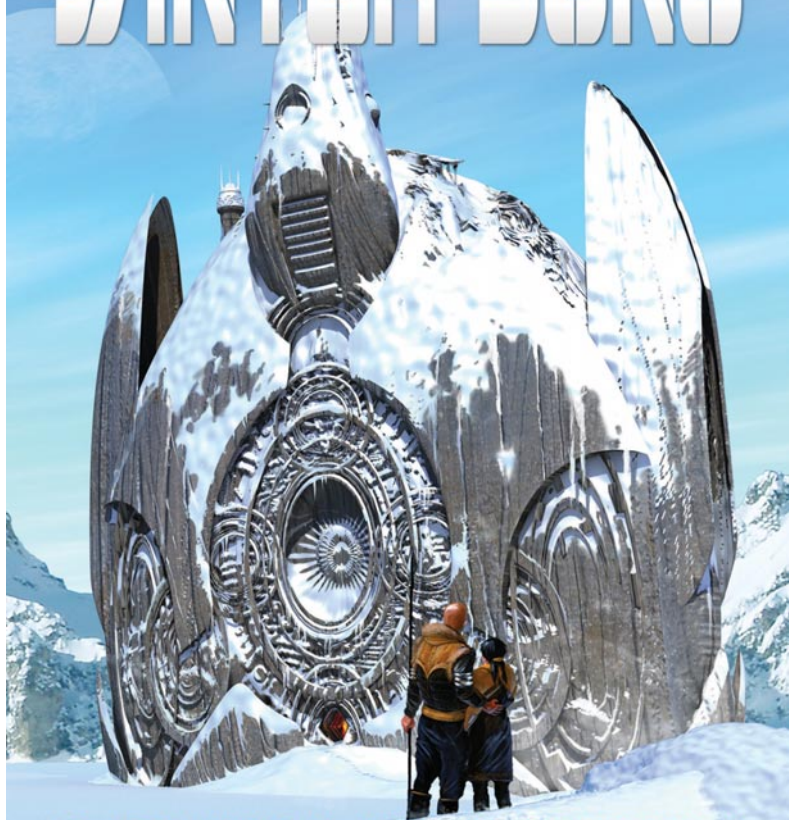


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WINTER SONG



COZIN HARVEY



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Lee Thomas

an excerpt from
WINTER SONG
Colin Harvey

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ONE

Karl

Karl was dreaming of his clone-wife, far away on distant Avalon, when the plasma bolt slammed into Ship's engines.

One moment he was bathing with Karla in iodised springs beneath Jodi's Falls, soaping her up-tilted breasts in the warm sunlight of Delta Pavonis, the next a giant was sitting on his chest while alarms screeched in the emergency lighting.

The pressure lifted and he floated naked in his bed-web on the bridge, a voice calling ever louder, "Karl, we are under attack." That Ship's too-perfect alto was gravelled by static showed how mortal the blow might be. His interface wasn't working; none of the usual displays were scrolling down his field of vision, and with no data feeding directly into his brain he was forced to use archaic Voice. "What – what's the damage?" He smelled the acrid tang of smoke and the monitors – used only by passengers – were blank.

He coughed, his eyes stinging, and a smooth wall opened and out popped a freshly grown mask connected to an air-pack.

"I'm not wearing that," Karl muttered between coughs. "I hate putting things on my face."

"You're enhanced, not invulnerable," Ship snapped. "Put it on!"

Muttering, Karl complied.

"Thank you," Ship said. "We have lost all but emergency power in this third. In the central third we have intermittent power. The rest is undamaged. When waves from the gravity generator threatened to crush you, I had to take the engines down, and can't restart them. I'm attempting to dodge a second incoming bolt with lateral power, but it's already expanded, and complete evasion is unlikely. Time to impact is four minutes."

Karl tried to digest the news that he was probably dead. "They must have fired as soon as they dropped out of fold-space."

Ship didn't answer directly. "The second bolt came from different co-ordinates, indicating another ship, though it's difficult to scan through the asteroid belt. I've registered a third ship nearby." It sounded sheepish; "They must have identified us before I could see them. The first I knew was their plasma bolt coming at point-nine-see. I had barely three minutes' warning. I'm sorry, Karl."

"Forget it," Karl said.

That meant there would be no respite while the others re-charged their capacitors. Even if by a miracle they dodged this second bolt, and one from the third ship, the first would have recharged and be ready to fire.

He slipped free of the amniotic safety of the bed-web. "Are they the Aye ships we spotted earlier?" Unlikely, he knew. The ships that were each individual Artificial Intelligences rarely interacted with the Flesh-bound, who held little interest for them. He floated over to one of the screens. "Can you get this working?"

Ship paused for so long that Karl wondered if it had died.

“Yes,” it said.

A schematic appeared, of Ship at less than three Standard AUs from Mizar B2. Karl had thought that here on the sunward edge of the system’s asteroid belt, surrounded by the myriad dots among which Ship and he had lurked, they would be safe to spy upon the Ayes. There *they* were, the symbols denoting the Ayes around the nearest of the four stars – the double pair that had so attracted astrophysicists ever since their nature had been discovered – in close orbit around the upper chromosphere of Mizar B2, doing whatever incomprehensible things Ayes did.

Scattered among the debris of the outer belt were three perfectly spherical ships, their regularity a defiant cry to the universe. “Their signatures indicate that they’re Traditionals. I’m sorry, Karl. You’ve been fired upon by your own species.”

Though it was debatable whether their assailants would consider Karl human, it was no surprise – Ship’s design was clearly the angular asymmetry of the Radicals; the Pures, the most likely suspects among the Traditionals, would have guessed that he had man-machine interfaces, and was therefore to be despised even more than the Ayes they hated. Like all bullies they picked on him, a single target, rather than five Aye ships.

Between the symbols denoting Ship and their assailants was the pulsing sphere of a plasma bolt, the enemy’s fuel hawked up from their engine and spat out of a tube.

“How far away are they?”

"Two AUs spaceward."

"Recommendations?"

"With five... four minutes to impact, your logical course is to abandon ship."

"Stitch that." He gazed at the monitor. "Let's see how far lateral power gets us. Are we dead centre of the bolt?"

"Slightly to starboard, so I have already set course in that direction."

"Good girl. What else can we do?"

"I can get no more power through the vents." As always, Ship ignored his anthropomorphising.

He thought. "What if we vented atmosphere from the hold?"

Ship paused so long that Karl thought he would have to prompt it. "It'd increase velocity by an additional one per cent. Not enough. We need seven."

"Vent the airlocks as well. Take the air pressure as low as possible, then drop it another per cent."

"I can't do that, Karl. I'm programmed to protect you. It's an unacceptable risk."

"And being blown up isn't?"

"That's why I recommended that you abandon ship. You have two minutes to decide. You should leave two minutes earlier not to be caught by debris and radiation. That's now, by the way."

"Jack it, I'm not leaving you!" Or the lump of neutronium locked in a stasis field in the corner of the hold. If the field failed the cargo would devour the ship in less time than it took to scarf down one of the tasteless protein-burgers he'd lived on for a month.

"Karl, that's sentimental nonsense," Ship said. "The major risk to you is from exposure, but I've sent a

tight-beam Mayday toward the Hangzhou Relay, which I estimate the nearest one sympathetic. It's about four light-months away. They can jump here in days once they have the signal, and the lifegel will keep you safe – even in vacuum – until then."

"I'm glad you haven't suggested I let our attackers pick me up," Karl said.

Ship ignored his feeble humour. "You have many months of power in your companion, which will kick in as soon as I am out of range. But before the power fails, the lifegel will need fuel, and will slowly consume your body. Even before that, there will be side-effects – weight loss, anaemia, eczema. Such skinsuits are only designed as a short-term measure."

Karl nodded, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I wish I had these bastards in reach."

"Adrenaline has that effect," Ship said. It added, "I am an object; you can replace me, probably even approximate my programming. But I am no more a person than any other vehicle. I am expendable. You are not. You should leave now, from Bay Eight."

Karl slapped the wall, but it didn't make him feel any better. "Bay Eight, then. Keep talking while I'm en route."

"Karl," Ship said. "There's something else you should know."

"Go on."

"I've found some data that was previously misfiled. This system was settled over four centuries ago."

"These bastards are local?"

"I believe not. There's no other indication of local traffic. The last records are over two centuries ago, from just before the onset of the Long Night. If the colony

survived, they probably slipped back during the conflict.

"It's unlikely that they did survive. If the war didn't get them, the planet's orbit is elliptical. During summer it would just be habitable, but its winters too cold to survive."

"Which star is it orbiting?"

"It appears to be orbiting both of the Mizar B pairing, at a distance that would give it a sub-Martian climate."

"Can I reach it from here?"

Ship said, "It's about eighteen million kilometres from here, so it will take..."

There was a perceptible pause, which told Karl how terribly, terribly wrong things were – Ship should have been able to calculate the numbers instantly, as well as simultaneously managing a multiplicity of other tasks. "Three standard weeks."

It added, "I will get you there. And I will download all the information I have to you. Plug in."

Gritting his teeth, Karl wiped the dust from the jack that hung beside the monitor screen for emergencies, and inserted it in the socket behind his right ear. "Aagh! That's horrible!" he cried. "It's like someone running claws down a stone wall, really, *really* loudly."

"I'm sorry," Ship said. "If so many of my systems weren't down..."

"Doesn't matter," he said, blinking a lie to the two words. The symbols flashed in front of his eyes, too fast to comprehend; he would review the data later, while he drifted in space.

Then he was pulling himself hand-over-hand down the corridor. As he rounded the first bend, Ship said, "The Ayes' behaviour is curious."

"How... so?" He was panting from the effort as he passed the hold, with the lump of super-heavy cargo that would have paid for the trip. Particularly if he could have traded it for information on the next leg.

"If I were to assume that they are going to continue with their actions, what the Ayes are doing to the star's upper chromosphere could have the effect of making the stars burn hotter."

"Why would they do that?"

"I don't know. They have never attempted to modify a star before, as far as we know."

Karl reached Bay Eight, and paused.

Before he could speak, Ship said. "You must go now."

Karl ripped off the mask, sighing with relief. He nodded, thin-lipped, and patted the wall. "Thanks... uh, you know—"

"No time," Ship said. "Go now."

The door irised slowly, revealing a wall of quivering blue jelly, three metres high and stuffed full of nanos. He paused, steeled himself, then pushed into the gel, which gave against him. He felt the stupid-smart goo hook into his skin and poke squidgy fingers into his nostrils, ears and even up his anus and urethra. It had little more intellect than an amoeba but was hardwired to climb into him and form a second skin, and did so relentlessly. He'd done this a hundred times, but every time it felt deeply unpleasant.

"Why would Terraformers pick a planet with such an unorthodox primary?" Karl wasn't really that interested, but it was better than thinking about the gel, or worse, the boiling mass of superheated plasma hurtling toward them at a quarter of a million kilometres a second. He fought down a rising tide of panic as the gel

pushed deeper. It took a mighty effort of will to open his mouth and let it flow down into his lungs. It formed an impenetrable skin over the vitreous liquid of his eyes: when it transluded so he could see the exit button, he knew that the covering was complete, and it had formed a tasteless, odourless emulsion between his frail flesh and the vacuum of space.

“With high maintenance, it would have been a viable project,” Ship said. “What they didn’t foresee was the coming war. They never do. That changed everything.”

Karl felt, rather than heard, the deep groan in the bowels of the ship as the containment fields around the neutronium weakened, and began to tear Ship apart.

“Got to go now!” he shouted to Ship by way of farewell.

“I have been squeezing all the lifegel into Bay Eight,” Ship said.

Before he could ask why, because the extra gel would do him no good, the closet-sized airlock opened onto space. The depressurising atmosphere fired him clear, and he understood then. The extra gel was propellant, and as he tumbled head over heels, he blessed his clever, dependable Ship.

Counting showed that he was rotating head over heels every six seconds. The lifegel opaqued to protect his eyes – leaving him with only turquoise-blue to stare at – every time he faced the eye-meltingly fierce glare of the Mizar quartet. As he turned to face shadow, it cleared again.

The lifegel formed a perfect seal around him, but he couldn’t stop his chest from rising and falling; the carbon dioxide he breathed out was absorbed by the goo

and gradually converted back into an oxygen and nitrogen mix a few microns thick, between him and the membrane.

He hadn't counted how long he had been accelerating when Ship said, "Karl, there's something else that I should tell you. The colonised planet's ozone layer appears—" and broke off.

Despite the fact that Karl was facing away from the suns, the membrane opaqued. Then – even though it was supposed to absorb all kinetic energy – he felt a punch in his back that would have been a fragment of Ship, blown to pieces.

Although it had only been a semi-organic machine, Ship had been closer to him at times than any lover, and he wept for his loss.

Later, after he had exhausted his tears, he slept. It was a fitful doze, more to process everything that had happened since his rude awakening than from exhaustion.

When he awoke, he held himself in as long as possible until there was no evading the unpleasant sensation of voiding himself into the membrane and allowing it to absorb the deposit. If it had not been for his circumstances, hanging in space would have been enjoyable. He even wondered why no one had used the lifegel at home to sight-see Avalon's neighbour worlds.

Astronomers on Ancient Earth had thought Mizar was one star. When they made the first telescopes, they realised that "it" was a pair. Still later, they finally understood that each pair – Mizar A and B – was in turn a pair.

Using the info that Ship had fired into him he went through the seven worlds orbiting the smaller pair that

was Mizar B and the centuries-old ruin of the semi-mythical Mizar B3, glimpsed only briefly before it flared and died again.

Farthest away from the stars that the settlers had named Alfasol, Betasol, Gamasol and Deltasol was tiny Asgard, a ball of ice and methane around a rocky core. Next was Valhalla, a blue hydrogen, helium and methane giant like Neptune. Moving inward past green Midgard – Mizar B’s Uranus – Vanaheim was the largest world, though only slightly bigger than many-mooned Asagarth, next to it and closest to the asteroid belt dubbed Bifrost. While sunward little Ragnarok was scorched to sterility. What this system lacked, Karl realised, was an equivalent to Earth and Venus; it would have made the Terraformers’ choices much easier.

And ahead of him was the other world, his destination. Isheimur, the settlers had named it – *ice world*.

The colony would have faded with the curtain-like falling of the Long Night, when the two types of humans, the Terraformers who wanted to shape worlds to fit humans, clashed with those Pantropists who rather wished to change humanity, to fit the worlds they settled. It had been a war that raged for decades, across only a few disputed systems to start with, but spreading like a virus.

Two centuries on, he had no idea whether there were survivors here or he was falling toward a dead world. The thought of re-entry made his mouth go dry, but at least the interminable waiting would be over – if he didn’t miss altogether and spin onward until the lifegal ate him alive.

Days, weeks, perhaps months passed. He had no way of telling one day from the next. He could have switched his companion on, but the semi-idiot objects reminded him too much of Ship, and he needed to save the power for more important things, like conserving the lifegel.

Isheimur crept closer until it filled his whole sky and he saw patches of blue and grey toward the equator. Sometimes it even eclipsed Mizar B – or Gamasol and Deltasol, as he should now call them, he decided.

He'd never heard of anyone trying what he was about to do, and he was sure that Ship would have told him if there was a precedent. No, this was the first attempt to confirm something that existed only as theory.

He was desperate to test the theory, for he still hadn't got used to the gel taking care of his bodily functions; as well as the waste, it fed him through intravenous drips of nutrient-rich saline. Worse, he felt at times as if he was starting to lose his mind.

If he had switched it on, his sub-moronic companion would have fed basic data directly into his cortex. But it would have been nothing compared to what sounded like Ship haunting him; he awoke from fragmented dreams with whispers still pulsing in his ears. Sometimes he woke crying. It seemed wrong that he should miss an artificial construct more than his own partners, but he'd spent more time with Ship than with them.

He wondered what Karla was doing, where she was, who she was with. More mercurial than he, though they were supposedly the same, would she and the others wait for him, or would they decant a replacement?

At last, he felt the drag of atmosphere. He swung his feet around so that he seemed to be standing on the still near-vacuum, but what air there was began to glow as he cut through it. He opened his arms to create drag, spreading himself as wide as he could. The gel rushed to insulate his feet and under his arms, but even so, some of the heat began to seep through.

He doubted that anyone had ever tried to dive feet-first into atmosphere, to fall all the way to the ground, and actually survived. Even with the lifegel, it felt as though giant hands squeezed him, and someone was applying a blow-torch to the soles of his feet.

The roaring grew louder, louder, louder, louder – until it filled his whole world. It drilled into his ears and the hands around him squeezed ever harder and each breath was an effort. When oblivion came it was a merciful release.

