

CHAPTER ONE

Lien Rag had been waiting for over an hour to see the Military Security Lieutenant. From the anteroom, he could see all of Grand Star Station. The view was so encompassing that it rivaled any which could be had from the dispatching towers. The rails disappeared into the distance, farther than the eye could see, until they reached the fake horizon, which was nothing more than the curvature of the city dome, miles away.

Distractedly, Lien looked up and saw the Ice People, three hundred feet above him. They lived outside the dome and spent their lives cleaning it, in exchange for food and trinkets. They were naked, or almost naked, and could withstand the incredible sub-zero temperatures of the outside world. Lien saw four of them, all men. In spite of their thick, reddish fur and their loincloths, their genitals, long and dangling between their legs, were clearly visible. One day, by accident, the wife of a governor or director of the Company had looked up at the dome and, discovering their nudity, taken offense. Security had tried to get the Redfurs, as they were commonly called, to wear clothes, but the Ice People could not get used to something that was, to them, totally alien and restrictive. So, a compromise had been suggested; they were to wear loincloths while working on the dome.

A fat man with a ruddy complexion was waiting with Lien in the anteroom. He, too, looked up, then shrugged.

“What a life, naked at fifty below, clearing off snow. If we just heated the dome, we wouldn’t need them anymore.”

“But it would be more expensive for the Company,” Lien explained.

“Are you here to get a red box, Voyager?”

“No,” Lien replied, annoyed by the other man’s indiscretion.

“Mine blew up the other day, and now they’re accusing me of sabotage... I’m a meat wholesaler and I’m on the rails all the time, but my wife lives in Lake Station...”

It was a small town up north, near a naturally-warm water lake from a source that sprang from the depths beneath the ice. Rumor had it that a buried nuclear reactor was the cause of this phenomenon, but since there were no signs of radioactivity, Lien didn’t really believe it.

“It’s nice there. Life is pretty comfortable... But I’m only there a day or two a week. Still... My wife comes and joins me sometimes. She’s got a loco-car. I wouldn’t mind spending more time there.”

He must make a lot of money, thought Lien, who never had a penny to his name.

“Excuse me,” he said.

His name had just appeared in bright letters on the black door of the Lieutenant’s office. The latter was a small oriental, plump and hunched over. He was wearing old-fashioned glasses, but Lien thought it was probably an affectation. It was hardly likely that Security would promote someone who was near-sighted.

“You’re Lien Rag, a Class-2 Glaciologist? I see here that you’ve applied for a steam engine. But I need some more information before I can process your file.”

“Of course,” Lien said, carefully. “You see, Lieutenant Skoll...”

He had just read the Security man’s name on his red accented, black jacket.

“... My work sometimes forces me to travel on old, abandoned lines that are no longer electrified...”

“You have batteries.”

“Yes, but they only give me a limited amount of freedom, whereas with a steam engine, I could travel to deserted areas where the ice is still pure.”

Lieutenant Skoll took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief. Lien Rag thought that, at one time or another, he must have seen an old motion picture, and obviously enjoyed copying the gestures of some long-dead actor.

“What lines are you planning to travel on then, Glaciologist?”

“They’re all listed in my application, Lieutenant. As you can see, I’m only using official documents from the Company’s archives.”

“Of course, of course. You’ve never heard of a line called the ‘Oblique Road,’ I suppose?”

Lien answered without hesitating.

“I have. But I’ve never come across it.”

"You plan to work in Sector 3 of the Seventeenth District, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then, you won't be able to find fuel for a steam engine there."

"There are some sub-glacial forests being exploited by isolated woodsmen. And, I could import some fuel from the surrounding districts..."

Talking to the Lieutenant, Lien felt that he was facing some kind of mysterious opposition from above. A mere, Class-2 Glaciologist never had, and never would obtain a much-prized steam engine that would confer on him a simulacrum of freedom and independence. Such things were almost exclusively reserved for the top people of the Company, Security, Maintenance, the Dispatchers and their wives.

Lieutenant Skoll was making notes in the margin of Lien's application. Then, he sighed.

"Very well. I'll forward your request."

"When can I expect an answer?"

"Probably in a week."

"But I have to leave tomorrow... I'm going on a month-long expedition. It's important..."

"I'm sorry, Glaciologist, but there's nothing more I can do."

Lien left the office. In the anteroom, the meat wholesaler looked at him questioningly, but Lien avoided his eyes. If the man really had sabotaged his loco-car's red box, then he was subject to a year of hard labor in one of the Northern District's labor camps, located in the outer periphery of the Company's territory. Beyond that point, there was only the ever-changing Front of the seemingly everlasting war that the Trans-European Company was waging against its powerful, eastern neighbor, the Siberian Company. Several years ago, Lien had served two years in an armored train that operated as a shuttle between the various Fronts. One day, his train had hit a mine and his right leg had been badly injured. As a result, he had been discharged and sent back to civilian life.

Lien met Go Farrell, his assistant, at a pre-arranged meeting place in a cafe near the Security building. When his friend silently questioned him, he shook his head negatively.

"We have to wait eight days for an answer, but I think it'll be no."

"Too bad. You want a beer? Something warm?"

"No. I'll have a vodka."

Farrell then proceeded to paint a glowing picture of a new cabaret train that had just arrived in Grand Star Station from the South.

"... And they have girls like you've never seen!... I want to go tonight. It's great! It travels on ten rails, can you imagine?"

"Which reminds me... I've heard that they're moving an entire town," Lien said. "F Station. It was all over the grapevine. A hundred thousand people. Three or four hundred rails, on the Great Northern Network."

"An entire town? All at once? But why?"

Lien drank his vodka down in one gulp and sighed.

"Dissidence. First, the Company cut their power off to teach them a lesson, but apparently, it wasn't enough."

"How on Earth could the poor buggers cope without power?"

"I don't know. They must have burned everything that they could get their hands on. But in the end, the Company decided to deport them. That means that tomorrow, traffic on the Great Northern Network will be blocked until nightfall. But at least, they won't go through here."

When they left the cafe, Lien once again looked up towards the dome. The Redfurs were still there, clearing off the snow.

"You're interested in them, aren't you?" said Farrell. "It's not the first time I've caught you looking at them..."

"I don't understand why nobody has ever tried to understand how they can live outside. During the two hundred fifty years of this new ice age, there've only been some minor, insignificant works published about them..."

"They refuse to be studied. When you try to get near them, they take off into the wilderness, where none of our trains can follow. Forget about them. Let's go look at the train of the Seventeenth District's Governor instead... Fifteen rails, a real palace, full of servants, and beautiful women wearing exotic furs... But you can't get too close, because it's heavily guarded."

As they neared the mobile palace, they noticed a disturbance amongst the crowd. Lien saw a strikingly beautiful, young, blonde woman, buried in a white fur coat, walking by, looking disdainful. Behind her, two other girls, more simply dressed, obviously her servants, were carrying packages.

“That’s Floa Sadon, the Governor’s daughter. She must have been out shopping. People say she’s naked under all her furs!”

Lien laughed.

“If you believe everything people say!...”

“But it’s true! Her conductor told me.”

A strangely brazen, yet light, wisp of perfume floated behind the girl. Catching a brief whiff of it, a strong wave of depression washed over Lien, leaving him feeling suddenly powerless. But he overcame it, and looked resolutely in front of him.

Farrell was loudly expressing his admiration for the two steam engines that were pulling the Governor’s train. They were two steel monsters, almost permanently clouded by powerful jets of steam, a symbol of power and wealth. The mobile palace effectively traveled over fifteen rails. One could have wandered inside as easily as in one of the ancient pre-ice age buildings. Lien fantasized that it contained lush patios and water fountains, all decorated in that rococo and somewhat ridiculous style that the directors of the Company seemed to enjoy. He remembered that, while he was at the Front, a general had had a replica of a Venetian palace built. Because the enormous palace needed twenty rails to travel, sometimes reinforcements had to be postponed or rerouted because it was in transit...

“Did you see those two engines?” asked his assistant. “Six men standing on top of each other couldn’t reach the smokestacks. They must have tons of coal and water in there. No wood, obviously. And they have to be able to travel under electric power too, if need be.”

Lien estimated that the Governor’s mobile palace must have had four floors and about thirty rooms; it required an insane amount of energy to move such a mass on rails. Sometimes, the smaller power substations blew a fuse when a director took a fancy to travel from one end of the Company to the other.

Farrell nudged him with his elbow; at one of the windows of the second floor, the silhouette of a woman was standing still, watching them.

“I bet it’s the Sadon girl. Do you think she’s noticed us?”

“I’m going home to file my notes,” Lien said. “Are you coming?”

“No. I’m going to buy us something for dinner. Occasionally one of us has to think about eating.”

Lien took one of the commuter shuttles which travelled along the vast, busy network of Grand Star Station. He and Farrell lived in a small train, parked on a minor line, located at the other end of the Station. To get back there on foot would have taken him all day. During the trip, he sometimes turned a distracted glance to the huge, waiting convoys, the armored trains, and the mobile fortresses, all traveling towards the Siberian Front. They said that, in the last few weeks, the fighting had suddenly become fiercer, the two sides battling endlessly for the possession of a small, strategic zone which was crisscrossed by a dozen important rail lines.

Lien and Farrell’s train had three cars. They lived in the first, which was also the engine. The second one contained all their equipment and scientific instruments, including a powerful drill which could be used to obtain ice samples, even at very great depths. The last car served as an office, as well as the living quarters of their crew. For the moment, the men were on a leave which would end at midnight. But Lien didn’t expect them to be back until morning. And some would probably wait to catch up with the train at a junction, when it stopped at some small, out of the way Station. But now, there was that problem with F Station, the town that the Company was exiling to the Great North, and which was going to jam all traffic along the entire Great Northern Network. It must be moving very slowly, Lien thought, not more than six or seven miles per hour. He tried to imagine its anxious citizens, locked in their small living quarters, unable to leave or, even if they could, exist in the merciless cold of the exterior, which would kill them in mere seconds...

Before entering his office, Lien again looked at the dome which, near the edge of the city, was closer to the surface. A few miles away it met the ice; beyond it was the endless icy wilderness, covered by layers and layers of snow, which fell on an average of one day out of three.

There was a Redfur campsite just near the edge of the dome, and Lien could see some wisps of smoke rising from a fire. The Ice People only used fire to cook their food. If their departure was to be

postponed because of F Station, Lien decided to go there the following day to meet with the Redfurs. He would have liked to have some of them on his crew, and vaguely felt that their presence would enable him to make important discoveries. But the Company insisted on being the only ones to have any contact with the Ice People. In addition, Lien knew that they would have felt that a Redfur on his crew was undesirable for conducting scientific work.

Instead of filing his notes, as he had told Farrell he intended to do, Lien studied the map of their future worksite. It was located north-east of what was once called Poland, near a town called Bialystok, which now lay buried under millions of tons of ice over half-a-mile thick.

The Company was having some problems with the area; the thickness of the ice there was increasing at a much faster rate than anywhere else. Because of this, heavy work was required to maintain the stability of the lines. Already, the Company had had to build some ice tunnels, which did not please Maintenance. So, the Glaciologist Corps had been given the mission of discovering the cause of the increase in thickness. The former Polish city was already buried under three thousand feet of ice, whereas elsewhere, the ground was only seven hundred to two thousand feet beneath the surface of the ice. There were even some places in the South, where the ice thickness did not exceed one hundred seventy feet. People had dug shafts down to the ground and found old installations from before the ice age. In Southern Germany, for example, there was an ancient forest that was being "mined" by industrious woodsmen.

When the telephone rang, Lien thought that it was Farrell calling to ask about that night's dinner menu.

"This is Governor Sadon's private secretary. His Excellency is giving a reception tonight, and would be happy if you could attend it in your capacity of Glaciologist working in his District. The reception starts at nine. Please wear your dress uniform."

"I'm very flattered but..."

They'd hung up before he had time to explain that his dress uniform was at the cleaners. Furious, Lien slammed his fist on the desk and considered the problem. He had been given no choice, he had to go out again to get that green and black dress uniform. It would have been inconceivable to go to the Governor's reception without it.

As he was leaving, Farrell stepped off a commuter shuttle, his arms full of groceries.

"Wait for me!" Lien shouted to the driver. Then, to Farrell, "I'll be right back. I'll explain everything later."

It wasn't easy getting the dress uniform out of the Company's cleaners. Then, finding another train to get home proved even more difficult. It was rush hour, and commuters fought to get seats on the various express shuttles, which all seemed to arrive simultaneously. Eventually, Lien had to settle for taking an omnibus which travelled around the Station's Periphery, and it took him an hour to get home.

"An invitation from Governor Sadon?" Farrell said after Lien apprised him of the situation. "It's the girl! She saw you before in the crowd and got you an invite."

"You're crazy."

"No. I saw her. She looked at you with her big green eyes, and that was enough. Then, she looked at you again from her window."

Lien shrugged and left to clean and iron his uniform, which had barely been processed by the cleaners. In fact, he had all but forgotten about it, since he hadn't worn it for months.

"I hope I haven't put on any weight."

"I can't even lend you mine, because you're taller than me."

"You've got to get me a loco-taxi for eight thirty. Try ordering one by phone."

"Okay. I'll do my best."

Waiting for the loco-taxi, they had a drink. Farrell was smiling enigmatically in a way that irritated Lien.

"Cut it out, will you?"

"You're nervous, I can tell. You're going to see Floa Sadon at that reception. Do you think she's going to be naked under her furs?"

"It's a full dress party. She'll probably be wearing a dress, not her furs."

"So?"

At the palace entrance, Security gave Lien a badge that he had to pin to his uniform. Then, a servant showed him to the end of a long line of people who were all waiting to be introduced to the Governor. Lien waited patiently, looking around. Suddenly, he saw Floa Sadon. She was wearing a long, black dress that went down to her feet, but which bared her entire back down to her buttocks, and covered very little of her chest. She noticed him watching her, and smiled at him provocatively. Then, she walked towards him, but abruptly turned away. Lien could see the voluptuous shape of her derriere moving beneath the thin black fabric. Suddenly he was flustered, and felt a strong desire for her. At the same time, he smelled a whiff of the same strong, seductive perfume that he had noticed in the afternoon.

“Ah, Lien Rag, Class-2 Glaciologist,” the Governor said, muttering through his thick, grey mustache. “I’m glad to see you. I want that ice thickening business solved as soon as possible; I’m counting on you. If you succeed, I can guarantee you a promotion to Class-1.”

“Well, the problem is rather complex and...”

But the next person in line had already pushed him out of the way before he could complete his sentence. It was obviously not the right time to give a lecture. He found himself free, alone, and bored, so he decided to go over to the buffet to get a cup of an amber-colored liquor, obviously made from fruit grown under dome conditions. Then, he took another walk around the party.

“So, you’re the Glaciologist?” a mocking voice suddenly said near his shoulder.

Floa Sadon stood behind him, and he could not repress a smile. She took him by the arm and dragged him back to the buffet. There, she filled a plate with various canapés, then pointed towards a low couch set up on a kind of secluded patio, at the center of which was an illuminated fountain. The water changed colors as it fell harmoniously. Lien remembered how, earlier in the afternoon, when he had looked at the exterior of the palace, he had had an intuition about this kind of decor.

“I’m the one who got you invited here,” Floa said. “My father couldn’t care less about the ice sciences.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Lien replied calmly. “Right now, the thickening of the ice in the Bia Sector is one of District Seventeen’s most pressing problems.”

She shrugged.

“Nevertheless, you weren’t included on the guest list.”

“Why should I have been? I’m only a Class-2 Glaciologist.”

“Let’s eat instead of arguing.”

Lien didn’t know the names of most of what was on his plate, but he knew that they were rare and expensive foods. The caviar, for instance, must have come from sturgeon breeding farms in expensive artificial lakes. There were also filets of caribou tongue, and pastries with surprising and delicate flavors.

“I saw you outside this afternoon, and I felt like meeting you.”

Lien shook his head.

“I don’t believe you.”

She stomped her feet. He then realized that she wasn’t wearing shoes. He admired the delicacy of her feet, and suddenly thought of the Redfurs, outside, cleaning the snow-covered dome. At that moment, he could not grasp the meaning of such a thought.

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, I don’t.”

“They haven’t told you about me? Haven’t you heard that as soon as I see a new man, the only thing I want is to make love to him?”

“No. Nobody told me anything like that.”

“Well, your friend seemed eager to meet me,” she said petulantly.

Lien tried to appear polite.

“My friend behaves that way with all pretty girls.”

“What about you? Has the study of ice made you equally as cold?”

“No, of course not... But, to be perfectly honest, I feel out of place here. Look over there. That’s Professor Elam, my boss. What’s he going to think if he sees me here, with you?”

“You’re right. Let’s get out of here,” she said. “Come with me.”

She took him by the hand and he discovered that the vast palace still had more surprises in store for him. They took a thickly-carpeted elevator, which deposited them in a plush corridor, leading to the Governor's daughter's room. It was huge and even had a pool.

There, Floa told Lien to sit in a chair while she moved towards the center of the room. Abruptly, she unclasped her dress and stood in front of him, totally naked. Lien remained still, although his heartbeat increased.

The young girl then opened a hidden closet and took out an isothermal suit and a fur coat. She quickly appraised Lien's size at a glance and gave him the suit.

"Put it on."

The isothermal suit fit him like a glove. Lien was surprised.

"Hurry," Floa said impatiently.

"But where are we going?"

"I'll explain later if you don't mind."

Then, she added with a perverse laugh.

"You don't mind getting dressed in front of me, do you?"