

Maker of Worlds

By Jack English

Chapter One: Fall from Grace

He fell from grace and was cast into the pit, destined neither to serve in Heaven nor rule in Hell. He was exiled, banished, pushed out of the light, and all for the glory of the gods.

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"Shit!" Alexander Stoneheart mumbled under his breath as he struggled with the space plane's seat belt. He stared out the porthole. The sun had just set on the Baja peninsula bathing the sky in the orange glow of a summer's evening.

A sudden burst of acceleration pressed him into his seat as he hurled out over the Pacific. Rapidly overtaking the setting sun, he shot skyward leaving the orange haze of sunset to dissolve into a thin, sparkling, blue band following the curve of the planet.

He was leaving his career--- his life behind as surely as he was leaving earth's golden glow. And to think, a scant two days earlier he had reached the zenith of his profession as the Director of the National Weather Control Center, a laboratory charged with the audacious task of taming earth's weather. And just when such god-like powers were within his grasp, he had been fired; banished to an obscure space station orbiting Venus. Why

did they do this to me? A voice screamed in his head. He was worse than dead. He was consigned to mediocrity.

His anger showed in the taugth muscles and deep creases in his face. A head taller than most, he had the build of a soccer player. His high rounded cheek bones and the angular planes of his face hinted at a trace of American Indian ancestry. But his light complexion, single mindedness and quick temper spoke of his Scotch-Irish roots. When he smiled, it was like sunlight on a spring morning. When he frowned, it was like the darkest storm clouds imaginable. He wasn't smiling.

His frustration was made all the worse by the unbridled joy of his fellow travelers. Loose-fitting sweat suits with Colonial Bureau emblems marked them as new Martian colonists.

Poor sons-of-bitches. He thought, turning to avoid eye contact. Do they know what they're getting into? Cramped, dingy quarters, reconstituted food, recycled water and air breathed by others a thousand times before. Yet they were willing to sacrifice everything to get away from earth.

Colonization of Mars was more a political decision than a scientific one. The 25 billion people of a crowded and desperate earth needed some hope of a new frontier. Lunar colonies and orbiting cities in space had proven too expensive to build. So, Mars became the last, best hope of man. The politicians had promised a new land, but it

was a promise they had only been able to keep for a handful of people.

He glanced around the cabin at the men, women and children headed for the High Frontier, as Mars was called in the marketing brochures, and thought, if anyone is in deeper shit than me, it must be these poor souls. Not only had they sacrificed their careers, but most had paid the Colonial Bureau a fortune in bribes for the privilege.

After docking at the space station which served as a transfer point, Stoneheart made his way to the main lounge. He plunked himself down in a dark corner of the bar and ordered four marguerites. He didn't know whether this would be his last drink for two years. Two stinking years of my life wasted. Two stinking years! A wave of anger dumped adrenalin into his bloodstream, making him still more agitated.

He looked up at the monitors listing arrivals and departures. His flight wasn't even listed. There was no regular schedule for trips to the Jules Verne II, the lone space station orbiting Venus, but every three or four months a supply ship was dispatched there.

A shadow passed between him and the monitors and sat down across the table. "Sorry," he waved the shadow away. "That seat is taken." His tone made it plain he wanted to be left alone.

"Alex, you dog! How-the-hell-are you?" The shadow said.

"Jack? Jack Callison? You son-of-a-bitch, how

are you? Last I heard you were teaching math somewhere in Australia."

"Melbourne, my boy. Pretty nice down under."

Jack Callison was a tall slender man with sandy hair and the kind of boyish good looks that women love. A shock of curly hair dangled in the middle of his forehead.

Stoneheart looked him up and down thinking how little he'd changed, not just physically, but the twinkle in his eye, and the slight smile in the corner of his mouth when he was up to mischief. Callison had been one of his few friends at the University. But their friendship was a study in contrasts. He was bookish. Callison was a party animal. He followed the rules. Callison bend them beyond all recognition. He wondered whether Callison's rule bending wasn't going to get him into serious trouble someday.

"So, what are you doing these days?"

Stoneheart smiled for the first time since being fired.

"This and that. I'm sort of a freelance mathematician."

"A freelance what?"

"Mathematician. You seem surprised."

"Last time I saw you--- guess it's been about fifteen years--- you'd just dropped out of graduate school because it interfered with your social life. What was the name of that blond with all the hair and the---" Stoneheart held his cupped hands in front of his chest.

"Oh, Evelyn. She spent three months with me. When she left, I went back to school, got my doctorate, and have been doing odd math jobs ever since. I've read a lot about YOU over the last few years though. 'Dr. Alexander Stoneheart, atmospheric physicist, proposes theory of weather modification.' Pretty heady stuff. I thought you were headed for a Nobel Prize."

"Looks like I'm headed for oblivion instead."

"Tough luck having the National Weather Control Center taken away from you. What happened?"

"Politics, bureaucracy, professional jealousy, just tiny minds... tiny, tiny minds."

"The way I heard it you called Secretary Collin an asshole for canceling your experiments and suppressing your paper on Jetstream Steering."

"He IS an asshole and how-the-hell did you hear about Jetstream Steering? That's supposed to be classified."

"I get around. I hear things. You really think the government can keep something like that a secret?" Callison leaned across the table and lowered his voice as if emphasizing the confidential nature of his question. "So, my friend, what are you going to do?"

"Do? What can I do?"

"You can quit." Callison cocked his head and raised his eyebrows, a devilish smile creeping in around the corners of his mouth. "Once you've quit, they have no hold on you. You can do

research, publish your results, and you won't have to waste two years aboard the Jules Verne II."

"How did you know I was being sent to the Jules Verne II?"

The waiter brought a tray of marguerites and Callison drew back, erecting a silent mask against the intruder. As the waiter turned away, Callison pulled one of the drinks toward him, licking the salt off the lip of the glass. "Never mind how I know. I just know." He slouched back in his seat. "What are you going to do? Your ship leaves in an hour. That's not a lot of time to think."

"No choice. I have to suffer through this exile and hope I can get back in the good graces of the bureaucracy when I return."

"You could quit," Callison repeated.

"Quit and do what? They'd never let me teach. All they'd have to do is remind a university of its reliance on government funds and that would be that. So, what else can I do? Become a network weatherman? No thanks."

Callison looked down at his drink, rubbed the glass with his thumb and then looked around the lounge. To the left of the bar, a monitor was tuned to the London network news. Beyond it, future Martian colonists swarmed around a cluster of tables. Beyond them, a half a dozen people at one table stood out from all the rest. Deep blue tunics with crisp lines, and lean perfect bodies marked them as employees of Rutherford Engineering.

"Ever thought about signing on with them?"

Callison waved his glass toward the Rutherford people. "They could probably find something for you."

"Are you kidding? Me, join up with those robots! Look at them. They all dress alike! Look alike! Think alike! No way! There's something sinister about them."

"What's so sinister about the world's largest engineering firm?" Callison struggled to suppress a smile.

"I don't know. Something just isn't right. Ever wonder how they get all the best contracts? You know they bid on the National Weather Control Center? They were twice as high as the company we used."

"And you went with the low bidder?"

"Of course."

"Did the low bidder build it the way you wanted?"

"Well, there were some problems, but..."

"Did your low bidder get the project done on time?"

"No, it took two years longer than scheduled. Say, you aren't actually defending Rutherford, are you?"

No, not really. I was just trying to find out why you think there's something wrong with..."

Callison was cut off by a round of cheering from the Rutherford table. All eyes turned to the news monitor.

The announcer said, "I repeat, in a surprise

move, the Colonial Bureau has awarded Rutherford Engineering a twenty-year contract to develop habitat for Martian colonists. Their bid, of a thousand dollars per square meter, was one tenth of that of the next lowest bid. Under the terms of the contract, Rutherford must build fifty square kilometers of habitat in twenty years, but can build as much as they want. The Colonial Bureau also noted..."

"God damn!" Stoneheart breathed. "They're everywhere. Someday it's all going to come crashing down on their heads."

Stoneheart looked at Callison, then up at a clock. He grabbed Callison's hand and shook it. "Jack, it's been good seeing you again. If I survive my two years in hell, let's get together. Got to go."

"So, you're really going? Just like that? After the way they treated you?"

"No choice, unless I want to be a weatherman. By the way, the name of the ship that's taking me to the Jules Verne II is the Dante, as in Dante's Inferno. Think there's any symbolism there?"

"Maybe. Just don't abandon hope. You better hurry. You've got less than ten minutes and the Dante is docked way down at T lock."

Stoneheart said goodbye and headed down the corridor at a near trot. T lock? How did Callison know it was T lock? It wasn't on the monitor. Another thing seemed funny, too. Just as the bar door closed behind him, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Callison walking over to



the Rutherford table.

## **Chapter Two: The Jules Verne II**

The three-month flight to the Jules Verne II passed in quiet oblivion. Stoneheart, like the crew, spent most of the time sleeping while the ship coasted toward Venus and its newest artificial satellite.

This was Dante's fourth trip to Venus and the crew was nervous. The Jules Verne II, like the original Jules Verne before it, was built by a consortium of government-owned companies and nothing quite fitted or worked right. It resembled a collection of pipes, woven by a demented plumber into slowly spinning wreath. There was no docking ring, so for the Dante to dock, the Jules Verne's rotation had to be stopped. And that was a very messy proposition. The gasket which should have sealed the connection between the shuttle airlock and the space station's hatch had not been installed properly, and was torn loose on one side when the last supply ship left. Even after Dante's skipper forced the mechanical interlock mechanism together, the fit was imperfect and air leaked out between the ship's airlock and the space station's.

The Dante's captain was the first to scramble through the air lock onto the Jules Verne II's cargo deck. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted." Edmond Utz was a barrel-chested, thick necked man who had found his propitious niche running the space station. Here, he was the master of the universe. "Captain, I understand you have another person for our little community."

The captain of the Dante jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Yeah, he's some kind of scientist."

Stoneheart followed the captain through the airlock. "Not so fast." Utz put his hand on Stoneheart's shoulder. "Captain, do you have paperwork for this man?"

The Dante's captain pressed his lips tightly together and said nothing. Instead he retrieved a data card from his breast pocket. "He's all yours, Mr. Utz."

"That's just what I wanted to hear." Utz held the data card between his thumb and forefinger. "Welcome aboard Mr. Stoneheart. If you follow that passage to the left," Utz waived his hand without making eye contact, "it'll take you to the mess and I'll introduce you to the crew." Utz turned his back on him and settled into small talk with the shuttle's captain.

It struck Stoneheart as odd that after a three-month space flight, the shuttle Captain and his crew stayed suspiciously close to the cargo bay and their ship.

The shuttle's crew knew about the Jules Verne II and without any order being passed, they transferred cargo in record time. In three hours,

the Dante undocked, and as it did, it ripped off the other half of the air lock gasket.

Utz returned to the mess and insisted on making formal introductions. "Dr. Stoneheart," Utz pointed, "this is Mr. Dayl, our engineer, Mr. Zibeck, communications, Larsen runs the solar observatory."

"When it works," Larsen quipped.

"What do you mean when it works?" Utz snapped, his beefy jaw looking like a bulldog's. "We transmit our quota of data." Those around the table avoided Utz' gaze. He continued the introductions. "Skully does electronic maintenance. The rest of the crew are on watch. You'll meet them soon enough."

"Glad to meet you gentlemen. I'd like to see the weather observatory. Can someone tell me where it is?" Stoneheart asked.

"Anxious to get started?" Utz asked wryly. "You'll have plenty of time for that. Two years is a long, long time."

"I'll show you." Skully smirked. A tanned, sinewy figure rose to his feet, a tool belt strapped to his waist and a cowboy hat in his hand. His short, receding, rust colored hair made him look like a figure out of another time and place.

"Watch that one." Utz flicked the back of his hand toward Skully. "He's a troublemaker."

Stoneheart nodded and followed Skully down a small passage. "I'll be glad when they spin up to one G." Stoneheart said. "The worst thing about

the Dante was no artificial gravity."

Skully squeezed through a small hatchway and spoke over his shoulder. "Hope you're willing to settle for a tenth G 'cause that's all we're gonna' git."

"What do you mean all we're going to get? The specs said the station maintains earth-normal gravity."

"What you probably read," Skully snorted, "were the design specs. What this station really does is quite another matter. You'll see."

"What will I see?"

"Now Doc, no sense me givin' ya' all the bad news at once."

Stoneheart grabbed Skully. "Tell me about the gravity. Why aren't we going to spin up to earth normal?"

"Well Doc, the station was designed for earth-normal gravity, but the first time they spun it up, it wobbled and creaked so badly, they spun it down within an hour. At first, they thought it was a problem with weight distribution and spent a month shifting everything around. When they spun it up to one G again, it still groaned and creaked, but not as badly, so, they thought they had the problem knocked.

"You can tell, just by looking around that it was built by a lot of different companies. The modules never fit together right and ground against each other at the joints. After a month at one G, the inter-module gaskets began to leak. At first we

were able to cope using this stuff." Skully slapped a large gun of silicone strapped to his leg, "but then the leaks got larger. Finally, two guys were trapped in a storage compartment when a seal failed catastrophically. They died from decompression. We heard them screaming over the commlink, but it only lasted a few minutes, and then they suffocated. Since then, we've never spun back up to one G."

"Does the Science Council know about this?"

"Officially, the Jules Verne II is a space station operating at earth-normal gravity. Unofficially, they don't give a damn. Here's the weather lab." Skully opened a hatch and pointed to a long room whose curved floor rose noticeable from where he was standing to the hatchway at the other end.

Stoneheart bounced in and cracked his head on the ceiling before falling onto a console. "Damn!" He breathed.

"Careful Doc." Skully said. "Don't want to break any of the equipment. Maybe you ought to move really slowly until you get used to low gravity."

"Look at this place. It's a disaster!" Stoneheart crabbed, "Trash all over, equipment racks left open, food left to rot." The faint odor of mold and old socks pervaded the room. "And where's the weather staff? Shouldn't someone be on duty?"

"They're probably in their cabins. As to whether someone should be on duty--- I couldn't say."

Stoneheart shook his head in disgust. "Mr.

Skully, can you show me where the weather staff bunk?"

"If you want, but you're not going to like it."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

They back-tracked along narrow passages then turned down another corridor where Skully pointed to a hatch. "Lampton is in there. He was in charge until you arrived. Brock and Stafford have the next two cabins."

"Thanks," Stoneheart said, buzzing to be let in. Skully leaned on a bulkhead. Stoneheart buzzed three more times with no response. He was about to move on to Brock's cabin when the hatch opened. The face that greeted him was like something out of a nightmare. Lampton's skin was pale almost to the point of being transparent. There were bags under his red eyes. He was only partially dressed and hadn't shaved in days. He propped himself up by leaning on the hatch frame. "Yeah?" was all he could manage.

"I'm Alex Stoneheart," he extended his hand.

"So?" Lampton muttered.

"I was sent here to take over the weather project."

A faint flicker of interest crossed Lampton's face then faded. "You my relief?" He straightened somewhat.

"No, I was sent here to take charge of the project and..."

Lampton cut him off. "Go away." He closed

the hatch in Stoneheart's face.

"What was that all about?" Stoneheart asked Skully.

"He's been here too long. Lampton, Brock and Stafford were sent up with the first crew eighteen months ago. Most of the others have been here less than six months, that's why they still have some sense about them. Utz and his lackeys came up on the last shuttle."

"How long have you been here?" Stoneheart asked.

"Been here nine months, got ninety-three days, four hours to go."

Stoneheart tilted his head toward Lampton's cabin. "What happened to him?"

"It was a combination of time and--- did I mention the two men lost in the decompression accident were part of his staff? Recycled water, filtered air, industrial tasting food, boredom, a lot of things. Now Lampton and his men stay in their cabins most of the time, doped up."

"Doped up?"

"Well, you know, tranquilizers, lots of tranquilizers."

"How about Brock and Stafford?"

"Same thing, I don't think any of them have been in the lab for a month."

"Geez-us!" Stoneheart breathed, "What does Utz have to say about that?"

"Oh, he doesn't CARE as long as the weather reports are transmitted back to earth. Stafford set

up some automatic equipment and as long as that's working, Utz is happy."

"What kind of a cesspool have I stumbled into?"

### Chapter Three: Bad Data

After seeing Lampton, he just wanted to be left alone. He made his way back to the weather lab and spent a few hours picking up the trash and stowing loose equipment. Callison was right. I should have quit and become a weatherman.

He was sitting on the floor, organizing a pile of computer parts when he was startled by a loud clang. Skully leaned into the hatchway, a grin on his face. He was holding a small, flat box.

"What 'cha doin' Doc?"

"Trying to clean up this mess." Stoneheart was clearly annoyed by the interruption.

"Brought you some food."

"Ah, thanks. Put it over there." He pointed toward the console with one end of a circuit board. "I'll get it later."

"Now IS later, Doc. You've been here in the lab for---" Skully glanced at the clock, "thirty hours. You need something to eat, and you need sleep. You don't want to end up like Lampton, do you?"

"I said I'd get it later." Stoneheart snapped.

Instead of taking the hint and leaving, Skully sat in a chair and propped up his feet. "You gotta' eat." Skully slid his well-worn cowboy hat back



onto the crown of his head. Crush marks and a small tear in the brim left the impression that it was the hat of a real, working cowboy. "I know you don't feel hungry 'cause your body uses less energy at low gravity, but don't be fooled, you'll use up all the sugar in your blood--- go into shock and---" Skully shrugged his shoulders and offered Stoneheart the container again.

He poked through it looking for edible bits among the pastel nuggets of reconstituted food.

"So, what do you think of the Jules Verne II?" Skully asked.

"It's a hell-hole."

"No news there. What are you doing?"

"Get that console working so I can review the weather transmissions for the last year, but the signal won't feed from the main database."

"Let me look," Skully tapped a few commands into the control panel. "I'm getting a fault on the database controller. We'll have to do a trace."

"We? You'll give me a hand?"

"Why not? I've got ninety-one days and a couple of hours until I'm relieved." Skully popped open a service panel at the base of a wall and stuck his head in crushing the top of his hat. "God, it's a mess in here. Half the fiber optic cables have been disconnected. Wait---" Skully reconnected some of the loose ends. "Try now."

Stoneheart put down the tasteless food, wiped his hands off, and slid into the console operator's chair. He tapped in a few commands. "It's

working."

Skully replaced the access panel and got up.

"Now what?"

"I'm going to have the computer put a year of images together into a video. Ah, this is interesting. There is a storm developing here at the western edge of the screen, moving eastward, probably accompanied by violent lightning storms.

"Look, there's another storm forming on the western edge of the screen. It's following the exact same track as the last storm. I wonder why?" Stoneheart hunched over the screen, worry lines etched deep in his face. "Look, there's another storm forming in the same place. Something's wrong." He poked the screen with his finger. "I've never seen two storms roll out the exactly the same way, let alone three."

"Well, Doc, what's the verdict?"

"Can't tell, let's switch over to the temperature display and rerun the transmission file. I'm looking for lightning strikes."

"Let me try." Skully pushed Stoneheart off the chair with his behind.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to have the computer subtract out all temperatures less than, say, 2000 degrees. What'll be left are the lightning strikes. Here it comes."

Lightning danced across the screen in the distinct pattern of a storm front. They waited a moment, and the pattern repeated itself, then again, a moment later.

"What-the-hell is going on here?"

"You sure you've tapped into the transmission log? Maybe you're displaying some kind of research file."

Stoneheart looked at the controls. There was no doubt that this was the data being transmitting back to earth. "Son of a bitch," Stoneheart breathed. "They've been transmitting the same data over and over again. I've been using it in my weather models for a year! Damn! I wonder how much this has screwed up my forecasts. I've got to let Utz know what's going on!"

"I've got ta' warn ya'; he's not going to be very receptive." Skully took off his hat and tried to reblock it with his hands, smoothing the wrinkles and sharpening the creases.

"What do you mean?"

"All he cares about is meeting his quota of data."

"How can you say that?"

"If he really cared, do ya' think he'd have let Lampton, Brock and Stafford screw this place up? Face it Doc, you're on your own. Better try to fix the damage and not worry about what happened before."

"That's pretty cynical. If you've got such a bad attitude, why'd you bother to bring me that stuff?" Stoneheart nodded toward the food bits.

Skully adjusted his cowboy hat to just the right angle of rake before leaning back and hanging his thumbs in his pockets. "Truth is Doc, I need your

help."

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