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# APOLLO'S OUTCASTS



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*for Florence, Aaron, Jack, Nicholas, Susan, Krystal, and Kristin—  
my nieces and nephews*



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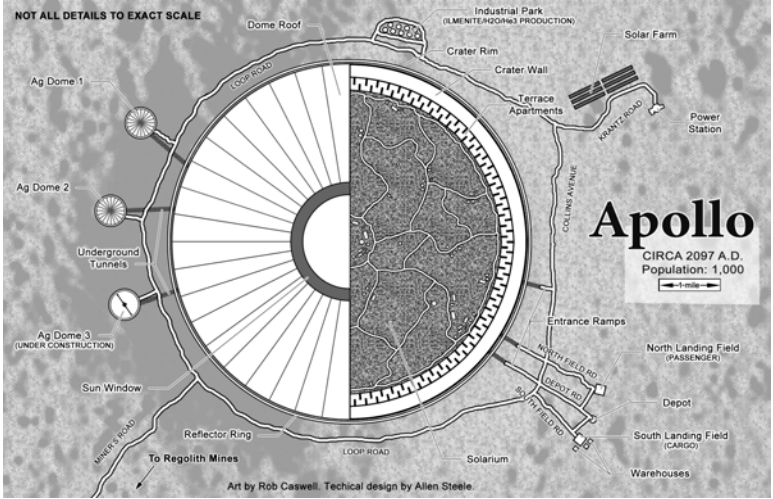
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FIRST PHASE  
**ESCAPE VELOCITY**



# 1. MIDNIGHT JOURNEY



n my sixteenth birthday, I went to the Moon.

“Jamey, wake up.” My father’s voice was soft and persistent in the darkness of my bedroom. His hand was on my shoulder, gently prodding me out of sleep. “C’mon, son ... you need to get up.”

“Huh? What?” It took a few seconds for me to realize I wasn’t dreaming; he really was there, and he really did want me to get up. I pried open my eyes to see him sitting on the edge of my bed, silhouetted against a sliver of light seeping in through the half-open bedroom door. It wasn’t morning yet; there no reason for me to get up so early. “Lemme `lone,” I mumbled, rolling over. “Wanna sleep.”

“I’m sorry, but you have to get up.” Dad shook me again, and when I didn’t budge he let out a sigh. “Lights on,” he said.

My bedside reading lamp and the ceiling light came on at once. “What are you doing?” I groaned, wincing against the unwelcome glare. I pulled a pillow over my face. “It’s too early...”

“I know it is, but you have to get out of bed.” Dad took the pillow away from me. “And you need to hurry. I want you dressed and in your mobil in five minutes.” His voice gained a no-nonsense edge as he stood up. “I mean it, Jamey. Up and at it ... now.”

He left the room before I could negotiate with him, or even ask why he was doing this. I gave myself a few seconds to rub the sand from my eyes and take a deep breath, then I told the bed to elevate to sitting position. My crutches were leaning against the wall where I always left them when I went to bed. Swinging my legs over the side, I took hold of the crutches and used them to help me stand up.

On the way to the bathroom, I noticed the calendar on my desk terminal: 12:07 AM AUG. 22 2097. *What the ...?* I thought. *It’s mid-*

*night!* Sure, it was my birthday, but there was no reason for him to wake me up this early.

Across the hall, I heard Melissa yell something nasty. At first I thought she was saying this to Dad, but then I heard Jan's voice and realized that Dad had given my oldest sister the task of waking up my next-oldest sister. Smart guy, my father. Melissa might be able to argue with him, but there was no way she could win a fight with Jan. But why did my sisters also have to get up, too?

Too tired to think, I put everything on automatic. A quick trip to the toilet, then I hobbled back into the bedroom and told the closet to give me something to wear. I realized that it must be unseasonably cool outside when it extended to me a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. Yesterday had been pretty hot, though, and I figured that I'd probably be switching to shorts and a T-shirt by lunch time. For now, though, I'd take the home comp's advice and dress warm. I continued to lean on my crutches until I shoved my feet into a pair of mocs, then made my way over to my mobil and carefully lowered myself into it.

The mobil woke up as soon as its padded seat registered my weight. "Good morning, Jamey," it said. "You're up early."

"Tell me 'bout it."

"I'm not sure what I can tell you. If you'd be a little more specific..."

"Never mind." I yawned and shook my head, and a sharp beep from the mobil's biosensors warned me that this small motion put a slight but noticeable strain on my upper spine. I ignored the warning as I folded my crutches and leaned over to lock them in place on the mobil's left side. "Living room," I said.

"Certainly." It started to roll forward on its two fat tires before it abruptly came to a halt. "I've just received instructions from your father. He's told me to tell you that you're to pack an overnight bag with a toilet kit and a change of clothes. And you're to hurry, too."

Okay, this was too much. "Dad!" I called out. "Why do you want me to pack a bag?"

No answer. From Melissa's room, I could hear her bickering with Jan; apparently she was even more cranky about all this than I was. I spotted my prong where I'd left it on my bedside table, and went manual to swing the mobil around so that I could pick it up. Fitting the prong into my right ear, I said, "Dad? Why do you want me to bring an overnight bag?"

*"We're making a little trip, son," he replied. "You'll need to take along a few things."*

*"Where are we...?"*

*"I'll tell you and your sister later." His voice became stern. "Please don't argue with me. Just do it."*

When my father spoke like that, I knew better than to quarrel with him. So I muted the prong and turned toward the closet, where I used the mobil's manipulator arms to pull out a nylon bag and stuff it with clothes. Figuring we weren't going far, I chose cargo shorts, a light shirt, and sandals; as an afterthought, I threw my trunks and swim fins into the bag, too. Maybe this was a surprise birthday trip to Virginia Beach or somewhere else where I might be able to get in the water. Swimming was my sport, and I knew Dad wouldn't take me anywhere that I'd have to completely depend upon my mobil to get around.

I was only half-right, but I didn't know it then.

I unplugged my pad from its solar charger and stuck in my pocket. Another visit to the bathroom for my toothbrush and my medicine box, which I tossed into the bag before I zipped it shut, then the mobil carried me out of my room. Melissa's door was half-open; she'd put on a fashionably short skirt and a halter top that showed off as much of her breasts as she dared. Looking good for the boys was a big deal to her, but her uncombed dark hair resembled a rat's nest. She glanced up from putting on her sneakers to give me a scowl that was pure hatred. Apparently she figured that her little brother was to blame for being hustled out of bed at such an ungodly hour. I ignored her as the mobil rolled past her room.

Jan's door was shut, but I could hear her moving around. I recalled what my father had said to me: *I'll tell you and your sister later.* Sister, not sisters; singular instead of plural. So Jan already knew what was going on. Which made sense, if you knew my family. Although she was only two years older than Melissa and four years older than me – make that about three-and-a-half, counting today's birthday – Jan was almost as much of a surrogate mother as an eldest sister. Dad never remarried after my mother died, which happened so long ago that I had no memory of her, and lately he'd come to depend on his first-born daughter to shepherd his two younger children.

Jan must have heard my mobil, because she opened the door as I rolled past her room. She wore slacks and a sleeveless T-shirt, and was tying back her long blond hair. Before she graduated from high school last year, some of her classmates used to ask me whether she was available. *If you have to ask, I'd tell them, then you haven't got a chance with her ...* which was both a good dodge and also the truth. Jan was as serious-minded as she was beautiful; she was going to the local community college when she should have been at MIT or Stanford simply because it allowed her to continue living at home and help Dad take care of Melissa and me. Mainly me; Melissa wasn't the one who'd be good as dead if she fell out of her chair when no one else was around. So getting and keeping a boyfriend was the farthest thing from Jan's mind.

"You've got your—?" she started to say, then she spotted the bag in my lap and nodded. "Oh, okay ... good. Dad's waiting for you."

"Yeah, I know." I stopped the mobil. "What's going on?" I asked, dropping my voice to a whisper. "Where are we going?"

Jan didn't say anything, but instead regarded me with a solemn gaze with which I was familiar. A long time ago, we'd reached an agreement: *ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies.* I knew at once that this was one of those times. "You need to hurry," she finished, turning away from me. "I'll be there in a minute." And then she glanced back and smiled. "Oh, and by the way ... happy birthday."



“Thanks,” I said, even as a chill went down my back. I knew that Jan hadn’t answered my question because Dad had told her to lie to me if I did. And because she wasn’t going to do that, this meant that whatever was happening here was serious. Really serious.

The living room was dark save for the reading lamp above Dad’s lounge, and I noticed that the curtains had been drawn. The kitchen lights were on, though, and I saw that the back door was open. I took me a second to put all this together. Although the mobil could climb down the back steps if necessary, the front door had a ramp for my convenience. So if the living room lights were off and Dad had propped open the kitchen door, that meant that he didn’t want any of our neighbors to see that we were about to leave.

Nonetheless, I was more curious than apprehensive as I rolled through the kitchen to the back door. The night was colder than I expected, the first chill of approaching autumn setting upon our suburban Maryland neighborhood of two-century wood-frame houses. Our van was parked in the driveway, its side-hatch already open and its ramp extended. In the luminescence cast by the dome light, I spotted the top of my father’s grey-haired head. He appeared to be kneeling beside the open driver’s side door, working on something beneath the dashboard.

Dad was a scientist, but he’d never been much of a mechanic; what was he doing down there? He raised his head to peer over the front seats as my mobil lowered its auxiliary climbing wheels and began to slowly descend the back steps. “Jamey ... good! You have your bag? Excellent.” He pointed the screwdriver in his hand toward the van’s rear compartment. “Get on in. I’ll find your sisters as soon as I’m done here.”

“Dad, why are we...?”

“Not now.” His head disappeared again; the quiet snap of a service panel being shut, then he stood up and walked around the back of the van, the household tool kit in his left hand. “Climb on in. I’ll be back in a sec.”

I'd maneuvered the mobil into the van and had just finished clamping its wheels within the floor chocks when Jan appeared. She was carrying a small bag of her own, and she gave me a nervous smile that was meant to be reassuring – and wasn't – before she opened the back gate and tossed the bag into the back. "You okay there?" she asked as she strode past the side hatch on her way to the front passenger door. "Want me to put your bag back with mine?"

"No, that's okay." I liked having the bag in my lap; it gave me some small comfort. A quick glance at the kitchen door; neither Dad nor Melissa were in sight. "Jan, please ... will you tell me what ...?"

"No!" Melissa yelled. "I *don't* wasn't to go on some *stupid trip!* It's the *middle of the night* and I just want to *sleep!*"

She appeared in the kitchen door, hauling a sequined pink overnight bag as if it was loaded with bricks, complaining every step of the way. I immediately noticed that Dad had made her change; the teenage-slut outfit was gone, replaced by jeans and a hooded pullover. But her hair was still a mess, and it must have irritated her to no end that she was being forced to leave the house before she had a chance to spend an hour primping at her mirror just in case she happened to meet the boy of her dreams.

Dad was right behind her. "You're going, MeeMee – our family nickname for her, which she detested – "and that's final." He planted a hand against her shoulder, not exactly shoving her down the steps but not giving her any choice in the matter either. "Now get in the van with your brother and sister."

"But I haven't even *showered...*!"

"Melissa." Jan jerked a thumb toward the back seat next to where I'd parked my mobil. "Get in. Now."

That shut her up. Melissa might give Dad trouble, and she seldom listened to me, but when Jan put a certain tone in her voice, she knew better than to argue. Seventeen years of futile resistance had taught Melissa a few lessons she'd never forgotten; Jan wasn't a bully, but she didn't back down either. A final, melodramatic sigh, then

Melissa marched around behind the van, taking a second to hurl her pink bag into the back before yanking open the rear passenger door and climbing in to sit beside me. A cold glare in my direction – *say anything and I'll murder you* – was meant to keep me meek and quiet, but I couldn't help myself.

"Nice bag," I said.

"Drop dead." She pulled out her pad and started to tap something into it. No doubt she was about to text her friends – all 78,906 of them – and tell them her tale of woe.

Dad saw this. "Melissa ... no, you can't do that." Before she could object, he reached forward and took the pad from her. "I'm sorry, but this is something you can't talk about."

She squawked about this, but he wasn't listening to her. He took the pad into the house and returned a moment later without it. Melissa could always buy another one from the next vending machine she saw, of course, but as my father closed the back door and used his remote to lock it, I realized again that secrecy was something he was taking very seriously.

Dad slammed shut the van's side hatch and rear gate, then climbed into the driver's seat. He thumbed the ignition; the engine beeped twice, but he didn't switch on the headlights. Instead, he placed his hands on the wheel and slowly pulled forward, moving down our short driveway to the street so unobtrusively that even the neighbor's cat couldn't have been awakened.

But when he turned right and drove past our house, I noticed that he'd left the bedroom lights on. That wasn't like him ... unless he was deliberately trying to give the impression that we were still home. And it wasn't until we were away from the house that he finally switched on the headlights.

"Okay," Melissa said, "I've had it. I've *really* had it. I want to know..."

"Be quiet, MeeMee, and listen to me." Dad glanced back in my direction. "You, too, Jamey. This is important, and I only want to say

it once.” He paused, taking a deep breath as he slowly drove through our darkened neighborhood. “I know this is unexpected, and I know you’d rather still be in bed. If there was any other way...”

He stopped himself, then went on. “Something has come up, and you’ve got to leave. Not tomorrow, but now ... right now. So I can’t have any arguments or disagreements from anyone. I just need for you to do what I say, with no ifs or buts about it. Understand?”

Jan nodded, even though his words weren’t meant for her. Melissa opened her mouth to protest, but then she caught Dad staring at her through the rear-view mirror. Apparently she realized that this was a bad time to be hard-to-please MeeMee, because she sulkily folded her arms across her chest and nodded.

“I understand,” I said, “but ... why won’t you tell us what’s going on?”

My father didn’t respond, but Jan did. “Trust me, *mon petit frère* ... the less you know, the safer you’ll be.”

That’s when I began to get scared.

\* \* \*

Burtonsville, the town where we lived, is just north of Washington D.C., about a quarter of the way to Baltimore. Dad got on I-95 just outside of town and headed south. This was the route he normally commuted to his job at the International Space Consortium’s American headquarters in D.C.. He went to hover mode and retracted the wheels, but he didn’t switch to auto. Instead, he kept his hands on the steering wheel, carefully watching the dashboard display so that he kept within the 80 mph speed limit. That wasn’t legal; cars on the interstate were required to be navigated by the local traffic control system unless there was an emergency.

Melissa noticed this, too. “You’re going to get pulled over,” she said, smug in her knowledge that our father was breaking the law.

“No, I’m not,” Dad replied, not looking back at her. “I removed

the GPS and traffic control chips before we left and put in ringers instead. So far as anyone is concerned, we're still parked in the driveway." He pointed to the traffic scanners we passed every hundred yards. "When they tag us, the phony chips identifies us as another car and tells the system we're on auto. So long as I maintain a constant speed and don't make any strange moves..."

"It'll think we're someone else and won't be able to track us," I finished. "But why...?"

Jan gave me one of her looks — *no questions, Jamey*—and I shut up. At least I knew what my father had been doing when I caught him beneath the dashboard. And I had little doubt as to where he'd been able to lay his hands on outlaw tech like this; ISC was full of guys who could make ringers in their basement workshops. But Dad had always been the law-abiding type. Why would he do something like this?

From behind us, the warble of a siren. Turning my head, I looked back through the rear window to see flashing blue lights. A Maryland state trooper, approaching fast.

"Dad..." Jan had spotted it, too. "Do you think...?"

"No. Take it easy." Without reducing speed, my father moved quickly and easily from the center lane to the right, just as car under traffic control would do. But he seemed to be holding his breath as the police cruiser came up on us. For a moment, I thought my father was wrong and that we were about to be pulled over. But then the cop flashed by ...

And right behind it, the two hovertanks and three troop carriers the state trooper was escorting. We hadn't seen them earlier because the vehicles were in camouflage mode, darkened pitch-black so as to blend in with the night. Probably coming from the Navy base in Aberdeen.

Why would they be out on the highway at this time of night with a state police escort? I was about to ask this when Dad let out his breath. He glanced at Jan, and she slowly nodded.

“You were right,” she said, looking straight ahead. “It’s started.”

“*What’s going on here?*” Melissa yelled.

“MeeMee...” Dad began.

“Don’t MeeMee me!” she snapped, which should have been funny but wasn’t. She slapped the back of Dad’s seat so hard that he jerked; the van swerved for an instant, and I found myself praying that the traffic control system wouldn’t notice the slight deviation. “I want to know what ... what this is all about!”

“Melissa...” My father started to reply, then shook his head. “Just shut up, okay.” Melissa stared at him; he’d never spoken to her that way before. “Radio on,” he said after a moment of stunned silence. “Scan news channels.”

The radio skipped through the channels, pausing every few seconds so that we could listen to one news station or another. Baseball and soccer scores, a local weather forecast, a couple of late-night talk shows. “Nothing,” Jan said after a few minutes.

“Didn’t think so,” Dad replied. “They’re not going to make any sort of announcement until they’ve got the Capitol locked down.” He gripped the yoke a little harder as he stared straight ahead. “They’ll be closing the Beltway soon. I just hope we’re not too late.”

I-95 had just merged with the I-495 Beltway leading around Washington D.C.; we were headed southeast, following the signs to the Maryland coast. I noticed that there was little traffic, unusual for the Beltway even in the early hours of a Wednesday morning. It wasn’t hard to imagine armed soldiers taking up positions at the interstate ramps, forming roadblocks to prevent any vehicles from getting on the Beltway. But why...?

“The president is dead,” my father said.

For a second or two, neither Melissa or I knew what to say. Then I found my voice. “What ... what did you say? How do you...?”

“I got a call from ... from a friend ... just before I woke you up. He told me that President Wilford died a few hours ago.”

Dad spoke as matter-of-factly as if he was discussing the miner-

alogical contents of main-belt asteroids, his usual line of work, but he couldn't have shocked us more. "The President's *dead*?" Melissa shrieked. "What... how...?"

"I don't know that yet, but ... well, something is going on." Dad shook his head. "It's too much to explain now, but ..."

His voice trailed off, but it wasn't hard for me to guess the rest. "It's about the Vice-President, isn't it?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. Lina Shapar will be sworn in as president, if she hasn't already. And according to people I know, she's going to declare a national emergency."

"Which they haven't done yet," Jan added, "only because they're still getting everything in place. But it's coming, and when that happens ..." She looked back at me again. "Dad will be danger. We'll all be in danger."

"But *why*?" Melissa demanded. "I don't get it? What's this got to do with us?"

I closed my eyes and shook my head. Melissa lived in her own world of clothes and boys and sock bands, and rarely paid much attention to anything else, even when it was happening inside her own house. "This has something to do with the ISC petition you signed, doesn't it, Dad?"

My father didn't reply at once. In the soft blue light of the dashboard, his face was grim. "Yes, it does," he said after a few moments. "Shapar didn't like the position we took. From what I've heard, she considers everyone who signed it to be a political foe ... and she's not the sort of person who tolerates opposition. If things happen the way I think they will ..."

"They're going to be coming after him." Jan twisted around in her seat to look back at me. "Shapar is going to order Dad to be put under arrest, along with anyone else she considers to be an enemy." She paused. "And they may come after us, too. As collateral, to make sure that he cooperates."

"But they can't *do* that!" Melisa protested. "It's against the law!"

“You’re right, MeeMee ... sorry, Melissa, I mean. Not under the Constitution, at least. But Lina Shapar has never been a big fan of constitutional law and neither are her cronies, so there’s no reason to believe that she’s isn’t going to let a small matter like the Bill of Rights get in their way.”

I was gazing out the window as Jan and Melissa spoke. In the far distance, beyond the rooftops of Washington’s northeast neighborhoods, I could make out the spotlight-illuminated dome of the Capitol, the Washington Monument rising behind it like a tiny white pencil. The sight was familiar to me, and its serenity made it hard to believe that a crisis was unfolding within a stone’s throw of these historic buildings.

The radio was still on, turned to late-night sports talk show. A couple of guys were discussing the Orioles when they were interrupted by a new voice: *“We interrupt this broadcast for a special news report from...”*

“Turn up the volume,” my father said.

The radio obeyed, and another voice came on. *“We have received official word from the White House that President George F. Wilford is dead. Repeat ... George F. Wilford, the president of the United States, died tonight in Washington, D.C. White House Press Secretary Andreas Sullivan confirmed the initial Secret Service reports, and has stated that the president appears to be a victim of assassination carried out by a lone gunman who managed to penetrate White House security...”*

“Oh my God!” Melissa’s eyes were wide. “He was shot!”

“I don’t think so.” Dad’s voice was very quiet, almost lost beneath the radio. “That’s what they’re saying, but that’s not what my friend told me.”

I stared at him. “How do you know? I mean, how could *they* know? The White House...”

“Quiet, Jamey.” Jan reached over to turn up the volume.

*“... Reports that Vice-President Lina Shapar was summoned to the White House from her official residence at the Naval Observatory, where she*



*was sworn in as the new president by Supreme Court Chief Justice Marco Gonzales. In response to the crisis, President Shapar has declared a national emergency, and issued an executive order placing the District of Columbia and its environs under military curfew. She has requested that the FBI and federal marshals immediately detain any individuals who may have played a role in President Wilford's death...*

"I'm on the list." My father's voice was little more than a whisper. "You can count on that."

"But you're not involved." I stared at the back of his head.

"You *couldn't* be involved," Melissa insisted, almost as if to reassure herself. "You're not, are you?"

"No, Melissa, I'm not ... but neither was Wilford assassinated." He let out his breath. "Look, I can't tell you anything else. At least not while there's still a chance that we may be arrested. Right now, the main thing is to get you kids to a place where you'll be safe."

"Where's that?" I asked.

A tense smile. "The last place they'd ever think of looking for you."