



AFTER
the ZAP
michael
armstrong



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**MICHAEL
ARMSTRONG**


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For information address Warner Books, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

 A Time Warner Company

Hachette Book Group, USA

237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

First eBook Edition: August 2001

ISBN: 978-0-7595-2439-2

Visit our Web site at www.HachetteBookGroupUSA.com

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WE FELL SO FAST I WAS ALMOST WEIGHTLESS

We must have hit a cooler pocket of air, something that made the blimp suddenly drop for a moment; then the air caught us, pitching us about forty-five degrees and sending all of us tumbling to port, our cable spools whirring like fishing reels. Levi's cable went taut, and the eye bolt snapped out of the wall. As he slid toward the opening, he grabbed for the edge of the hatch—and missed.

Kicking out from the bulkhead, my cable spinning behind me, I shot over the gaping hole and made a wild grab for Levi's harness, catching the end of his cable with my right hand. But it whizzed through my fingers, cutting to the bone. Levi flailed his arms, caught the lip of the bay and hung on with his fingertips. I clawed my way to the edge, reached for his wrist and caught his

My cable whined and I felt like a shark taking the drag to the limit. The wind roared. The blimp pitched again, we swung against the side of the bay, and I felt Levi's grip start to slip...

Dedication

To my father,
Allan L. Armstrong, M.D.
November 19, 1923–January 21, 1982,
and to my friend,
Michael D. Baring-Gould
May 7, 1937–July 25, 1986

Acknowledgements

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“I think that they should put the code [to launch a nuclear attack] in the heart of a child, so Reagan would have to tear it out to use it.”

—Petra Kelly, former head of the West German Green Party

CHAPTER 1

She was all punk and plasmatics when I first saw her at the St. Herman's Club. Her Mylar tunic reflected blues and purples and pinks from the neon icon hung over the bar. She was a neon icon herself, dressed in lime green tights, a magenta turtleneck, and fluorescent-orange cowboy boots. Her face was a Maori mask, fine lines drawn on it like fingerprint whorls. Her eyes were made up like cat eyes, and her lips were a bright magenta. She wore a Mepps fishing lure in her left ear and a tiny jade labret in her right cheek.

When she smiled the jade skin plug bobbed up on her cheek and fell into a dimple. Her teeth were clean and even except for a little gap between the front incisors. She wore a fingerless black leather glove on her left hand. Her hair was dyed an azure blue, matching her eyes, and it was arranged in a complicated braid that fell down to her waist.

She held the tip of that blue braid in her left hand and waved it in front of her face, trying to be coy or something. She was coy, all right—like a shark. I gave her a quick glance as I walked by the dance floor, just like I gave the two-tone twins and the gang of albino cruisers a quick glance, but I wasn't lusty after anyone, not just then. I had other things on my mind. I wanted a beer. The St. Herman's was rumored to have a basement full of pre-Zap beer, none of it gut rot. Blue Braid would have to wait. We exchanged electric looks and then I went to get my brains fried.

The St. Herman's Club whirled around me like a slow motion carrousel. It was a club within clubs. At the center was a circular bar, the neon icon of St. Herman glowing beneficent over the crowds. On the carrousel's rim, doors opened up into other rooms that circled slowly around the hub. Every now and then—when the band quit playing and the club got silent for a brief moment, as bars sometimes do—you could hear the crack of whips and the groans of slaves turning the floor of the carrousel down in the basement.

A large arc of the carrousel was taken up by a stage. On the stage a gang of cossacks were froghopping to the house band, Johnny and, the Oosiks. The Oosiks crooned some blues number about a woman named Cordova "who nuked ma heart in two," which impressed me, not because of the song but the sound; the Oosiks were singing into bone microphones, and the sound shook the walls like a gentle earthquake.

Where the Oosiks had gotten electronics from I didn't know. Maybe Japan. Lots of weird stuff came in from Japan, though the Japs weren't supposed to sell stuff to us in the States. I hadn't seen real electronics since the Zap, since that big thermonuke went off miles up in the sky and fried the world's microchips into little puddles of brown glop. The microphones looked like bones but the sound that came out of them was clear and distinct and strong.

About halfway through the song—at the end of the line, "You fry my eyes / like neutron flies"—there was a pop and a burst of flame from a box behind the singers, and the sound system went dead.

The horns and guitars and drums petered out, and then one of the Oosiks went over to the box, fiddled with something on the back of it, and pulled out a smoking vacuum tube. Tubes. The Oosiks used tubes, circa 1960 or something—damn antiques. I was impressed even more. Tubes hadn't been fried in the Zap, and if you could find a tube, any tube, why, that might make you a rich man. Johnny and the Oosiks was a high class band, indeed.

I pushed my way to the bar, holding my copy of the *I Ching* against my chest so that folks would get the idea that there was a reader around. I didn't know how many readers there were in Kodiak. Some places didn't have any readers, and if Kodiak was one of those places, it couldn't hurt to advertise, especially in bars. People in bars always wanted things read, and sometimes they wanted to let you keep what you read for them. It was the book that impressed them, not the words within. The *I Ching*. What did they know of the *I Ching*? Still, I could hear the Oracle murmuring in my ear, even with the book shut.

"It furthers one to cross the great water," the Oracle had said. And had I not crossed the great water? Had I not booked passage on the *Orca*? And had not *Orca* Captain left me here at Kodiak, someplace in the godforsaken People's Republic of Alaska? Would it further me? I'd find out.

Oh yeah, I'd find out.

I slapped the *Ching* down on the bar and sat down next to a guy with hair cemented into two spikes that made him look like a snail. The guy glanced at the book with dead eyes, blank eyes, and drooled on the counter. The book seemed to stir something inside him; a flash of intelligence rippled across his face, then died. Spikes got up and moved to an empty bar stool two seats down. He glanced back at the book once, and shuddered.

From a pouch around my neck I took out three copper coins, then pulled a stub of a pencil from a little pocket on my vest. Doubt nagged me, doubt that had almost kept me from getting on the *Orca* in Sea-Tac Int'l Airport down south, and I needed to know if I was going in the right direction. Was I on the true path? I would ask the Oracle. I opened the book to the inside cover and threw the coins six times.

A code I'd written on the inside cover told me what each of the four combinations of heads and tails could mean, each combination standing for one of four lines: a broken or unbroken line, or changing broken or unbroken line. I wrote down the lines and built the hexagram from the bottom up. I got SU. Following, an unbroken line at the bottom, two broken lines, two more unbroken lines, and a broken line at the top, none of them changing. No changing lines meant that I paid no attention to the meaning of the lines in the Oracle. Sui erased all doubts, for it said in the Judgment:

**Following has supreme success.
Perseverance furthers. No blame.**

The Oracle was saying that I should follow—someone, something, I didn't have the foggiest idea. But I knew the Oracle, knew the devious ways it worked, knew that once it got its hooks on reality it didn't let go. The *I Ching* was like a peephole into the future, a link to some cosmic connection, and it worked, almost all the damn time.

A big hand slammed the book shut, scattering my coins across the bar. I looked up, stared into the bloodshot eyes of the bartender, a scowl like a bad attack of gas on his face. He pushed the book toward me with his right index finger, a finger about the size of a small spruce tree, and stared at me little harder. I noticed his other hand was under the bar and I had to assume that whatever was in the hand could do nasty damage to my body. Times like that, it's a good idea to be polite. I decided to be polite.

"Hi," I said. "Anything wrong?"

"Yeah," he said. "No readin' in St. Herman's, unless it's the Bible, that's what's wrong. That the Bible? Don't look like the Bible to me."

"It's the *Book of Changes*," I said. "Sort of like a tide book." I opened the book up, showed him page 231, hexagram 60, Chieh/Limitation.

"Words," he said. "The book has *words*." He said "words" the same way someone might say "cancer" or "snakes."

"Yeah," I said. "So?"

"I thought it was a picture book," the bartender said. He reached over, pushed the book away from him. "Man, no readin' of *words* in here, not even the Bible."

"Heck, I'm sorry," I said. "Don't you have any readers in Kodiak?"

"We had one, once," he said, licking his upper lip, "but we ate him."

"Oh." I took the book off the bar, leaned over, and slipped the *I Ching* into the back pocket of my vest. I looked to my right and caught Blue Braid staring at me. I turned away quickly. Maybe it wasn't so smart to advertise.

But I couldn't understand why someone would eat readers—eat *me*. I guess a lot of people blamed readers for the Zap, figured that words equaled intelligence and intelligence was what made the Zap, made the big thermonuclear bomb that fired a million-watt electromagnetic pulse that warped and scrambled and rearranged the neurons of everyone's brains. To lots of folks—certainly Spruce Fingers there—readers were a curse, readers were bad news, quid pro quo, let's eat readers.

Heck, *I* didn't cause the Zap. Not me. I just read. I figured the guys who did fire the Zap didn't have to be readers to do it. Maybe if more people *had* read, they might have had the wisdom to keep the world from clawing out its throat. But try telling that to people. Nope, sometimes it's better to keep your mouth shut.

And it wasn't like I'd come off clean from the Zap. Sure, I could read. Sure, I could look at the letters and make sense of them, but I didn't have the memories to add to the word. I didn't have the past that made the words mean more, didn't have the experience to make the words my *own* thoughts.

Everybody was supposed to have memories, but what did I have? Vague notions of where I had been. Flashes of insight that flickered before my eyes in the dawning hours. Twitches in my body when I would try to do something I thought new, and it would turn out I already had done, like helping Orca Captain sail and navigate. Odd feelings of already seen when I knew for a fact I'd *never* seen.

All I could remember from before the Zap were the immediate moments before the bombs blew miles in the sky. I had been someplace warm, someplace where the air hung heavy with salty spray, outside a pink mansion surrounded by booming music, people tripping their minds out on some kind of mushroom, and me, me, wrapped up in aluminum foil—a costume, I think it was—when the Zap hit. I remembered the burning flash, the crackling like heat lightning in the sky, and then darkness, deep violet darkness, and then awakening to the pink building on fire and people burning books. Nothing else. My memories had been wasted as surely as most people's minds had been wasted. I didn't know why I had to be so different, though I figured being wrapped in aluminum foil might have

helped, but it had happened and that was that. In some ways I was about as good as ol' Spikes there, drooling on the counter. The Zap hadn't left me clean, either. So what did Spruce Finger know?

The bartender stood, tapping his hands on the plastic-drenched wood of the bar. "Um, what do you do with readers now?" I asked.

"Nothing," the bartender said. "We don't need no readin' here. No namin', either. We just make our own names up."

"Good idea," I said. "What's in a name?"

"You got it," he said. "Want a beer?"

I smiled, glad to change the subject. "Yeah, okay. Give me a beer." The bartender started to gather up my coins. I stopped him, took the coins, handed him a .22 bullet. "Give me a *good* beer," I said. "Something from, you know, *before*."

The bartender smiled, took the bullet, bit it, flipped it in the air, caught it, and dropped the bullet into his barter bag, a big leather pouch around his waist. He went to a large icebox, opened it with a key hanging from a leather thong around his neck, and pulled out a brown bottle icy with frost. He handed me the bottle, and I smiled at my good fortune as I read the faded red label: Budweiser. The bartender watched me savor the fine brew.

Beer. Glorious beer. For that the trip across the Gulf of Alaska might have been worth it. Five years hadn't aged the beer much at all. It was cool and tart with just that right kick of hops. I let the beer wiggle down my throat, caressed it with my tongue. They didn't make beer like that any more; the crap they made these days tasted like battery acid. Down south I had once gotten two weeks lodging for a bullet, but that beer was worth it.

"Good, huh?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah," I said. "You really have a basement full of beer?"

He nodded. "But don't get any ideas. We've got a contract with the KOMs—Kodiak Militia. A KOM gets two free beers a week here. Steal beer from us, you're stealing it from them, if you get what I mean."

"I do," I said.

I sipped my beer, nodded at the bartender as he went down to the bar to wait on a few customers. He came back a moment later—guy must have liked me, or maybe he was just being friendly.

"Beer okay?"

"Wonderful," I said.

"When you get in?" he asked.

"Yesterday," I said. "The *Orca*." I rubbed my coins together, then put them back in the pouch around my neck.

"You staying in Kodiak?"

I felt this little shiver go down my back; why did he care? "No," I said. "I'm going to try to work my way north."

"The *Orca*'s not going north?" the bartender asked.

"South. *Orca* Captain heard there were some nice islands down south. I'm heading north."

"Why north?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's just this urge. You know how sometimes when you're walking down a path, and the path splits, and you take one fork just because it feels right?" The bartender nodded. "Well, that's the way north is for me. Every time I come to a fork, I take the one that goes north. It just feels right."

The bartender pulled his hand up from under the counter, slapped a wet rag down, wiped up the drool Spikes had left on the bar. "So what do you expect to find there?"

“My memory,” I said. “Somewhere north is my memory. Zap fried my memory.”

“You’re a wipe,” he said.

“A what?”

“A wipe. That’s what we call someone who got their memory wiped by the Zap. My brother was one. Woke up after the Zap and didn’t know me from anyone.” He looked down the bar at Spikes. “Could be worse. That guy’s a total wipe— what some call an ass wipe. Hardly a brain left at all.” He slipped the rag back under the counter. “So you’re looking to move on?”

“Maybe,” I said. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a flash of Blue Braid dancing, turned to look at her. The bartender followed my stare.

“Nice,” he said. “Maybe you should talk to her. She’s a blimper. They’re going north, I hear.” The bartender turned around, went to drag one of the albino cruisers off a customer they were trying to hustle.

I stared at the mirror across the bar, watched the bar swirl in a mirror behind my back. I could see myself between mirrors and right on the infinite edge. Brown hair, combed back and flipping over the collar of a green-and-blue plaid flannel shirt. A scraggly mustache. Blue canvas pants. And this vest with like a million pockets.

Blimper? I thought, watching Blue Braid dance in front of me. Her hair swung around her waist and the light gleamed off her tunic. Hot. She was dancing with some guy in pink tights, but it was like he was part of the crowd. Blue Braid was a kaleidoscope swirling in the middle of dullness. Every now and then she would glance my way, and once she smiled, a beckoning smile, I thought.

Over by the door I idly noticed the bartender talking to a man and a woman, both wearing red armbands and carrying nasty-looking little submachine guns. I turned around, finished my beer. I glanced over at the bartender, wished he’d quit talking to the people with the guns, and come get me a beer. The bartender pointed at me, and I gave him a little half-wave, then realized he was pointing me out to the people with the guns.

A fly crawled across my neck, and I reached up to swat it. Something cool and smooth wrapped itself around my hand. I pulled it down, felt resistance, turned, looked up at Blue Braid, her hair coiled around my hand.

“Dance?” she asked.

I blushed. “Not really . . . I’m kind of clumsy,” I said.

“*Dance*,” she said, and yanked me to my feet. I had to lift my chin to look at her; even with the boots, she had about three inches on me, and I’m almost six feet. I let her pull me to the dance floor. She took my hands in her hands—Johnny and the Oosiks were doing a slow number and couples were bobbing like drunk buoys in desperate embraces—and whispered in my ear.

“Those folks with the guns are KOMs, kid. They’re after your hot little buns.”

“Me?” I asked. “What did I do?”

“You *read*, dumbskull, is what you did. You read in public in Kodiak, which is about the fastest way to make yourself lunch. Let’s ease over to the edge here.”

Blue Braid and I worked our way from the center of the bar and up onto the carrousel, to a small area of the dance floor before the band. Blue Braid jerked her head toward a hallway that a hole in the outer wall of the carrousel was opening up to.

“Head for that hall,” she said, pointing with her chin at the hole.

“They really would make me lunch?” I asked.

“Or slave you,” she said. “You want to stick around and find out?”

“Not really,” I said, thinking of the crack of whips from the basement. I looked down the hall, saw

what she had in mind. If we could get to the hallway before the KOMs, the inside wall of the carrousel would move around behind us and cut them off. I looked back into the crowd, saw the two KOMs pushing their way around the rim of the carrousel, knocking people aside, kicking over chairs. "Yeah maybe we should leave."

"Maybe," she said.

Blue Braid started shoving her way through the crowd like she might have had to do this once or twice before; good for her, I thought. I liked that. I liked a woman who knew how to get through crowds. I stayed in her wake, trying to jostle people so they'd bunch up behind us. The hole in the inside wall passed over the hallway, opening about halfway. We jumped through it just as the carrousel creaked around one more notch.

The hall went about five feet and ended in a door with a lock and chain wrapped around the push bar, and a red flap of tape over the handle that was supposed to keep people from opening the door, I guess. There was faded lettering on the door that read EMERGENCY ONLY: ALARM WILL SOUND which didn't bother Blue Braid a bit. She shoved the door open and smiled as the tape snapped apart. Some alarm. No bells, no lights, just a gust of cold air blasting into the hall. I hung on her heels and we slipped through and out onto a patio. The carrousel turned another notch. I saw one of the KOMs poke an arm through the door, then yank it back as the hallway behind was cut off by the slow revolution of the rim.

Out.

There was a high fence around the patio, and the patio was covered almost to the tops of the tables in snow. That fence didn't mean anything. It was wood slats over gridlike metal. Blue Braid kicked a slat with those bright orange cowboy boots, got a toehold, climbed up, then reached down with that braid and wrapped it around my wrist. I pulled, got a toehold, then looked back. There was another door leading onto the patio. I jerked my wrist away from her braid, jumped down, ran over to one of the picnic tables.

"Come on," Blue Braid said.

"Got to block that door," I said. I thought I heard someone pounding from the inside. I flipped the table over, snow falling onto my pants, flipped the table once more, jamming it against the door.

"Move it!" she yelled.

I ran to her, jumped up at the fence, grabbed for the braid. She jerked her head forward, I scramble for a hold, and then we were over the fence.

The back of the St. Herman's Club was on a road that went along Kodiak harbor and up into the mountains, I remembered from when the *Orca* had docked earlier. That might be good, I thought. The KOMs would have to get out the front door and swing around to get us, and if we were lucky, we'd be gone.

I stopped to catch my breath. Blue Braid looked back at me, motioned for me to keep going.

"We're not free yet," she said.

I leaned over, hands on my knees. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because you're kind of cute," she said, smiling. "And because I need a reader."

"Why?"

She shook her head. "Maybe I like readers," she said. I stood up, glared at her. "Okay, I need my name read."

"Okay," I said. Reason enough, I thought. Hadn't the oracle said, "Joy in movement induces following?" I'd follow. I'd follow her, even if she was poison. Women often were. Lots of women had given me that line before, that they wanted something read. Oh yeah. What they had wanted was . . .

well, not words exactly. Blue Braid might be different. She might want the word alone. I smiled at the thought. If she wanted a little more, well, she'd be worth giving it to. In any case, I'd follow her if it meant getting away from the KOMs. Better that than becoming lunch.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Up there," she said. She pointed up and to the south, to a flat mountain. *Orca* Captain had pointed it out to me when we came into Kodiak: Pillar Mountain. A little red light blinked from the top. The road behind the club—DEAD ROAD, a charred metal street sign said—led straight to the bottom of Pillar Mountain. We took off down it, Blue Braid leading.

It was maybe a mile to the mountain, and by the time we got there I was half out of breath. Blue Braid was hardly panting. I looked down Dead Road and couldn't see anyone coming. The KOMs might have gone to get help, might be sneaking up the road right then just waiting for us to make a move. I caught my breath, looked up Pillar Mountain.

We were at the bottom of a trailhead that switchbacked up the side of the mountain, just to the right of a big landslide scar that made the mountain look like a giant grizzly had slashed its face. A rope dangled over the scar. Some big boulders from the landslide littered the ground near the trail head.

"We go up?" I asked her. Blue Braid nodded. "How?"

She reached into her big purse, threw me a hunk of webbing. "Put this on," she said.

I took it from her, untangled it, saw that it was a harness of some kind. I watched Blue Braid put a similar harness on, copied her. The straps of the harness wound under the crotch, around the shoulder across the back, and connected at the chest.

"You ever use a monkey harness before?" she asked. I shook my head. "Better get used to it—we hang from them a lot on the blimp."

"Hang? Blimp?" I asked. I thought the bartender had been joking.

"Yeah, blimp," she said.

Blue Braid pulled out a little flashlight from her purse and clicked it on. Batteries. She had batteries. I hadn't seen a battery smaller than a six-pack since I'd thrown away the little battery from my old watch four years ago. I was pretty damned impressed. Blue Braid flicked the flashlight on and off a few times. A light flashed back at us from the top of the mountain, and then something dark moved. Something big. Something huge.

Something rose up from the mountaintop and came toward us. A white light flicked on its nose, red light on one side, green on the other. The thing grew larger and larger and black, indigo black, three colored lights on the thing sharp and distinct against the night.

It rode down the side of Pillar Mountain away from the top until it hovered over us. It was like a whale, a floating whale, large enough that when I put my thumb up I could not blot out its shape. The thing floated toward us, humming, a searchlight now lit on its belly, the shaft of light shining down at us.

It hovered over us, a cloud, or a flying mountain, perhaps 600 feet long, with a thing like a leech stuck to its belly. I could see windows in the leech thing, and people moving behind the windows. The big part of the thing was like a sausage, taut and bursting. Four fins, like a rocket, were at the end, and two little wings were at the front. The searchlight stabbed, thrust, and found us.

Two words were painted on the side of the blimp: WONDER and some word starting with B that had faded away; the sides of the silver blimp were lit by floodlights. Little dots of blue and orange and green and red and yellow were painted on the blimp. One orange circle had three black triangles in it, a mandala, the mandala of radiation.

I heard a rumbling sound behind me and saw the light from a horse-drawn jeep coming toward us.

The car braked to a halt, and the horses reared back. In the light of the jeep's weak battery headlights I could see four figures with red armbands jump out and point up at the blimp. KOMs. Blue Braid and I hunkered down behind a boulder. I put an arm around her, pulled her tight—I don't know why. I think I wanted the warmth. If I got my guts shredded into spaghetti, I wanted to die in someone's embrace. Blue Braid shrugged her shoulder slightly, looked at me as if she were going to pull away, then smiled and nestled closer.

The searchlight swung from us to the KOMs. One of the KOMs held up a rifle and fired a round at the blimp. The tracers flashed up at the bottom of the bag, made thunk-thunk sounds. A machine gun flashed from a turret near the bow of the blimp; bullets kicked up snow in front of the KOMs' jeep, and the horses reared up, whoofing steam and neighing. The KOMs ducked behind the jeep. A standoff, and we were in the middle.

Things like angels fell down from the blimp on spider web ropes. They had human faces but glowing eyes—headlamps — on the top of their heads. The headlamps threw little circles of light on the snow. I was held by the big light from the blimp and the little lights from the blimpers. The searchlight switched to the KOMs, blinding them in brightness, and that machine gun on the blimp blasted another round over the KOMs' heads.

The blimpers came down, walked toward us, still attached to the ropes, submachine guns slung over their shoulders. Their boots made little crunching sounds in the snow, the sound roaches make when you step on them. Crunch and crunch and crunch.

Blue Braid ran up to them, grabbed a slack rope in front of them. She motioned me to her. I slipped out from behind the boulder, ran to her, and helped with the rope. She clicked a big snap (she called it a biner) on the end of the rope to my harness, then hers, so we were hanging face to face. She put her arms around me, smiled a thin grin.

“Almost home free,” she said.

I could feel the backwash of the *Wonderblimp*'s propellers, blades barely turning against a slight headwind so that the great ship hovered over us, barely moving. I thought that any minute a wind would blow the blimp away, yanking me off my feet, whipping the air with loose ropes, but it didn't happen. Blue Braid clicked her flashlight on and off, and then I felt the rope pull taut and I was yanked up.

I spun around on the end of the cable, cold wind whipping me through the night. It was like twirling at the end of a swing, a swing wound round and round tight, and then let go. Kodiak whirled slowly below me: the harbor, the mountain, the sea, the town; harbor, mountain, sea, town. The two other blimpers were being pulled up below us. The KOMs were still standing crouched behind their car, caught in the light and the gaze of the machine guns. The KOMs never fired a shot— kind of them, I thought. I was pulled up and up into the blimp toward an open hole of light.

CHAPTER 2

When I came up and inside the blimp, someone stuck a gaff out to the rope and pulled me over to the deck. I was in a room about the size of a small cabin, some sort of hangar or deck. A guy who could have been a bear if he had had a bigger nose slipped the sling off of me and then put a hand on my shoulder to steady me. The way the fingers clutched my shoulders, I got the impression the hand might do more than steady me if I gave it a reason to.

“Who are you?” the guy attached to the hand said.

“He’s a reader,” Blue Braid said. “The KOMs were after him.”

“You can read?” the guy asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“We’ll see.” He brushed shaggy bangs out of his eyes, smiled at me with teeth like glaciers. He pushed me aside, turned to the open hatchway, and helped the two blimpers who had come up behind us into the hangar. One of the blimpers walked over to a handle on a bulkhead and cranked the bay doors on the hatchway shut.

“All clear?” a man’s voice asked from a speaker on the bulkhead right of a passageway.

“We’re back, Nike,” Blue Braid said, punching a button next to the speaker. The props roared loud from outside, and I wobbled a bit as the blimp moved forward.

“Okay,” said the big guy, “let’s see if you can read.” He laid his right hand on my shoulder, and with his left hand gave me a tattered card, one of those cards made out of that hard plastic stuff. It had a picture of an animal on it and little raised letters and a black strip of some shiny material on the back. The little raised letters said “Walter Abercrombie.”

I read the words at the top aloud: “Brontosaurus Oil Company Credit Card.”

He smiled. “That’s my name,” he said. “You *can* read. Call me Bron.”

I smiled to myself. He *was* a Bron, not like the dozens of Brons I’d met before. I didn’t have the heart to tell him his name was Walter. He didn’t look like a Walter. Bron slid his hand down from my shoulder and grabbed my hand, lightly, firm but not like a vise.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said. “My name is Holmes. Holmes Weatherby, Aye-Aye-Aye.”

“That’s an odd name,” Blue Braid said.

“It’s *my* name,” I said. “When I woke up after the Zap, I found a card in my wallet with my picture on it. Under the picture were the words, Holmes Weatherby, I-I-I.”

“What’s the I-I-I mean?” Blue Braid asked.

“Three I’s,” I said. “*Orca* Captain—this guy who gave me a ride up here on his ship—said it meant the past I, the present I, and the future I.”

“Well, glad to meet you, too,” she said. She stuck out her hand, the one without the glove, and I shook with her, too. “Welcome aboard the *Wonderblimp*.” She turned to the other blimpers. They had

taken the headlamps off, set the submachine guns down, and were removing their harnesses. “Levi, Ruby,” she said.

“Hi,” Levi said. He was young, maybe twenty, with a pasty white face and yellow-blond hair cut short around his ears like shorn wheat. A pigtail hung down his neck to just above his shoulder blades.

Ruby looked as young as Levi, but her hair and her eyes contradicted her face. From the roots to the nape of her neck her hair was almost white, but from where she had gathered it into a braid to her waist it was jet black, like she had dyed it and was letting the gray grow out. Her eyes were milky white in the center, dark brown on the rim of the iris, with fine wrinkles cracking at the corners of her eyelids, like she had been squinting into sunlight for ninety years. Young face, old eyes, old hair the texture of corn silk . . . Ruby’s face seemed confused about its age.

She seemed to stare through me, her face going blank for a moment, then expression returning. “I had a thought,” she said. “Maybe a message, but nothing. Pleased to meet you, Holmes.” Ruby looked at Levi, took his hand with a hand gloved like Blue Braid’s. “We should go see if Nike needs our help.”

I watched her go with Levi, stared at the young-and-old hair. A thought occurred to me. “What’s your name?” I asked Blue Braid.

She looked down, the braid swishing before her face. “I told you: I don’t have a name,” she said.

“We call her Blue,” Bron said. “Why do you think she picked you up?”

“You *really* want me to read your name?” I asked.

Blue nodded. “Please?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“Later,” Bron said. “We better go up and see the captain.” Bron turned, moved forward, and Blue and I followed him.

We walked up a short passageway to the bridge, a low room at the bow of the nacelle—the name for the structure stuck on the bottom of the blimp bag, Blue told me. Ruby sat at a console, and Levi stood before a wheel at the very bow of the room. A man in blue coveralls, with graying hair, a neatly trimmed mustache, and long slender fingers sat in a big chair just aft of the ship’s wheel. He wore a tattered blue baseball cap that had a design like a checkmark on it, with the word NIKE above the mark. He turned as we came in, looked at me, snorted.

“Blue,” he said, “What’s this?”

“A reader, Nike,” Blue said. “You told me if I ever found a reader to grab him.”

“Yeah, sure,” Nike said. “The last two ‘readers’ you picked up wanted to get into your pants, not into books.”

She blushed, the red of her skin highlighting that Maori mask. “Nike, this guy can read. I saw him.”

“He read my card,” Bron said.

“Oh yeah?” the guy asked. “Read this, kid.”

He reached into a pouch on the side of his chair, threw a book at me. The pages fluttered, and I caught it by the binding, holding the book open. I turned the book over, looked at the title: *Moby Dick* by some guy named Herman Melville. There was a picture of these men in a boat going after a big whale. I turned to the page I’d caught, page 307, stabbed my finger halfway down, and read aloud.

“But, to this, Bishop Jebb’s anticipative answer is ready. It is not necessary, hints the

Bishop, that we consider Jonah as tombed in the whale's belly, but as temporarily lodged in some part of his mouth. And this seems reasonable enough in the good Bishop. For truly, the Right Whale's mouth would accommodate a couple of whist-tables, and comfortably seat all the players. Possibly, too, Jonah might have ensconced himself in a hollow tooth; but, on second thoughts, the Right Whale is toothless."

"Jonah . . ." the guy said.

"What?" I asked.

"In the Bible," he said. "Surely you know the Bible?"

"The one book," I said, hoping I didn't insult the Oracle. The Bible was the only book anyone after the Zap tolerated, the only book that could not be burned.

"Ruby recites it to us every night," he said. "Jonah gets eaten by the whale." He sighed, shook his head. "You can read, I guess. I suppose you have a real name, then?"

"Holmes," I said, nodding. "Holmes Weatherby, Aye-Aye-Aye."

"I'm Nike," he said. "I run this ship. And I'm the head of our order."

"Order?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"Order," Nike said. "The Order of the Atom. Do you know what we do?"

I shrugged. "Fly around in a blimp?"

"Fly around in a blimp? Yeah, we fly around in a blimp. But we do a little more than that. Haven't you ever heard of the *Wonderblimp*? Haven't you ever heard of the goddamn Order of the Atom?"

"The Order of the Atom?" I shook my head; the name still didn't mean anything.

Nike snorted. "Where you from, boy? Down south?"

I nodded. "Way south, south and east, from a finger of land that sticks into a great ocean—"

"Spare me the geography," he said. "But you traveled to Kodiak. Surely you've heard of the Nukers?"

"*The Nukers*?" I stared at him. Recognition must have dawned on my face, for Nike smiled.

"You know the Nukers, then," he said.

Yeah, I've heard of them, I thought. They gave out nukes. But who had nukes? And who would want to give them out? It had never made sense to me. Nukes were madness. Nukes had put us all in the mess we were in today, nukes had caused the Zap, and the Zap had fried electronics, scrambled brains and taken away half my memory. Who would give out nukes? I'd heard of the Nukers, sure, but I had also heard of men who had two heads, and women with four breasts, and I had never seen things like that.

"I've heard stories," I said. "You give out nukes?"

"Give out nukes?" Nike laughed. "We don't *give* out nukes. We *find* nukes. We find the nukes left over from the Zap." He started talking faster. "We find the nukes the crazy Americans left buried all across the country. And then when we find the nukes, we take them apart and put them back together so people have to *die* to use 'em. We put this little code thing in the hearts of small children, and if someone wants to blow a nuke, they have to cut out the kid's heart."

Nike's face got red, and his voice got deeper. He rose from the chair, began pacing the bridge. Lev looked nervously at Nike, tried to concentrate on steering the blimp to a blinking light on the top of Pillar Mountain.

“We’re nuke anarchists, Holmes!” Nike yelled, raising a gloved right fist. “We put the nukes back in the grubby little paws of the people who should have had them all along. We’re goddamn nuclear pirates!” He lowered his voice, stopped, stood inches before me, and glared into my face. “Anyway,” he said calmly, “that’s what we do.”

I nodded. “Sure,” I said, like I’d say to some nut case who had cornered me in a bar and wanted to know if fish could really fly. “Sure,” I said. “That’s swell.”

“Swell,” Nike repeated. “Swell.” He shook his head, walked back up to his seat, sat down. “Blue, Blue, Blue, what am I going to do with you?”

Blue Braid smiled. “Let him stay.”

“Stay?” Nike looked at me, up and down, the way he might look at a horse or something. “How much you weigh?”

“Maybe 175 pounds,” I said. “Haven’t seen any scales in a while.” I smiled.

“Hmmm,” he said. “Can you read maps?”

“A little,” I said. “I helped *Orca* Captain navigate up to Kodiak. ’Course, we didn’t have great maps, but . . .”

“The KOMs were after you?”

“Uh-huh. Would have fried me for breakfast if not for Blue.”

“Levi here”—Nike jerked a thumb in his direction—“he can read maps, but not too well. Can’t read anything else. We could use the help. I’m not exactly sure where Kachemak is.” He clapped his hand. “Okay. Okay, you can stay.”

Blue smiled, hugged me. “Oh, Nike!”

“But,” he said, raising a finger, “but only as far as Kachemak”—Blue’s face dropped—“unless he proves to be worthwhile.” He stared at me. “You have to navigate for us, and you have to do Blue’s reading.” He shook his head. “If you can get a name for her, it would be worth it for me. Damn woman pesters me all the time.” He smiled. “So is that okay with you?”

I bit my lip, tugged at my mustache. “Um, one question: which way is Kachemak?”

“Which way?” Nike asked. “Heck, the only way. North. We’re going north. Kachemak, then we keep going until we find . . . well, until we find what we’re looking for, is all.”

“North . . .” I said.

“Something important about north?” Nike asked. “It’s only a direction.”

North, though. North . . . That direction pulled me. I thought north might be where I was from. North might be my home. And if I found my home, well, I might find out the one thing that had been bugging me since the day the Zap rearranged the neurons of my brain and took away most everything in my mind except the power to read.

I might find out who the hell Holmes Weatherby, I-I-I, was.

“North is kind of special to me,” I said. I told him what I told the bartender, how I was a wipe, and how I kept feeling drawn north, because I thought something north might tell me who I was.

“You’re a wipe, huh?” Nike asked.

“Yeah. Don’t remember much from before the Zap. Not enough to help me figure out who I am.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “Well, maybe you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

“How far north are you going?” I asked again.

“To the Mountain,” Nike said. “Until we find Denali.”

Denali: In my mind I saw a huge massif of snow and rock, a massif like a pyramid, and before that massif was a great glacier, and a muddy river. I could feel more memories flowing from the river, rising up to the mountain. Maybe the landscape would trigger my memories. Maybe my past would

unfold before me as the land crawled below. Kodiak did not tug me, but Denali . . . The word itself was recognition.

“The Great One,” I whispered.

Nike whirled around. “Yes, the Great One,” he said, looking at me funny. “Well? You want to go with us?”

As if I really had a choice. Ah, heck. If going with them led me to memory . . . I smiled, nodded. “Sure,” I said. “That’s fine. If you drop me at Kachemak . . . well, I guess I’ll find some way to keep going.”

“That’s the spirit,” Nike said. “Okay, you’re our reader until Kachemak.” He reached out, and we shook hands. Nike patted me on the shoulder. “Welcome aboard.” He turned to Blue Braid. “Blue, I think we can dock at Pillar Mountain without your help. Why don’t you show Holmes to a cabin. I think the spare one next to yours . . . ?”

She smiled at that, crooked a finger at me, and wiggled it. “Follow me, babe,” she said.

Like the *Ching* advised, I followed, even if the path wasn’t well lit. I followed. Perseverance furthers, right?

No blame.

* * *

The *Wonderblimp* had been hovering over the mountain while Nike talked to me. After we left the bridge, I felt the blimp bank slightly, heard the engines thrum down to a low rumble as the blimp redocked at Pillar Mountain.

Blue Braid took me to a cabin on the upper deck, the first cabin on the port side across from the stairway. A lounge and dining area spread across the bow of the nacelle, and in a corner of the lounge was a galley. Cabins were on either side of the passageway aft of the lounge, and at the end of the passageway I could see a railing that looked over the hangar bay I’d come up in.

Blue opened the door to my cabin, right next to the galley. Just large enough for a single bed, the cabin had a small closet on the outside bulkhead, a chest of drawers built into the aft side, and two more doors, one next to the chest, another next to the closet. Blue opened the door on the port side of the gondola. Cold air rushed into the room, and we stepped out onto a promenade deck that ran along about a fourth the side of the nacelle. Blue closed the door behind her.

“Pretty neat, huh?” she asked.

I held my breath, tried not to look down. Blue hung onto the edge of the railing, loose hairs around her face rippling in the wind. I could see some sort of landing field to starboard, but got dizzy.

“Pretty neat,” I said. “Can we go in?”

“You scared of heights?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Scared of edges.”

“Okay.” She walked aft, past a porthole and to another door. “That’s the head,” she said, pointing at the porthole. “The door inside connects your cabin to it. This is the best part.” She opened the second

door, motioned me inside. “We share the bath. My cabin.”

Blue had a swell cabin, a little bigger than the double bed in it, but like mine, with a small chest of drawers and a closet. There was a shelf next to the bed and one thin book on it. I walked over to the bed, sat down, and picked up the book: *Little Monster Grows Up*, by someone named Mercer Mayer.

“I thought I was the only reader.”

She smiled. “I like to look at the pictures.”

I sat on the bed, riffling the pages. Blue sat down next to me, her braid whisking around on her lap, smiled at her. She smiled at me.

“You want something to drink?” she asked.

I gulped. “Yeah.”

She got up, went over to the bulkhead below a port next to the door, slid back a panel. “Beer?” she said, holding up two brown bottles. I nodded. She slid the door shut, handed me a nearly frozen bottle. “Our own brew,” she said, “But it’s okay.”

“Pretty neat fridge,” I said.

Blue lowered her head a little, batted her eyes, looked back up. “Built it myself. Doesn’t work a damn in the summer, unless we’re cruising high up. I like to tinker.”

“Yeah?” I said. I twisted the cap off, took a taste of the beer. It tasted pretty good for homemade, not like battery acid at all.

“Yeah.” The braid swished over to my thigh, wriggled around against my jeans.

“You saved my life, I think,” I said.

She shrugged. “I wanted a reader. And I couldn’t let the KOMs get you.”

“They really would have eaten me?”

“Nah,” she said. “Just slaved you. They only eat readers when folks are starving.”

“Swell,” I said. “Still, I owe you.”

“You do,” she said. “You want to pay me back?”

I looked at that braid, watched it as it danced over to my crotch. My mouth got a little dry. I quickly took another sip of beer. “Uh, how?”

She raised her head, stared at me with those deep blue eyes, and looked like she was going to ask me to father her children. She slipped off her tunic, pulled a tattered card from a small pocket on her turtleneck.

“Would you name me?” she asked.

I squinted at her. “You don’t like Blue?”

“It’s just a nickname,” she said. “It’s not a real name. I need to know my real name.”

“It’s been five years since the Zap,” I said. “How come you don’t have a name by now?”

“Not a lot of readers around.” She shrugged. “Well, besides, I didn’t have any words on me after the Zap. No wallet, no names on my clothes, nothing. I’ve been looking for words, but I never found any that looked right. Until this.” She handed me a card. “A memor gave it to me at Sea-Tac Int’l Airport.”

I took the card. “A memor?”

“Like Ruby. You don’t know what a memor is?”

“It’s a little rustic down south.” I said.

“I guess. Memors are these people who seem to know everything, and remember messages until they give it to the person it’s for.” She brushed a strand of hair back from her face. “We picked Ruby up about a year ago. She’d been trying to pass for dumb, because they didn’t like memors where she came from. You can always spot memors—they look young but have gray or white hair.”

“So a memor gave you this card?” I asked.

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