under control, but he was too wide awake to sleep. He settled back in his canvas—strapped seat and watched the airmen trying to find comfortable sleeping positions on top of the mail bags and flat packing cases.

As the morning melted into afternoon, thin wisps of strato cumulus gave way to a broken layer of thin, yet clinging cloud. Ever so often between the banks of mist the coast line with its myriads of islands appeared. The ceiling had closed in by the time the 124 began its pattern at Goose Bay, Labrador. The ground control approach unit directed the ship in a number of descending giant steps and sharp banks. On the final approach, the pilot pointed the nose down at what seemed to Ken a steep angle, The touch was gentle and the white snow glistened in the beam of the landing lights. As the 124 taxied to the refueling point, the passengers looked silently upon the cold world where vertical walls of snow twenty feet high bounded the taxiway, When the big props were still, a crewman

announced, "All passengers have exactly two hours for dinner. The time is now 1533." Ken followed Major Totter down the vertical aluminum ladder under the nose and grimaced as the snow blew into his face. He hadn't worn boots, and the snow sifted into his shoes, but he made it to the blue bus without getting his socks wet.

"Damned blizzard must have moved in on us," shouted one of the crew members above the wind.

"Where're we heading now, Major?"

"I guess we'll hit the officers' club for some chow."

"I could use some."

"Say, look at that snow drift next to that hangar. It must be at least fifteen feet deep."

"They've still got trees anyway." The bus turned off the ramp, churned over some heavy snow and pulled up to a snow-covered awning.

"De Gink Hotel:" A few passengers ducked their heads under the door and out into the storm. The bus pulled away and, after a number of right turns, stopped in front of a lighted doorway.

"Officers' Club." Major Totter and Ken got off and stood still for a second to take stock of the situation.

"This is a hell of a place to tell where you are when they set you down at night in a blizzard," said Major Totter. On both sides of the road the ploughs had piled the snow so as to make roads look like canyons seven to eight feet deep. The door to the Officers' Club looked as though it had been installed in the snow bank. Inside the surroundings were warm and comparatively friendly. On the right through the swinging doors a group of fighter pilots kept the gently curved bar in constant agitation while at the tables majors and captains entertained their female guests quietly with wit and strong drinks. In the rooms beyond the bar, the parlor athletes kept in shape by flailing ping pong balls and gently fingering cues with a practiced dexterity. Ken began to explore the reading room across the main hall, but Major Totter waved him toward the dining room, "Come on, boy, we haven't got too long to chow down," They fell in at the line in the rear of the large dining room. "No matter where you are, whether you're in Labrador or San Antonio, you wait in line at a cafeteria," said Major Totter. "I think it's the trays more than the line that gripes me." They filled their plates with canned corn, boiled hominy and pork chops and went over to one of the small tables along the wall, "This is a strange diet for Labrador," said Ken, "You wouldn't want fillet of seal, would you?"

"Well, now that you put it that way, I guess not."

"What are they sending a shining second lieutenant up to the polar regions for?"

"I guess they need someone to handle their petroleum for them."

"So you're the future POL officer."

"I'm not so sure they'll use me in that capacity," said Ken with hesitation.

"I get it. The Air Force is determined to make you a well-rounded officer. Did you come from O.C.S.?"

“I’m afraid I’m one of those ROTC officers,?!”

“What course did you follow—engineering?”

“No, geology.”

“I’m beginning to see the connection with the oil business.”

“That’s the connection that the classification team at Lackland figured out. They had a T.W.X. saying that they had a couple of slots open at the Air Force Petroleum School in Tillamook, Oregon.”

“The land of cheese and ocean breeze,” commented the major, “I’m from that neck of the woods. As a matter of fact, I went to school out there.”

Ken would never forget one evening on the road to Portland. He had just attended a performance of the “Mikado” at the College of the Pacific, and the return to Tillamook promised to be hazardous in the fog. Pockets of extremely dense fog hung in the low dips, making it next to impossible to spot the places where cave-ins had dumped portions of the outside lane into the torrent that flowed in the mountain gorge. While following the twisting road through the mountains, he had suddenly burst out of the cloud and, in the light of a full moon, he could see the jagged topography of the great Tillamook burn. Mile upon mile of desolation with occasional long, needle-like spires of burnt-out tree trunks gave the countryside a ghastly strangeness that Ken could not forget.

“Odd coffee pot they’ve got here,” said the major as he poured himself another cup. A candle burning in the base of the glass pot holder provided enough heat to keep the coffee warm for a long time. The circular cartons of milk on each table looked very inviting, but after a few swallows, Ken realized that it must take a long time to get accustomed to the offerings of a mechanical cow.

The P. A. system announced that Lt. James was wanted on the phone. He heard the apologetic voice from Traffic remind him that take-off time was in forty-five minutes. Ten minutes later the blue bus nosed around a large pile of snow and stopped in front of the traffic terminal.

This was the final checking point for passengers who were going farther north. Looking at the packed and drifted snow that stood eight feet high around every doorway, it was inconceivable to Ken that he was supposed to survive for a year twelve hundred miles farther north.

The take-off was smooth and, after an hour of flight, the 124 broke out of the snow clouds. A brilliant moonlight clearly showed the mile upon mile of ice floes with small, dark threads of water marking the boundary of each giant crack. By taking his glove off and scraping through the frost with his warm hand, he caught a glimpse of the green, wavy curtains of the Northern Lights that sporadically appeared like specters from outer space.

“Let’s get some shut-eye,” suggested Major Totter. “They took out that confounded waste tank so we’ve got some room on the floor now.” He took one of the OD blankets that made the canvas-strapped seats softer and spread it out on the cabin floor. The rest of the human cargo had managed to find some secure horizontal positions on and around the freight. Ken tried to sleep, but a sub-zero draft came through the crack in the floor where

the cargo elevator was installed. No matter which orientation he tried, he could only sleep for what seemed to be minutes at a time.

The 124 banked and nosed up the coast of Greenland. Ken unhooked the seat straps and peered out one of the starboard ports for his first look at Denmark's polar possession. In the bright moonlight the whole scene was spectacularly magnificent and yet awesomely cold. Sharp twisting mountain ridges were bluish-white on the lighted side giving way at the peaks to the blue-black of deep shadow. In the depths of these shadows, the ebony water of the fjords outlined newborn icebergs. The bergs reminded Ken of Athena springing full-grown from the head of Zeus. He smiled as he toyed with the idea of this being the world's first recorded example of a splitting headache.

Sleep was hard to find. This was the commencement filled with apprehension; everything about this environment was against man's chances of survival.

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In early June the leaves on the maples had matured and yet they had retained the light green of newness. Like nature's leaves the senior had matured educationally but had retained the greenness which insured the advancement of civilization.

Ken stood in front of Smith Hall and looked for a place to don the robe and mortarboard symbolic of the educated man. The large sandstone columns provided excellent cover, but the white stains on the porch showed that squadrons of pigeons found sanctuary in the lofty capitals. He looked up at the small ledges and decided that he would take the calculated risk. Even though the grounds committee had carefully placed rows of upturned spikes on every level surface, even the untrained ear could still hear the bubbling coo of several hearty birds. In a few minutes Ken emerged from behind one of the columns and mingled with the scholarly throng with white tassels. As in all such affairs, parents, relations, and anybody remotely interested in the achievement of the graduate hovered, fussed and smiled over their charge. This was the culmination of four whole years of work, pain, joy, and development, and what could be more fitting than the blue skies and a host of loving people.

Slowly the unwieldy mob of black robes turned into an orderly procession that marched two by two in silent expectation toward the large sports hall. The military guard that headed the column of scholarly dignitaries carried the flags proudly. Many of those who followed would soon be called upon to flourish a blade in behalf of the freedom that they now enjoyed. For the moment this was forgotten as they walked under the salutary arches of the tall campus elms. Virtually every well-wisher was armed with a camera and was determined to preserve the moment for posterity. Inside the hall, the organist labored on an obscure march while the audience took their seats. Ken still recalled Jane, holding his coat and smiling at him as he came through the doors.

The day of graduation passed and the evening festivities began with a steak fry in the back lawn at the fraternity. The fraters were jubilant and determined to make this last night of college life an occasion to be remembered when they crouched low in a Korean trench. Jane sensed the undercurrent of urgency, but it was not until they walked up to the steps of her sorority that she looked around and asked, "Have you gotten your orders yet?"

“Not yet.”

“Where will they send you?”

“I guess I’ll go to Lackland and then overseas.”

“That means I won’t see you for quite a while. Here’s good-bye.” She drew close and her full lips kissed his ever so gently—and then firmly. Her hands kneaded the tight muscles in his shoulders and then caressed his neck. She was small and breathlessly alive in his arms. She withdrew and said, “Good-bye and good luck.” As she turned to go inside, he saw a wet stain next to her nose in the light that filtered through the door.

The 124 started to lose altitude and Ken felt his ears begin to tighten. The crew member who had been sleeping on the survival gear box slid down to the cabin floor and started to clean up the in-flight lunch boxes.

“That was a lousy place to sleep,” said Major Totter as he folded an O.D. blanket. “That crack where the elevator comes up sure puts out cold air.”

“Everybody up and into your seats. ‘We’re about to start our pattern.’” Like so many unwilling cattle, the passengers returned to their seats and automatically fastened their safety belts. As the plane banked to the left, Ken could see the glow of lights through the port. Even at a low altitude the whole community seemed almost infinitesimal compared to the miles and miles of darkness that spread out in all directions. Just before the wheels touched, he saw the blue and then the red runway lights flash by in an almost solid line. The pilot reversed the pitch on the props and the 124 slowed down to a standstill, then taxied smoothly ahead. The wheels howled as the aircraft turned onto the taxiway. After several changes in direction, the forward motion stopped and the pilot began his post-flight check. The passengers were busy digging out their hand-carried baggage and putting on their coats. Ken pulled up the collar of his trench coat as he felt the blast of cold air that came through the personnel hatch under the nose. An A.P. checked orders and cleared the passengers quickly but no one seemed eager to disembark.

Ken climbed down the ladder and moved a few steps away to give the next man room. At 2:30 a.m. in February the immediate atmosphere was anything but warm. He felt that the experience must be close to what the science fiction writers try to describe when their pioneers of the stellar universe step out of their space ship onto a strange dark planet. Two banks of floodlights subjected newcomers to the third degree brightness as they walked toward the door in Base Operations. The wind swirled snow and small chunks of ice through the air, but occasionally it subsided, and a seething cloud of fine ice crystals flowed over the surface of the hard-packed snow like a dense mist. Base Operations was housed in a long, low rectangular building sheathed in what appeared to be aluminum. The monotony of blank walls was occasionally broken with groups of windows about a foot and a half square. Ken grabbed the ice-box handle on the heavily insulated door and pushed inside.

The next door had a high sill that reminded him of the intercompartmental passages on naval vessels. Behind still another door, he found the traffic lounge and the sign-in register as well as the transient officers’ barracks register. Major Totter followed him to the counter and looked around curiously.

“I guess this is it. Say, we’re both in the same room. I’ll call a taxi while we’re waiting for them to unscramble the baggage if you’ll watch my brief case.”

“Will do, Major.” He returned after a few moments.

“We might as well sit tight; the motor pool is jammed. They’ll send something down as soon as it comes in. Do you remember what barracks we’re in?”

“Didn’t he say eighty-one?”

“So he did.” They sat on the wooden bench next to the windows and looked about them. Ken studied a dog-eared map of the United States that was tacked on one of the brown fiber-board walls. The fingerprints of thousands of men had stained every hamlet from Provincetown to Los Angeles. Just what that worn map signified, the newcomer to Pitugfik could never know. The rest of the lounge was purely functional. Rough twelve by six-inch wooden beams supported the roof and the braces were secured with heavy bolts. The walls with windows were made of aluminum panels and reflected the light strongly from the naked light bulbs.

“Major Totter? Your baggage is ready, sir.”

“Let’s go.” They picked up their bags out of the baggage room and returned to the wooden bench.

Another airman dressed in an O.D. parka, flying pants, and large white felt boots pushed the door open hesitatingly.

“Taxi?”

“Is that for Major Totter?”

“Yes, sir.” The carryall rolled about one hundred yards from Base Operations and stopped.

“T.O.Q. Eighty-one, sir.”

“You mean this is it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be damned; we could have walked it,” said the major. He turned to the driver, “Didn’t mean to bring you out on such a short trip.”

“That’s my job, sir.”

After fumbling through another set of doors, they discovered they had entered the latrine end of the building. The charge of quarters led them to a twelve by eight foot room which boasted two beds and two steel chairs. With the exception of one or two hooks and a shelf, the room could have put a monastic cell to shame for its simplicity. The two long walls were made of brown fiber-board while the outside wall was composed of aluminum paneling.

“It’s not home but it is a room,” said the major as he put down his bag on the bed. He looked at the window and smiled. “You know, if I wrote home for curtains and gave my wife the dimensions of that window, she would think I was decorating a port hole. Look at that thing. It must be all of fourteen inches on a side.”

Ken yawned. "I'll worry about that one when they give me something to decorate. Right now I'm for hitting this old sack."

Major Totter took off his jacket and tie. "Let's hit the deck early in the morning."

"I'm game," said Ken.

At 0930 the vibration from a C-124 made the loose coat hangers in the corner jingle. Major Totter raised himself on his right elbow and looked out the window.

"Get up, boy, it's time to face the morning—and what a morning..."

Ken swung his feet to the asphalt tile floor and squinted to see if the gray blurred scene out the window was merely a product of his sleepy imagination. Snow blew by the window in great veils and obscured all but the nearest objects.

The major called a taxi and after breakfast they parted company as they tried to clear themselves with the various facilities on the base. Ken found that it was virtually impossible to maintain his sense of direction in the blowing snow. The carryall taxied him from one building to another but, from the outside, all the buildings looked the same. "So this is the fabulous base in the Arctic," he thought. Thousands and thousands of dollars had been spent so that man could exist in an environment where nature's every move was inimical. The wind had not yet arisen to the point where activity was impaired, but the temperature was already ten above. To the uninitiated, this seemed severe enough but, to the experienced veteran, the rise in temperature signalled the approach of the breath-taking winds which forced everyone to take cover. The Air Force handbook stated that the extremely cold air on the surface of the ice cap flowed down to the coast and, as it approached sea level, became compressed and warmer, causing winds of abnormal velocity. Knowing the source of the problem in this case was of small comfort to the old timers.

By 3:00 p.m., the dull gray of afternoon had merged into the black of night and clouds of blowing snow continued to whistle by the windows at the Officers' Club. Ken watched a captain and a major play a game of 8-ball. They played carelessly as though it was a task that had to be performed more as a ritual than as a game. There seemed to be a peculiar listlessness about the officers in the lounge. They appeared tired—so tired that they did not care.

A major at the bar stared at the new second lieutenant as though he were trying to recall his name. Major Liston was the base adjutant and Ken had met him earlier that day, but he did not expect the man to remember him. The major talked earnestly to a first lieutenant who was facing the bar. The lieutenant turned casually and walked toward Ken. He was built stockily, but his face looked hard and angular as though it belonged to a thinner man.

"My name's Fred Gains," he said, thrusting out his hand. "I hear you're my replacement in this petroleum business. The name's Ken James, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right; you boys work pretty fast around here,"

"When it comes to replacements, we keep close tabs on the orders."

"I'm sure glad to meet someone who can clue me in," said Ken hopefully.

“Look, boy, I couldn’t have been happier to see you, even if you’d been female and beautiful.”

“That’s a heck of a compliment.”

“You’ll understand it someday. Come on over to the bar. What’ll you have? —Hold it; I forgot that they’re out of everything but rum and coke.”

“I’ll take it.”

“How’s the weather down south?”

“How far south do you mean? It was pretty cool at Goose.”

“Right now I don’t care particularly—I’ve just got to get out of here,”

Ken thought he detected an ominous sincerity as he looked at Lt. Gain’s expressionless eyes.

“Why do you say that?”

“You’ll find out in good time, but let’s get down to cases. What’s your experience in this petroleum racket?” Lt. Gains saw that he had not succeeded in changing the subject.

“Maybe you want to ask me a few questions first,” he said amiably.

“Maybe I’m just imagining things, but I get the idea that something is wrong with this place.” Lt. Gains looked down at the rich translucent brown of the rum and coke and then upward as though framing his answer carefully, “I don’t think I’ll say anything. I’ve been here too long.” He smiled. “I guess I’m prejudiced. You’ll probably do a lot better than I did so I’ll just keep my mouth shut. I sure-n-hell hope you feel better than I do when you leave. Well, what’s say we have another and get off this business before you get as shook as I am,”

They discussed Ken’s experience and some of the problems that were inherent in the extreme cold but the subject that had whetted Ken’s curiosity never returned to the conversation.

It was 1:15 a.m. when Ken reached the billeting window. He placed his orders on the plywood counter and waited while an airman checked the vacancies on the status board, “You’re PCS, sir?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve got a room in one hundred eight—number fifteen...” he hesitated, “You might not want it.”

“Why not? Is it next to the latrine or did they just forget to supply heat?”

“It’s not that, sir. The last officer only stayed in it three weeks before they sent him home in a Pitugfik dinner jacket.”

“What’s a Pitugfik dinner jacket?”

“Well, sir, he was nuts—crazy.”

“How crazy?”

“He tried to kill himself.”

“Is that the last room you’ve got?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t have much choice then—sign me up. I’m a little crazed already so that won’t make any difference.”

Room fifteen was identical to the room he and Major Totter had shared. There was one straight-backed steel chair and one cot; however, such additional luxuries as a clean mirror, a shaded wall light, a shelf, and several books made things appear more comfortable. Ken explored down the hall and noted that the latrine boasted two shower stalls, a number of sinks with mirrors and four hand-pumped marine toilets. The detailed instructions on the operation of this facility were displayed on the aluminum paneled wall opposite the stalls. Ken returned to room fifteen and wondered if any amount of interior decoration could ever change his cubicle into a home that would last a year.

At 0730, local, Lt. Gains and Ken stepped into the petroleum section’s jeep in front of the Officers’ Club.

“You’re damned lucky we’ve got any wheels at all—that’s one of the sorest points at this rock right now.”

“Didn’t they ship you enough last season?”

“Do they ever ship you enough of anything?”

Ken left the question unanswered and wondered if this was the beginning of the same theme that they had touched on so briefly before.

The base petroleum office was located in Warehouse Seventeen which differed from the other aluminum-clad buildings only in its lack of windows. The office portion of the building was split into two parts by a plywood partition that separated the accounting department from the petroleum officer and the files. Four windows in the outside wall of the inner office faced the southwest for a maximum amount of sunlight in the fall and spring.

In the outer office, two airmen and a technical sergeant worked assiduously at tables that were nailed together from packing cases and other plywood scraps. Aside from the occasional whir of the calculating machine and the shuffling of papers, there was no sound.

“Pretty quiet office you’ve got here,” observed Ken.

“I like it that way,” Lt. Gains said firmly.

“Sergeant Hill! Bring the lieutenant a chair.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sergeant Hill, I want you to meet your new boss, Lt. James. Lt. James, you’ll note that the sergeant here is a good Texan like me,” offered Lt. Gains with a wry smile.

“What I can’t figure is why they sent you guys from Texas up to this cold country.”

Lt. Gains looked out the window pensively. “The slogan on the wall down at headquarters says, ‘Only the best go north.’ I guess that’s why we’re here.”

“Well, let’s get you started on learning this business; —if you look over these files, — let’s see—letters in and letters out ought to do the trick. You’ll get some idea of what’s been going on from these.” He lifted two folders from the file. “When you get through with that, you can just keep on going through that file.”

“O.K., will do.” Ken settled down to the task of reading all the military correspondence and was startled momentarily by the ringing bell of the field phone that was on Lt. Gains’ desk. It rang four times and stopped.

“That damned thing drives us nuts! We’re on the Polar exchange-44 ring 5 is the number. You’d better write that down somewhere. You’ll get the idea pretty soon. The two guys on 44 ring 4 have nothing to do but ring this damned phone and shoot the breeze like a couple of old women. We keep waiting for that fifth ring...” Lt. Gains stepped across the office and closed the door carefully. “You asked me what was wrong with this place—I’ve decided to tell you. You see this office we’ve got here. It took me twelve months of hell to make this hole in the wall. Everything we’ve got we’ve had to pillage, steal, pronogriate, liberate, or whatever you want to call it.” His eyes narrowed. “You haven’t got the supplies to do the job—but they hop all over your ass for not doing it. O.K., so you go out and do it the only way you’ve got left. You borrow it. If you get caught, your whole career is ruined. Look at every captain, major, and lieutenant in that club who’s been here six months or more,—take a good look. They’re all broken men. They’ve quit fighting! They don’t give a damn whether they win or lose. They couldn’t care less. They say if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em. Most of ’em join, but damn it, I haven’t and I’m not going to! I’m a fighter and I’ll fight down to the wire. Sure, I’ve got lots of enemies—and I’d probably be court-martialed by now if they didn’t fear that I’d call ’em as I see ’em in the trial. I guess my boys have liberated enough crap to put me in Leavenworth for life—but you know,” Lt. Gains paused and a smile came across his face, “those planes are still flying and getting enough fuel. These buildings have still got heat and light.

“Now, why do I hate this fornicating place? It’s a thousand and one little things that make it hell. I hate the months when you never see the sun. I hate the damned midnight sun when you can’t sleep. You know those hand-pumped toilets? I hate to pump the handle and have manure and urine spray in my face and over my clothes because some son-of-a-bitch down south doesn’t think we need pump gaskets. I hate the smell of that three-foot-high pile of frozen human feces that sits right next to the steps outside the barracks. If they just had the parts to close that valve on the waste tank outlet—but no. I hate the stench that the ventilator pumps into my room when the waste tank overflows because all the waste trucks are broken down for lack of parts. I hate to go three weeks without a shower or water to wash my face in because the water trucks can’t get parts. I hate to have to hoard water in a V.O. jug for brushing my teeth. I hate to put on tons of clothing and have to walk around like a diver on the bottom of the ocean. I hate the 30-below zero air when it goes down to my lungs and causes me to cough for hours. I hate the metal trays we eat off of. I hate the rancid pork we have day in and day out. The breakfast bacon’s so bad I can’t touch it. I hate to be crammed into a smoke-filled room with a mechanical cow to see a movie. I hate tripping over these damned bunny boots. I hate working seventy-two hours without sleep. I hate having to wait seven days for my mail to get home. I hate working seven days a week on twelve-hour shifts all summer. I hate missing all the holidays and Christmas. I hate being away from my wife. I hate having to

fight and fight again to get the bare essentials from these dead-weights who've joined the I-don't-care boys. I hate to be nailed to this blasted rock, unable to go anywhere but to the ice cap and the bergs in the bay. Does that answer your question, Lt. James?"

"Yes, it does." He had heard every word but as yet the full power of Lt. Gains' words could not be felt.

"I've got more but I can't think of them all at once." Lt. Gains stared at the wall thoughtfully. "You'll get it easier; they know the mistakes now. I guess we were sort of pioneers." He turned toward Ken. "I can see you're shocked at my little outburst but, believe me, you have no way of knowing until you hit it face to face for a few months. I guess every sad sack makes his own adjustment, but you'll see lots of things that'll drive you crazy.

"To change the subject, we're going to inspect some facilities tomorrow. I know it's Sunday, but I might as well initiate you in the tradition. The Army Engineers are sellin' us a tank farm, and we've got to make sure we don't get shortchanged. Put on your long johns and anything else you've got; it's going to be real cool."

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The next day was Sunday and, as had been predicted, the temperature hovered around forty below. At 1800 sharp, Ken plunged into the blue jeep behind Lt. Gains.

"Follow that covered yellow truck, Sergeant." Lt. Gains turned toward Ken, "There'll be time for introductions later when we get to the pumphouse. The civilians work for the Corps of Engineers and built the whole outfit. The major runs the show as far as they're concerned. Remember that you're going to sign for all seventy of these sixty thousand-barrel tanks; so don't let his rank keep your criticism back."

"What type of thing are we looking for?" asked Ken, "Things like adequate grounding—faulty equipment—for instance, I know that a lot of these storage tanks haven't got the CO2 bottles connected."

"How are these supposed to work?"

"Well, when it reaches a certain temperature in the tank, two hundred pounds of CO2 goes off at the top of the tank and supposedly stops the fire before it starts."

The road on the tank farm ran along the tops of the thirty-foot high dikes that separated the tanks from one another. As the jeep negotiated a sharp turn that angled down to a low building, Gains announced, "This is the west transfer pump station where most of your pumping will be done. Incidentally, you're going to have lots of trouble with water collecting in those dike areas."

"What damage can that do?"

"It soaks into the perma-frost under the tank pads and forms ice lenses which heave and rupture the pads. It's also tough on the troops who have to go skin diving to turn the valves.

"I've got too darn much to learn about this game," commented Ken.

Lt. Gains looked at him earnestly, “Don’t let that eat on you now. Wait ‘till you’re told to do stupid things by stupid people that outrank you.”

“You’re bitter.”

“How did you guess?” The jeep jerked to a halt, and they wasted no time in getting to the heated pumphouse. The building was split up into two portions. One part housed the heating boiler and the crews that stayed on the tank farm while the other side contained the pumps and water separators. The wall between the two was vapor-proof with a small double window looking into the pump room. Lt. Gains pointed to the window, “The fumes in the pump room may be strong enough to be toxic. The men working in that stuff have to be watched carefully through the window. They usually act a little drunk before they pass out.”

“I guess one spark in there could start this whole business going.”

“You’re right, chum. If some joker puts on the wrong shoes in the morning or doesn’t use spark-proof tools, you’ll get court martialed— that’s if you live through it.” He paused and then continued, “I haven’t had all the responsibility that you’re going to get. After we sign tomorrow, you’ll own this system lock, stock and barrel—one of the largest clear product farms in the world!” Lt. Gains could not hold back a short laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m just thanking God it’s you that’s got this whole show and not me.”

“You’re comforting as hell.”

“Think nothing of it. Let’s get down to business.” They followed the major from the Corps of Engineers through the pumphouse and out onto the squeaking snow. The inspecting party scrambled up the dikes and met the razor-edged wind at the crests. The bulk of their clothing made their movements almost as slow and difficult as those of a diver at thirty fathoms. Ice crystals formed in fluffy profusion on the fur-lined hood of each parka as moisture-filled breath met the outside air. The wind-blown snow was rigid enough to support their weight as they walked from tank to tank and made the going a little easier. Ken not only felt the cold cutting at his face but he could feel the moisture on the small hairs inside his nose freezing. His eyes watered when he faced the wind and small crystals immediately formed in the corners of his eyes and on the lashes which froze together when he blinked.

After inspecting six tanks, the inspectors burst into the warmth of the next pump house. Each man took his turn at the mirror, looking for the white splotches on his skin that would signal frostbite. It was only then that Ken began to cough with every breath.

“Sounds like you swallowed some sub-zero air,” said the major. “I guess so.”

“Gotta watch that; you’ll freeze a lung and maybe start a case of T.B. The medics claim that’s the reason why most of the Eskimos got it.” The major tapped his pipe on the cracker tin that served as a waste basket, dug into a tobacco pouch that looked like an old football bladder, and leaned back against the aluminum wall. “I sure pity the poor son-of-a-bitch who has to run this thing—miles and miles of pipe-line to walk in thirty or forty below.”

“I’m that poor son-of-a-bitch,” said Ken softly.

“I feel sorry for you. That’s a hell of a responsibility for a second lieutenant, but that’s the Air Force for you. Millions and millions of dollars ready to blow sky high if someone makes one little mistake and they stick you with it... Look at those tanks.” He pointed to the map with the mouthpiece of his pipe. “One stick of bombs and there goes the whole works. No sir, I wouldn’t want this elephant for all the tea in China.”

“Cut it out, Major. You’ll scare my replacement so’s I can’t get out of here,” interrupted Lt. Gains.

A week later Lt. Gains rotated back to the United States and left his replacement to master the problems on his own. Ken found that the technical aspects were not quite so immediately awesome as the reports which were required by higher headquarters. All of his collegiate mathematics could not make the consumption data check with the issues.

In the next two weeks he learned that each one of the forty-one recurring reports required calculation time and effort. Lt. Gains’ twelve-hour day had been an accurate estimate of his working hours.

On the morning of the 24th of March, Ken turned from his pillow and felt the frame of his cot tremble. Overhead there was a noise that resembled blowing sand scraping across the flat aluminum roof. Outside the window he could see great swirling clouds of ice crystals flash by. A sign on the door next to the latrine indicated that winds from fifty to seventy knots were whipping the base and that no showers could be taken during the emergency.

“What’s all this about?” asked Ken.

“It’s simple to answer that one,” explained a voice from the wash bowl section of the latrine. A smallish man about thirty years old strolled out and smiled. “Pretty damn good weather,” he offered amiably.

“How do you figure?”

“It’s a phase three and nobody except a few imbeciles play around outside in that breeze. In fact, there’s a Base Regulation against it.”

“What’s the danger?”

“As a doctor, I can say that the chill factor is increased greatly by such a wind, frostbite, hypothermia—all that sort of thing. Secondly, you can’t see far enough to find your way around and he who gets lost is a cold corpse.”

“Cheery thought.”

“You’d better stay inside and cut yourself on C-ration cans; that’s a hell of a lot easier to repair. —Say, my name’s Ed Wakerson.”

“Ken James.”

“How long have you been in this quaint nook of the universe?”

“About three weeks.”

“Strange, I haven’t seen you around, but then again, playing the part of the local saw-bones, my hours don’t conform to union rules.” Doc Wakerson turned and sauntered down the hall. “Come on down to my hovel and have a cup of coffee. I enjoy shocking shining second lieutenants by telling them the gruesome facts of life concerning this malignant growth that we are presently infesting.” He slouched down in an armchair and began to expound. “See that phone? Some sweet little airman will pull out a blade and carve his initials on his roommate so I’ll have to sew ’em up. Every phase three, five or six stupid idiots cut their fingers or feet on C—ration cans. They try to eat a meat ball with the top of the can as a spoon. Naturally, there’s a base regulation against purloining mess hall spoons, so I have a good business.

“Come now, young man, tell me what brass you double—crossed to get sent to this penal colony?”

“I don’t think I double—crossed anybody.”

“You just can’t be this unlucky. Come now, man, think: Some character must have had it in for you.”

“Sorry, Doc, not a one.

“I see you’ll have to be coached—my, such innocence.” Doc snuggled down farther in the chair and waved his cigarette holder elegantly. “You don’t mind if I call you Junior, do you?”

“I’m the most junior guy around, so I can’t object.”

“Excellent adaptability! You might even be sane when you rotate. Let’s see, first you must decide which category of individual you fall into. There are the joiners and the fighters. The joiners soon give up trying to be efficient and become helpless lumps of clay who will comply half-heartedly with directives from the wheel house. They bitch continuously about how they are being mistreated in this lousy hole.

“The fighters, on the other hand, struggle to get their jobs done at all costs. They take what the wheel house crams down their throats and try to make it work. Eventually these poor slobs get ulcers.” He paused to flick the cigarette ashes into a makeshift wastepaper basket. “I see a surprised expression on your face. Here’s a little secret. The C. O. is bucking for General. He’s got to say that this place is capable of supporting the Strategic Air Command or his Efficiency Report will suffer. One poor E.R. and the Air Force gets rid of them. These majors and colonels are in this business for life; they don’t know how to do anything else. They’ve got a strangle hold on ’em. The upshot of all this is that we’ll have to perform like superhumans to get the joint in shape.”

Doc rummaged around in his plywood desk and brought out a handful of long-playing records. “Let’s add a little culture to an otherwise singularly uninspiring morning.”

“Won’t you wake up the rest of the troops?”

“Your consideration is touching—in fact, it’s dragging. You’ll learn that those jet jockeys will keep you awake five nights out of seven; so, when I get my turn, I’m not at all squeamish about blasting ’em clean out of the sack.” The sharp entrance of the strings from the Roman Carnival Overture shook the floor. “I like it loud. I guess I’ve got a little Wagner in me.

“You look like you could stand a little chow—leave us crack a case of C-rations for breakfast.”

“Have they got a can for breakfast?”

“There’s no pancakes, no cereal, no eggs, but they do have powdered milk, powdered coffee, prunes, pineapple and assorted canned fruit.”

“It’ll have to do,” muttered Ken.

“Junior, I’m afraid we’re going to have to get accustomed to this magnificent repast. We’ve got to rotate these rations this year—which means we’ve got to eat all this crap before it spoils. Cheer up; A few months on C-rations will make you appreciate home cooking.”

“Who said I didn’t appreciate it already?”

“No one, but, as I observe, you are a callow youth whose face does not betray the hard lines of the battle-scarred veteran.” Ken could not argue the point but there were quite a few scars that didn’t show. In a moment’s reflection Ken picked up a memory that had remained dormant for years.

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The Academy took great pride in turning out men. The mark of a man in their sharply-defined limits was the ability to regiment the course of daily events to the point where each hour and each minute was carefully planned to produce the maximum.

It had been a seasonably warm afternoon in early May and from the front steps of Tower Hall, Ken looked down the main vista which apparently spread a grass carpet to the haze-covered hills miles away. He could not help but notice the perfection of the landscaping and the richness of the grass that showed long rows where it had been mowed earlier in the day. No student was supposed to tread on this soft sea of green except when he marched in solemn procession to graduation.

On this afternoon, Ken’s thoughts could not wander too far from the task at hand. In fifteen minutest time he would begin to dress for the final performance of “Othello.” The hollowness in the pit of his stomach was the same whether he was about to run the three hundred or to perform on the stage before hundreds of hypercritical eyes. He wasn’t a major character, but the inner excitement was roughly the same. There was more than just a play to be performed. For almost four years Ken had stubbornly preserved his own idea of what was right against real and imagined gibes of his fellow classmates who, he felt, had made a compromise with principle in order to attain popularity. The individual arguments were of minor importance but a principle was at stake. Ken’s father had emphasized that above all else, principle was paramount, and this contention had caused Ken to choose friends who for one reason or another neither sought nor attained popular standing. To those who looked down their noses at his associates, Ken tried to show by word and deed that these people had as much to offer as anyone else and that, if treated as part of the same team, they were valuable members of society. This same spirit carried him on to join the fencing team which at that time also bore a stigma which he felt was invalid, and he strived to prove that it was a sport that required skill and concentration

rivaling any other athletic competition. It was Emerson's terse statement that who-so-ever would be a man would be a non-conformist that kept him confident.

At this late date they required his fencing talents in the Dramatic Club's production of "Othello." Ken's assignment was to instruct the rest of the cast and to participate in the most spectacular dueling scene. His cause would depend upon his skill in the execution of that one scene.

A few minutes later he walked quickly down the steps of Cedar Hall to the large basement room where the make-up session had just begun. Among the rectangular cement columns, members of the cast busied themselves with a cursory review of their most difficult lines. Some mumbled to themselves and stared into the glass show cases that contained a fine collection of stuffed birds while others perched themselves on the thick window sills and watched the late afternoon sun shimmer across the light green of new leaves.

The feminine parts were taken by masters' wives and daughters while the rest of the *dramatis personae* were drawn from the student body. Make-up specialists were imported from Boston and, in their practical hands, faces that had seen little else but the cloisters of scholastic institutions became lined with age and scarred with the sword. Ken donned his red tights, tabard, and purple cape with great care for, after all, he was Montano, the Governor of Cyprus. He sat down in the chair for make-up and waited for the specialist to study his face. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"Montano, Governor of Cyprus." Ken's boyish voice wasn't convincing. The specialist stroked his chin.

"Let's see, you're supposed to be the Governor. This means you're probably an old soldier graying at the temples with at least one good scar. We'll let a wiry beard cover the lower portion of the face." In a quarter of an hour Ken aged a battle-weary thirty years.

He picked up his sword from the weapons closet and sat down in one of the wide window sills to watch the make-up artists do their work on the other members of the cast. As far as Ken could tell, the girl who was going to take the part of Bianca needed very little change. Shakespeare had pictured her as a determined and voluptuous young female who sought the affections of the Florentine, Michael Cassio. Even though Joyce Kellogue was a master's daughter, she took delight in exhibiting her obvious charms in a way that drove the masculine populace to distraction. Nearly every red-blooded American boy in the school had at one time or another entertained libidinous thoughts as she passed by, but either their advances were consistently ill-timed or she was determined to frustrate all advances. In either case, it was a well-established fact that even the most accomplished campus Romeos had met with singular defeat.

Ken looked at this "cunning'st pattern of excelling nature" as an artist might look at a fine painting and was glad that this privilege cost him nothing. He wondered casually whether his new face and costume made him more appealing, but he shrugged this off as a bit of ridiculous vanity and settled back against the concrete wall to wait for curtain time. There was something about waiting for one moment in a play that tied up his intestines in knots. No matter how tranquilly the shades of evening had kissed the blossoms of spring, the whole atmosphere was heavy with anxiety.

Behind Tower Hall and over a rock fence, there was a graveyard that was carefully maintained even though the names could hardly be read. Ken could barely see the top of one of the obelisks that marked the final resting place of a noteworthy individual.

“O.K., Gang, let’s go upstairs quietly.” The director endeavored to show no signs of nervousness, but the yellow-orange stains on the fingers of his right hand betrayed him. The duke and senators of a by-gone century wearily mounted the cement steps self-consciously watching the sweep of their swords.

Act II, Scene 1, was Montano’s first appearance and Ken wondered if this time would ever pass, but it did and his opening scene went well. The ticklish portion of the performance came next. According to the text, the stealthy Iago urges Michael Cassio into a drinking bout which he hopes will make Cassio drunk. In the latter portion of the scene, as a result of his drunkenness, Cassio attacks Montano and in the duel wounds him seriously. To do this convincingly, Cassio’s sword had to pass as close as possible to Montano’s side away from the audience.

Mike Jansen who played the part of Cassio was a big wheel on campus and, in four years, he had acquired all the polish that New York society would demand. Ken watched him as he leaned against the wall and chatted amiably with Joyce Kellogue—they made quite a pair. There was no time for woolgathering as the cue for his entrance shot through his ears.

Barely ten minutes later, Ken sat in the dressing room behind the stage staring into the mirror at this glistening face. Beads of sweat had already ruined some of his make-up, but this wasn’t the time to touch it up. Mike Jansen walked up behind him.

“Say, I didn’t think I would come so damned close on that last lunge.” He paused and continued, “The audience really liked it though. Someone said that one old maid passed out in the back row.”

“You don’t say.”

“How do I look in this purple cape?”

“O.K., as far as I can tell—but it’s mine.”

“Mind if I borrow it? I’ve got to rush.” Mike ran out of the room, and his sword banged against the doorfacing. Ken rose from the dressing table and walked up close to the full-length mirror. He craned his neck to look at the hole in the right side of his tabard where Mike’s sword had gone through. The rough edges of the blade had sawed his flesh, but the point had passed by. Mike had forgotten the whole routine and had started swinging wildly. Showers of sparks had flown over the stage as the steel edges clashed. One of the initial blows had been so heavy that it had broken off the last six inches of Ken’s sword, and after that he was fighting for his very life. He could not repress the thought that this lapse of memory had occurred at such a critical time. There was no love lost between Mike and himself, but he could not believe that the dislike would manifest itself so violently. He had to relax somehow just to keep the sweat from ruining his make-up if nothing else. The back stairway down to the basement was dark, but it was relatively friendly compared to the hundreds of faces that had enjoyed the battle only a few minutes before. No seats had been sold in the balcony, and Ken used the basement room to pass under the audience. He ascended the three flights of stairs to the last door at the top. From

the balcony he could watch the rest of the play and collect his thoughts that had struck out in all directions. From that distance the characters in the play seemed to have collected life's problems into a few square feet of stage. Their trial was short, yet then again, so long when it came to memorizing the lines.

Suddenly he became aware of someone entering the same row of seats. Joyce Kellogue looked at him and smiled sweetly.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"No, come right ahead."

"You were wonderful in that dueling scene," she said quietly. "Didn't that sword hurt you? I saw it go through your clothing."

"It didn't do much damage—just a scratch." He realized after he had said the words that they were about as trite a combination as he could have thought of. Now that the opportunity had passed, he recalled Mercutio's famous line which seemed as though it would have been much more appropriate.

"I don't believe it. Come on downstairs and let me clean that scratch—at least put a bandage on it." She slid away and pulled him by the hand. When they reached the basement, she quickly located the first-aid kit.

"Pull your shirt up so I can get a look at it. I think you're bashful." She laughed playfully.

"Not so, friend, and I give you fair warning."

"If this is your line, I'll have to admit it's a new one. That's quite a gash you've got. Now sit still while I clean it up."

The alcohol stung, but her touch was ever so gentle. The cut was deeper than he had supposed and it had bled enough to form a red circle four inches in diameter on his undershirt. The touch of her hands gave him a tingling sensation that surprised him.

"How am I doing, doc?" he said lightly.

"I think you'll live but, remember, no more dueling."

"Not one little duel?"

"Not one," she said firmly. She returned the kit to its proper place and gave Ken a chance to readjust his costume.

"I hate to break this up, as much as I've enjoyed it, but we're on upstairs in a few minutes."

"As thou wilt, kind sir," she curtsied low and elegantly. He in turn bowed from the waist. Above their heads they could hear the musical prelude to the next scene.

"Come on., let's go." Ken began to run up the back stairs.

"Hey, patient: Don't tun so fast," she whispered as they entered the stage's left wing.

"That's doctorly advice if I ever heard it," he said.

"Well, I've got to preserve you for the last scene."

“Oh, someone else can take Othello’s sword and bring Iago back.”

“But you’ll never get to the party after the show. There is one, you know.”

“If you will accompany me, fair lady, I’ll try and live through the last act.”

“Please live, kind sir, and take me to the ball,” she said, tilting her head and smiling.

“I will.” He had barely spoken when she left him to answer her cue.

It had all happened so rapidly that he hadn’t had time to sum up his unique acquaintance and unusual success. It was fortunate that his beard hid his facial expression or the audience would have seen a smiling Montano looking upon the “tragic loading” of Othello’s bed.

After the curtain calls he hurried to his dressing room and changed clothes quickly but removing the make-up with cold cream was a slow job. When he arrived at the big downstairs room, the festivities had just begun but, as he scanned the gathering, he did not see Joyce.

“Whom are you looking for?” She had come up so suddenly that he was for the moment totally taken by surprise and began to utter something that she did not let him finish.

“You look...” he said helplessly.

“Thank you, and you look, too, or I should say, stare. What did I do—leave something besides make-up behind in the dressing room?”

Cashmere sweaters had always fascinated Ken, but he had to concede that this one approached perfection.

“Come on, brave, bold Montano, let’s try some of the punch; I hear it has been ‘craftily qualified.’” He ladled out two glasses full. “This stuff is pretty potent,” observed Ken.

“Helped make it myself,” she chirped. “You know,” she glanced at her watch, “it’s only ten o’clock and all the actors have excuses that are good ‘till twelve, so we can chit-chat for quite a while.”

“You’ve got a wealth of information tonight.” He wanted to add a few more obvious things to that wealth but compliments from his lips always sounded like dead fish that fell to the ground and lay there.

“I thought you were going to say something else. I guess I’m too accustomed to those well-worn attacks. In fact that is one of the reasons I like you.”

“Tis I who am honored.” He conversed casually but with the inward care of a man trying to pick his way through a mine field. The alcohol in the fruit punch began to punch back and he felt light as a cloud on his feet, but some fog also crept into his speech. Most of all, he saw the girl in front of him as a fantastically perfect creation.

“You keep looking at me. You had better take a peek at some of the other girls. I can’t stand that close an inspection,”

“Right now you could withstand inspection with a microscope as far as I am concerned.”

“Why, Montano, I think you’re becoming a little tipsy,” she said with a laugh. “You drank better than the rest of them on the stage.”

“We are not always what we play we are,” he observed profoundly. “You are so right, but enough of this somber thought. Look at that moon.” She pulled him by the arm over to the window. “An astronomer’s dream.”

“You’re as romantic as a pair of calipers.”

“I never made a specialty of it, but I’m pretty fast at learning.”

“Bottoms up on that drink and we’ll give you an aptitude test.” It was ironic that she should use that term. If the Academy was good at anything, it was at giving aptitude tests and, up to this moment, Ken had hated every last one. He swallowed almost a full glass of punch and followed Joyce over to the back door.

“Come on out here and enjoy the evening,” she urged. They walked arm in arm through the apple orchard inhaling the thousand different fragrances of spring that hovered close to the ground on a warm, still night in May. They talked of the play, of what they had in common, and of the perfection of that moment in nature. A hazy moon provided enough light to soften hard lines and make the beautiful even more beautiful. Shortly they had passed through the orchard and had come to the old graveyard whose collapsed wooden gate provided no obstacle. The reflection of the moonlight on the polished marble flickered from one surface to another and followed them like a hovering spirit.

Joyce and Ken paused slightly and seated themselves on a long flat stone that was markedly larger than the rest.

Though the alcoholic haze made his mind nebulous at best, he had one idea that seeped up from within him. He would show those guys that he could best them all at a man’s game.

“I bet it’s not the music you’re thinking about with a smile like that on your face. In fact, a smile like that only shows up when one is thinking of the fair sex,” observed Doc Wakerson.

“You just interrupted an interesting memory.”

“That’s all you’ve got to go on up here. I hope for your sake you’ve got a good one or a strong imagination.” Doe paused, “On second thought, I want to modify that.” He looked up into the curling smoke from his cigarette and asked deliberately, “Are you married?”

“No,”

“You’ve got a girl?”

“I don’t think she’s mine, but I know one who’s my idea of a real champion.”

Doc drew himself up into his chair. “Let old Wakerson give you a little advice.”

“I know she’s not my personal property if that is what you mean.”

“You know it now, chum, but wait ‘till you’ve been here a little longer. I’ve seen literally hundreds of men slowly destroying themselves because their wives or sweethearts want to have a little fun while they’re away. There are two old sayings that seem to contradict each other but they fit this whole show pretty well. Take ‘Out of sight, out of mind,’ for instance. This applies to a lot of the sweet young things on the home front because they meet eligible mates every day. On the opposite side we’ve got the idea that absence

makes the heart grow fonder, which applies to the average G. I. stationed up here. Freud called it the libido but, no matter what you call it, these guys after a while begin to love any female who'll write to 'em. They don't see a girl for months on end, attribute all sorts of qualities to one sweet young thing and, when she runs off with some other character or just stops writing, it tears 'em apart. They may try suicide or think themselves into an ulcer. I have to repair more of these than if we were fighting a full battle." Doc paused to change the L.P. record.

"That's not a pretty picture of the female population," commented Ken.

"I've got the statistics to prove it right in that plywood desk. I always like to hear a convincing argument against the evidence I've got so, come on, tell me about this real champion you know... sounds like a fine filly."

"What can you tell me about T.B.?"

"Are you changing the subject?"

"No."

Doc grunted and looked at the ceiling. "You may be right," he said thoughtfully. "It takes one hell of a struggle to be a champ; T.B. can sure be a hell of a struggle. Let's see if I read you straight.

This sweet young thing is lying in a hospital somewhere fighting T.B."

"Right."

"I take it that you want to know all you can about the disease because of her."

"Right again."

"Prepare yourself for a lengthy diatribe." Doc rose from his chair, rummaged around one of the desk drawers and pulled out a pad of paper. "Incidentally, any time you want to sit back and waste time, just ask some guy to show off how much he knows. I'm about to give a classic illustration.

"This miserable bacillus belongs to mycobacteria or acid-fast genus. I can see that means next to nothing to you so we'll dispense with that. I guess size is next. You can put six million of these bacilli, plus or minus two or three, end to end in the space of an inch. Each one of these lousy critters breathes, absorbs food, and carries on a complex metabolism. They take up O₂, give off CO₂, absorb minerals and organic compounds in addition to building them into proteins, fats and carbohydrates. This remarkable beastly can even synthesize the complex stuff it needs for growth from very simple substances. For example, I just read somewhere that tracer studies with radioactive carbon 14 have shown that this microbe will break down glycerin, burn some of it as energy and use its carbon to make proteins, nucleic acids, fats and carbohydrates. In other words, it can almost multiply indefinitely. With the electron microscope we can see tiny granules on the body of the organism. These granules may correspond to the mitochondria found in animal and plant cells. These seem to be the powerhouses which regulate the use of fuel and operate the machinery for building its structures and producing new bacilli. The virulent stuff grows in serpentine-shaped colonies like this," he sketched freely on the

paper. “Non-virulent colonies grow in clumps that look like this. You follow me this far?”

“I think so.”

“The tubercle bacilli can grow almost anywhere in the body, but they really go for the lungs. They operate by killing tissue and causing ulcerations which discharge more bacilli. I guess I’m getting too technical.” He paused. “Let’s see—I’ll put this in military terms so you’ll get the plan of battle. Once battle is joined, the body fights with all it’s got—but I’m ahead of myself. The enemy strength runs something like this. We can’t hurt ’em with heat, or cold, or desiccation, or even with the common disinfectants. The disinfectants that do hit the target can’t kill ’em all ‘cause every colony has some varieties which are resistant to the drug. These boys really reproduce in a hurry when the others die off and this whole new population is immune to the drug that killed the others. In other words, it’s a damned tough customer.”

“How’re they ever going to beat this thing?”

“I think chemotherapy is going to give the answer some day. Getting hungry, Junior?”

Ken nodded.

“Here again it pays to have a good imagination.” He reached down beside his chair and produced one of the unit boxes. “What would you like?” He took out one of the cans and flourished it aloft like an auctioneer. “I have pineapple shipped from sunny Hawaii—three years ago.”

“O.K., I’ll take it.”

“Sold to the man with the blue shirt!”

“Say, what do we do for can openers?”

“One carries one on his person at all times. They pack one to a case or something like that. Since you’re new in this league, I’ll make a special dispensation and let you use mine.” Doc rummaged around in the box. “Say, you stepped in it and came up smelling like a rose; here’s a brand new one hot off the press.” Doc put two cans of spaghetti and ground beef into one of the wash basins that he had filled with hot water.

“This isn’t the greatest stove ever designed, but it gets ’em warm.”

Ken followed the operations in silence.

“Now draw your pocket knife,” ordered Doc, “and start stabbin’ pineapple.

five

On the second day of the storm, the wind continued to carry clouds of blowing snow at fifty to ninety-knot velocity. The barracks was out of water, but this condition was not unusual.

Ken slept until he heard a voice shouting for Lt. James. “You’re wanted on the hook.” He moved slowly down the hall and picked up the dangling receiver.

“Lt. James speaking.”

“This is Captain Stone over at Air Installations. Say, we’ll be out of fuel at Half Moon Lake in about two hours. You’ve got the fuel trucks—what’re we going to do?”

“That’s about eight miles out, isn’t it?”

“Seven and a half.”

“What happens if we don’t get there?”

“About two men will freeze to death and all the pipes will burst at our water supply.”

“What’s the fuel capacity?”

“One thousand gallons.”

“what’s the forecast for the next few hours?”

“More of same. That wind will be blowing one hundred miles per hour out there.”

“Have you got a plough? My boys could never make it without one. Say, hold it a minute; how about getting a sled and pulling some drums out by means of a weasel?”

“Sounds O.K. to me. I’ll take a reading with the motor pool and call you back.” Captain Stone hung up but, in a few minutes, he was back on the line again.

“The weasel idea was fine but the only weasel they’ve got was blown over and damaged by the wind.”

“Blown over?”

“I thought that was weird, but they said it was at the top of a drift when the wind got under it and flipped it on its back.”

“Pretty stiff breeze.”

“You’re not just a’kiddin’.”

“I can’t let my drivers go into that—they’ll be lucky to get back alive. Why don’t they drain the system while there’s still heat and send out a couple of ploughs for the three men?” suggested Ken.

“I’ll buy that, but I don’t know whether the colonel will; but I’ll suggest it and give you a call.”

“Good show.” It took Captain Stone two minutes by the clock to get the answer.

“The colonel says we’ve got to get fuel to it.”

“Well, that’s it then. Have you got a jeep or anything that’ll move?”

“I’ve got one, but I won’t swear to its getting us anywhere in this stuff.”

“I’ll try to round up my diesel drivers by phone while you’re working on the plough.”

“O.K., I’ll take you over to your garage—just sit tight ‘till I get to your barracks.”

“Will do.” Ken put on three pairs of socks, the heavy white felt boots, flying pants, parka, and long gloves, but even this seemed like feeble protection against the subzero wind. Captain Stone pushed open the heavy outside door and staggered over the thresh-hold.

“That’s a real bastard out there. Did you hear that the weather boys are classifying these storms by sex?” he continued.

“Bitches and sons-of-bitches,” he said solemnly. “Let’s get back to that jeep before it dies on us.” The headlights showed only the white veil of fast-moving ice crystals and no more. The wind had blown the road clean in the open stretch between the garage and the group of officers’ barracks and, by sensing when the ground became tilted, Captain Stone was able to navigate. When they arrived at the garage, the two standby drivers looked at them in amazement.

“How did you make it over here, sir?” asked the buck sergeant.

“That’s a story in itself, but here’s the pitch in a nutshell. Get your best running truck loaded with fuel. By the time you get back, the plough ought to be here. The plough’s going to run ahead of you so all you’ve got to do is follow.”

“Where to?”

“Half Moon Lake.”

“Pardon, sir, but you can’t see your hand in front of your face. We’ll lose ’em sure.”

“That’s the chance we’ll have to take.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned away and motioned the other driver toward the trucks. Ken could hear him clearly as he grumbled, “We’ll freeze our ass surer’n hell.”

One driver started the truck while the other manned the sliding doors. Within seconds after the two thousand-gallon tanker backed out of the garage, it was blotted from view by the blowing snow.

“How far do they have to go to get it filled?” asked Captain Stone as he clamped the heavy outside door shut.

“About three quarters of a mile.”

“That’ll take ’em a half hour easy.” The captain looked up and squinted as though he were calculating a differential equation in his head. “That damned plough of mine ought to be here by now.” The radio inside the garage office reminded all within hearing that the Air Base was still in a phase three wind. To all except a very few, this news caused little concern; they rolled over in bed and turned the knob until the voice stopped.

One half hour later, the plough and diesel truck were ready to start. Lieutenant Colonel Geist had arrived and had taken personal charge of the operation in order to allow Captain Stone to handle another emergency at one of the power plants.

Ken left one man at the garage to handle other calls and climbed into the truck cab beside the driver. Without further ceremony, the expedition marched into the wide-open maw of the storm. Darkness had closed in early so that the visibility approached zero.

“Keep that spot light on the rear end of that plough and don’t get too close to him.”

“Yes, sir, —but if he gets thirty feet away, I’ve lost him.” The driver double-clutched and geared down to take a soft spot. Suddenly he stopped and rammed it into reverse. Out of the blowing snow, Ken could barely see the outline of the rear end of the plough, even though it was only a very few feet away and coming toward them.

“He’s backing up for another shot at that drift,” Ken said simply.

“Yes, sir.” The driver wiped the steam on the inside of the windshield with the fur on the back of his glove. “This fur is good for wiping the windshield,” he commented.

“Where’s all that smell coming from?”

“The heater’s broken, sir, and the alcohol is leaking on the floor. You’d better move your feet.”

“Is this the best truck we’ve got?”

“Yes, sir. The Marmon Herringtons are best for this type of run, but 289, 425, 424, and 288 are in the shop. We must use a Diamond T.”

“What makes a Marmon so hot for this stuff?” asked Ken.

“Four wheel drive, high chassis and big wheels,—if an old Marmon can’t pull it out, it can’t be pulled. The low low in that thing barely moves, but it’ll sure pull.”

“How come these trucks are in such sad shape?”

“The civilians had ’em up here for two years before we got ‘em. They had no place to park inside so they left ’em running all winter long. At thirty and forty below we can still use SAE 30 in these damned things. Those pistons have room for two to tango.” The driver stopped talking and then began again.

“You know, Lieutenant, this is the lousiest mission I’ve been on yet. If that plough breaks down we’ve had it.”

“It won’t break down,” said Ken confidently. As the two vehicles moved through the storm, large chunks of snow a foot in diameter pelted the truck as the wind picked up pieces of the drift that had just been broken by the plough. In the open spaces, gravel-size stones became airborne and banged against the lower parts of the truck around the wheels. The constant shifting of gears grew more tiresome and the driver stopped talking. It was zero outside and below freezing inside the cab but sweat glistened on his forehead.

Two hours passed before the Diamond T ground to a stop outside the pumphouse at Half Moon Lake. When the full force of the wind struck the building, it trembled as though an earth shock had shaken its foundation.

Colonel Geist slapped his gloves together. “This place isn’t so damned cold.”

“That fuel tank still has three hundred gallons left!” shouted the driver as he tapped the gauge with his gloved hand.

“Let’s have a look at that.” The colonel strode across the room and peered down in the opening to the tank. Over his shoulder, Ken could see the glistening surface of the diesel fuel.

“O.K., what’s the big idea of all that noise on the phone when you had that much on hand? We risked our necks to get here.” The colonel’s voice was sharp and clipped. The airman first to whom the remark was aimed stammered. “All we knew was that we were losing heat fast. The burner won’t light—we thought we were out of fuel.”

“Now that I’ve got my hood down, I see what you mean. We can’t waste time fooling with a burner that won’t work. Drain the pumps and lines. We’re going to have to abandon ship.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lieutenant James, you and your driver take these airmen in the truck, and I’ll ride in the plough.”

“Yes, sir.”

In fifteen minutes, the two vehicles again set out into the storm which increased in ferocity. The driver of the Diamond T could barely change gears over the arms and legs of the three other occupants.

“Open that damned window or we’ll die from lack of air.”

“You wouldn’t want it open,” observed Ken.

“What’s that smell?”

“That’s the alcohol in the heater leaking on the floor,” answered the driver with resignation.

“Whoever’s closest, wipe off the window so the driver can see.”

“Lieutenant, I couldn’t move if I had to take a crap right here.”

“I can’t see anyway,” said the driver. In the gusts, the tail lights became invisible and the Diamond T slowed to a crawl.

“Look out! That plough’s backing up!” The shock mashed faces and elbows against the windshield glass.

“Is everybody O.K.?” asked Ken.

“My nose is bleeding, sir,—”

“If that’s all that’s wrong, we’re lucky.”

“The radiator and fan must be shot, sir.”

“I don’t think that plough driver even knows he’s hit us. He’s pulling away. Can you move this truck?”

“No, sir. She just conked out and I can’t turn her over.”

“We’ve got to stop ’em before they lose us. I’m bailing out—keep me in that one headlight that still works. I’m liable to be blown clear over to Elsmere Island.” Ken burst out of the cab and fell on his knees in the snow. The door slammed behind him like a vault. He tried to stand, but the wind hurled him down face first against the hard crust. Stones and sand peppered his flying suit as he crawled along the ground. The wind seemed to form a vacuum right at the opening of his parka so that every breath was labored and heavy. There was just enough air to breathe. The desire to lie down and curl up with his back to the wind seemed unnaturally strong.

Suddenly out of the white nothingness, the rear end of the plough appeared almost over his head. He yelled as he saw the heavy treads of the rear tires grinding towards his body.

They stopped six inches from where Ken was squirming and crawling away. A break in the wind allowed him to gain his feet long enough to mount the side of the plough and pound his glove on the door.

The window opened and Colonel Geist shouted, "What's wrong? Heard you yell."

Ken answered, but the words went with the wind. He raised himself to the open window and bellowed, "The radiator's shot—truck won't run. What do you want us to do?"

"We'll tow you. Get the cable off the back end and tie on. Blink your lights when you're ready to start." Ken dropped back to the hard snowdrift and tried to stay on his feet. He staggered like a drunken fullback as he hurled his weight against the wind. By lunging when the storm let up, he covered the distance to the undamaged headlight in a few minutes. His gloved hand pushed down on the door handle, and it opened a crack.

"Two of you bail out. We've got to get the cable off the rear end of that plough and hook up. They're going to tow us." The door opened and two airmen plummeted to the hard snow surface. Ken wished he could see their faces as the wind buffeted them to their knees, but the darkness and blowing snow obscured all but their dark shapes.

The three-quarter-inch cable which was wound around two hooks on the plough was as easy to handle as a live anaconda. The progress was slow and painful for the three men who worked in silence. Words were blown away and could only be heard by the speaker.

When the cable was fastened, the three jammed themselves into the truck cab and waited for the plough to take up the slack after the driver had blinked his lights. The plough did not move. "For Christ's sake—he's not stuck!"

"He must have forgotten his own signal. We can't sit here forever. Keep blinking that headlight." The minutes passed with no action, and Ken realized that he would have to face the storm again. He dropped out of the cab to the snow and, by holding on to the cable, he was able to cover the space between the vehicles easily. As he climbed to the cab of the plough, he could see that ice and snow had completely blocked the rear window. He tapped on the side window and motioned the driver forward as the plough bucked ahead, Ken lost his grip on the door and fell off to one side. The Diamond T jerked forward and, as the plough backed up for another shot at the drift, the two met in a sickening jolt. Evidently the driver of the plough had not felt the shock. He gunned the engine and the plough lurched to the attack line like an enraged bull. Again he backed up and mashed the engine of the Diamond T. A cold rage was overcoming Ken's tiredness. He had watched the collisions of the two mechanical giants from the place where he had fallen, but now he raised himself against the wind and leaped at the cab of the plough as it pushed forward for another lunge at the drift. He wrenched open the door and shouted into the darkness of the cab.

"What in hell do you think you're driving! You're smashing that truck to bits!"

A cold voice from within countered, "Whom do you think you're talking to, Lieutenant?"

"Whoever's driving this thing."

"I'll make sure we see each other when we get back." The colonel's voice was sharper than the wind outside.

“We’ll both be lucky if we get back.”

“That’s enough, Lieutenant. Get those airmen out of that truck and unhook it. Tell ’em to hang on to the back of the plough when they’ve finished.”

“Yes, sir.” When the plough moved forward again, four men clung to the back end of it like leaches. The wind pulled at their bodies and cut at their faces. It blew tiny ice crystals into the sleeves of the large mittens and sheathed their wrists and upper arms in ice. All their strength was drained into their aching arms. Ken wondered at the prodigious reservoir of strength that the human body can provide when the natural world screams at life and makes death so attractive, but if one of these men fell, none of the others would be strong enough to lift him back.

Ken’s concept of time became elastic to a degree that he had not thought possible. This was a lifetime which was not composed of shorter minutes or shorter hours.

The plough lumbered past the first black hangar two hours and twenty—seven minutes after the truck had been abandoned. Fifteen minutes later, Ken lunged through the icebox door to barracks 108 and stopped to lean against the orange—brown wall of the waste tank. He pulled off the large mittens with his teeth and let his arms dangle at his sides. There was no feeling in both his right and left wrists where the skin was splotted with white.

Doc Wakerson opened the inside door to the intermediate room and looked at Ken through the funnel-like opening in his parka. “What’s the trouble, Junior?”

“Where are you going, Doc?”

“Some stupid slob has got frostbite on both his wrists. I’m going to the hospital to see what I can do.”

“Does it look like this?” Ken held out his arms.

“How’d you do that?”

“Holding on to a snowplow for three hours.”

“Are the others this way?”

“I think so.”

“How did you freeze in that area? You’ve got the long mittens.”

“That wind drives the snow up around the wrists—forms a sheet of ice—look,” He shook his glove and let the chunks of ice fall on the floor.

“O.K., Junior, —don’t rub it or use snow. Don’t injure the tissue. Allow it to warm up gradually and don’t worry about the mottled color, that’s normal. I’ll be back after I give the word to the other troops.” Doc swung the door open and backed out into the storm. He returned within an hour and started to work.

“I’ve got some sterile bandages for you.”

“How are the others?”

“Oh, about the same as you. There won’t be any amputations but they’ll be uncomfortable for a while. What sent you jokers out into the wild and woolly?”

“A couple of scared men who might have frozen to death.”

“Next time, use your head.”

“It wasn’t my idea.”

“Sounds logical and normal.” Doe turned and walked out of the room. Ken heard him say, “You’ll find out, Mr. James, that this little safari is just the beginning.”

six

As spring approached the Arctic, Ken prepared for the day when the first tanker loaded with thirty thousand barrels of jet fuel would drop its rusty hook into Northern Cross Bay. The pipe line that lay on the bottom of the bay had to be connected to the shore lines by sections of flexible pipe. Each section had to be filled with compressed air and checked for leakage. The large strainers that were located before the big diesel—driven booster pumps had to be cleaned. The caterpillar diesels and the booster pumps themselves had to be serviced, checked, and tested for mechanical failures. Each valve had to be turned and greased. In the evenings, Ken studied the schematic map of the tank farm, trying to unscramble the maze of pipes and valves in a way that would allow no contamination of the fuels. Lieutenant Gains had ironically referred to it as his magnificent sewage plant. After considerable deliberation, Ken realized that the common line system could, in fact, serve sewage more easily. The newness of the problems, plus their urgency and number made time pass quickly for Ken, but there were moments that relieved the growing anticipation.

On the tenth of June, the P.X. received a stock of new luxury items and thirty minutes after the doors had opened, hundreds of men found excuses of one sort or another that gave them time to scan the new merchandise. During his lunch hour, Ken glanced casually at the new stocks of perfumes and cameras, but there was more direction to his rambling than mere window shopping. He had been studying the selection in the jewelry counter for months, and on this day he was ready to purchase the largest of the diamond solitaires that were sprinkled against the dark blue velvet background. In his reasoning mind he was making a careful investment, but in his inward soul, he wondered if Jane would like it.

“Let’s see that one,” he pointed to the solitaire.

“This one, sir?”

“That’s it,” The airman second class behind the counter could not conceal his surprise.

“If no one bought it, I was going to save up for it myself,” he said shyly.

Ken raised the ring out of its case and watched the various colors of refracted light dance from one facet to the next. He knew the stone well, but he must not purchase it hurriedly. “How large is it?” he asked.

“One caret.”

He examined it thoroughly and then closed the case. “I’ll take it,” he said abruptly. He had not questioned the ring size because he wanted the stone and knew that the rest could be changed. He unwound a rubber band from a large roll of twenty dollar bills and began to count them carefully. The airman second recounted the bills and completed the

necessary paperwork. In one short transaction, many months' savings were exchanged for a small piece of carbon, but Ken harbored a feeling of joyful excitement as he walked along the muddy road with the small case in the pocket of his parka. He looked at the distant cliffs of red sandstone that marked the eastern boundary of the island that protected the bay and sensed that even this world could be a friendly place.

With two weeks to go before the first tanker challenged the waters of the bay, the flexible pipe line remained in doubt. Pack ice had clustered around the point where the coupling was to be made, and the operation was postponed.

The fourth of July at Pitugfik was another twelve-hour working day. Pilots said that the visibility was good. The sun that never set had burned its way through the snow and had left the dark brown ledges to dominate the mountain sides.

The field phone finished its five rings and Ken raced around the corner of the desk to pick up the receiver which hung on the rectangular box.

"You think it's one of mine: Are you sure? O.K., I'm on my way." He slammed the receiver on the wire hook and yelled, "Sergeant Hill— where's that jeep?"

Sergeant Hill looked out the door, "I don't know, sir, but there's a Marmon outside if you want to go anywhere."

"One of our diesel trucks is burning twelve miles out on the road to M-Mountain—let's take the Marmon." As the big fuel truck ground forward in low gear, Ken could already see the black smoke billowing over South Ridge, and by the time they reached its summit they could see the fire clearly.

"The fire chief must already be there, sir. That blinking red light means they've got an 0-11A out there to fight this one," observed Sergeant Hill.

"Can't you get any more out of this coffee grinder?"

"No, sir, this is as fast as she'll go. We're going a hell of a lot faster than the A.P.'s think these trucks can go right now."

"Who's driving the M-Mountain run today?"

"I think I heard Airman Beach say he was going to take a run up there. He said he liked the chow on M-Mountain—." Sergeant Hill's voice trailed off into silence. Even at a distance of five miles they could clearly see the fire blaze up viciously and engulf the truck in a pool of swirling orange flame.

"Can't that fire chief do anything but watch?" Ken grabbed the door handle so hard that his knuckles seemed to whiten.

"He's probably O.K., sir—the driver, I mean," said Sergeant Hill after a considerable pause.

"This bucket of bolts isn't the fastest thing on wheels."

"I've got it floored now, sir. I wouldn't choose this truck to race in the Grand Prix." Sergeant Hill stopped talking and grunted like a wrestler as he worked with the large steering wheel around a curve and double-clutched to meet the increased grade.

The wind died and the billows of black smoke and boiling fire built up into an almost vertical column. The scene was spectacular against the back drop of barren hills and desolate ice cap. Anything that moved other than running water and wind-blown dust was unusual. The same fire in the midst of a dump on the Jersey meadows would not have seemed unnatural, but here it was set apart in ghastly splendor that made it seem like an oily pyre that burned endlessly.

The fire marshal waved the Marmon to a stop one hundred yards from the blaze. Ken opened the door and shouted, "Where's the driver?"

"Still with the truck!" Sergeant Hill looked at Ken and then turned away, "Couldn't you do anything?"

"He was dead long before we ever got here." The fire marshal scuffed the sand and continued, "It keeps flaring up whether we use foam, CO2 or dry chemicals. We've shot our wad—that diesel oil makes a damned hot fire!" Ken let go of the heavy door and stepped down slowly. "How much is that truck worth, Lieutenant?"

"About twelve thousand dollars." The fire marshal whistled long and low.

"I'd sure hate to sign that report of survey. You goin' to tell 'em you were celebrating the fourth?"

"That's not so funny, Chief."

The fire marshal looked back at the dirt and turned away.

The truck frame sagged and touched the ground in the middle like a sway-back horse. Ken inched in close to the inferno and focused his field glasses on the front seat. He turned away quickly and looked down at the ground.

"You going to pass out or lose your lunch, Lieutenant?" The fire marshal watched him solemnly.

"Neither one." Ken mounted into the seat of the Marmon Herrington and watched the smoldering hulk. By the time the wrecker was able to haul the gutted vehicle off the road, the stench was overpowering.

During the summer months in the Arctic, sleep is an ephemeral blessing that bears no relation to the amount of sunlight. As the sun dipped low and approached due north in its daily circuit, sleep had not found Lieutenant James.

• • •

It was July 15 when the tanker Mission Saint Vincent dropped anchor in the icy waters of Northern Cross Bay. A small launch carried Ken among the fog-shrouded icebergs in the direction of the tanker. There was something stately and calm about the bizarrely-turreted bergs.

The light blue that reflected from their cold hearts was singularly striking. When they glided close to the ice, Ken could hear it pop and crackle at its water line like frying bacon. The launch slid along the port side of the tanker and he grabbed the rope ladder that hung from the deck above his head. As he climbed, he could see that the hull had

been freshly scraped and painted. The mate extended his hand as he reached the deck level. “Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. You’re the petroleum officer?”

“That’s right—Lieutenant James.”

“I’m Mr. Cheever. If you step right this way, I’ll take you to the Captain; he’s expecting you.” He paused, “You had breakfast yet?”

“I ate at around seven.”

“Our steward’s pretty sharp;—might as well eat with the Captain.” The deck sloped toward the scuppers and was interrupted by cylindrical shafts three feet high and about four feet in diameter spaced regularly over the storage tanks below. The small hatches in the tops of these shafts allowed the mate and petroleum officer to stick the tanks and take samples.

Mr. Cheever strode aft past the coffer dams, across to the starboard companionway and down toward the compartment at the end. The captain stood up as the mate entered and extended his hand. He was a man of average height and build. His wrinkled khaki pants and shirt in addition to his need of a shave did not mark this man as the skipper, but his grip rivaled the fighting claw of a Maine lobster.

“This is Lieutenant James, the petroleum officer,” said Mr. Cheever. “Captain Erickson.—Sit down, Lieutenant. Let’s have some chow before we get to the business at hand. We won’t be anchored fast for an hour or so; we’ve got time.” A Puerto Rican boy took the breakfast orders and disappeared into the galley.

“How was your trip up to the frozen North, Captain?” opened Ken cautiously.

“Lousy! I hate this peasoup and berg dodging when you’ve got a load of jet fuel,”

“Did you have much trouble?”

“Pack ice to the south gave us some tense moments, but we’re O.K. to this point. She’d better not clobber in now—she’s just out of dry dock,”

“I noticed as I came up the side that she was in pretty good shape for a T-2. You came straight from Paulsboro?”

“That’s where we loaded. Say, how fast can we unload and get out of here?”

“It depends on a couple of things. If my booster pumps are in shape, I’ll be able to crank it through at about five thousand barrels an hour.” The captain tilted his head back and closed his eyes in mathematical concentration, “That’s about twenty-six hours for this load and that won’t come too soon.”

“We’ve got diesel left in those lines from last year. I won’t buy mixing that with jet,” stated Ken.

“What’re you figuring?”

“I want you to pump salt water for a couple of hours to flush out my lines.”

“O.K.—I’m easy to get along with.” He leaned back in his chair and smiled genuinely.

“You know, Lieutenant, there’s one thing you haven’t got up here that’s really something a little ways down south, They’ve got the biggest mosquitoes I’ve ever seen—this

includes Texas. I caught one in the cabin here and had to fold his wings to get 'em out the porthole.” Ken smiled politely. Captain Erickson continued to talk about the various voyages he had made and concluded by saying that Pitugfik was the last place in the world he would take his ship again.

“Say, what’s that king-size bird that looks like a crow? We spotted one of those a little ways south following our wake.”

“Probably the Arctic raven. They hang around dumps and pick up whatever they can...the ‘Skimos do the same thing.’ Ken was reminded of Coleridge’s bird that brought “both mist and snow.”

After breakfast Ken and the mate verified the amounts of fuel in each compartment and took samples.

For two days prior to the tanker’s arrival, Air Installations crews had grappled for the end of the undersea line, but had not completed the operation. It was only as the tanker was finally tied to the mooring buoys that the pipe was ready to go. Two hours later the hookup to the tanker was complete. While the final hookup was being made, Ken and Master Sergeant Ender followed the course that the water would take and made sure that all the gates and plug valves were properly set. Upon his return to the booster pump station, Ken found a note from the director of Port Operations stating that the tanker unloading was critically behind schedule. He stopped momentarily and listened to the diesel cats running smoothly at idle; he was ready.

“Where’s that phone we’re supposed to have, Sergeant?”

“There isn’t any, sir.”

“Base Communications was supposed to give us a ship to shore hookup; where is it?”

“They must have forgotten it, sir.”

“Forgotten? Hell! That was the main portion of their summer shipping season plan. It was supposed to be completed three weeks ago.”

“The people in charge rotated, Lieutenant,”

Ken wanted to shout something, but it was too much effort over the hum of the diesels. He looked up from the RPM gauge and spotted Colonel Geist ducking under the sliding overhead door.

“What in hell’s holding up this damned show?” he roared. “No communications, sir.”

“Who’s supposed to do that in the plan?”

“Sir, I suggest we move outside where we can hear each other.” Colonel Geist put his hands on his hips and stepped outside. Ken pulled the door down behind him and stood erect. “Base Communications was supposed to have done it two weeks ago, sir.”

“That’s not much of an excuse, Lieutenant James. Every hour that tanker sits there, we’re wasting government money. If I were you, I would find some communication and find it fast! Colonel Geist whirled and slid into the driver’s seat of the blue staff car.

He continued, "I'm going to have that cargo ship at the dock radio the tanker to start pumping. You had better be ready to take it." The rear wheels spun on the gravel, and the blue staff car surged forward.

"Lieutenant, what's he going to do?" asked Sergeant Ender.

"He's going to have that cargo ship radio the tanker to start pumping, and we've got to be ready."

"It'll be tense if he shoots it to us all at once."

"How come?"

"That surge will clobber us."

"I'm so shook I didn't think of that. Get in that weapons carrier and see if you can catch Colonel Geist and persuade him to let you direct the ship when it starts pumping!"

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Ender gunned the weapons carrier and bounced toward the pier, spraying muddy water out of the potholes as he drove. Ken ran to the rear of the pump house and began to yank the heavy wheel that lifted the sixteen-inch gate valve on the by-pass line.

If he could open it in time, the surge might be taken up in the mile of pipe beyond. He tugged the large wheel until his arms were weak with gnawing pain. He felt the line quiver as the water rushed toward the valve. The valve to the by-pass was not open far enough and the surge roared around the sharp elbows and into the giant strainers before the pumps. Ken watched the bellows expansion joint as it was brutally sprung to the exploding point. The diesel cats raced to take up the pressure and, within seconds, evened off the flow. He scrambled over the sixteen-inch pipes and gingerly approached the bulged expansion joint.

"Keep the suction pressure at ten pounds," he shouted to the diesel operator.

"I'll have to run her up to thirteen hundred RPM's, sir."

"Go ahead, we'll have to risk it."

Five minutes later Colonel Geist's staff car rocked through the water-filled puddles and stopped at the pump house door. "You should be getting pressure."

"Yes, sir, but we sprang the expansion joint before the pumps when the first surge hit us. I think this condition is dangerous—I'm going to get the tanker to cut down."

Colonel Geist grunted and stepped on the accelerator. As the staff car pulled away, Sergeant Ender halted the weapons carrier a hundred feet down the road and started walking toward the pump house.

"I was too late, Lieutenant—he wouldn't buy it anyway."

"It took the shock, Sarge, but it won't take much more." pointed to the swollen joint.

"Damn thing's twisted too—even upset the cement block underneath. It sure'n hell won't take any more of that," observed Sergeant Ender.

"Get on that ship's radio and tell the pumps to cut down to fifty pounds. She's fresh from drydock and sure packs a wallop."

“Yes, sir, will do.” The weapons carrier bucked forward and raced along the road on top of the long breakwater that led to the pier. Ken watched the carrier until it stopped at the A.P. shack at the beginning of the wooden surface. As he turned, he spotted a jeep rolling to a stop short of the pump house. A short, sharp-faced man in civilian clothes unfolded from behind the wheel and introduced himself as Bill Shaftner.

“I’m from the Corps of Engineers—helped build this system.” He held out his I.D. card in an unfolded wallet. “Thought you might need some help,” he added with a smile.

“I could have used your advice about a half hour ago—it’s too late now,” Ken waved his arm in the direction of the expansion joint. Mr. Shaftner walked over to the joint and examined it closely, “What pressure is the ship pumping?”

“I’m not quite sure. We haven’t got any communications—other than the radio on that cargo job at the dock.” Shaftner strolled inside and looked at the suction and discharge pressures.

“Ten pounds on the suction side is all she’ll take. You’d better keep it there. That must have really been one hell of a surge.”

“Ship’s just out of dry dock—shot us the juice all at once.”

“Weren’t they supposed to string up a phone?”

“That was the plan, but the Communications troops got drafted for so many unloading details—they never made it.”

“You can’t keep pumping like this.”

“Think we should stop?”

“That’s the safest thing.” He paused. “Hold the line a minute. I don’t work for the Corps of Engineers for nothing. Just keep pumping as you are—I’ll see what I can do for you.” Shaftner crawled into his olive drab jeep and splashed up the road toward the center of the base. One and a half hours later a field phone stood on a concrete block at the corner of the pump house. The thin wires that were attached to the terminals extended into the deep blue water and emerged on one of the buoys that held the tanker in position. From there, the wires stretched into the cabin nearest the pumps.

It was 1900 hours and the low angle of the evening sun exaggerated the red color in the series of shale and sandstone beds that formed a large cliff to the south. The base was relatively quiet except for the tireless diesels that seldom quavered from a steady one thousand RPM’s. Ken was tired and unshaven, but his muscles tensed like a startled cat when he saw Colonel Geist’s staff car approaching.

“Lieutenant James!” His voice was loud and raucous. “How much time have you got to go?”

“I’d estimate another seventeen hours, sir.”

Colonel Geist turned and glanced around as though he were looking for someone, “That’s too much time. Don’t you realize that it costs the government twelve hundred dollars a day to keep that tanker out there?”

“We can’t pump any faster, sir, because of the expansion joint.” Colonel Geist walked over to the joint apparently estimating the damage. “It’ll take it,” he said firmly.

“Mr. Shaftner doesn’t think so,”

“To hell with Shaftner!” he snapped.

“It is my opinion, sir, that it’ll cost more if we blow the joint...”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, Lieutenant James. What’s the pressure on the ship?”

“Fifty pounds, sir.”

“Tell ’em to take it up to a hundred pounds.”

“I feel it’s my duty, sir, to remind you that the Corps of Engineers advised against it.”

The colonel’s face reddened.

“God damn it, Lieutenant, raise that pressure!” Out of the corner of his eye Ken saw the pump operator duck inside the pump house. Colonel Geist stared coldly at Ken and said slowly, “I’m not going to repeat that order.”

Ken saluted and turned toward the sliding door of the pump house. He walked inside and motioned to the pump operator to come outside so that he could hear the instructions.

“Watch for another surge. Try and take it up by increasing the RPM’s.” The airman looked at him with amazement.

“The colonel wants it so that’s what we do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ken carried the field phone around the corner of the pump house to a position where he could watch the expansion joint and cranked the field phone. He could barely hear the voice at the other end.

“This is Lieutenant James speaking. Raise the pressure on your pumps very slowly.” Ken could hear the diesel cats increase their tempo.

“How high is it now?”

The voice answered, “Seventy-five pounds.”

“We’re trying to raise it to a hundred...” Before Ken could finish, he saw the expansion joint jerk and, as it burst, a jagged piece seemed to fly lazily at him, but he could not dodge it.

•••

The dark veil of unconsciousness began to lighten, and Ken could see the fluorescent lighting in the white-walled room. Doc Wakerson leaned over, “I’m glad to see you open those baby blues, Junior. You were concussed, so to speak.”

“My head feels like someone used it for batting practice—face burns, too.”

“That’s not surprising,” observed Doc, “considering you were grazed by a sizeable chunk of something. In fact, you have a three-stitch sample of my embroidery in the back of

your head.” Doc pulled up a chair by the bed and sat down deliberately. “What’s more you’re damned lucky you weren’t blown all over hell or burned to death.”

“What happened at the pump house?”

“There are quite a few stories floating around on that. I’ll give you the unofficial Wakerson picture, It seems that the pump house operator ran the diesels high to take the increase on the ship so when she blew the diesels began to run away. Is that the term you use?”

“That’s close enough.”

“I’m trying to tell it as he told it.”

“O.K., O.K., man, don’t stop there.”

“Anyway, he says that he pushed the throttle off and ran out the door. Then, thank God, he spotted you out like a flounder, so he grabbed you by the collar and dragged you to high ground.”

“You mean that tanker was pumping all this time?”

“You bet your sweet ass they were—sprayed all over hell.”

“Don’t say it. I see what’s coming.”

“Quiet, boy, let me spin this yarn. Next, some stupid S.O.B. drives by in a six by six and the whole show blows. Fire was really something; and that, Junior, is why your face burns you weren’t dragged quite far enough. Oh, I should mention that the tanker stopped pumping when they saw the fire.”

“That’s handy.”

“You just got a singe—nothing to worry about. You might say, Lieutenant James, that you owed your presence on this earth to one each pump operator.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“But then again your life won’t be worth too much after Colonel Geist gets through with you,”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Didn’t Hamlet say, ‘Troubles come not as single spies but whole battalions!’?”

“Claudius said it.”

“I stand corrected, but I’m in the right play. Well, anyway, it looks like Geist is looking for someone to pin it on and you are the super-logical candidate.”

“Aw, come off it.”

“I’m dead serious. He’s been ranting around shouting that he would court-martial Lieutenant James or hang him from a yard arm.”

“What in blazes is he going to charge me with?”

“Dereliction of duty.”

“What!”

“Down boy, you’re getting too excited.”

“You’re doin’ all the exciting. Where did he dig that up? He gave the order!”

“Well, that’s interesting. He hasn’t said a word about that.”

“When can I get out of here?”

“We’ll keep you here—oh, about a week for observation. We gotta make sure that knock on the cranium didn’t scramble your wires.”

“Damn it: How can I defend myself cooped up in this aluminum cell and tied to the rack!”

“They’ll give your defense counsel time to prepare the case.”

“This is the damnedest frame-up I’ve ever heard of.”

“Now relax, old man, and be charitable. They’ve just burned up a million dollars worth of Uncle Sam’s hard-earned cash. They’ve got to stick somebody for it. Who’s a more logical guy than the man in charge?”

“Your reasoning shows me zilch!”

“I’m trying to clue you in so you’ll know who to swing at.”

“Sorry, Doc. I didn’t mean to shout at you, but this gripes me all the way.”

“It’s O.K., kid.” Doc rose from the chair stiffly and turned to the door. “If you need anything desperately, just press the button. You’ll get service—in about an hour or so. Chin up and all that sort of rot; I’m going to join the troops in the sewing room.” Doc strolled out but what he had said left Ken stunned. His anger swelled and then diminished as the minutes passed. Someone must be playing an evil joke. This couldn’t happen to him. Surely they didn’t mean to hang him and him alone for trying to carry out a lawful order. Was Geist trying to teach him a lesson because of the truck incident? Could a lieutenant colonel be that small? Or was he just trying to save his own oak leaves? The thoughts were caught up and slowly returned to their pigeonholes by the sorting hand of sleep.

seven

The wheels of justice moved rapidly on the James case. The charges were served and a First Lieutenant Gregory T. Rymson was assigned to the case as counsel for the defense.

Ken was still in bed when Lieutenant Rymson came to see him. The defense counsel was a slender man of average height whose features and prematurely gray hair seemed to reflect a sadness beyond that inherent in his job. When he sat down, he moved slowly like a manager walking out to the mound to remove his best pitcher.

“I’m your assigned defense counsel; if you want somebody else, now’s the time to move.”

“I don’t know anybody who knows anything about it. I’ll have to rely on you.”

Lieutenant Rymson grimaced as though suddenly pained. "I was afraid you'd say that." He sighed heavily. "Let me brief you on my short though active legal career. First, let me say that my regular assignment is with Statistical Control. This defense business is just an extra duty. I am not a lawyer in the sense of Article—what—ever—it is, but neither is the prosecution, so in the eyes of the military, we're all even. Out of sixteen lambs I've defended the last five months, sixteen have been found guilty! My only saving grace is that I know the members of the court pretty well." He bowed his head slightly when he had finished and looked at the square tile blocks then he mumbled, "In other words, statistically, I'm a hell of a risk."

"I'd say you're about due for a win," said Ken softly.

"Well, you're an optimist; —that may pay off. Let me fill you in on a few other details. If you want to request a general court, it could be arranged, but the possible penalties go up." He reached into his pocket and produced a pack of cigarettes. "This duty makes me chew up a lot of these things."

"No thanks."

"That's right, you as the petroleum officer can't have this habit and live too long in that business. Getting back to the general; looking at it from the other side, they'll assign you a qualified legal eagle. Why in hell they made this a special is beyond me. Most places would have killed this before it got to the inner office. But ours is not to reason why... You didn't sign a confession, did you?"

"What have I got to confess?"

"Now let's review this whole thing." Rymson reached into his brief case and brought out a long typewritten sheet. "According to Geist's statement, at approximately 1900 hours local on 15 July he came by the pump house and told you to continue pumping at fifty pounds pressure..."

"That's just it, damn it! He ordered me to raise it to a hundred pounds!"

"Go on, boy; you interest me."

"I told him we shouldn't raise it—even quoted chapter and verse on what Shaftner said. He's from the Corps of Engineers. Geist got mad and ordered me to raise it anyway."

"I assume you haven't got witness one."

"I'm afraid not."

Lieutenant Rymson leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "That figures. We're back where we started—with just your word against his, there's only one possible verdict and that favors rank." The silence that followed was profound; finally Lieutenant Rymson started again.

"Where was that pump operator who saved your neck?"

"Inside the pump house, but he couldn't have heard anything from in there—I could barely hear outside. He was standing in the doorway for a second while the colonel was there."

"What happened next?"

“I told the operator that I was going to tell the ship to raise it slowly to a hundred pounds.”

“Did you mention the colonel?”

“I don’t remember whether I did or didn’t.”

Lieutenant Rymson was taking some notes on a small memorandum pad. “It looks like we’ve got to get ahold of that operator.” he said finally. “You don’t happen to remember his name?”

“He’s an airman first works for A.I.O. in their diesel power plants.”

“That description probably fits fifty men, but I’ll be able to find him O.K. There’s one thing that doesn’t figure. Why’s Geist got it in for you?”

“We tangled once before. We were trying to make a fuel run to Half Moon Lake in a phase three. I said a few things that riled him.”

“H-mm-n. It looks to me as though Geist is getting you before you put the finger on him for this fire. He probably figures it can only boil down to your word against his—in which case you’ve been had.”

“Doc says I’ll be ready to ride tomorrow.”

“That means you’ll be on the griddle the day after tomorrow. I’ve got to hustle on the spade work.” Lieutenant Rymson stood up. “If we’re really going to win this thing, we’ve got to play on another angle besides this business of Geist giving the order.”

“What’s wrong with the truth?” asked Ken coldly.

“Nothing, except that it’ll put you just where Geist wants you... his word against yours.”

“I’ll be damned if I’ll perjure myself!”

“Take it easy. Don’t blow your stacking swivel yet. We’re not going to play that way.”

“What other way is there?”

“I’ve got some research to do before I answer that one.” He turned to leave. “I could say don’t worry but that’s ridiculous—better start praying now.” The door closed softly behind him.

Ken could not help but feel that his whole career was precariously and unfairly on the block. Justice loomed as only a remote possibility. Lieutenant Rymson had not helped his peace of mind and for the first time, he felt a gnawing aloneness that permeated his whole being. The events swirled around him like an angry ocean without shores. Lieutenant Rymson had casually suggested prayer, and in this moment Ken probed the innermost recesses of the spirit to find words that would span the void to the Eternal. “God, give me strength...” He stopped and then continued, “to do thy will.” This was not what he had begun to say, but he felt strangely relieved. The door knob turned slowly, and he recognized the oil-stained parka that belonged to Sergeant Hill.

“I sneaked in the back way, sir. I thought you might like something to read.” He placed a bundle of magazines on the bedside table and sat down selfconsciously. “Is it true they’re trying to can you, sir?”

“Yes, it is, Sarge.”

Sergeant Hill looked down and ran his fingers over the fur lining of his cap. “The men wanted you to know that they’re behind you.” He paused and then added softly, “No matter what happens.” He reached into his parka pocket and pulled out a blue envelope. “Here’s your mail, sir. The guys in the Orderly Room figured that the reg. on who collects the mail didn’t amount to much in this case.”

“Thank you, Sarge.” Ken wanted to say more, but the words would sound out of place.

“I’ve got to run before the pill rollers catch me, sir.” Sergeant Hill edged around the door and was gone.

The handwriting on the envelope was familiar, but the Youngstown postmark caught Ken’s eye first. He opened it quickly and read each line. The doctors were experimenting with a new treatment which, if successful, would allow Jane to leave the hospital in six months. She did not mention failure. He thought that this was like her and, when he recalled his own problems, he was ashamed of his earlier despair.

At 800 on the morning of the trial, Doc Wakerson began rebandaging Ken’s burns. “We’re going to make you look like a blasted hero,” he commented as he unwound another spool of gauze. “I’ve used twice as much of this as is really necessary but, boy, you sure look convincing. They’ll take one look and acquit you. Come on, put that arm in the sling as I prescribed.”

“I don’t need it, and you know it.”

“You know this, and I know this, but the court doesn’t. Look, Junior, let’s not play Strategic Air Command with me...”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You don’t urinate cologne or excrete ice cream. In other words, don’t be so super-righteous. Anyway, look at what Geist is trying to do to you.” Ken didn’t answer. “Let’s see, that wheel chair can be adjusted so that one leg can be outstretched—that’ll really get ’em.”

“Listen, Doc, they know I didn’t get really hurt in that fire.”

“On the contrary, Junior, I have kept you from the public eye and have merely hinted grave things. Sergeant Clint! Drive the ambulance up to the receiving door.!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Cut the comedy, Doc,”

“We’re going to give you the full treatment. There’s no reg. against extra tender care, so relax. I’ve briefed these boys so that you’ll arrive just as the court members begin to get there. They’ll handle you like you’d been operated on from head to toe.” Ken was about to say something, but Doc held his hand over his mouth and whispered softly in his ear, “Don’t open your big yap again, or I’ll bandage it up. This is the only amusement we’ve had around here in months; so for the morale of the troops, play along with the gag.” The ambulance backed into the truck well, and the attendants wheeled Ken inside.

“Take special care of him, boys,—you know, the full V.I.P. treatment. The door closed behind him, and the attendants sat quietly along the flat benches that were let down on both sides.

“You guys are sure taking care of a real lemon,” commented Ken.

“That’s not what Doc says,” observed the sergeant in charge.

Now that the trial was so close, Ken found that his apprehensions were difficult to keep suppressed. His stomach felt bottomless. At exactly 0845, the ambulance rolled slowly through the potholes in the parking space in front of Headquarters and backed up to the platform at the top of the steps to the front door. The sergeant took a hammer out of his pocket and removed the railing which was opposite the back door of the ambulance. Ken did not notice the court members or any of the curious onlookers who gathered around and watched as the hospital attendants lifted him ever so gently over the high door sills.

Lieutenant Rymson looked far less composed than when Ken had seen him earlier in the week. He bent over the wheel chair and whispered, “I didn’t know you were hurt this badly.”

“Neither did I,” said Ken quickly.

The conference room at the north end of the building had been converted into a courtroom by the assistant trial counsel. Four tables had been pushed together at one end of the room under the large map of Greenland. The number of chairs behind the tables indicated that the trial counsel expected all the members to be present. The board members took their places one by one and examined their court-martial manuals with apparent interest.

Lieutenant Rymson shuffled through his notes and then leaned over. “You haven’t met Lieutenant Bassett, have you?”

“I’ve probably seen him at the club.”

“He’s the assistant defense counsel. He’s coming down the hall now.”

“Say, Chuck, I think it’s time you met Lieutenant James since you’ve been doing some of the footwork on this case.”

“Glad to meet you.” Lieutenant Basset’s smile was wide and genuine.

“I forgot to tell you. That airman first from A.I.O. is going to testify on our side,” whispered Lieutenant Rymson.

“What’s his name?” asked Ken.

“Carmell. —Sidney R. I’m not too sure what he’ll say when the prosecution gets ahold of him, but I think he’ll help us. The whole question is feathery at the moment.” Ken thought that to call it feathery was a magnificent understatement.

The president took his place at 0859 and brought the court to order at exactly 0900 local. The trial counsel stood up and read rapidly from a typewritten sheet: “The court is convened by...” His words formed a background for Ken’s thoughts which clung to the idea that this whole thing must be a preposterous dream, “. . .and a copy of which has been furnished to each member of the court, counsel, the accused, and to the reporter for

insertion at this point in the record.” The piece of onion skin paper that fuzzily listed the charges rested on the table in front of him. “The following persons named in the appointing orders are present...,” The ceremony, though just beginning, seemed as impersonal as the aluminum walls, but that was as it should be. “The prosecution is ready to proceed with the trial in the case of the United States against Kenneth Milton James, Jr., Second Lieutenant U.S.A.F. 6033rd Air Base Wing.”

The phrase, “The United States against Kenneth Milton James, Jr.,” fascinated Ken. The odds to begin with were staggering, but these were the kinds of odds that stimulated defiance.

The reporter was sworn in and he sat down at his small machine. Every word of these proceedings would be faithfully printed and transcribed for the final report to the higher reviewing authority. The court and counsels were sworn in.

“The court is convened,” said the president.

The trial counsel continued in a monotone, “The general nature of the charges in this case is dereliction of duty. The charges were preferred by Lieutenant Colonel Randolph B. Geist . ,” That name spoken so matter-of-factly symbolized the rising tidal wave that carried Ken toward a destiny over which he had no control. “... Neither the law officer nor any member of the court will be a witness for the prosecution. The records of this case disclose no grounds for challenge.”

The trial counsel continued to read mechanically, “If any member of the court is aware of any facts which he believes may be a ground for challenge by either side against him, he should now state such facts... The prosecution has no challenge for cause... The prosecution has no pre-emptory challenge. Does the accused desire to challenge any member for cause?”

“The accused does not,” said Lieutenant Rymson.

The trial counsel continued. “Does the accused wish to exercise his right to one pre-emptory challenge against any member?”

Lieutenant Rymson spoke to Ken quietly, “The prosecution thinks it can win without a pre-emptory challenge. We’re better off with the odd number as it now stands.” Ken nodded his approval.

“The accused has no pre-emptory challenges.”

The trial counsel began to read, “With the consent of the accused, I shall omit the reading of the charges, a copy of which is before each member of the court and the accused... “ Ken reread the charges on the small slip of onionskin paper and noticed that they had given him one of the last carbons. The trial counsel was still reading, “...the charges and specifications, the name and description of the accused, his affidavit and the reference for trial will be copied verbatim into the record.”

“The accused consents.”

“The reading of the charges may be omitted,” said the president.

The trial counsel continued, “The legal qualifications of all members of the prosecution are correctly stated in the appointing orders. No member of the prosecution named in the

appointing orders has acted as investigating officer, law officer, court member, or as a member of the defense in this case, or as counsel for the accused at the pretrial investigation or other proceedings involved in the same general matter.

“By whom will the accused be defended?”

Lieutenant Rymson rose like a startled rabbit. “The accused is to be defended by First Lieutenant Gregory Rymson, the appointed defense counsel, and Second Lieutenant Charles E. Bassett, the appointed assistant defense counsel.”

The trial counsel continued: “Will counsel representing the accused state whether the legal qualifications of the appointed members of the defense are other than as stated in the appointing orders.”

Lieutenant Rymson: “The legal qualifications of all appointed members of the defense are correctly stated in the appointing orders.”

The trial counsel turned slightly and continued, “Has any member of the defense acted as the accuser, a member of the prosecution, investigating officer, or member of the court in this case?”

“No counsel for the defense has so acted.”

Ken leaned over toward Lieutenant Rymson and asked, “When are they going to get through all this hogwash?”

“Don’t worry; they’ll get to you sooner than you think.”

“Didn’t we forget the challenges?”

“We shall see what happens. A mistake like that might throw this case out on its ear and save your neck...”

The trial counsel began again. “The charges were served on the accused by me on 17 July. How do you plead? Before receiving your plea, I advise you that any motions to dismiss any charge or to grant other relief should be made at this time.”

Lieutenant Rymson answered quickly, “The defense has no motions to be made. The accused pleads not guilty to all specifications and charges.” He sat down and looked at Ken squarely and said, “Now the fun begins.”

The trial counsel rose deliberately with the maroon Manual for Courts-Martial in his left hand. “With the permission of the court, I wish to read an extract from the Manual of Courts Martial, dated 1951, page 324, which bears upon this case.”

“Permission granted.”

The trial counsel began to read slowly. “A duty may be imposed by regulation, lawful orders, or custom of the service. A person is derelict in the performance of his duty when he wilfully or negligently fails to perform them, or when he performs them in a culpably inefficient manner. When the failure is with full knowledge of the duty and an intention to perform it, the omission is wilful. When the nonperformance is the result of a lack of ordinary care, the omission is negligent. Culpable inefficiency is inefficiency for which there is no reason or just excuse. Thus, if it appears that the accused had the ability and

opportunity to perform his duties efficiently, nevertheless, he may be found guilty of this offense.” The trial counsel sat down, looked across his table and smiled.

“I guess I’d better say something,” said Lieutenant Rymson over his shoulder. “With the permission of the court, I wish to continue reading the same reference so ably read by the trial counsel.”

“Permission granted.”

“However, an accused may not be charged under this article, or punished otherwise, if his failure in the performance of his duties is caused by ineptitude rather than by wilfulness, negligence or culpable inefficiency.” Lieutenant Rymson sat down and commented, “You don’t mind if you’re considered inept, do you?”

“It Is closer to the truth than the charges are.”

The trial counsel began again. “With the consent of the accused, the prosecution and defense stipulate that the accused was at the time of the alleged offense a member of the United States Air Force.”

The president spoke wearily, “Subject to objection by any member of the court, the stipulation is accepted.”

“The prosecution calls as its first witness, Mr. William L. Shaftner.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Ken, Lieutenant Bassett leaned over and whispered, “Don’t worry about him; he’ll help us.” While the trial counsel swore Shaftner in and asked the routine questions of identification, Ken tried to recall what actually had happened.

“Now, Mr. Shaftner,” continued the trial counsel in brisk tones, “If the accused is present in the court room, would you please point him out.”

Mr. Shaftner pointed a wavering finger at Ken, “I think that’s him, but with all those bandages, it’s difficult to say.”

“Let the record reflect that the witness pointed to the accused. Did you have any occasion to see Lieutenant James on or about the 15th of July?”

“Why yes, I drove my jeep up to the pump house at about 10:30 to see how the operation was going.”

“What did you find?”

“It seems that a surge from the pumps on the tanker had sprung an expansion joint before the booster pumps in the pump house number one.

When I arrived Lieutenant James was trying to figure out some communication from ship to shore,”

“What did you do?”

“At first I suggested he shut down, but then I thought I could get some communications for him, which I did.”

“Did you offer any advice?”

“I told him to keep the suction pressure at ten pounds and not to take any higher pressure from the tanker.”

“In other words, you felt that he understood the danger of pumping at a higher pressure,”

“Yes, I did.”

Ken leaned over to Lieutenant Rymson and asked, “Why don’t you object? Those are leading questions.”

“Negative perspiration, boy; this is part of the strategy.” The trial counsel smiled and said, “Your witness,” Lieutenant Rymson arose and walked deliberately in front of Mr. Shaftner. “Mr. Shaftner, did you and Lieutenant James disagree on the solution to the problem?”

“No, we were in perfect accord.”

“Would you say that he was trying to do the job right?”

“I definitely would.”

“Doesn’t it seem peculiar, therefore, that he later apparently disregarded the safety precautions that both you and he had agreed upon?”

“That was something I have wondered about ever since the accident.”

“No further questions.” As Lieutenant Rymson sat down, it was obvious that the trial counsel and the court were curious as to where this line of questioning was leading. The witness was excused and there was an air of expectation in the courtroom somewhat like the uneasiness of the crowd before a title bout.

“The prosecution calls as its next witness Lieutenant Colonel Geist.” Colonel Geist walked into the courtroom boldly and gave the president a sharp salute.

“Raise your right hand, please... You swear that the evidence you shall give in the case now in hearing shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.”

“I do.” Colonel Geist sat down easily in the witness chair. “Would you tell us your name, rank, organization, station, and armed force.”

“Randolf B. Geist, Lieutenant Colonel, 6033d Air Base Wing, Pitugfik Air Base, United States Air Force,” He spoke deliberately as though the information had been memorized.

“What is your specific assignment at this installation?” Colonel Geist swallowed and answered slowly, “Air Installations Officer.”

The trial counsel sat on the corner of his table and continued his questioning casually, “What is your function during the present shipping season?”

“I’m the assistant port operations officer.”

“Do you know the accused?”

“Yes, I do.”

“If he is present in the courtroom, would you point him out.” Colonel Geist pointed at Ken and smiled ever so slightly.

“Let the record reflect that the witness indicated the accused,”

“Did you have occasion to see the accused on or about the 15th of July?”

“Yes, I went down to the pump house in the morning and found that Lieutenant James had not provided for any ship to shore communications.”

“What did you do?”

“In view of the fact that every hour of delay meant a high cost to the government, I went aboard the cargo vessel at the dock, contacted the tanker by the ship's radio, and told them to start pumping.”

“Would you say that the accused was negligent in not providing communications?”

“I would.”

“Did you have another occasion to see Lieutenant James on the same day?”

“Yes.”

“At what time?”

“I would say around 1900 hours, local.”

“What happened then?”

“I discussed the unloading operation with Lieutenant James and advised him of the dangers of pumping at a higher speed with that expansion joint sprung.”

Ken grasped the edges of the table with his free hand and gritted his teeth.

“Down, boy; we'll get to this joker in a minute,” assured Lieutenant Rymson.

The trial counsel stood up and walked closer to the witness. “Now, Colonel, would you describe the lighting conditions.”

“I would say that they were excellent. The sun doesn't set all night.”

“Did Lieutenant James recognize you?”

“He certainly did.”

“What happened after you spoke to him?”

“I began driving my staff car out to the shipping pier. Suddenly there was an explosion behind me. When I turned around, I saw the whole thing in flames.”

“What did you do after that?”

“I went to the cargo ship at top speed and called the tanker to stop their pumps. The important thing about the tanker was that it was pumping jet fuel onto the fire at close to a hundred pounds pressure.”

“What was the pressure when you were at the pump house a few minutes before?”

“Fifty pounds.”

“Do you know why it was raised?”

“The only logical answer is that Lieutenant James took it upon himself to give the order.”

“Your witness.” The trial counsel sat down and nodded to his assistant.

Lieutenant Rymson walked around in front of the colonel with his hands clasped behind his back and began thoughtfully. “There are one or two points I’m a little hazy on. I believe you said, Colonel, that the accused was, in your opinion, negligent in not providing communications. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“In a briefing held on 10 June for the whole 6033rd staff, the subject was discussed, was it not, Colonel?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Do you recall who was charged with the responsibility of providing communications for the petroleum unloading operations?”

Colonel Geist reddened. “I don’t recall exactly, but I believe the Base Communications outfit was supposed to handle that. My point was that Lieutenant James should have made sure that it was accomplished.”

“In other words, the responsibility for the installation of communications was that of the Communications Squadron and not Lieutenant James?” Colonel Geist remained silent. Lieutenant Rymson continued, “You also mentioned that you radioed the tanker to stop pumping. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You further contended that they were pumping at a hundred pounds. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know it was pumping at a hundred pounds?”

“The pump operator on the ship said so.”

“If it please the court, I would ask that the testimony concerning the pumping pressure on board the ship be stricken from the record as hearsay in so far as he obtained the information from what someone else told him.”

The president glanced at the court members, “Subject to objection from any member of the court, the testimony concerning the pumping pressure on board the tanker is stricken from the record, and the court is instructed to disregard it.” Lieutenant Rymson stood squarely in front of Colonel Geist and resumed his questioning.

“Did you make any definite statement of your desires to the accused?”

“Yes. I told him definitely not to increase the pressure.”

“Did you say this in an ordinary tone of voice?”

“I believe I did.”

“How close were you to the pump house at the time?”

“I would estimate fifteen or twenty feet.”

“Do you recall whether the door was...”

“Objection. I cannot see that this line of questioning is material to the case.”

Lieutenant Rymson turned slowly to the court.

“I’m merely endeavoring to establish the conditions under which the alleged discussion took place. These conditions are quite important to my ultimate point.”

“Subject to objection from any member of the court, the objection is overruled.”

“I’ll repeat my last question. Do you recall whether the door was open or closed?”

“I believe it was open.”

“Were both the booster pumps in the station running?”

“Yes.”

“With two Caterpillar diesels running at a thousand RPM’s within fifteen or twenty feet of the place where you were standing, isn’t it possible, then, that you were misunderstood?”

Colonel Geist looked uncomfortable. “I can’t deny that it is possible, but I don’t think that it’s probable.”

“How often do you change deisel operators on a job of this kind?”

“Every four hours.”

“Why?”

“For medical reasons.”

“Would you enlarge on that a little?”

“I’m not too sure—it’s something to do with the ears.”

“I see. Now, Colonel, do you know why the line broke?”

“I believe it was because of the higher pumping pressure.”

“Where did it break?”

“From what remains after the fire, it looks like the expansion joint before the pumps gave way.”

“Why should it break at that point?”

“It had been sprung in the morning because of a lack of communications.”

“Who gave the order to start the pumps?”

Colonel Geist’s face flushed and his hands moved uneasily. “I did, but Lieutenant James should have opened the by-pass.”

“No further questions.”

The president looked at his watch and asked, “Does either counsel wish to retain this witness for further questioning?” Both sides indicated that there were no further questions.

“Does any member of the court wish to question the witness?” The court members shook their heads. “The witness is excused,” The prosecution announced that it had no further witnesses.

Lieutenant Rymson got up and began again. “The defense calls as its first witness Airman First Class Carmell.”

Airman Carmell entered the courtroom slowly but saluted the president with snap. After he was sworn in, the trial counsel continued, “Will you state your name, rank, organization, station, and armed force?”

“Sidney R. Carmell, Airman First Class, 6033rd Air Base Wing, Pitugfik Air Force Base, United States Air Force.”

Lieutenant Rymson took over the questioning of the witness. “What is your assigned duty?”

“I’m a diesel engine operator for Air Installations.”- “What was your assignment on or about 15 July?”

“I was operating the diesel engines at booster pump station number one.”

“Do you know the accused?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If he is present, will you point him out?” Carmell pointed to Ken, “Let the record reflect that the witness pointed to the accused.”

Lieutenant Rymson stopped to blow his nose. “What were your hours of work?”

“1800 hours to 2200 hours. We’re on just four-hour shifts ‘cause the noise of the engines makes you deaf for more’n that.”

“Did anything unusual happen while you were on shift?”

“Well, I’d been on shift for about an hour’n Lieutenant James had been there since I came on shift. We were runnin’ about nine hundred fifty RPM on both engines and had the suction pressure down to ten pounds and the discharge up to ninety pounds.”

“Do you know what pressure the ship was pumping?”

“Fifty pounds. I guess they’d been pumpin’ that all day. Long ‘bout 1900 Colonel Geist drives up and starts talking to the lieutenant.”

“How far were they from the pump house?”

“About twenty feet or so.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“I heard their voices gettin’ louder so I went to the door to see what it was all ‘bout.”

“Did you hear any part of what was said?”

“I thought I heard the colonel say, ‘Raise that pressure, Lieutenant.’ But it wasn’t real clear.”

“What happened after that?”

“The lieutenant came into the pump house and waved me outside. He then told me to watch for another surge and try and take it up by increasing the RPM’s.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“I must’ve looked surprised ‘cause he said, ‘The colonel wants it, so that’s what we do.’”

“Your witness.” The trial counsel rose and placed a stack of papers on the table in front of him carefully.

“I believe you said that you thought you heard Colonel Geist say something—would you tell us what you mean by ‘thought’?”

“The diesels were runnin’ and makin’ a lot of noise. I can’t be too sure.”

“In other words, it’s possible that he could have said, ‘Don’t raise the pressure, Lieutenant.’”

“No further questions.” The witness was excused.

“The defense calls as its next witness, Master Sergeant Ender.” Sergeant Ender walked in with hesitation but saluted the president briskly. The trial counsel swore him in and handled the preliminary identification questions. Lieutenant Rymson patiently continued, “Now, Sergeant Ender, when did you first see Lieutenant James on the morning of the 15th?”

“After he’d just come in from the tanker.”

“What time was that?”

“Must have been goint on 0900 hours.”

“What did you do after that?”

“We went over the lines and checked the valves to make sure we wouldn’t pump against an open valve. We also stuck the tanks that we were going to pump into.”

“What time did you get to the booster pump station?”

“It must’ve been after 1000 hours.”

“Did Lieutenant James remain at the pump house?”

“He stayed there from then on ‘till she blew that night as far as I know. I brought him sandwiches and coffee for both lunch and dinner.”

“Your witness.”

“No questions.” Sergeant Ender was excused and both sides conferred hurriedly among themselves.

Lieutenant Rymson turned to Ken. “Look, I’d like you to take the stand. They can’t cross-examine you on anything except what you bring up, but they’ll try to make you mad. Do you think you can stay cool?”

“I think I can.” Ken was reminded of the locker room just before game time. In the profound quiet, the coach would announce the kick-off line-up and then say, “Remember, don’t lose your poise.”

Lieutenant Rymson continued, "This is what I want you to do. I'm going to ask you what you believe the colonel said. You answer that you believe that he told you to raise it. That's the truth, isn't it?"

"It sure is."

"The trial counsel will jump on the word 'believe.'" I want you to be humble and stick with your story no matter what he says. Don't lose your head and let 'em rile you."

"I'll give it my best."

Lieutenant Rymson stood up and addressed the court. "The rights of the accused as a witness have been explained to him, and he wishes to take the stand as a witness."

The president of the court looked directly at Ken and read carefully from the manual. "As the accused in this case, you have these rights.

"First, you may be sworn in and take the stand as a witness. If you do that, whatever you say will be considered and weighed as evidence by the court just as the testimony of other witnesses, and you can be cross-examined on your testimony by the trial counsel and the court.

"Second, you may remain silent, that is, say nothing at all. You have a right to do this if you wish and if you do so, the fact that you do not take the witness stand yourself will not count against you in any way with the court. It will not be considered as an admission that you are guilty nor can it be commented on in any way by the trial counsel in addressing the court.

"Take time to consult with your counsel and then advise the court whether you wish to testify or to remain silent."

"The answer's the same," said Ken.

"The accused wishes to take the stand. If it please the court, the defense would request that the witness be allowed to remain in his wheel chair for the swearing in and cross-examination."

"Permission granted."

The trial counsel swore Ken in and continued on the identification. "State your full name, rank, organization, and station."

"Kenneth Milton James, Jr., Second Lieutenant, 6033rd Supply Squadron, Pitugfik Air Base."

"Are you the accused in this case?"

"Yes."

The trial counsel sat down. Lieutenant Rymson began his questioning. "Where were you from 1000 hours to 1900 hours on 15 July?"

"I stayed at the pump house. The hazard of the weak expansion joint, made it almost mandatory."

"What happened at or about 1900?"

“Colonel Geist drove up and we discussed the operation.”

“What did he tell you to do?”

“I believe he told me to raise the pressure.”

“What happened after that?”

“I told the airman first to watch for a surge while I told the pumps on the ship to raise the pressure slowly. I just got through telling ’em to raise the pressure and she blew.”

“Your witness.” The trial counsel stood up immediately and began his questions.

“You said that you believe the colonel told you to raise the pressure. Does this mean you were not sure?”

“I was sure at the time, but in view of the fact that the colonel says he didn’t, there must be some question as to what I heard.”

“Just how sure were you, Lieutenant James?”

“Sure enough to act on it.”

“No further questions.”

Ken wheeled his way back behind the table. “How’d I do?”

“O.K., boy... it’s up to me to carry the ball for the T.D. now.” The trial counsel said, “The prosecution has no further evidence to offer. Does the defense have any further evidence to offer?”

“It does not.”

“Does the court wish to have any witnesses called or recalled?”

“It does not,”

“The prosecution waives opening argument.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Lieutenant Rymson, “but there’s nothing we can do. We need this final argument, so here goes.” He walked around in front of the tables and began.

“The facts of this case certainly are confusing. At the moment, we have an apparent contradiction that can not be resolved easily from what has been presented. It is the intention of the defense to show why this is so, and furthermore to show positively that there was no negligence or dereliction of duty on the part of the accused.

“First, let us examine the testimony given by Mr. Shaffner. He stated that he informed Lieutenant James of the danger and he claimed that they were in perfect agreement at the time. He furthermore contended that Lieutenant James was trying to perform his duties correctly. Does this sound like negligence or dereliction?”

“Now let us examine what occurred during the rest of the day. From roughly 1000 hours to 1900 hours, the operation proceeded smoothly. Lieutenant James had stayed with the job—he didn’t even take time out for lunch or dinner. I ask you, is this negligence or dereliction?”

“At 1900 hours, Colonel Geist allegedly told the accused to continue at his present speed of pumping. Are we now to assume that the accused had a complete collapse of his mental faculties? Are we to assume that he acted on impulse? This does not make sense by the wildest stretch of the imagination. Should we assume that Colonel Geist was lying? Certainly not. Examine the testimony more closely, and you will note that both Airman Carmell and Colonel Geist agree on the possibility that the order could have been misunderstood. In fact, we have two witnesses to one who believe that this was the case. Now, let us pick up another thread from the testimony. Colonel Geist said that the diesel operators were on only a four-hour shift. Why?... Because of medical reasons involving the ear. Airman Carmell, probably the most qualified man to speak on the subject, mentioned that a man’s hearing was adversely affected if he remained in the vicinity of the diesel engines for more than four hours. Now review, if you will, the length of time that Lieutenant James had been at the booster pump station. From 1000 hours to 1900 hours—that’s roughly nine hours that Lieutenant James had been on the job, which is more than twice the time that the diesel operators work. The defense submits, therefore, that Lieutenant James did not understand the order correctly. Both he and Colonel Geist were standing only twenty feet away from the place where two diesel engines were running at a thousand RPM’s and it is conceivable that this alone would cause room for doubt.

“Using this as our reason, the accused’s orders to Airman Carmell and Colonel Geist’s statement begin to make sense.

“The defense contends, therefore, that the whole tragedy resulted from a misunderstanding that was brought about by physical conditions, The whole incident in no way reflects negligence or dereliction on the part of the accused.” Lieutenant Rymson sat down and winked confidently at Ken.

The trial counsel collected his notes and then addressed the court. “The prosecution wishes to compliment the defense on its most fertile imagination, but we are not here to determine whether the alleged offense is logical or not. Thousands of crimes are committed every year that have no apparent motive.

“Let us return to the facts of the case, pure and simple. First, Lieutenant James did not insure that communications would be installed in time. Here is the beginning of this disaster—when the expansion joint was initially sprung. Secondly, he also failed to open the by-pass line when he knew the shock was coming. Already we have set the stage by two mistakes of negligence. The third, and most damning of the three, he deliberately ordered the pressure to be raised when all the advice he had received stood against this act. The defense has in no way denied that he gave this order. It has, in fact, proved it by virtue of the accused’s own testimony.

“Airman Carmell’s testimony upon what he overheard is liable to serious question in so far as he was closer to the diesel engines and farther away from the conversation between Colonel Geist and the accused, “I submit that when Lieutenant James told Airman Carmell that the colonel wanted the pressure raised, he was merely making a statement to cover himself in case something happened. Let us remember, furthermore, that Colonel Geist claimed that a misunderstanding was not probable. Therefore, it appears that Lieutenant James’ actions in giving the order was not only negligent but premeditated in

that he endeavored to shift the blame to Colonel Geist in the event of an accident. Such an attempt to shift the responsibility to a higher authority is reprehensible in the eyes of the prosecution and should only be rewarded by a verdict of guilty.” The trial counsel sat down and looked grimly at the court.

“That guy really poured it on,” mumbled Ken.

“He’s just doing the best job he knows how,” said Rymson dryly. The president asked, “Has the defense anything further to offer?”

“It has not.”

“The court is advised that the elements of the offense are as follows:… “ While the president continued with the elements of the case, Ken felt that this could not be the end. Colonel Geist’s testimony aggravated him like a malignant growth. Why should a man of his rank so completely ignore the truth? The president’s words slowly interrupted his thought. —”The court is further advised: First, that the accused must be presumed to be innocent until his guilt is established by legal and competent evidence beyond reasonable doubt.

“Second, that in the case being considered, if there is a reasonable doubt as to the guilt of the accused, the doubt shall be resolved in the favor of the accused, and he shall be acquitted.

“Third, that if there is a reasonable doubt as to the degree of guilt, the finding must be in a lower degree as to which there is no reasonable doubt; and fourth, that the burden of proof to establish the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt is upon the government.

“The court will be closed.”

The defense, prosecution, recorder, and spectators all filed out of the courtroom, leaving five men to reach a decision. Ken waited in silence. Up the hall, Lieutenant Rymson and the prosecution carried on the argument vigorously, but the controversy was academic.

The court made its decision within twelve minutes, and the participants returned to the courtroom. Every muscle in Ken’s body tightened. He tried to repress the cramp that had begun in his outstretched right leg. His stomach reflected that sickening tenseness that manifests itself as a critical moment moves irrevocably closer. The president of the court was still thumbing through the manual as Ken wheeled the chair between Lieutenant Rymson and Lieutenant Bassett in front of the long table.

“The court will come to order,” The trial counsel looked over the court, “All parties to the trial who were present when the court closed are now present.”

The president read carefully. “Lieutenant James, it is my duty as president of this court to inform you that the court in closed session and upon secret and written ballot has found you not guilty of all specifications and charges. The court will adjourn to meet at my call.”

Ken felt a moment of intense exhilaration. Congratulations were being offered by many hands from all sides, but the edge of victory dulled as they lifted him into the ambulance.

The aching resentment toward Colonel Geist would have to be swallowed up in the furious activities of the shipping season.

Eight

Almost as soon as the Arctic summer had come, it began to wane in perceptible and ever-increasing steps. Following the first sunset, the position of its setting changed from day to day, moving from west to south across the iceberg-punctuated horizon. At last, only twilight remained.

Somewhere to the south twenty-four Baker three-six bombers already marked the blue with gently arching vapor trails. The estimated time of arrival was twelve hours away, and Pitugfik prepared for the demands of the Strategic Air Command. Ken inspected his refueling facilities and rechecked the greases and prop oils in the warehouse, but yet apprehension hid stealthily in the labyrinth of his mind. Each movement would be timed and criticized by a special inspection team. In any defensive or offensive maneuver, his part of the operation was the most vulnerable and time-consuming. The responsibility for the success or failure of the mission rested on silver eagles, but many quick and important decisions remained with slightly tarnished gold bars.

With the first muffled mutterings of six engines, men paused at their jobs to listen to the reason for their living in frozen darkness. Pride moved as they felt for an instant the oneness of success that gives a team of men consolation. In the gray of midday, the B-36's approached one by one with the gravity-defying slowness of hovering seagulls. Those that had already landed continued their stentorian uproar as they finished the post-flight check.

Ken stationed himself in a briefing room inside one of the large hangars and waited for the call that would begin the refueling operation.

"Who in hell is this Lieutenant James? I'll straighten him out fast!"

Ken turned and saw the sergeant point. "He's over there, sir." A bird colonel in a flying suit walked toward him. "I'm told that you're the refueling officer of this outfit."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm furthermore instructed that you want to refuel my planes by a lousy hydrant system."

"Those are my instructions."

"How do you mean that, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I mean that according to my understanding of the mission, we were supposed to test the refueling facilities. Hydrants are the refueling facility."

"We'll see about that. Look, Lieutenant,—you start refueling those planes by truck until you're told to do otherwise."

"Sir, may I suggest that you contact Colonel Stack, the base commander?"

"You don't seem to understand, Lieutenant, I'm representing the Strategic Air Command. My mission is to get those planes refueled by the fastest possible method, and that's by truck!" The colonel turned and walked out of the room without looking back.

Ken picked up the receiver to the field phone. "Polar Exchange please... Sergeant Hill? Lieutenant James. How many F-6's are in shape to roll?" Ken scribbled the number eight on the pad in front of him. "How many F-1 A's?" He wrote down four on the next line. "That leaves twelve in the shop. No parts. That figures. A S.A.C. Colonel was just in here and wants us to use trucks. We've got to try and give 'em what they want." He hung the receiver in the slot, lifted his parka off the chair and walked out into the hangar. The gigantic doors at the front closed behind a thirty-six that had been hauled inside as he opened the small personnel hatch and stepped outside. The wind felt momentarily refreshing, but quickly it again became the face-galling breath of the Arctic. His footsteps squeaked as he walked on the wind-hardened snow. From the top of a tall drift he could see the big birds as they were dragged by their bills to the parking areas. He made a rough estimate of the distance from each to the truck fill stand and turned his steps back to the hangar. When he returned to the briefing room, he found the S.A.C. colonel waiting for him.

"I suppose you went out for a coffee break."

"No, sir."

"I'll say one thing for you guys—you stick together. We'll try your hydrants until something gets screwed up. I've never seen a damned hydrant system yet that worked."

"Your men will contact us when they want service."

"That's it, Lieutenant. I'm going to time you to see how long it takes." The colonel turned and marched into the hangar.

It was completely dark outside when the first call came over the field phone. Sergeant Hill spoke rapidly.

"Lieutenant, one of those S.A.C. crewmen tripped the switch to the hydrant on Spot 6. Before I could cut her off, the whole thirty-six was covered with avgas."

"Did you get the crew out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you get the Fire Marshal?"

"Hess supposed to be on his way."

"I'll be out in a minute." Ken grabbed his parka and ran out to the jeep that he had parked by the hangar. The door handle stung his hand and reminded him to put on his heavy gloves. He killed the engine and coasted to within three hundred yards of Spot 6. As he approached on foot, the acrid smell of avgas rolled heavily downwind and cloyed his nostrils. Sergeant Hill loped across the hard snow to meet him.

"Is that you, Lieutenant?"

"Yea."

"What'll we do, sir?"

"Cover it with foam as fast as we can. Where is that fire chief?"

"Sir, we'd better shut this area to traffic."

“Where are those S.A.C. guards? We could sure use ’em now.”

“Lieutenant, look at that son-of-a-bitch driving toward us !”

Ken began to run toward the bouncing headlights shouting and waving his arms but suddenly he broke through the crust and fell face first.

“Stop! Damn it, stop!” The wind seemed to cut the words short; the headlights continued.

A blue flame slithered along the ground toward the plane and then in a brilliant flash it clenched the center of the fuselage in a fist of fire. Ken rolled away from the heat and looked for Sergeant Hill.

“Get back before your suit catches on fire! Get the extinguishers from the pump house and try and keep it from spreading to the pits and tanks!”

Sergeant Hill ran around to the pit side of the blazing aircraft. From all quarters of the field the blinking red lights of the 11-A fire trucks converged on the fire and began spewing foam.

The fire chief spun his jeep around and stopped next to Ken. “Anybody aboard?”

“No!”

“How’d it happen? I just heard that you spilled some gas.”

“Some slob drove up here with his jeep and started it off. I tried to stop ’em, but I was too late. You can see the jeep over there.” He pointed to the empty jeep that still stood a hundred feet from the plane. The chief grabbed one of his men, “Get a hook on that jeep and drag it back 1”

“Who was driving?”

“I don’t know; they bailed out fast.”

“We’ll get the answer from the motor pool.”

“Can we save anything, chief?”

“Maybe a little of the tail.”

“That’s just what we all need.”

“How’s that?”

“A little piece of tail.”

The chief smiled broadly. “Lieutenant, I don’t know how you can keep your sense of humor when you know they’ll probably try and hang you for this one.”

“After a while you get used to it—nothing phases you.”

The noisome smelling foam spread out across the blacktop in a small lake. In the center of the lake, the crinkled spidery frame of the B-36 lay prone. As the white suits moved in close to the billowing smoke, Ken and the chief moved in some distance behind.

A blue command car skimmed down the taxiway, kicking up rotating clouds of ice crystals. He skidded and fish-tailed between two fire trucks before he stopped at the edge

of the foam. The S.A.C. colonel burst out of the front seat and ran into the foam until the heat drove him back. Colonel Stack followed gingerly behind him.

“Where’s that damned Lieutenant who wanted to use this stinking hydrant system?” Ken walked around and into the spotlights from the 011-A’s.

“There’s that sad son-of-a-bitch!” He walked toward Ken deliberately. “Listen, you stupid ass, get your trucks on the job immediately or I’ll bust you lower than the lowest whale dung on the bottom of the ocean!”

Ken looked at Colonel Stack. “Sir, I don’t think the colonel and I have been introduced.”

“This is Colonel John Blunda of the Strategic Air Command—and I might suggest to you, John, that you calm down before we continue.”

“Calm dawn: This stupid son-of-a-bitch just burned up four and one half million dollars worth of my planes—and you tell me to calm down! Why don’t you get this incompetent slob out of the job. He’s already been in court once!”

“Just a minute; you’re getting under my skin. We have no reason to believe that Lieutenant James was at fault.”

“He’s in charge, isn’t he?”

“Of refueling, yes, but we don’t know that the plane was being refueled!”

“Well wasn’t it?”

“No, sir.”

Colonel Blunda turned abruptly and walked toward a master sergeant who was examining what remained of the tail section. “Chief!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Weren’t you refueling when this thing caught on fire?”

“No, sir.”

“What in hell were you doing?”

“We were trying to stop up some leaks in the fuel lines—cold weather...”

“So what happened?”

“I guess the cover must have come off the switch box.”

“What switch box?”

“The one that starts the hydrant system pumping avgas.”

“Where is this switch?”

“It’s right under the fuselage near the hydrant opening.”

“What next?”

“One of our troops stepped on the damned switch and started the whole works pumping. The cover came off the hydrant and avgas sprayed all over the bottom of the ship. One of the refueling boys cut it off fast, but we must’ve had twelve hundred gallons out here.”

“Then what?”

“We abandoned ship and waited for the fire department to foam it down. The whole thing started when some guy drove up in a jeep.”

“Was it the lieutenant over there?”

“No sir. He got here before that and tried to stop ’em, but the guy drove in anyway.”

Colonel Blunda turned slowly and walked back to where Ken was standing. “I owe you an apology, Lieutenant. I hope you’ll accept it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who was the joker in the jeep who set off the whole mess?”

“I don’t know, sir. In the dark with these parkas on, it’s tough to recognize anybody.”

“I guess my troops’ll have the full story on this. Let’s get out of the cold.”

•••

At the end of the third day, the last of the bombers left the runway and the reverberating dissonance lost itself among the fjords. When Ken returned to the office to check the stock position report, Sergeant Hill had already placed the corrected figures on his desk.”

“Sir,—I sure hope this is O.K. We can’t stay awake much longer.”

“How long have you been without sleep?”

“Goin’ on three days now, but you’re in the same shape, Lieutenant.” Ken nodded sluggishly. “This looks O.K. Have ’em type it up so I can sign it.”

“There’s a guy dressed in civilian clothes outside. He says he’s from the Office of Special Investigation. You want to see ’em now, Lieutenant?”

“Send him in. Can’t keep the cloak and dagger troops waiting. By the way, did he say what his name was?”

“I think he said it was Sharp, sir.”

Mr. Sharp smiled broadly as he shook hands.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Sharp?”

“The usual—maybe answer a few questions for us.”

“Shoot while I’m still awake.”

“O.K. I’ll get to the meat. The wheelhouse has noticed that you’ve got a string of accidents after your name.”

“I can’t deny that.”

“You’ve had more than your share, and we’re trying to find out why if we can.”

“What do you want to know?”

“For one thing, according to your testimony at that trial, you thought that you were ordered to raise the pressure. Is that correct?”

“It is.”

“Are you positive?”

“I’m sure of it !”

“Were you ever involved with Colonel Geist before this matter of the pump house?”

“We made a run out to Half Moon Lake in a phase three. We all almost cashed in the blue chips on that play.”

“What happened?”

“We lost a truck and two of my men got frost-bitten wrists.”

“The Doc says you got a little yourself.”

Ken smiled. “I see you’ve already nosed around quite a bit.”

“Was Colonel Geist involved in that other accident where the truck burned?”

“No, not as far as I know.”

“According to the accident report on the day-before-yesterday fire, you tried to prevent a jeep from going close to the plane—is that correct?”

“Yes, I guess whoever it was couldn’t hear me over the noise of the jeep. It was pitch black anyway.”

“Did you see who was driving?”

“No. I was going to check with the motor muddle but I never got around to it.”

“Was Air Installations doing any work for you at that time?”

“Let’s see—one of the boilers in the pump house out on Spot 24 froze and broke some pipe. They were supposed to fix that... I think they also activated a new set of pumps out there. Don’t tell me Geist was in that jeep!”

Mr. Sharp moved uneasily. “He says he was out inspecting Spot 24.” Ken shook his head. “It looks like we couldn’t stay out of each other’s way if we tried.”

Mr. Sharp got up out of his chair. “I see you haven’t had much sleep, so I’ll let you get some sack time.”

After Mr. Sharp left, Ken sat back for a moment and looked at the map of the pipe system. He wondered why Geist had used the taxiway when the road was almost as short and much less dangerous. He fell asleep in his chair before other thoughts could follow.

nine

“Did you get some sack time, Junior?”

“Sure did, Doc. Feel like a new man.”

“Pretty good flick tonight. I’ve seen so many Grade Z pictures that anything else seems magnificent by comparison.” Doc dusted his ashes into the peach can ashtray and walked into the main lounge of the Officers’ Club. “See those guys playing bridge—the one

closest to the window has cleared twelve thousand dollars at the game since he's been here."

"Who's sucker enough to play with that outfit?"

"There's new blood coming in all the time, Junior. I'm sure glad it's coming, too. We're getting stale, you and I."

"You know as well as I do, Doc, they pulled a boner when they cut out all leaves."

"Gotta bring in men and equipment—can't have the troops goin' home to mama every few minutes. We're raising a brood of pampered, tough-talking brats in the old U. S. of A. Discipline is what they need..." Doc paused. "The only trouble is that I'm the most undisciplined cynic of them all. How 'bout a drink, Junior?"

"I'm with you."

"What'll it be?"

"Let's be practical, Doc. Ask 'em what he's got."

"He's got everything. As you may recall, the Liberty ships made a rum run a few months ago."

"V.O. on the rocks."

"Didn't know you were a drinkin' man."

"Neither did I."

Doc smiled and pointed to a well-lighted picture of Marilyn Monroe that hung above the back row of bottles. "How many movies 'till rotation?"

"Must be about seventy."

"I'm down to twenty-nine."

"One guy has it figured to seconds."

"Too damned depressing."

"What is?"

"Large numbers. If some son-of-a-bitch came up to me and said you have a hundred and fifty million seconds to go, I'd clobber 'em." Doc turned from the bar and looked over the slot machines to the tables beyond. "I wonder how many seconds he's got to go."

"Who do you mean?"

"Look at Geist sittin' over there all alone with his thoughts. He's been at that table for hours... he'll drink himself into an ulcer."

"What's his problem?"

Doc turned back to the bar and stared at the bottles. "I don't know, Junior. I've been trying to get a line on him ever since he torpedoed you. He hasn't got any close friends—nobody seems to like him much either. I had one of the personnel troops look at the 201 file, and it seems his wife and kids left him. In fact, as far as the record is concerned, he's all alone except for Uncle Sam."

“Maybe we should go over and talk to him.”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry for the guy!”

“If it’s a guilt complex that’s eatin’ him, maybe I could smooth things over a little.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Junior, but you’d be a lot safer just letting things ride,”

“As he’s going now, he isn’t doing the Air Force or himself any good.”

“Now look here, Junior, take a word of advice from your old Dad. Geist’s been sittin’ there since I went to the movie. He’s probably got enough booze in ’em to be real mean—and you’ve got just enough in you to make you over-confident.” Ken put his arm on Doe’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about the Kid. I’m just going to try and be friendly.”

“Just remember, you’re playing with fire.” Doc walked between the bridge players and out the far door.

Ken squared his shoulders and walked casually over to the colonel’s table.

“Good evening, sir.”

Geist looked up and paused before answering. “Good evening, Lieutenant.”

“Are you expecting someone, sir?”

“Er—no—sit down.” Ken moved one of the steel-backed chairs out and sat down. “Well, Lieutenant, what do you have in mind?”

“I saw you sitting alone, sir, and I thought that this would be a good time to talk things over.”

Geist moved uneasily in his chair. “Continue.”

“Our two shops have to work so closely together that it doesn’t pay to have friction; so for the sake of the mission, I thought that we ought to try and bury the hatchet over a drink or two.”

“I can’t figure you out, Lieutenant. You should hate me and everything I stand for:… But no—you come up here like a friendly puppy and say, ‘Let’s bury the hatchet.’ What’s your game?”

“I haven’t got a game. Is it a cardinal sin to want to get along with people?”

“It isn’t natural for someone in your position to act this way. If you’re trying to butter me up for your efficiency report, I’m the wrong man. Try your squadron C.O.”

“I’m sorry you feel like taking it that way, sir.”

“How would you suggest I take it?”

“At face value.”

“Now, just tell me why should you feel so bound to the mission.” Ken looked down at his empty glass and then sidewise at Colonel Geist. “You said that I should hate you. To tell you the truth, I can’t respect myself if I hate someone,”

“How about the enemy?”

“This is required in a state of war. To be a top-notch fighting man I guess you’ve got to hate in some degree, but I’m claiming that a state of war is not the desired end of society.”

“Lieutenant, war has been with us since our ancestors hung upside down from the trees. You can’t change human nature.”

“Just to say it’s human nature, sir, and then do exactly as we have in the past is not progress. I believe society progresses when we begin to do what we have all talked about in the wouldn’t-it-be-nice-if category. Somebody’s got to start the ball rolling someplace in the hope that it’ll become the style.”

“You can’t legislate an anti-hate campaign !”

“No, sir, but I propose to deal with my fellow men in accordance with my own beliefs.”

“You can’t tell me, Lieutenant James, that by virtue of all this circuitous logic you overcame the feeling that you must have had at that trial. Logic is pleasing to the philosopher but not one of us follows it when his own ox is gored. There must be a more powerful reason.”

Ken leaned back in his chair and studied the fingerprints in the condensed water on the outside of his glass.

“You’re quite right—there’s probably another reason. It’s one of those things that you don’t realize until someone else points it out.” Ken began self-consciously as Colonel Geist studied him carefully, “Call it insanity, madness, sentimentality or whatever you will. There’s a girl I know back home who would make two or three of me when it comes to courage. She’s flat on her back in a hospital, but still she attacks life with everything she’s got. They’re experimenting with a new treatment now... one of those that may cure or kill; she’ll take the chance every time and go in smiling.

“I asked myself what she would say about this whole show. The answer was clear as the nose on my face. Here we are standing guard so that people like her can have a fighting chance in a free society. For these people and for the others who can’t do it themselves, we’re doing the job. I don’t know; maybe it’s like Doc says—after you’ve been here a while, your mind becomes over-occupied with home, but I feel obligated to get along with everybody if I’m going to do the job right.”

Colonel Geist sat quietly for a moment. “Lieutenant, that’s not insanity. It sounds like you’re in love with that girl. But I’ll buy that one.”

“Shall we call it square?”

“All right, Lieutenant, all square.” Colonel Geist extended his hand and Ken grasped it warmly.

A few minutes later, Ken pushed through the two heavy doors into a night as clear as though there were no atmosphere. The Big Dipper circled overhead during the dark season and its individual stars seemed as close as the sixty-watt bulb that lighted the entrance of the last barracks in the row.

Doc was standing in the hall when Ken entered at the far end. “Well, how’d it go?”

“It was a little tougher than I expected.”

“—So you’re no better than when you started.”

“I wouldn’t say that. He agreed to shake hands and start from scratch—but I am not sure whether he was just trying to shut up a dull second lieutenant or not.”

Doc turned and walked toward his room. “I got to hand it to you, Junior. You at least tried.”

tEn

It was early in the afternoon when Sergeant Ender came into the outer office stamping the snow off his feet and slapping his mittens together like seal flippers.

“The Lieutenant in?” Sergeant Hill nodded. Ender laid a sheaf of papers in the “In” box on Sergeant Hill’s desk, “Here are those damned tank readings. It’s colder’n hell out there.”

“You ain’t no brass monkey.”

“I’m not in the mood to take any crap from you, Hill. Wait a minute—I’ll take this one with me.” He drew one of the sheets out of the pile that he had just laid down. He knocked on the blue door and entered.

“Lieutenant, we’ve got problems!”

“What’s up?”

“Take a look at those readings on tanks five and six.”

“Five feet—that’s too low. We need more than that to hold the things down in a phase three. Transfer ten feet from number nineteen.”

“That’s the problem, Lieutenant. The transfer line’s blocked.”

“Where?”

“I’ve tried the bleeder valves up to the gorge and on the other side of it. It’s my guess that we’ve got water frozen in the bottom of that shallow V where the pipes are suspended across the gorge. It must’ve collected water in it and frozen solid.”

“You say you’ve tested the bleeder valves on either side of the gorge?”

“Yes, sir, she must be plugged out in the middle.”

“That’s a heck of a place to get to. Do you think you can get out there?”

“We can crawl along the pipe, but it’s damned dangerous. It’s about a hundred feet to the bottom of that gorge.”

“I’ll call-Aircraft Maintenance and see if we can borrow one of those heaters. If we get enough ducts, we can thaw it out. I’m not too sure how to get it out there.”

“Don’t worry, Lieutenant, you get us the heater, and we’ll get it out there.”

“If anybody tries to go out there, be sure to tie a rope around him.”

“Yes sir.”

“I’ve got a staff meeting at Base Headquarters, so it’ll be a couple of hours before I get out there.”

At 1730 hours local, Ken’s jeep rolled to a stop at one side of the Transfer Pump Station. Sergeant Ender and Sergeant Hill were waiting inside the pump house. Ken stamped his feet and threw back the hood on his parka as he reached the warm air inside.

“What’s new in the wheelhouse, sir?”

“Tomorrow’s a day off for nonessential personnel. We’re essential, so the usual Sunday shift rules apply. The Base Commander wishes you all a Merry Christmas—and, last but not least, I spoke to Colonel Geist, and he’s coming over to see if he can figure a way to get that line unplugged.”

Sergeant Hill looked at Ken curiously. “You’re going to ask that guy’s advice after the trouble we’ve had with him?”

“We’ve got to get along with Air Installations. Without them, we couldn’t maintain this tank farm for a week. You apparently get along with them on the operating level. It’s up to ME to get along on the command level.”

Sergeant Hill shook his head and looked at the floor. “O.K., Lieutenant, but everything that guy touches seemed to turn to trouble.”

“Let’s forget that. Sergeant Ender, what have you done to the diesel line thus far?”

“We removed the big gate valve just after the manifold to see if she was stuck, but it was working O.K. I went over to Aircraft Maintenance and borrowed one of their heaters with some ducts like you suggested.”

“Did you try to get to the bleeder valve in the middle?”

“I shinned—you know—sittin’ down and inchin’ along, and I got the ducts out there by suspendin’ ’em under the pipe. That damned bleeder valve is on the underside of that pipe. There’s nothin’ between it and those rocks below.”

“Didn’t you use a rope?”

“I tried but, with all this bulky clothing on and my short arms, I couldn’t get the rope around the pipe.”

“You didn’t get the bleeder valve open then?”

“No, sir. I had to lean way over to turn the handle—and without a rope, I didn’t think it was worth it.”

“I’ll go along with that.” Ken sat down on one of the grease-stained benches and unzipped his parka half way. “Where are the rest of the troops?”

“They’re outside keeping that heater going. That thing sure eats gas.”

“What’re you using in it?”

“One fifteen—one forty-five,”

“Let’s go outside and take a look.” They stepped outside onto the roadway that ran along the edge of the gorge.

“We could see the valve from here if we had a good spotlight. That flashlight of yours doesn’t give enough light to work by.”

“Sergeant Hill, go inside and get the diesel drivers on the phone. Ask ’em to bring over the truck with the spotlight. I think 385’s the one.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s the plan, sir?”

“The plan is to drain the water from the middle of that V.”

“That’s a real hairy job, Lieutenant.” Sergeant Ender paused significantly. “Who’s goin’ to be the lucky guy?”

Ken couldn’t see the sergeant’s face in the darkness of the parka hood, but the voice intimated more than the words.

“I guess I’m elected.”

“Sir, I’ve been out there. That’s too risky for the officer in charge to be fooling around with it.”

“The troops who built this thing must have done it hundreds of times, so it’s not impossible.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, sir, but I don’t think you should take the chance.”

“How many days can the base last on the diesel that we’ve got on the other side?”

“About a week, sir.”

“O.K. That means we’ve got to clear it and clear it fast.”

“Now, would you want to order one of you men out there? They’ve all got wives waiting for ’em to come home.” Sergeant Ender scuffed the snow with his boot and said nothing.

“I’m it then. Where’s that rope you tried to work with?”

“Over here. It’s stiffer’n hell, Lieutenant.”

“Let’s look at the pipes on that crossover.” The four pipes about three feet apart angled down on a ten degree slope to form a shallow V in the middle of the gorge. “Looks like it’s possible to walk out there by alternating steps between two of the pipes. That suspension doesn’t get in the way,”

“One slip, sir, and you’d go right down between ’em.”

“I’ll sit down on the thing and slide along.”

“Here comes 385, Lieutenant,”

Ken drew a deep breath. “Let’s get started,” Sergeant Ender started to tie the rope around Ken’s waist. “I haven’t had dinner yet— make it good and tight. I’ll carry the rest with me and tie it to the pipe when I get out there. Keep that spot on me... just in case.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ken paused at the brink of the gorge, took a long breath and sat down on the pipe. He inched his way along gingerly in a sliding leapfrog motion. Below the pipe, he could see only darkness, but he knew that the throat of the gorge was choked with unyielding stone. In front of him his long shadow followed the curved surface and fell away into blackness on either side. He was alone with nothing but a cylinder of incredibly cold steel between his legs. He wondered what the temperature actually was—twenty-five, thirty below, probably colder. The end of the rope pranced giddily in the air below him, and he became fascinated with its motion in the wind. He had slithered around the cable supports and now was almost at the center. As he reached the lowest point in the saddle, he bent forward, hugging the steel, to see if he could reach around the pipe. His free mitten caught the end of the rope and he drew it around the pipe. He thought that Sergeant Ender’s arms must be very short. The only knot he could manage looked very loose, but he didn’t have the strength to make it tighter.

Another light suddenly flashed on the wall of the gorge in front of him. He turned his head slowly and saw a vehicle bucking down the sharp incline to the pump house. Colonel Geist had arrived.

Ken backed up two feet and bent forward again to see if he could reach the bleeder valve. The pipe outlet was easy to reach, but the valve handle was farther down. He edged to one side and noticed that his flying suit slid easily across the pipe. His mitten closed carefully around the valve handle and he twisted it hard, but it didn’t move. He unclasped the pipe and sat erect for a few moments taking long breaths. Leaning forward and moving his arms down, he grasped the valve handle with his right hand and yanked with all his strength. His weight slipped sideways and then stopped as his legs and arms squeezed against the steel. He squirmed his weight on top of the cylindrical surface and again sat upright as sweat trickled down his nose onto the fur inside his parka. Forward again, and his gloved hand could now turn the handle easily.

As he recovered once more, he noticed that his sleeve glistened wetly. He flexed the sleeve and watched the ice crack and drop off into the darkness. Taking off his glove, he reached around with his bare hand and felt water dropping slowly.

“A few more heaters might do the job,” he said aloud. He untied the rope and paused to consider the problem of his return. The suspension cables blocked his backwards retreat, and he realized that he must either turn around or continue straight ahead. The other side of the gorge was out of the range of the spotlight, and he wanted to stay within the range. He sat quietly for a few moments and then decided to prop one foot against the next pipe and then swing the other over to it. He swung the right leg over easily, but the second followed with more difficulty. As he moved his right leg back again over the pipe, the momentum carried his center of gravity to the right side. His hands, arms, and legs clawed at the smooth surface, but his body rotated slowly around until he hung by his arms and legs beneath the pipe. His heart pumped wildly as hot sweat saturated his clothing. He knew that he could not hold this position for much longer than a minute.

Sergeant Hill grabbed a rope in which he had already tied a loop and ran to the edge of the gorge.

“Don’t sit on it—walk down it!” Colonel Geist’s voice was loud and commanding.

“You’ll never make it!” Sergeant Hill felt the rope yanked out of his hands and watched, open-mouthed as Colonel Geist’s lithe frame weaved back and forth in giant steps along the two pipes. Geist reached the low point in the V in a few seconds and spread himself across the two lines.

“Put your foot through the loop: I’ve got your foot O.K.—now, going to pull you around. Keep those arms locked!” Ken’s body edged around the pipe until his stomach was again on top. His pounding brain barely comprehended the shriek of anguish that was cut short by the wind. He turned his head and saw only the rope dangling lifelessly across the two pipes. Ken clung to the frigid steel and prayed to Almighty God.

It was mid-afternoon of the next day when Mr. Sharp knocked on Ken’s door.

“Come in—I expected you before this.”

“I suppose you know what I’m here for.”

“My statement of what happened, I guess.”

“You’re right on the money.”

“Fire away.”

“What was Geist doing down at your shop yesterday?”

“My diesel line to the base was plugged with ice in the middle where the pipes cross the gorge. I asked Geist to come over and give me advice on how to clear it out.”

“You asked him?”

“I did.”

“What happened next?”

“I had shinned out to the middle to open the bleeder valve under the pipe and... “ “You were in the middle before he arrived.”

“Right. I remember the headlights of his jeep shining on the opposite side of the gorge. I’m not too sure what happened after that... I slipped while I was turning around on the pipe and was barely holding on underneath. I don’t know how long I stayed that way, but I heard Geist’s voice giving me instructions. He dangled a rope with a loop in it, and I put my foot through it. He pulled me on top from there.”

“Did you see him when you came on top?”

“I heard a yell, but I never saw him fall, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“You never touched him?”

“No.”

“That fits with what Sergeant Hill said. Is that all?”

“It makes you feel grateful and lousy at the same time when a guy gives up his life so that you can live.”

“I wouldn’t lose much sleep over that.”

“How do you mean?”

“I guess I’d better fill you in on this. You know Lieutenant Weiss?”

“In charge of Air Police?”

“That’s the man. He was going through the personnel files looking up somebody’s record and he happened to spot Geist’s 201 file; you know, the one with the mug shot in the corner. Well, he saw that the guy in the picture didn’t look like the Geist we know, so he handed it over to us. We nosed around a bit and found out that Geist was divorced and had no relations. This was interesting from several angles. In the Z.I., there was an unsolved case concerning a body that had been hauled out of the Raritan River. To make a long story short, this body seemed to check out with the 201 file. This gave us the idea that the original Colonel Geist had been abducted at Camp Kilmer and someone put in his place. Since each officer carries a copy of his records with him, this was a pretty easy job.

“When I came around to see you before, we were trying to get a line on what he was up to. Evidently his mission was to disrupt things as much as he could and get information at the same time. You see where you fit into this?”

“I read you. My shop was the easiest thing to destroy.”

“You’re battin’ a thousand.”

“Why didn’t you guys nail him?”

“First, we didn’t have enough evidence.

“Secondly, we hoped he’d give us a clue to some more of his kind.”

Ken shook his head. “I can’t figure why he saved my neck.”

“That’s one I can’t answer.” Mr. Sharp rose to leave and turned, “I guess we’ll never know the answer to that one.” The door closed, and Ken stood quietly for a moment. He moved to the dresser and withdrew the small jewelry case from behind a row of black socks.

As a thousand spectrums skimmed from facet to facet, the answer became clear.

THE END