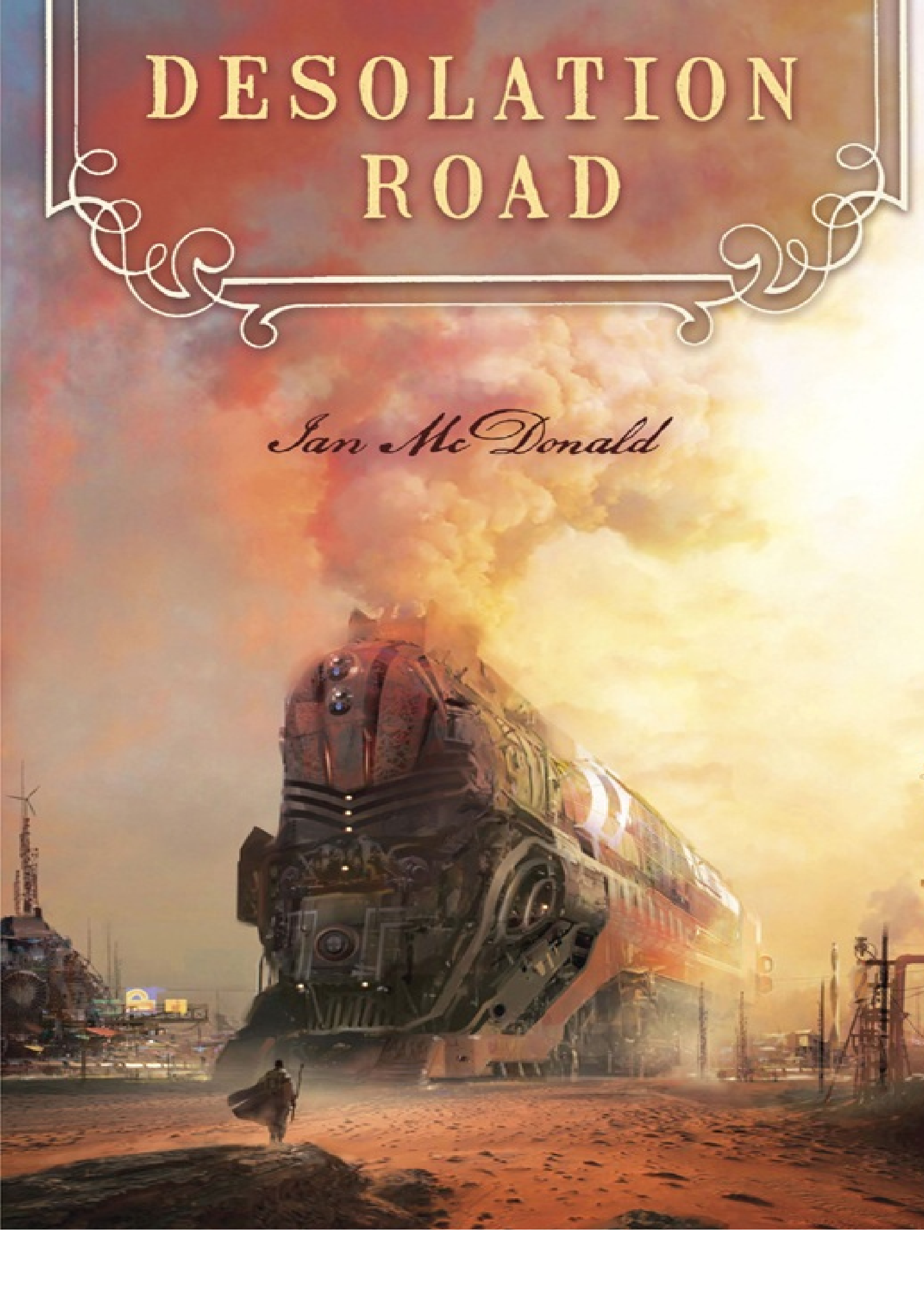


DESOLATION ROAD

Jan McDonald



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by

Jan McDonald

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To all the numerous people who helped
raise *Desolation Road* from the dust,
especially to Patricia—
architect, constant supporter,
and First Lady of the town.

For three days Dr. Alimantando had followed the greenperson across the desert. Beckoned by a finger made from articulated runner beans, he had sailed over the desert of red grit, the desert of red stone, and the desert of red sand in pursuit of it. And each night, as he sat by his fire built from scraps of mummified wood, writing in his journals, the moonring would rise, that tumbling jewel-stream of artificial satellites, and it would draw the greenperson out of the deep places of the desert.

On the first night the meteors were flickering high in the stratosphere when the greenperson came to Dr. Alimantando.

“Let me near your fire, friend, let me have warmth, give me shelter, for I am of a warmer age than this.” Dr. Alimantando gestured for the greenperson to draw closer. Observing the strange, naked figure, Dr. Alimantando was moved to ask, “What manner of a creature are you?”

“I am a man,” said the greenperson. His mouth, his lips, his tongue, showed leaf-green as he spoke. His teeth were small and yellow like nibs of maize. “What are you?”

“I also am a man.”

“Then we are the same. Stoke up the fire, friend, let me feel the blaze.” Dr. Alimantando kicked a knot of grey wood and sparks fled upward into the night. After a time the greenperson said, “Have you water, friend?”

“I have, but I want to be careful with it. I don't know how long I will be crossing this desert, or if I will find any water on my journey.”

“I will lead you to water tomorrow, friend, if you will give me your flask tonight.”

Dr. Alimantando was still for a long time beneath the tumbling lights of the moonring. Then he unhooked one of his flasks from his pack and passed it over the flames to the greenperson. The greenperson drained the flask dry. The air about him sparkled with an aroma of verdure, like forest after spring rain. Then Dr. Alimantando slept and did not dream at all.

The next morning there was only a red rock by the embers of the fire where the greenperson had sat.

On the second night Dr. Alimantando made camp and ate and wrote in his journal. Then he sat, just sat, made vast with the exhilaration of the desert of stone. He had sailed and sailed and sailed, away from the hills of Deuteronomy, away from the desert of red grit, through the desert of red stone, across a land of chasms and fissures, like a petrified brain, over polished stone pavements, between eroded pinnacles of dark volcanic glass, through forests petrified for a billion years, down water-courses dry for a billion years, through wind-sculpted palisades of ancient red sandstones, over haunted mesas plunging over thin granite lips into infinite echoing canyons, gripping wide-eyed with terror to every handhold as the wind-board's pro-magnetic levitators fought to hold it aloft. He had run before the long wind, he had sailed and sailed and sailed until the first pinpricks of the evening stars pierced the sky.

As he sat thus, bluehot lasers flickered fitfully across the vault above him, and the greenperson came to him again.

“Where is the water you promised?” asked Dr. Alimantando.

“Everywhere was water once and will be water again,” said the greenperson. “This stone once was sand once and will be sand again on a beach a million years from here.”

“Where is the water you promised?” cried Dr. Alimantando.

“Come with me, friend.” The greenperson led him to a notch in the red cliff and there, in the deep darkness, was the chuckling of lonely, clear water, trickling from a crack in the rock and dropping into a small dark pool. Dr. Alimantando filled his water flasks but did not drink. He was afraid of defiling the ancient lonely water. Where the greenperson had stood, pale green shoots now pushed through the damp imprints of his feet. Then Dr. Alimantando slept and did not dream that night at all.

The next morning there was a withered gray tree by the embers of the fire where the greenperson had sat.

Upon the third night after the third day, when he had sailed the desert of red sand, Dr. Alimantando built his fire and made his camp and wrote his observations and speculations into his leather-bound journals in his fine, delicate hand, all loops and curlicues. He was weary that night; the passage of the desert of sand had drained him dry. At first he had tingled with exhilaration and wind-driven sand as he rode the wind-board up and over, up and over, up and over the ever-breaking waves of sand. He had ridden the red sand and the blue sand, the yellow sand and the green sand, the white sand and the black sand, wave after wave after wave until the waves broke him and left him drained dry, exhausted to face the desert of soda and the desert of salt and the desert of acid. And beyond those deserts, in the place beyond exhaustion, was the desert of stillness, where could be heard the ringing of distant bells as if from the campaniles of cities buried a billion years beneath the sand, or from the campaniles of cities a billion years yet unborn that would stand there. There, at the heart of the desert, Dr. Alimantando stopped, and beneath a sky huge with the riding lights of a SailShip arriving at the edge of the world, the greenperson came a third time to him. He squatted upon his heels beyond the edge of the firelight, drawing figures in the dust with his forefinger.

“Who are you?” asked Dr. Alimantando. “Why do you haunt my nights?”

“Though we journey through different dimensions, like you I am a traveller across this dry and waterless place,” said the greenperson.

“Explain these ‘different dimensions.’”

“Time and space. You space, I time.”

“How can this be?” exclaimed Dr. Alimantando, who was passionately interested in time and temporality. Because of time he had been driven out of his home in the green hills of Deuteronomy labeled “demon” and “wizard” and “eater of children” by neighbours who could not accommodate his harmless and creative eccentricity within their tightly defined world of cows, clapboard houses, sheep silage and white picket fences. “How can you travel in time, something I have sought to accomplish for years?”

“Time is a part of me,” said the greenperson, standing tall and brushing his body with his fingertips. “So I have learned to control it as I have learned to control any other part of my body.”

“Can this skill be taught?”

“To you? No. You are the wrong colour. But one day you will learn a different way, I think.”

Dr. Alimantando's heart leaped.

“How do you mean?”

“That's for you to decide. I am here only because the future demands it.”

“You riddle much too well for me. Say what you mean. I can't abide obtuseness.”

“I am here to lead you to your destiny.”

“Oh? So?”

“Unless I am here, certain trains of events will not come to pass; this my fellows have decided, for all time and space is theirs to manipulate, and they have sent me to guide you to your destiny.”

“Be more explicit, man!” cried Dr. Alimantando, his quick temper flaring. But the firelight flickered and the sky-filling sails of the Praesidium vessel twinkled in the light of the vanished sun and the greenperson was gone. Dr. Alimantando waited in the lee of his wind-board, waited until he

fire died to red-glowing embers. Then, when he knew the greenperson would not be returning that night, he slept, and dreamed a steel dream. In this dream titanic machines the colour of rust peeled back the skin of the desert and laid iron eggs in its tender flesh. The eggs hatched into squirming metal larvae, hungry for hematite, magnetite and kidney ore. The steel maggots built for themselves a towering nest of chimneys and furnaces, a city of belching smoke and hissing steam, of ringing hammers and flying sparks, of rivers of white molten steel and pulpy white worker drones who served the maggots.

The next morning Dr. Alimantando woke to find the wind had risen in the night and covered the wind-board with sand. Where the greenperson had squatted at the edge of the firelight was a cracked boulder of green malachite.

The breeze strengthened and carried Dr. Alimantando away from the heart of the desert. He breathed in the wine-sharp air and listened to the crack of the wind in the sails and the whisper of windblown sand streaming away before him. He felt the sweat dry on his skin and the salt-burn etched into his face and hands.

He sailed and he sailed and he sailed, all morning. The sun had just reached its zenith when Dr. Alimantando saw his first and last mirage. A line of pure, shining silver ran straight through his musings on time and its travellers: purest, bright-shining silver, running east-west above a line of low bluffs which seemed to mark the end of the desert of sand. Drawing nearer, Dr. Alimantando discerned dark shadows in the silver glare and a reflected green glow, as if from green things that might be growing there.

Trick of a dry mind, he told himself, portaging the floating wind-board up a faint track through the cave-riddled bluffs, but on reaching the top of the rise he saw that it was not a trick of a dry mind, nor any mirage. The glow of greenness was indeed the glow of green growing things, the shadow the dark silhouette of a peculiar outcropping of rock which bore on its summit an antennae-feathery microwave relay tower, and the line of silver was precisely that, two sets of parallel steel standard-gauge railroad tracks catching the sun.

Dr. Alimantando walked a little while in the green oasis remembering what green smelled like, what green looked like, how green felt under his feet. He sat listening to the chuckling of water running through the cascading system of little irrigation ditches and the patient chunk, creak of the wind-pumps drawing it up from some stratum of subterranean aquifer. Dr. Alimantando helped himself to bananas, figs and pomegranates and ate a moody lunch in the shade of a cottonwood tree. He was glad to be at the end of the stern desert lands, yet the spiritual wind that had carried him through that separate landscape had died out of him. The sun beamed down on the bee-buzzy oasis and Dr. Alimantando slipped into a lazy, comfortable siesta.

An indefinite time later he was woken by a sting of grit on his cheek. For a closed-eyed, lazy moment the significance escaped him. Then realization struck him like a nail hammered between his eyes. He sat bolt upright, shivered to the pith by a bolt of pure horror.

In his haste he had forgotten to tether the wind-board.

Carried off by the rising wind, the loose wind-board bobbed and swooped across the dry flat. Helpless, Dr. Alimantando watched his only means of deliverance sail away from him across the High Plains. He watched the bright green sail until it vanished into a speck of colour-blindness on the horizon. Then for a long and stupid time he stood trying to think what to do, but he could not think anything but that mocking, bobbing wind-board. He had lost his destiny, he had let it sail away from him on the wind. That night the greenperson would step out of time to talk with him but he would not be there because he had missed his destiny and all those trains of events that the great minds of the greenpersons had foreseen would never come to be. All gone. Sick with stupidity and disgust, Dr. Alimantando set down his pack and hoped for rescue. Perhaps a train might come up the line. Perhaps

a train might come down the line. Perhaps he might tinker with some mechanism in the relay tower signal his distress through the airwaves. Perhaps the owner of this fertile, green, deceptively soft place might help him. Perhaps...perhaps. Perhaps this was all just a siesta dream from which he might waken to find his battered wind-board floating beside him.

Perhapses led to if-onlys. If only he had not fallen asleep, if only he had tied that rope...if only.

A molar-grating subsonic rumble shook the oasis. The air shivered. Water trembled in drops from the leaves of the plants. The metal relay tower shuddered and Dr. Alimantando leaped to his feet in consternation. There seemed to be some disturbance beneath the desert for the surface boiled and mounded as if some huge object was tumbling and turning deep below. The sand blistered into a greasy red boil and burst, shedding torrents of sliding grit, to reveal an enormous boxlike thing, bright orange, with soft rounded edges, emerging from under the Great Desert. Its mountainous flanks bore the word ROTECH lettered in black. Drawn by his fatal curiosity, Dr. Alimantando crept nearer to the edge of the bluffs. The orange box-thing, big as a house, sat on the desert floor, humming potently.

"An orph," whispered Dr. Alimantando, heart pounding in awe.

—Good afternoon, man! said a sudden voice inside Dr. Alimantando's head.

"What?" yelled Dr. Alimantando.

—Good afternoon, man. I apologize for not greeting you more readily, but you see, I am dying, and I am finding the process most troublesome.

"Pardon?"

—I am dying; my systems are failing, snapping like threads, my once-titanic intellect is plunging toward idioty. Look at me, man, my beautiful body is scarred, blistered, and stained. I am dying, abandoned by my sisters, who have left me to die in this dreadful desert rather than on the edge of the sky as an orph should, shields down and blazing to brief stellar glory in the upper atmosphere. A curse upon those faithless sisters! I tell you, man, if this is what the younger generation has come to, then I am glad to be leaving this existence. If only it weren't so undignified. Perhaps you can help me to die with dignity.

"Help you? You? You're an orph, a servant of the Blessed Lady; you should help me! Like you, I am abandoned here, and if I am not aided, my demise will shortly follow your own. I have been abandoned here by capricious fate, my means of transport has failed me."

—You have feet.

"Surely you're joking."

—Man, do not trouble me with your petty needs. I am past aiding you. I cannot transport you away from this place; I cannot transport myself even. Both you and I will remain here, in the place I have created. Admittedly, your presence here is unscheduled, much less official; the Five Hundred Year Plan does not allow settlement in this micro-environment for another six years, but you may stay here until a train comes past to take you somewhere.

"And how long will that be?"

—Twenty-eight months.

"Twenty-eight months?"

—I am sorry, but that is the forecast of the Five Hundred Year Plan. The environment I have prepared is admittedly rough and ready, but it will support and sustain you and after my death you will have access to all the equipment within me. Now, if you have quite finished troubling me with your woes, may I address myself to mine?

"But you must take me away from here! It is not my destiny to be...whatever it is you want from me..."

—Communications systems warden.

"A communications systems warden: there are great events I must set in motion elsewhere!"

—Whatever your destiny, it must be worked out here from now on. Now, kindly spare me your whinings, man, and let me die with a little dignity.

“Die? Die? How can a machine, a ROTECH environmental engineering module, an orph, die?”

—I will answer this one question, and then I will answer no more. The life of an orph is long, myself am almost seven hundred years old, but we are no less mortal than you, man. Now, give me peace and commit my soul to the care of Our Lady of Tharsis.

The pervasive hum ceased abruptly. Dr. Alimantando held his breath in anticipation until it was uncomfortable, but the orph sat unchanging and unchanged on the red sand. In reverent silence Dr. Alimantando explored the little handmade kingdom the orph had bequeathed to him. He found particularly fine caves threading the outcrop of rock which bore the microwave relay; these Dr. Alimantando chose for his home. His few possessions seemed trivial in the large round caverns. He unrolled his quilt bag to air and went to pick dinner.

Darkness was falling. The first jewels of the moonring were shining in the sky. Up there the unfeeling orphs were rolling and tumbling, forever caught in the act of falling. Trapped by soil and gravity, their moribund sister cast giant purple shadows across the sand. Dr. Alimantando ate a spiritless supper and went to sleep. At two minutes of two a great voice woke him up.

—God rot ROTECH! it cried. Dr. Alimantando hurried through the pitch-black caves to see what was happening. The night air hummed with power, searchlight beams lanced the darkness, and sections of the orph's mighty body slid in and out, open and shut. The orph sensed Dr. Alimantando shivering in his nightshirt, and transfixed him like a martyred saint with its searchlights.

—Help me, man! This dying thing is not as easy as I had imagined.

“That's because you are a machine and not a human,” shouted Dr. Alimantando, shielding his eyes against the searchlights' glare. “Humans die very easily indeed.”

—Why can one not die when one wants to? Help me, man, help me, come down to me and I will show you how you can be merciful to me, for this creeping debility, this mechanical incontinence, is intolerable. Come down to me, man. Help me!

So Dr. Alimantando scrambled barefoot down the rough trail up which he had portaged the orph the morning before. He realized that he must have sailed over the buried orph without ever knowing. Strange things, strange things. He hurried over the yet-warm sand to the humming face of the behemoth. A dark spot appeared on the smooth metal about the size of a twenty centavo piece.

—This is my systems termination activator. Touch it and I will cease to be. All my systems will shut down, all my circuits will fuse and I will die. Do it, man.

“I don't know...”

—Man, I am seven hundred years old, as old as this earth that you walk upon; does old age no longer command respect among you humans in these degenerate days? Respect my wishes, I desire nothing more than to be gone. Touch the spot. Do it, man. Help me.

Dr. Alimantando touched the dark spot and at once it faded into the warm orange metal. Then very slowly, very gradually, the life-hum of the orph dwindled and faded and died and was gone into the silence of the Great Desert. As the great machine relaxed into death, its multitudinous panels, hatches and sections opened, revealing the marvellous mechanisms of its interior. When he was quite sure that the orph was dead, Dr. Alimantando crept back to his bed, troubled and guilty over what he had done.

In the morning he went to pick the body of the orph he had killed. From it he built, over five days of furious, driving and utterly enjoyable labour, a lozenge-shaped solar collector five times as tall as himself and mounted it, with some difficulty, on a wind-pump gantry. Energy and hot water secured, he went on to knock windows in the walls of his caves and glazed the unparalleled view of the Great Desert with plastic from the orph's polymerization plant. He dismembered the corpse and carried it piece by piece up the bluffs to his new home. He rooted through the bowels of the machine to carry

out chunks of machinery that might make good automatic cultivators, irrigation pumps, electric heating plates, lighting panels, methane digesters, sprinkler systems, all with just a little bit of work and inventiveness. Dr. Alimantando worshipped inventiveness, particularly his own. Every new improved device delighted him for days on end until he built the next one. Day by day the orph was reduced to a pitiful shell, and then to sections as Dr. Alimantando built new solar collectors, then solar plates, and then one night the storm wind blew really hard, so hard that Dr. Alimantando, upon his homemade bed, shivered and curled up inside his quiltbag. In the morning the bones of the dead machine had vanished like an ancient city beneath the drifting sands.

But through its death Dr. Alimantando had transformed the waiting oasis into an actual comfortable, technological hermitage, a private world unknown even to those who had built the world where a man might ponder long and deep upon destiny, and density, time, space and the meaning of life. All this Dr. Alimantando did, and paper being scarce, he wrote his speculations on the walls of his caves in black charcoal. For a year and a day he covered his walls with algebraic expressions and theorems in symbolic logic, and then one afternoon he saw the steam of a train plume on the western horizon and knew that the orph's promise had come true, and all of seven months early. He waited until the train was close enough for him to read the name *Bethlehem Ares Railroads*, and then went up to the topmost chamber in his house, his weather-room, and sat looking out at the great desert until the train had passed over the eastern horizon. For he realized that destiny is a numinous, quicksilver thing, and from his studies he knew that it took many paths through the landscapes of time and paradox to reach its destination, for were not destiny and destination the same word spelled with different letters? This was his destiny, to live a life of fruitful solitude atop a desert pinnacle. He could think of worse things. So one morning, shortly after the first train in history passed through Dr. Alimantando's universe, he took himself and a bottle of peapod wine to the weather-room. The topmost cave, with its four windows pointing out in each direction of the compass, was of such fascination to him that he visited it only rarely, so that it would remain special. He looked out upon each preview for a long time. Then he poured a glass of peapod wine, and another, and another, and another, and with the last drop from the bottle he raised his glass and gave a name to everything he could see.

"Desolation Road," he slurred, drinking down the final glass of peapod wine. "You are Desolation Road." And Desolation Road it remained, even though Dr. Alimantando realized when he sobered up that he had not meant Desolation Road at all, but Destination Road.

Mr. Jericho had pumped the rail-bogie through forests and plains. He had pumped it through meadows and metropolises. He had pumped it through paddy-fields and orchards, marshes and mountains. Now he was pumping it through the Great Desert. He was patient. He was obdurate. He was a small gnarled man, tough and black as the polished root of some desert tree, ageless and adamant. He would pump that hand-crank off the edge of the world if it would hide him from the men who wanted to kill him. They had found him in Telperson, they had found him in Namanga Loo, they had found him in Xipotle and even he had had difficulty in finding Xipotle. For five days he had looked over his shoulder and then on the sixth day it was no longer necessary, for the city-dressed killers had stepped off the train, drawing every eye to them, and Mr. Jericho left that same hour.

It had been a move of desperation, striking out across the Great Desert, but desperation and desire was all that was left to Mr. Jericho. There were blisters on his hands from the hot thrust-bar and his water was running low, but he kept pumping pumping pumping that ridiculous hand-crank rail-bogie across kilometres and kilometres and kilometres of stone and blazing red sand. He did not relish dying in the stone and blazing red sand. It was no way for a Paternoster of the Exalted Families to die. So said Jim Jericho. So said the collected wisdom of his Exalted Ancestors tumbling in the limbo chamber embedded in his hypothalamus. Perhaps an assassin's needle was preferable. And perhaps not. Mr. Jericho grasped the thrust-bar once more and slowly, painfully, creaked the bogie into motion.

He had been the youngest Paternoster to accede to the Exalted Lines and had needed all the store of wisdom of his forefathers, including his lamented immediate predecessor, Paternoster Willem, to survive his first few months in office. It was the Exalted Ancestors who had prompted his move from Metropolis to the New World.

—A growing economy, they'd said, a thousand and one operational niches for us to exploit. And to exploit them he had, for exploitation was the purpose of the Exalted Families: crime, vice, blackmail, extortion, corruption, narcotics, gambling, computer fraud, slavery: a thousand and one economic niches. Mr. Jericho had not been the first but he had been the best. The audacity of his criminal daring may have taken the collective public breath away in gasps of outraged admiration, but it also provoked his rivals into forsaking their petty divisions and allying to destroy him and his Family. Peace restored, they could resume their internecine strife.

Mr. Jericho paused to wipe salt sweat from his brow. Even aided by the Damantine Disciplines, his strength was nearing its end. He closed his eyes to the sun-sand glare and concentrated, trying to squeeze his adrenal gland into triggering the noradrenaline surge that would power him onward. The voices of the Exalted Ancestors clamoured inside him like crows in a cathedral; words of advice, words of encouragement, words of admonition, words of contempt.

“Shut up!” he roared at the ion-blue sky. And it was quiet. Strengthened by his denial, Mr. Jericho seized the push-bar once more. The bar went down. The bar went up. The bogie creaked into motion. The bar went down. The bar went up. As it came up Mr. Jericho caught a glimpse of a green shimmer on the close horizon. He blinked, wiped stinging sweat out of his eyes, looked harder. Green. Complementary green on red. He disciplined his vision as he had been taught by Paternoster Augustine, focusing on the boundaries between objects where differences became apparent. Then, aided, he could distinguish tiny pinpricks of light: sunlight glinting from solar panels, deduced the

massed wisdoms of the Exalted Ancestors. Green on red and solar panels. Habitation. Mr. Jericho seized the thrust-bar with renewed vigour.

Between his feet were two items. One was a silk paisley-pattern scarf. Wrapped in it was manbone-handled needle-pistol, traditional weapon-of-honour among the Exalted Families. The other was a deceptively small leather bag, of the type once called Gladstone. It held three-and-a-quarter million New Dollars in United Bank of Solstice Landing bills of large denomination. These two items along with the clothes on his back and the shoes on his feet, were the only things Mr. Jericho had been able to take with him on the Eve of Destruction.

His enemies had struck all at once, everywhere. Even as his empire collapsed around him in an orgy of bombings, burnings and murder, Mr. Jericho had paused for a moment to admire his adversaries' efficiency. Such was the path of honour. He had sadly underestimated them, they were not the bumpkins and petty parochial warlords he had mistaken them for. He would know better next time. And they in their turn had underestimated Jameson Jericho if they thought that he would fall to them. His staff was dying around him: very well, he would work alone then. He activated his escape contingency. In the fractional instant before the virus programs dissolved his data-net into proteolytic soup Jameson Jericho had a new identity. In the split-split-split-second before the government audit programs battered into his credit-matrix, Jameson Jericho funnelled seven million dollars into fifty company deposit accounts in bank branches in fifty small towns across the northern hemisphere of the planet. He had debited only what lay in his black Gladstone bag by the time the Paternoster penetrated his falsified death (poor dupe of a doppelganger, but business was business) and sent assassins and tracer programs out after him. Jameson Jericho left behind his home, wife, children, everything he had ever loved and everything he had ever created. Now he was running across the Great Desert on a stolen Bethlehem Ares Railroads pump-bogie in search of the last place in the world where anyone would think of looking for him.

It was drawing on evening when Mr. Jericho arrived at the settlement. It was not impressive, not for a man accustomed to the grand architectural vistas of the ancient cities of the Grand Valley, who grew up on Metropolis, the ring city, the mightiest city of all. There was one house, a rough adobe shack propped against an outcrop of window-pocked red rock, one microwave relay tower, a handful of solar collectors and wind-pumps, and a lot of slightly unkempt green garden. Yet, the very isolation of the place impressed Mr. Jericho greatly. No one would ever look for him here. He climbed down from the creaking bogie to soak his blisters in the water-butt beside the house. He dampened his red handkerchief and dabbed the base of his neck with the warm water while mentally cataloguing the market garden. Corn, beans, matoke, onions, carrots, potatoes, white and sweet; yams, spinach, various herbs. Water trickled redly through irrigation channels between allotments.

"Should do nicely," said Mr. Jericho to himself. The Exalted Ancestors agreed. A desert hawk croaked from the top of the microwave tower.

"Hello!" shouted Mr. Jericho at the top of his voice. "Hellooooooo..." There was no echo. There was nothing for his voice to echo from, save the red hills on the southern horizon. "Hellooooo..." After a time a figure emerged from the low adobe shack; a tall, thin man, very brown, like leather. He had long twirling moustachios.

"Jericho's the name," said Mr. Jericho, eager to gain the advantage.

"Alimantando," said the tall, thin leatherman. He had a doubtful look. "Doctor." The two men bowed to each other rather stiffly, rather uncertainly.

"Pleased to meet you," said Mr. Jericho. Alimantando was a Deuteronomy name: touchy people, the folk from Deuteronomy. Among the very first settlers, they tended to think the whole planet was theirs and were rather intolerant of newcomers. "Listen, I'm just passing through, but I need a place for the night: some water, some food, a roof over my head. Can you help me?"

Dr. Alimantando studied the uninvited guest. He shrugged.

~~“Look, I’m a very busy man, I’m in the middle of important research and I do appreciate not having my peace of mind disturbed.”~~

“What is it you're researching?”

“Compiling a compendium of chronodynamic theories.”

The Exalted Ancestors threw the appropriate response to the surface of Mr. Jericho's mind.

“Ah, like Webener's Synchronicity Postulates and the Chen Tsu Triple-Paradox.”

Dr. Alimantando's suspicious glance held a twinkle of respect.

“How long are you staying?”

“Just one night.”

“Sure?”

“Pretty sure. I'm only passing through. Just one night.”

And Mr. Jericho stayed just one night, but it lasted for twenty years.

The storm was close now and the rail-schooner ran before it full-sailed to steal every kilometre distance from the boiling brown dust-cloud. For three days it had run before the storm, three days since the morning Grandfather Haran turned his left eye, his weather-eye, to the western horizon and noticed the dirty ochre rim to the sky. "Dirty weather coming," he had said, and dirty weather came and was coming closer all the time, now so close upon the pioneers that even Rael Mandella, cursed with the gift of pragmatism, realized there was no outrunning it and that his family's only hope lay in finding some place of refuge before they were engulfed in dust.

"More speed, more speed!" he cried, and Grandfather Haran and dear, beautiful Eva Mandella, his mystical wife, heavily pregnant, hung out every last handkerchief of sail until the rail-schooner hummed and sang along the straight steel tracks. Spars creaked, hawsers twanged and shrieked, the wind-bogie rocked and swayed. In the equipment trailer the goats and llamas bleated fearfully and the pigs scabbled at the bars of their cages. Behind, rollers of brown dust spilled across the land in ever-closing pursuit.

Again Rael Mandella lashed himself for the rash decision to bring wife, father and unborn child across the Great Desert. Four days ago, at Murcheson Flats, the choice had been simple. Throwing the points lever one way would send his family south into the settled lands of Deuteronomy and the Great Oxus, throwing it the other would send them out across the Great Desert to the empty places of Northern Argyre and Transpolaris. He had not hesitated then. It had pleased him to think of himself as a bold pioneer breaking new ground, building his own land with his own hands. He had been proud. This then was the punishment for it. His charts and maps were relentless, the ROTECH surveyors marked no habitation for a thousand kilometres along this line.

A crack of wind caught the mainsail and ripped it down the middle. Rael Mandella stared dumbfounded at the flapping rags of sailcloth. Then he gave the order to close-haul. Even as he did so three more sails split with cracks like gunshots. The rail-schooner shuddered and lost some of its headlong momentum. Then Eva Mandella stood up, swaying, clutching a humming hawser. Her belly heaved in imminent labour, but her eyes had the far look and her nostrils were wide as startled deer's.

"There's something out there," she said in a voice that slipped under the shriek of the wind and the wires. "I can smell it; something's green and growing out there. Haran, you've got the eye for it, what can you see?" Grandfather Haran pointed his weather-eye down the geometrically perfect line and through the swirling dust and haze that presaged the storm he saw what Eva Mandella had smelled: a blob of green growingness, and more besides; a tall metal tower and some lozenge-shaped solar collectors.

"Habitation!" he cried. "A settlement! We're saved."

"More sail!" roared Rael Mandella, the shreds of sailcloth flapping around his ears. "More sail!" Grandfather Haran sacrificed the ancient family banner of finest New Merionedd silk, with which he would have proudly proclaimed his son's kingdom in the land beyond the desert, and Eva Mandella her cream organdie wedding dress and finest petticoats. Rael Mandella sacrificed six sheets of irreplaceable plastic solar sheeting, and together they were all hoisted up the mast. The wind caught the rail-schooner and it gave a little shudder and a little jump, and looking more like a travelling carnival caught up in a waterspout than pioneers intent on the new lands, the frontier-family Mandella spun down the line to sanctuary.

Dr. Alimantando and Mr. Jericho had seen the rail-schooner while still far off, a scrap of many coloured cloth flying before the front of the storm. They had braved the first tugs and gusts of the dust-devils to fold up the delicate petals of the solar collectors into tight buds and retract the feather antennae and dish aerials into the relay tower. While they worked, heads and hands wrapped in thick turbans of cloth, the wind rose to a shout-defying shriek and filled the air with flying needles of dust. As the rail-schooner braked furiously in a shower of shrieks, screeches and sparks, Dr. Alimantando and Mr. Jericho ran up to help unload the caboose. They worked with the silent, selfless synchronization of men who have known only each other for a long and solitary time. Eva Mandella found their tireless, mechanical lifting and carrying rather frightening: livestock, rootstock, seedstock, tools, machinery, materials, fabrics, domestic items, nails, screws, pins and paints; carry and set, carry and set, all without a word being spoken.

“Where can we put them?” screamed Rael Mandella.

Dr. Alimantando beckoned with a cloth-wrapped finger and led them to a warm, dry cave.

“This for you, the one connecting there for your equipment.”

At seventeen minutes of seventeen the dust storm struck. The same moment, Eva Mandella went into labour. As her wedding dress, her petticoats, the family banner and six sheets of valuable solar sheeting were whirled up into the atmosphere on winds that might shred a man's flesh from his bones, she squeezed and squeezed and moaned and gasped and squeezed and squeezed in the warm dry cave by the light of tallow candles; squeezed and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until she squeezed two squawling infants into the world. Their advent wails were lost beneath the greater wailing of the storm. A little red sand trickled into the mouth of the cave. In the yellow flickering candlelight Rael Mandella picked up his son and daughter.

“Limaal,” he said to the child in his right hand. “Taasmin,” he said to the child in his left, and in doing so he cursed them with his curse, so that his right-handed rationalism passed into his son and his wife's left-handed mysticism passed into his daughter. They were the first natural citizens of Desolation Road, and their citizenship bestowed citizenship upon their parents and grandparent, for they could not press on to the land beyond the desert while there were still infants at the teat. So they stayed forever and never found the land beyond the mountains for which all Mandellas have been searching ever since, for they know that Desolation Road is always one step short of paradise and they are not content with that.

Rajandra Das lived in a hole under Platform 19 of Meridian Main Station. He shared this hole with a lot of other people, and there were a lot of holes under Meridian Main Station, so there were a lot of people. They called themselves gentlemen of leisure, connoisseurs of freedom, scholars in the Universuum of Life, Blythe Spirits. The railroad managers called them gutterboys, tramps, beggars, freebooters, goondahs and bums. The passengers called them distressed gentlefolk, unfortunate fallen souls and knights of misfortune and opened their purses to them as they squatted on the station steps, hands outstretched to receive showers of centavos, their eyes gazing milky-blind, courtesy of special cataract contact lenses manufactured by the Eastern Light Spectacle and Optics Company of East Bread Street. Rajandra Das, however, was above the largesse of the train-traveling people of Meridian. He existed wholly within the subterranean community of Main Station and lived on what the beggars could afford to pay for his services. He enjoyed a certain measure of respectability (though what respectability might amount to in a kingdom of tramps was questionable), because he had a talent.

Rajandra Das had been given the power of charming machinery. There was nothing mechanical, electrical, electronic or submolecular that would not work for Rajandra Das. He loved machines, he loved to take them apart, tinker with them, put them back together again and make them better than before, and the machines loved the feel of his long, dextrous fingers stroking their insides and tweaking their sensitive components. Machines would sing for him, machines would purr for him, machines would do anything for him. Machines loved him madly. Whenever any device went wrong in the holes under Meridian Main Station, it went straight to Rajandra Das, who would hum and huff and stroke his neat brown beard. Then he would produce screwdrivers from his jacket of many pockets, take the device apart and within five minutes have it fixed and running better than before. He could coax two years out of four-month light bulbs. He could tune wirelasses so fine they could pick up the cosmic chitchat between ROTECH habitats in high orbit. He could rewire prosthetic arms and legs (of which there was no shortage in Meridian Main Station) to be faster and stronger than the fleshly parts they replaced.

Such abilities did not go unnoticed by the station authorities, and when on occasion there was a pressure fusion percolator that just wasn't settling right or a persistent kink in the number 3 pinch bottle that had the engineers slamming their E-M field-inducer wrenches to the concrete in frustration, then the most junior subapprentice would be sent into the faeces-redolent warren of runways and tunnels to get Rajandra Das. And Rajandra Das would straighten the kink and adjust the faulty percolator and everything would be right as ninepence again, if not righter.

So Rajandra Das led a charmed life; immune to the periodic transport police purges of the tunnels, respected and liked and comfortably off. Then one day Rajandra Das won the Great Railroad Lotto.

This was a cunning piece of social engineering devised by a legendary bum known only as the Old Wise Fellow, and this was how it worked. Once a month the name of every subterranean beneath Meridian Main Station went into a big tombola. A name was drawn and the winner invited to leave Meridian Main Station that same night on any train of his choice. For the Old Wise Fellow had recognized Meridian Main Station for the trap it was; a comfortable, warm, dry hole, an invitation to an eternity of contented beggarhood and self-mortification. It was the denial of everything potential

a human. It was a gentle jail. Because he was Old and Wise, (old as the world, the legend went) the Old Wise Fellow made two laws to govern his game. The first was that every name without exception must go into the tombola. The second was that no winner could ever refuse his prize.

And then the tombola in the little room with picture postcards from past winners on the walls gave a little whirr and a little cough and coughed up Rajandra Das's name. It may have been pure luck. The next day, again, it may have been sheer eagerness to please on the part of the tombola machine. Either way, Rajandra Das won and while he packed his few possessions into a canvas bag word spread across Meridian Main Station, both above and below ground, from the Esterhazie Avenue Freight Siding to the office of Mr. Populescu, the station master: "Rajandra Das has won the lotto...have you heard Rajandra Das has won the lotto...he's leaving tonight...really? Yes, he won the lotto," so by the time midnight came and Rajandra Das was crouching in an inspection pit beside Number Two Main Downline waiting for the signal light to change, there were over a hundred people lining the track to see him off.

"Where you heading for?" asked Djong Pot Huahn, holemate and faithful provider.

"Don't know. Wisdom eventually, I think. I've always wanted to see Wisdom."

"But that's right on the other side of the world, R.D."

"Makes it all the more worth reaching."

Then the signal light did turn green and down the line in the bright glow of Meridian Main Station there came a puffing and panting of fusion-heated steam. Out of the glare and the steam came the train, a thousand and a half tons of clunking clanking Bethlehem Ares steel. The boxcars rolled ponderously past Rajandra Das's covert, crushingly slow and heavy. Rajandra Das counted twelve, his lucky number, and made his jump. As he ran along between the train and the rows of well-wishers, hands reached out to slap him on the back and voices called out shouts of encouragement. Rajandra Das smiled and waved to them as he jogged along. The train slowly gathered speed. Rajandra Das picked his car and hopped up onto the coupling. Shouts, whoops and applause came out of the darkness behind him. He edged along the side of the car and tried the door. His charm had not failed him. It was unlocked. Rajandra Das slid the door open and rolled inside. He made himself comfortable on a pile of boxed mangos. The train rumbled into the night. In his fitful, fretful sleep, it seemed to Rajandra Das that the train stopped for long times at anonymous junctions while brighter, faster trains screamed past. At dawn he woke and breakfasted on mango. He slid the door open and sat with his legs dangling over the track, watching the sun rise beyond a vast red desert, eating slices of mango which he cut with his multibladed Defence Forces knife, stolen from Krishnamurthi Speciality Hardware on Water Street. There being nothing to look at except a lot of red desert, he went back to sleep again and dreamed of the towers of Wisdom glistening in the dawn light as the sun rose beyond the Syrtic Sea.

At twelve minutes of twelve Rajandra Das was awakened by a small explosion at the base of his spine. Stars blazed before his eyes, he gasped and gaped for breath, winded, agonized. There was another explosion, and another. Rajandra Das was now sufficiently awake to recognize them as kicks to his kidneys. Too winded even to howl, he rolled over and a bristling, sweaty face breathed a foul miasma over him.

"No good goddamn freeloading lazy bum of a tramp," growled the greasy face. A foot drew back for another kick.

"No no no no no no no no no no, no no don't kick," wailed Rajandra Das, finding the air in some pocket of his lungs to plead, hands raised up in futile defence.

"No good goddamn freeloading lazy bum of a tramp," said bristle-breath again, for emphasis, and kicked the wind out of Rajandra Das. A hand grabbed Rajandra Das's threadbare coat and lifted him.

"Off you go," said the face, dragging Rajandra Das to the open door. Red desert sped by beneath the wheels.

“No no no no no,” pleaded Rajandra Das. “Not here, not in the desert. It's murder!”

“What do I care?” grumbled the sweaty face, but some vestige of decency untouched by Bethlehem Ares Railroads must have been stroked, for he set Rajandra Das down on a heap of mango boxes and sat down to watch him, tapping his nightstick against his thigh. “Next place we so much as slow down you going off.” Rajandra Das said nothing. He was feeling his bruises turn purple up and down his back.

After half an hour the car jolted. Rajandra Das could tell from the pressure on his purple bruises that the train was slowing.

“Where are we, hey? Someplace civilized?”

The guard smiled, showing a wicket of rotting teeth. The train slowed. With a gritty grinding of brakes, the train stopped. The guard slid the door open, admitting a blaze of brilliant sunshine.

“Hey hey hey, what is this?” said Rajandra Das, blinking and blinded. Then he found himself lying on hard dirt with the wind knocked out of him again. His canvas bag thumped painfully onto his chest. Whistles blew, steam hissed, pistons churned. A trickle of burning hot liquid ran down Rajandra Das's face. Blood! he thought, then blinked, spat, sat up. The guard was urinating on him, laughing uproariously as he tucked his warty member back into his rancid pants. The train blew and moved off.

“Bastards,” said Rajandra Das to the railroad company in general. He wiped his face clean with his sleeve. The urine formed a dark red stain in the dust. It might well have been blood. Rajandra Das took a long look from the sitting position at the place he had landed in. Low adobe houses, a white wall with two, some greenery, some trees, some wind-pumps, a handful of large lozenge-shaped solar collectors and a stubby microwave relay tower on top of a pile of rocks that looked as if someone lived in them.

“It'll do,” said Rajandra Das, beloved of tombolas and trains and boxcars but not guards, never guards of the Bethlehem Ares Railroad Company. Figures were approaching, indistinct in the noontime heat-haze. Rajandra Das picked himself up and went to meet his new hosts.

“Hey,” he said, “there wouldn't be any picture postcards of this place, would there?”

The Babooshka did not like trains. Their bulk intimidated her. Their weight crushed her. Their speed alarmed her and the sound of their wheels was that of doomsday approaching. She feared their steam and their spoutings and the possibility of their fusion tokamaks exploding and blasting her to loose atoms in the upper atmosphere. She hated trains. Especially trains that had to cross dreadful red deserts. Trains, they were largely indifferent to the Babooshka. Even this one that was crossing the dreadful red desert.

“Misha, Misha, how much longer until we can get off this horrid engine?”

Mikal Margolis, mineralogist, industrial chemist, dutiful son and young pioneer, looked away from the hypnotic red desert; clean, spare and beautiful in its geological potential, and said to his little mother, “We shall be through it when we're through it, and then we shall be in Paradise Valley, where it rains only at two o'clock in the morning, where, when you plant a seed, you have to stand back because it will shoot up and hit you on the chin, where tame songbirds come and sing on your fingers and where you and I, Mother, will make our fortunes and see our days out in wealth, health and happiness.”

The Babooshka was pleased by her son's simple tale of wonder. She liked the bit about tame songbirds sitting on her fingers. The only birds in New Cosmobad had been raucous black crows.

“But how much longer, Misha?”

“Next stop, Mother. No towns in this desert, so we don't stop until we are there. Next stop, then we change to the mountain railroad that will take us to Paradise Valley.”

“Oh, changing trains, I do not like it. I do not like trains, Misha, I do not like them at all.”

“Never worry, Mother. I'm here. Now, would you like some mint tea to soothe your nerves?”

“That would be very nice indeed, Misha. Thank you.”

Mikal Margolis rang for the steward, who brought mint tea in a smart pot decorated with the black and gold Bethlehem Ares Railroads livery. The Babooshka sipped her tea and smiled at her son between sips. Mikal Margolis smiled back and wondered what he was going to tell his mother when they got to Paradise Valley, for the only paradise it was was an industrial chemist's one; where the rain fell at two o'clock in the morning because that was when the refineries vented their tail-gasses into the atmosphere, where it was ethylene in the soil that made the plants shoot up overnight, then wither and then die, and where all the birds had succumbed long ago to toxic fumes and the ones that sat upon her fingers were cunning mechanical duplicates, all part of the Company's public relations programme.

He would worry about that nearer the time. Outside the polarized window was the thrilling red desert, a man's landscape, a gritty wonderland of raw rocks and minerals. He imagined himself riding across it on horseback, wrapped in serape and headcloths, his leather specimens case slapping against his back. Caught up in such reverie, it was not long before the gentle rocking of the train sent him off to sleep.

He woke in pandemonium. Not the Pandemonium that was the name of the interchange for Paradise Valley, but the other, more dreadful sort. Valves were hissing, voices shouting, metal clanking against metal, and someone was shaking him by the shoulder, calling, “Sir, your mother, sir, wake up, sir, your mother, sir, sir, sir.” He focused on the pale face of the steward. “Sir, your mother, sir.” The Babooshka was not in her seat. All the luggage was gone. Mikal Margolis dashed to the window to see

his mother gliding happily down the side of the track, waving along a slender young man with a beard grinning under a pile of parcels and cases.

“Mother!” he roared. “Mother!”

The Babooshka looked up and waved, a tiny, happy china doll of a woman. Her voice was as doll's.

“Misha! Come on! Can't waste time. Have to find the other station.”

“Mother!” bellowed Mikal Margolis, “This is not the right stop!” But his words were lost in a billow of steam and the thunder of fusion engines powering up. Creakingly, agedly, the train began to roll. “Sir, sir!” cried the flapping steward. Mikal Margolis straight-armed him into an empty seat and dashed for the door. He jumped as the carriage passed the end of the makeshift platform.

The Babooshka swirled up the platform in a storm of small indignation.

“Misha, the shock you are giving me, your poor dear mother! Falling asleep on the train, no less! Come, we shall miss the mountain railroad.”

The cheeky porter-type had to put the bags down, he was laughing so hard.

“Mother, where are the mountains?”

“Behind the buildings.”

“Mother, you can see right over the buildings, they are so low. Mother, this is not the right station.”

“Oh, no? Then where is this your poor dear mother has put you?”

Mikal Margolis pointed to some words laid out in pretty white pebbles by the edge of the track.

“Desolation Road, Mother.”

“And this is the next stop, no?”

“We were meant to get off at Pandemonium. The train was not supposed to stop here. This town was not supposed to be here.”

“Then blame the railroad company, blame the town, but not your poor dear mother!” fumed the Babooshka, and lambasted, lampooned, be-jasused and generally cursed the railroad company, the trains, their tracks, their signals, their rolling stock, their drivers, their engineers, their guards and anyone even remotely connected with Bethlehem Ares Railroads down to the meanest lavatory attendant, third-class, for approximately twenty minutes.

Finally Dr. Alimantando, nominal head of Desolation Road, pop. 7, elev. 1250 m., “one step short of Paradise,” arrived to settle the altercation so he could return to his chronokinetic studies in peace. Only the day before he had commissioned Rajandra Das, general factotum, sorcerer's apprentice, odd job man and station porter, to spell out the name of the town in proud white pebbles so that any train that might pass would know that the people of Desolation Road had pride in their town. As if lured by a malicious sympathetic magic, the train bearing the Babooshka and Mikal Margolis pulled over the horizon and stopped to take a look. Rajandra Das's charm over machines was powerful, but surely not that powerful. Nevertheless, he had charmed the Babooshka and her son into being, and now Dr. Alimantando had to decide what to do with them. He offered them refuge in one of the warm dry caves that riddled the bluffs until such time as they chose to leave or had a more permanent residence constructed. Stiff with indignation, the Babooshka refused the offer of sanctuary. She would not sleep in a dirty cave with bat droppings on the floor and lizards for company; no, nor would she share it with a son who was a faithless wastrel and did not know how to treat an old lady who was his poor dear mother. Dr. Alimantando listened with what little grace he could muster and then prevailed upon the Mandellas, whose house was built with family in mind, to take in the waif. Mikal Margolis took the cave. There were bat droppings and there were lizards, but there was no mother so it was not that bad.

In the Mandella household the Babooshka found a contemporary in Grandfather Haran, who entertained her with peapod wine and honey-tongued flatteries and asked his son to build an extra room onto the already rambling Mandella home especially for the Babooshka. Every night they would sip wine, reminisce on the days when both they and the world were young, and play the word game.

the Babooshka loved so much. On one such night, in early autumn, as Grandfather Haran was putting the word “bauxite” down on a double-word triple-letter, the Babooshka noticed for the first time his distinguished grey hair and fine upright body, chipped by time like a china god, but strong and uneroded. She let her eyes rest upon the iron-stiff beard and the lovely little shiny button-eyes, and she let out a quiet sigh and fell in love with him.

“Haran Mandella, as we say in Old New Cosmobad, you are much much gentleman,” she said.

“Anastasia Tyurischeva Margolis, as we say in Desolation Road, you are much much lady,” said Grandfather Haran.

The wedding was set for the following spring.

Mikal Margolis dreamed in his cave of the mineral springs of Paradise Valley. He would never find his fortune lying around in the rocks of Desolation Road, but he did find crystals of sulphate dilemma. With time it refined into a pure form: to find his fortune he must leave Desolation Road and his mother; to leave her would mean leaving on his own and he did not have the courage for that. Such was the essence of Mikal Margolis's purified dilemma. The resolution of it into useful compounds and his quest for personal anti-maternal courage was to lead him through adultery, murder and exile to the destruction of Desolation Road. But not yet.

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