

C h a r a c t e r s

Dr. Bull Giovanni, exobiologist, UPSA Base, Europa

Dr. Charley Stevens, physician, UPSA Base, Europa

Scene One (asterisked characters reappear in Scene 9):

Cindy, Hank's wife

Ginny, young daughter of Hank and Cindy*

Hank, Cindy's husband*

Scene Three:

George, Dragoman launch manager, UPSA Base, Europa; TP operative

Pinky, Dragoman launch technician, UPSA Base, Europa; TP operative

Scene Four:

Winston Hale, EDC ambassador; TP co-conspirator

Charlene Philips, Winston Hale's aide and lover, TP co-conspirator

Willis P. Sheets, Dragoman navigator, UPSA Base, Europa; TP operative

Scene Five:

Richard Dawkins, UPSA Secretary (reappears in Scene Eight)

Scene Six:

Dr. Bloom, supervising physician, UPSA Medical Laboratories, Boston

Dr. Morton, staff physician, UPSA Medical Laboratories, Boston

Scene Seven:

Mr. Stokes, technician, UPSA Medical Laboratories, Boston

Scene Eight (see also Scene 5):

Frank A. Varo, CEO of TP

Scene Nine:

Holovision News Anchor

Scene Ten:

Mr. Shanks, communications specialist, UPSA Clinic, Europa

Scenes Eleven and Thirteen:

“Mamma” Stevens, mother of Dr. Charley Stevens

Abbreviations:

EDC = Extraterrestrial Diplomatic Corps

IMO = Intelligent Microscopic Organism

TP = Translunar Pharmaceuticals

UPSA = United Planetary Space Agency

XM-1 = Exophonetic Modulator Prototype (see below)

Special Terminology:

anabiosis: reanimation after apparent death.

bioluminaire: lighting device using a bioluminescent source.

chemosonic: of or related to a form of extraterrestrial speech in a fluid medium based on the production, transmission, and interpretation of both chemical and sonic semantic units.

cyberear: cybernetic ear used to interpret extraterrestrial speech patterns.

Dragoman: bathyscaphe for exploration of extraterrestrial oceanic environments, equipped with devices facilitating chemosonic (q.v.) communication with alien marine species.

Exophonetic Modulator: (XM-1): device with handheld keyboard interface facilitating communication between humans and IMOs (q.v.) that mitigates the potentially harmful effects of chemosonic (q.v.) speech.

googolplexplexplex: the number $10^{10^{10^{10^{10^{100}}}}$

holo: a holographic image

holorecorded: recorded by a holographic video device simulating three-dimensional movement

HV: holovision, i.e., three-dimensional television

IMO: Intelligent Microorganism

morphomimesis: the ability of a living organism to realistically mimic various forms or to “shape-shift”

spesium: rare element found only in the oceans of Europa used in human male fertility treatment

yoctometer: a unit of measurement equal to 10^{-24} (one septillionth) of a meter

The Rape of Europa

by Joseph Dillon Ford

I. Earth, the East Coast of North America, 2150

Ginny “Mommy, what’s that up there in the sky? See, it’s a big black thing, and it’s eating the stars.”

Cindy “What? My God! I’ve never seen anything like that before. Hank, quick, come out here. There’s something really weird going on.”

Ginny “I’m scared, Mommy!”

Cindy “That’s okay, honey. Daddy and I are here. Hank! Hurry up! It’s urgent!”

Hank “What’s all the commotion? Gees, Cindy, you’d think it was the end of the world!”

Cindy “Whatever it is, it’s upset Ginny, and I don’t like the looks of it either. See—up there.”

Hank “Hmmm. That *is* weird. It’s way too big to be a plane, and I don’t hear any engines. It seems to be moving in front of the stars, blocking ’em out as it goes along.”

Cindy “You can see some of them coming back on the right as it moves to the left—but what in the world could it be?”

Hank “I dunno. I think they were talking about asteroids on the news the other night. Some of ’em pass pretty close to the Earth.”

Cindy “But *that* close? And if it were an asteroid, wouldn’t we be able to see something? A big rock? Some sort of light? That thing is totally dark, like a big black patch.”

Hank “Well, I’m sure we’re not the only ones who’ve noticed it. Let’s go in and see if there’s anything on HV about it.”

Ginny “Is it going to hurt us, Daddy?”

Hank “Naw, Ginny! What put that idea in your head? See, it’s just passing by, and even though it’s big, it’s far away, so nothing bad’s gonna happen. Come here to your daddy!”

Cindy “I still don’t like it, Hank.”

Hank “Nobody says you should, Cin. But don’t go stirrin’ up Ginny’s imagination. I’m sure there’s a good explanation and we’ll know sooner or later. Besides, I’m still hungry. You two go on in and turn on the HV. I’m gonna put another couple of meatballs on the grill.”

2. Europa, United Planetary Space Agency Base, Two Years Later

Charley “So Bull, I guess you’ve heard the news? Translunar Pharmaceuticals has developed an infertility treatment using some of the spesium samples we sent back to UPSA Labs a few years ago.”

Bull “Spesium?! *Our* spesium? You’ve gotta be kidding! How the heck is that supposed to boost a guy’s sperm count?”

Charley “Don’t ask me. All I know is they claim it’s worked on the dozen or so test subjects they’ve given it to. All guys between the ages of twenty and forty with no history of infertility before the Cronus Event.”

Bull “I’m sure glad I wasn’t there when Big Black zapped everyone’s nads!”

Charley “It’s really nothing to joke about! Besides, just what do you need with yours anyway? You’re not exactly a family man.”

Bull “Poor Charley! Do I detect a note of spinsterish frustration with the fact that yours truly, the hottest stud on Europa, doesn’t date older women?”

Charley “Or younger ones either, from the looks of it.”

Bull “So just what are you implying?”

Charley “Only the obvious, my ever-so-stylish *Hexobiologist!*”

Bull “Since when did you get a license to hunt Witches with a highly cultivated fashion sense, you frumpy old *Fuzzzzician!*”

Charley “Well, I’m proud of my Mediterranean peach fuzz, and I’ll bet it even turns *you* on.”

Bull “In your dreams, Muttonchops. You’ll never be any bellibone!”

Charley “Okay, I give up. Truce. . . What the hell is a bellibone, anyway?”

Bull “Don’t you ever use a dictionary? We’ve got the unabridged OED in the library, you know.”

Charley “I haven’t got time for this. What’s a friggin’ ‘belly bone’?”

Bull “That’s for me to know and for you *not* to find out.”

Charley “Well, since I know enough about human anatomy to dismiss ‘belly bone’ as sheer nonsense, let’s break it down, shall we? ‘Belle et bonne’—that’s ‘beautiful and good,’ isn’t it? So when you say I’ll never be a ‘bellibone,’ you’re calling me ugly and wicked, and assuming I’m too ignorant to get your meaning. Well, the joke’s on you, perv!”

Bull “Woops! I forgot your mamma taught you a little French. How many languages does she speak anyway? You really should try to be more like her.”

Charley “Leave Mamma out of this. Why she’s always doted on you I’ll never understand. There you were every summer vacation, lapping up her lemonade and pretending you had a crush on me.”

Bull “Actually, Nurse Nutkin, I adore you above all my other suitors, and I plan to make you my blushing bride once it’s safe for us to return home.”

Charley “You mean safe for *you* and those orblots to which you’re so fondly attached, don’t you? But how about if we both get down to Earth again for a minute? Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Bull “The spesium, you mean?”

Charley “What else?”

Bull “I expect Translunar has plans to begin extraction here within months, maybe even weeks.”

Charley “With or without European or UPSA authorization?”

Bull “With or without, Charley, and you know where that leaves us, don’t you?”

Charley “Between a rock and a hard place.”

Bull “Between the devil and the deep blue sea, which, of course, happens to go down here to a depth of at least ten kilometers and is actually pitch black. As for the identity of the Devil, we’ve already established his initials are TP. It’s gonna be genocide. The IMOs have nowhere to go and no way to get there even if they could find a safe haven.”

Charley “Well, Bull, there *are* new, less destructive extraction technologies.”

Bull “That argument may work on Earth, but it won’t here. Any tampering with European ecosystems is a recipe for disaster.”

Charley “But there are trillions of them—”

Bull “More than a googolplexplexplex, and that’s a conservative estimate based on random samples taken over five years ago.”

Charley “What I’m trying to say is, they can afford to lose—”

Bull “Stop right there, Charley! We’re talking about intelligent living beings. Sure they may be shorter than a yoctometer. They may spend their whole lives swimming around inside some cracked icy brine-filled globe where the sun never shines. And they may chow down on toxic chemicals that even in tiny amounts would kill you or me. But this is *their* world, and we have no right to declare jihad, wipe out half their population, then make off with as many metric tons of spesium as we can cram in the holds of TP’s cargo fleet.”

Charley “Even if it means the human race goes extinct?”

Bull “The human race doesn’t have to go extinct. There are other ways.”

Charley “Human cloning is still illegal, and using existing supplies of frozen sperm severely limits the gene pool. People still want sex, they still want to get pregnant and give birth the old-fashioned way, and they still want their kids to look like them and not some anonymous donor.”

Bull “So the traditional pleasures of copulation and childbearing outweigh preserving the first sentient extraterrestrial species we’ve discovered? I’m afraid there’s just no logic to the calculus of intentional extinction.”

Charley “As far as the Earth is concerned, Translunar is god, a spesium cocktail is the Blessed Sacrament, and Europa is the only place in the solar system where it’s on tap.”

Bull “And that Blessed Sacrament will come with a hefty price tag.”

Charley “You got it, Bully Boy! So if you know what’s good for you, you won’t stand in the way of that old-time heterosexist imperialism you’re always complaining about. And if the IMOs know what’s good for them, they’ll settle for temporary displacement and let us take what we need. The ocean under us is full of the stuff, and they may even be able to—”

Bull “You’re still dreaming, Charley. You know their situation as well as I do. There are just too many of ’em, and most of the subspecies are just too specialized and interdependent for mass redistribution and relocation on Europa. Even small-scale extraction will kill trillions. At the very least, UPSA should compromise and let ’em colonize Antarctica in exchange for mineral and mining rights.”

Charley “Who’s dreaming now? What would happen if they adapted too well to life on Earth? Even Antarctica would eventually be too small for them, and then they might—”

Bull “Hello! You’re talking to an exobiologist who knows at least a little bit about the risks! But we’re not dealing here with a species that just eats, shits, and makes babies. These IMOs are exactly what they should be—*intelligent* microscopic organisms. They’ve got a civilization unlike any other we’ve ever discovered. They realize they’re facing a serious situation, and they’re dealing with it as mindfully as they can. For that matter, they never even paid much attention to life on other worlds, at least not until our robots came boring through their ice floes fifty years ago. They’ve always stayed pretty much to themselves, and seem to like it that way.”

Charley “But—”

Bull “And, I might add, *Homo sapiens* is a landlubber without the least inclination to put down roots in thermally extreme oceanic ecosystems.”

Charley “You seem to have all the answers, but nobody on Earth is willing to play host to a species whose spoken language alone is enough to kill.”

Bull “None of our research suggests that even a large colony of Europeans would pose any real threat to indigenous terrestrial species. Yes, their speech does have potentially harmful psychotropic effects on humans, but you’d have to be in the drink with them for at least twenty-four hours before there was any real potential for harm. And with the Dragoman’s filtration systems and the XM-1, even the worst chemosonic curses they might utter against us would do little more than go in one cyberear and out the other.”

Charley “So say you.”

Bull “Actually, the European languages are fascinating once you get into them. Some of their poets even rival Dante and Shakespeare.”

Charley “You seem to forget I was present when you rolled out the prototype of your precious Exophonetic Modulator and gave that recital of European poetry for the EDC. If I was mildly entertained, the diplomatic corps was in stitches—that is, if they weren’t puking their guts out in the john. Sorry, Bull, but the ‘European culture’ angle just won’t sell. There would never be enough Dragomans on Earth to go around if the IMOs managed to stray past the Antarctic Circle. Besides, who even bothers to read Dante and Shakespeare anymore?”

Bull “Negotiations are still worth a try, Charley. We’re going down in the Dragoman again next week.”

Charley “Next week? And I thought I knew everything that went on at this base! That means you and the others will be coming by for a physical. Oh, joy! I can’t remember the last time I saw a—”

Bull “You’re a twisted bitch, did you know that, Charley?!”

Charley “And you’re a fairy prince with the most darling little sugar plums, so don’t be surprised if you wake up after your exam and find that Nurse Nutkin has—”

Bull “I’ve got plenty of real Colombian coffee in my cabin, so if Nurse Nutkin thinks she can knock me out and abscond with my sugar plums, she might as well go chase her own tail—or whatever Old Brown left of it.”

Charley “Beatrix Potter must be turning in her grave!”

Bull “Anabiosis? Don’t count on it. The old girl is long dead and was no saint besides. Word has it she used to kick and beat kids.”

Charley “Is there nothing sacred left for us in the twenty-second century?”

Bull “Life, Charley. Life. And on that I’d stake my own.”

3. Europa, UPSA Base, Dragoman Launch Site, Five Days Later

Pinky “Come on, George. You can tell me now. Who’s goin’ down besides Bull Giovanni?”

George “Are you gonna keep your mouth shut?”

Pinky “I’ve never let you down before, George, have I?”

George “We’ve never done a job like this before.”

Pinky “You know you can trust me, George. C’mon. Who’s it gonna be?”

George “If you breathe a word of this to anyone, you know who’s gonna be next!? . . . Okay. They obviously want Giovanni because he’s the egghead who figured out IMO-speak. Just about everyone who watches the news knows his pretty-boy mug and listens to his shit about peaceful coexistence with ET. Hell, my daughter keeps a holo of the bastard in her bedroom!”

Pinky “Sure, it had to be Giovanni. They could hardly go down there without a translator. But who else?”

George “Remember what I said and keep your trap shut. The others are Ambassador Hale, his aide, and that new navigation guy, Sheets.”

Pinky “You’re kidding! I thought Hale was in bed with Translunar?”

George “He is—*and* with Ms. Philips. But as far as Translunar’s concerned, they’re all dispensable.”

Pinky “I don’t guess anyone told *them* that.”

George “There’s been bad blood between Hale and Translunar for years, ever since he resigned from the Board and their stocks took a beating. But his wife has meanwhile got her hands on thirty percent of the company, and she’s apparently some heiress bitch with near-total control over the family finances.”

Pinky “So I guess she knows about him and that hottie aide of his?”

George “You can bet she knows—and that Hale doesn’t have a clue about it. Heck, he spends most of his time off-world, so I guess he figured she wouldn’t even notice as long as he kept up that dignified diplomatic façade. But Translunar has as many intelligence operatives in the field as it does lobbyists in Beijing, so it was only a matter of time before they made sure she had all the lurid details. After this deal, what with his life insurance policies and the spesium drug profits, she’s probably gonna be the richest woman on Earth.”

Pinky “Do ya think ya could set her and me up on a date?”

George “Get outta here!”

Pinky “So what about this Sheets guy? He doesn’t seem like the type to volunteer for a suicide mission.”

George “Sheets wants a kid and they made him a real sweet deal. At least he thinks so.”

Pinky “Wait a minute! You mean he’s been set up for a double-cross?”

George “They’ve given him some bogus top-secret experimental miracle drug he believes will keep him alive. He thinks he’s going to be the only survivor and come out of this thing a big hero and the next poster boy for Translunar.”

Pinky “So what’s to keep them from—”

George “From whacking us, too? First of all, Pinky, we’ve both got the training, experience, and technical expertise they need for spesium extraction. Second of all, you and I both have very fortunate taste in women.”

Pinky “Wha—wait a minute! Are you saying your Alice and my Josie—”

George “Are more than just cousins. You’ve heard about Grandpa Frank, haven’t you? Well, Grandpa Frank *is* Translunar, to the tune of a fifty-five percent controlling interest.”

Pinky “Holy Mother! I had no idea. *That* Grandpa Frank is Frank A. Varo?”

George “The same. So you’d better stop thinking about other women and do the right thing by little Josie and marry her all nice and proper. Besides, my friend, I figure Uncle Frank has *his* eye on Mrs. Hale, and when the two of them pair up—”

Pinky “This just blows me away! Why didn’t you say anything before?”

George “They’ve been watching you, Pinky, so you could prove yourself, and today’s the day for your big test. They’re sure you’ll come through for them, and so am I—but if we don’t finish this job before the next shift gets here, neither of us will probably be any better off than Sheets. So how about the sodium and magnesium sulfate intake filters?”

Pinky “He—I mean we—no—”

George “Intake filters, Pinky!”

Pinky “Sure, George. Th—the—they’ll be reset once the virus kicks in at 2,734 fathoms.”

George “Irradiation initialization?”

Pinky “At the same depth.”

George “Environmental controls?”

Pinky “Will go offline at 13:15:30, along with the XM-1 and all communications and recording systems, except the automated systems status signal.”

George “Sea water immersion level?”

Pinky “Set to reach full flood stage at 13:30:30. By then they’ll be so pumped full of adrenalin and toxic crud they’d wish they could drown.”

George “Wetsuits?”

Pinky “Up to the usual specs, for all the good that’ll do ‘em.”

George “Gondola?”

Pinky “Secured.”

George “Float compression?”

Pinky “Normal.”

George “Ascent status?”

Pinky “Ballast tanks, magnets, and hoppers are absolutely fail-safe on this baby. They’ll be able to reel ‘em back in afterwards alright—at least what’s left of ‘em.”

George “And you’ve run the usual diagnostics on the cables, hatch, vents, valves, bioluminaires?”

Pinky “Everything will check out just like it should before they launch, and after recovery there’ll be nothing to pin the blame on us. The inspectors, the media—everyone will figure it was the IMOs. I’m the best at what I do. You believe that, don’t ya, George?”

George “Of course, Pinky. Otherwise, do you think I’d have told you more than you need to know about this operation? Okay, then. We’re set. Frank and Ed probably won’t start pulling duty for another fifteen minutes, so we’ve got time to spare.”

Pinky “How ‘bout if we grab a Coke and cool off or somethin’?”

George “Good idea, but first I’ve gotta hit the crapper.”

4. Europa, Dragoman Cabin, the Following Afternoon, 13:00:00

Hale “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this thing, Bull. Too claustrophobic for me!”

Bull “I can see why you might feel that way, Mr. Ambassador, but I guess I’m so used to the Dragoman by now it doesn’t seem much smaller than my quarters.”

Hale “How about you, Charlene? Are you comfortable enough?”

Philips “I guess so, Winston, but I’ll be glad when this business is finished and we’re headed back to Mars. Ice moons and underwater meetings in the dark with microscopic aliens is hardly my idea of a holiday. And since you brought the subject up, aren’t these wet suits a bit too tight?”

Hale “I don’t know. What do you think, Bull?”

Bull “Have you ever been to Antarctica, Ms. Philips? Conditions here are somewhat similar to those you’d find in a subglacial polar lake.”

Philips “I put in a few weeks at McMurdo, but caught a bad cold and didn’t get to do any diving. UPSA puts us all through ET environmental simulation drills before we leave the Academy, but that’s about as close as I ever come to—*this*.”

Hale “I understand the cabin will only fill up enough to just cover our heads while we’re seated?”

Bull “That’s right, Sir. Chemosonic communication requires full immersion in a mutually compatible liquid medium. That way they’ll be able to sense not only what we’re saying, with the help of the XM-1, but also, to some extent, what we’re thinking and feeling.”

Hale “I’m afraid that gives them a decided advantage, Bull.”

Bull “It keeps us all honest, Sir. But we have so many more advantages than they do. Our relative size. Our amphibious capabilities. Our transportation technology. It sort of makes the playing field a little more level.”

Hale “Mr. Sheets, what time do you have?”

Sheets “13:10:45, Mr. Ambassador.”

Hale “So they should be joining us in here shortly? I’m sure glad you’ll be doing the talking and translating for us, Bull. I’d never be able to manage much more than a simple hello with this keyboard.”

Philips “I still don’t understand why they speak so slowly, Mr. Giovanni. It seems to me that’s one of the things that’s held them back.”

Bull “Not at all, Ms. Philips. They don’t think of time in the same linear way we do. Here below the surface there’s no day and night, and just like on Jupiter, no actual cycle of seasons. For the IMOs, everything is essentially now. Past, present, and future are just three different aspects of the same thing, so there’s no sense of time passing, no hurry to reach an imaginary finish line.”

Hale “But isn’t it this poorly developed sense of time that’s contributed to their overpopulation crisis? If they had been able to imagine a future in which their numbers would increase to a point beyond which further growth would have catastrophic consequences, then—”

Bull “Actually, Sir, they seem to have been aware of the present situation for as far back as their collective memory serves. What they call ‘the Florescence’ — which is what we’ve labeled the ‘overpopulation crisis’ — is something each of them somehow knows from birth.”

Hale “But they have no written records, as I understand it, Bull. Isn’t the very alphabet on this keyboard your own invention?”

Bull “Yes, Mr. Ambassador. It’s true they maintain no physical records external to their own collective memory, and my ‘European alphabet’ is no more than a practical means of

representing their twenty-five most basic speech patterns. Otherwise, there would be no way to disseminate their knowledge to a species such as ours that's dependent on written languages. But we shouldn't expect an extraterrestrial life form to exhibit the same cognitive and linguistic behaviors as *Homo sapiens*. In fact, their ways of knowing and communicating have enabled them to utilize the physical resources of this world with extraordinary efficiency. Instead of building libraries and universities and filling them with records, they *are* their libraries, universities, and records. What's more, European intelligence is universal; what one knows all know."

Philips "It all sounds rather mystical, Mr. Giovanni. If what he's saying is true, Winston, these IMOs actually know the future before it happens."

Hale "Is she right about that, Bull? Are you saying they have some precognitive ability?"

Bull "Not exactly, sir. Rather, their cognitive ability gives them access to knowledge we habitually categorize as past, present, and future."

Hale "That description comes pretty close to omniscience. Are your IMOs God?"

Philips "Oh, Winston, you have such a trenchant wit!"

Bull "I haven't any evidence that's the case, Mr. Ambassador. My research has really just begun. But I can say that they seem to know a great deal more about what's happened and what's going to happen than the average human being, especially when it comes to things like minute temperature fluctuations or changes in the concentration of chemicals in solution. They're completely attuned to everything going on within their own environment, and are able to modify that environment instantaneously to maintain homeostasis. As I hope I've already been able to impress on you, they *are*, in a very real sense, their environment, and that environment is one vast living entity."

Sheets "Mr. Ambassador, Sir, I'm afraid we have a problem. Environmental controls have just gone offline."

Hale "What's that, Sheets?"

Sheets "Sir, we can't maintain our present temperature or regulate the sea water immersion level. And we've started to take on much higher concentrations of sodium and magnesium sulfates and other potentially toxic solutes than normal."

Hale "What do we do now? Sheets? Bull?"

Philips "Oh, Winston, I don't like this!"

Bull "Open a line to the top, Sheets."

Sheets “Sorry, Mr. Giovanni, but communications are down, too.”

Bull “This makes no sense at all. We’ve never had a problem like this before. We’re going to have to abort, Sheets. Take us up.”

Sheets “I don’t think so, Sir. We’re staying right here.”

Hale “What do you mean, Sheets? Mr. Giovanni has just told you to take us up, and I’m ordering you—”

Sheets “Sorry, Sir. I don’t take orders from either of you.”

Hale “Bull, can’t you do something about this man?”

Bull “Sheets, what the devil is going on?”

Sheets “We can’t have these IMOs threatening our survival. We can’t have them spreading all over the Earth. We’ve got to take what we need. I wanna be with my wife again, like a real man. I wanna have a kid, maybe two.”

Hale “Listen to me, Sheets. We’re on your side. Ms. Philips and I have come to tell the IMOs what you’ve just told us, but if you don’t get us out of here, you’ll never see your wife again. There won’t be any kids.”

Sheets “You’re lying. Giovanni’s with them, and you’re with Giovanni. I’m gonna make it out. They gave me the pill and I’m gonna get out of this cesspool just fine.”

Bull “Listen to me Sheets, Hale, Philips. I think I see what’s going on here. Someone has set us all up. Sheets, there *is* no pill that can protect you from unheated, unfiltered European sea water, and these wet suits can only postpone the inevitable unless we get environmental controls back online. I don’t know what your game is, *Mr. Hale* and *Ms. Philips*, but this was supposed to be a diplomatic mission, not an opportunity for you to deliver an ultimatum that amounts to a death sentence for the IMOs.”

Hale “Translunar. That son of a bitch Varo’s behind this!”

Philips “*She’s* got to be in on it, too, Winston. I saw how she looked at us the last time —”

Hale “I’m so sorry, Charlene! I should have gotten a divorce, but I never thought she’d —”

Bull “Hale, Philips, would you please save it for later and let me try to handle this? Sheets, don’t you see what’s going on? Varo—and evidently Hale’s wife, too—want the three of us out of the way, and they’re just playing you for the fool.”

Sheets “You’re lying. I know you’re lying. Translunar’s already developed a cure for male infertility, and all they need is enough spesium to go into full-scale production so the whole world can get back to normal. You figure, Mr. Hale, that if you can keep the mineral-rights-for-Antarctica issue at an impasse, that’ll give you enough time to work out your own sweet deal with Translunar’s competition. And you, Giovanni, you’re just too blind, too attached to your goddamned IMOs, your big-ticket research grants, and your celebrity status to see the truth. Varo and Translunar are the real heroes. You’re all a bunch of parasites.”

Bull “Look, Sheets, I don’t know what they told you and don’t give a river rat’s ass what you think of me or anyone else personally, but science is science. All of us *will* die unless you get us out of here. Prolonged exposure to European sea water at this temperature will kill us. And assuming that at least a few hundred trillion IMOs are already here with us inside this cabin, I can’t predict how they’ll react under the circumstances. You’ve got to restore environmental controls.”

Sheets “I can’t, even if I believed you—and I still don’t. A virus has temporarily disabled all systems, including emergency backups and overrides. There’s no way out until they pull us out, and no way to let anyone at the base know what’s going on.”

Hale “Bull, how long before they realize there’s a problem?”

Bull “My best guess, Hale, is that someone knows already. If they don’t receive an automated systems status message from the Dragoman every fifteen minutes, they have standing orders to send a radio signal that will release the ballast and initiate recovery.”

Philips “So we will make it back to the surface, Winston!”

Bull “Not so fast, Philips. We would have felt a little motion if the ballast had already been released, so there may be a problem. Do you know anything about this, Sheets?”

Sheets “Communications are disabled, but the status message was sent, and will continue to be sent for at least another forty-five minutes. They don’t know anything yet.”

Philips “It’s getting so cold, Winston! I can’t feel my hands and feet anymore.”

Hale “Neither can I, Charlene.”

Bull “And neither can you, Sheets, can you? I’ll bet you’re also finding it harder to move, and your reaction time is slowing down.”

Sheets “Shut up! You’re just trying . . . to confuse me.”

Bull “If your mind is getting blurry now, I expect . . . in another fifteen or twenty minutes . . . you’ll be hallucinating. Looks like your magic pill isn’t working.”

Hale “What have I done, Charlene? What have I done?”

Philips “It wasn’t you, Winston. It was them. It was her. And *you*, Giovanni! It was you . . . you and these damned ET feces swarming around us . . . inside us!”

Bull “It was all of us . . . All of us who turned life into a curse . . . raping our own world, then coming here to do the same thing. It’s time to admit that. If not to the God that made us, at least to the god we’ve made of ourselves.”

5. Europa, Med Lab, the Following Week

Charley “The bodies have all been prepped and placed in individual stasis chambers.”

Dawkins “Thanks, Charley. I know it couldn’t have been easy to you. Everyone tells me how close you were to Bull.”

Charley “They’ve already dispatched a medevac ship from Mars Base, and it should be arriving here within a few weeks. If everything stays on schedule, UPSA Labs will be able to begin examining the cadavers by early May.”

Dawkins “Getting home can still take an awful long time. Have you been contacted by any of Bull’s relatives or friends yet?”

Charley “No, Mr. Secretary. He was an only child, and both his parents are dead. Bull had lots of admirers but not many friends outside of UPSA.”

Dawkins “Have you talked to any of the other victims’ family members?”

Charley “Not directly. Mrs. Hale’s attorney had a few questions and needed a copy of my preliminary report about the cause of death. I told him it was still classified and he’d have to file a formal request with UPSA. Her brother-in-law said Mrs. Sheets wanted a watch and a ring shipped back to her for burial with her husband. I told him that might be arranged once the investigation was finished, but that I had no control over the disposition of personal effects. All these conversations were holorecorded and are archived here in the library.”

Dawkins “I’ll have some copies made before I leave this afternoon. Did anyone else, including the media, make any attempts to contact you?”

Charley “All other inquiries were redirected to and fielded by the press secretary’s office. All but one.”

Dawkins “And that one was—?”

Charley “From my mother, Sir. She wanted to know if I was okay.”

Dawkins “And what did you tell her?”

Charley “I said that I was fine, Sir. I said everything was just fine.”

6. Earth, UPSA Medical Laboratories, Boston, 1 May, the Following Year

Morton “They’re about to offload the stasis chambers. We should be ready to receive them within the hour.”

Bloom “Good. Make sure everyone is scrubbed down, suited up, and ready by 15:00:00.”

Morton “Charley Stevens is one of the best, Dr. Bloom. I really don’t expect there’s much we can add to her reports. It seems pretty conclusive that the cause of death was severe hypothermia, aggravated by incipient hypoxia and exposure to toxins typically found in unfiltered European sea water. The Dragoman life-support systems malfunctioned, possibly as a result of human error, and they basically froze to death.”

Bloom “I’m quite sure our neural scanners will show evidence of psychotropic intoxication. If there was any human error, it resulted from a deliberate chemosonic attack impairing the cognitive faculties of both the navigator and the delegation. We know the IMOs are hostile and obviously never intended to negotiate a peaceful settlement. There can be no other explanation.”

Morton “But Dr. Bloom, they were down there just five hours. There’s no evidence that chemosonics pose any serious threat to humans unless exposure after full immersion exceeds twenty-four hours. Dr. Giovanni’s research—”

Bloom “Was obviously flawed. He allowed the fame his discoveries brought him to affect his judgment, and the consequences of that mistake are by now all too apparent. Do your job, Dr. Morton. I have every confidence your findings will be consistent with my own.”

Morton “Yes . . . Sir.”

7. Earth, UPSA Autopsy Room No. 2, 18:00:00

Morton “Why haven’t you brought in the body of Dr. Giovanni yet? I told you we’d just be breaking for a half hour after we finished with Hale.”

Stokes “Dr. Morton, it’s not in Cabinet Two. We’ve searched all the other cabinets, too, Sir. Only Philips and Sheets are still there, in Three and Four.”

Morton “This is outrageous! You can’t just lose a cadaver, especially *that* cadaver! I hope you’ve at least notified Security?”

Stokes “Yes, Doctor. They were notified the instant we realized something was wrong.”

Morton ““Wrong”? Do you realize just how *wrong* this is, Stokes?”

Stokes “Dr. Morton, Sir, I never left my post. Not even to go to the bathroom, even though I really needed to.”

Bloom “Morton, what is going on here? Security just notified me that Giovanni’s body is missing.”

Morton “I just found out myself, Dr. Bloom. We’d finished with Hale and took a half-hour break in the lounge. Stokes says he was there the whole time.”

Bloom “Stokes? Is that you?”

Stokes “Yes, Doctor Bloom.”

Bloom “You say you were present, but is it possible you could have fallen asleep, or been distracted, even for just a minute?”

Stokes “There’s no way that could have happened, Sir. I was alert and at my post the whole time. I saw no one, absolutely no one going in there or coming out.”

Bloom “We’ve got to get to the bottom of this immediately. Inform Security to seal the perimeter and conduct a grid-by-grid search of every structure and vehicle within a 250-mile radius of this base. Morton, Stokes, you come with me. We’re going to have an interplanetary conference call with the Secretary.”

8. Earth, Translunar Pharmaceuticals Headquarters, Office of CEO Frank A. Varo

Dawkins “That’s all we know right now, Frank. Giovanni’s body has just disappeared.”

Varo “I see, Richard. Your people just lost him? And what am I to make out of that? That you’re all a bunch of friggin’ incompetents who can’t even move a stiff from point A to point B after my men pulled off everything without a hitch? Do you understand what this means? If you don’t produce a body, the media will be all over this. A body, Richard. A body.”

Stokes “I understand, Frank. But where, I mean how do we—”

Varo “You had four bodies. The public has no idea what condition they were in, and if you did at least part of your job right, neither do the families. Now you’ve got three on ice. You do the math, Dicky. Four minus one makes four.”

Stokes “But what if the families want to view the remains?”

Varo “There’s nothing left but four boxes of mutilated meat, courtesy of the IMOs. Do you really think they’ll want you to crack ‘em open for one last look? What’s about Sheets’s wife?”

Stokes “Evidently he didn’t tell her anything. He kept his word.”

Varo “Good. At least you got that much right.”

9. Earth, a Shopping Mall, the East Coast of North America, Two Weeks Later

Holovision News Anchor “. . . the vicious terrorist attack against Dr. Bull Giovanni, Ambassador Winston Hale; his aide, Charlene Philips; and UPSA Navigator First Class Willis P. Sheets. Remains of these heroic champions of liberty have been moved to the Rotunda of the United States Capitol, where they will remain for three days before being transported to the Beijing Center for Interplanetary Peace for another three-day period of public mourning. In other news, Translunar Pharmaceuticals has announced that its new male infertility drug, TestoMax, will be available by prescription only starting on November 25, on the same day the world gives thanks for. . . .”

Ginny “Daddy, are you and Mommy going to make a new baby brother for me like you said?”

Hank “Of course, Ginny! But he won’t be born until next year.”

Ginny “Oh, when, Daddy, when?!”

Hank “Well, let’s see . . . maybe around August or September.”

Ginny “That’s such a long time from now. Can’t you make him a little sooner so he’ll be here by Christmas?”

Hank “I wish we could, Ginny, but we have to wait until we get the seed ready to plant in Mommy’s tummy.”

Ginny “But if you plant a seed in Mommy’s tummy, and it grows into a baby, Mommy won’t be able to eat.”

Hank “That’s not how it works, Ginny. The baby will eat some of Mommy’s food.”

Ginny “Is it dark inside Mommy’s tummy, Daddy? Won’t the baby be afraid of the dark?”

Hank “No. Babies are used to the dark.”

Ginny “I used to be a baby, but I’m still afraid of the dark. Aren’t you afraid, Daddy?”

Hank “No, not any more. I’m all grown up.”

Ginny “When I’m grown up, will I still be afraid?”

Hank “No. There’s nothing to be afraid of, sweetie.”

Ginny “Not even that big black thing we saw in the sky that made all the babies go away?”

Hank “I—look here, Ginny! Do you see what I see? I bet you’d like some ice cream.”

Ginny “Oh, yes! I want a vanilla cone with sprinkles.”

Hank “And I think I’ll get two supersize scoops of cherry nut in a cup. Come on, let’s get in line.”

10. Europa, United Planetary Space Agency Base Clinic, Three Weeks Later

Shanks “Dr. Stevens, excuse me, but the Commander told me to interrupt you. There were some problems with the communications array, so we just got the news: Big Black is back.”

Charley “What do you mean, Shanks?”

Shanks “They first sighted it over the eastern Mediterranean, headed southeast towards Africa. Then about six hours later it passed over the Cape of Good Hope, and it . . . it descended into the Atlantic Indian Basin.”

Charley “What do you mean ‘descended’? Has anyone been hurt?”

Shanks “As far as I know, it hasn’t affected anyone physically, but there’s mass hysteria and every government on Earth is on high alert.”

Charley “This is just too weird! Do you know anything else?”

Shanks “Nothing, Ma’am. The array’s gone down again, so all we can do is wait.”

Charley “Thanks, Shanks. God, what next?!”

Shanks “I’m sorry I had to be the bearer of bad news, Dr. Stevens. . . I . . . took the liberty of bringing you your mail. Sue-Ellen said you hadn’t picked it up in a while, so the disc is nearly full. And there’s also this package, and a postcard, too. Nice picture.”

Charley “Let’s see. Hmmm. ‘Titian. *The Rape of Europa*. Looks like it came from Boston, but whoever sent it was apparently in such a hurry they forgot to write a message. Oh, well. Listen, Shanks, could you do me another favor and tell me the instant the array is back online?”

Shanks “I promise you’ll be one of the first to know. Ma’am, could I ask you for a little favor, too?”

Charley “Sure. What is it?”

Shanks “That Greek stamp on the package there. Could you save it for me? I’m a collector.”

Charley “Here, I’ll give it to you right now. Let me just open this up and see what’s inside. Looks like a little book. Squirrel Nut—”

Shanks “Is there anything the matter, Ma’am?”

Charley “No. No, Shanks. Nothing. It’s just a gift.”

Shanks “From a friend, Ma’am?”

Charley “I don’t—let me see. There’s something written here inside the cover: “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” Affectionately yours, Ana B. Iosis.”

Shanks “She sounds like a very good friend. That’s the Bible, isn’t it? When I was a kid, my mom used to read—Ma’am? Ma’am, you really don’t look too well. Maybe you should sit down. I’ll go call Dr. Fremd.”

11. Crete, Six Months Later

Mamma “Charley! Ma petite! I can’t believe it’s you, come all the way from Jupiter!”

Charley “Europa, Mamma.”

Mamma “No, here is Europa. I tell all my friends Jupiter. No one understands. Ah, let me look at you!”

Charley “It’s been too long, Mamma.”

Mamma “Such a long time, and such a long trip! Here, please, you come sit down and rest.”

Charley “You know I can’t stay long. Just a few days for the conference. Then I have a job interview at MIT.”

Mamma “You like your new job there? You won’t go back to Jupiter?”

Charley “I don’t have the job yet, Mamma. I won’t know until after the interview, but yes, this time I’m back on Earth to stay.”

Mamma “Yes, you stay this time. Everyone’s so afraid. You make them feel safe again.”

Charley “I hope so. Is he . . . here, Mamma?”

Mamma “You know he is! Such a beautiful boy! He waits for you on the balcony. I bring you both something to drink.”

12. Crete, Balcony of the Stevens Home, Minutes Later

Bull “Nurse Nutkin? You certainly look . . . like hell.”

Charley “Bull!”

Bull “No, you really do look like hell.”

Charley “I can see you haven’t changed a bit! Come her and let me squeeze you!”

Bull “Watch out! The sugar plums—”

Charley “I wasn’t sure if that message in European characters you wrote inside the back cover told me to go to my mother’s in sunny Crete or to fry her in hot grease.”

Bull “You should have checked my European Lexicon more carefully. When the IMOs say ‘fry’ they’re referring idiomatically to thermal vents on the sea floor where they go home to get warm and feed. As for the confusion between ‘grease’ and ‘Greece’—”

Charley “How, Bull? How?”

Bull “The IMOs. They realized I was there to help them, and that the others weren’t. I don’t know exactly how they did it, but they managed to infiltrate the cabin and put me in a state of suspended animation.”

Charley “But you were clinically dead! I examined you myself before we shipped the body—I mean, you—back to Earth. You were in really bad shape.”

Bull “If they’d let you do the autopsy, you would have discovered that deep-tissue regeneration had already begun. They stayed with me, repairing the damage from the inside out. And what they couldn’t repair they’ve replaced with something just as good or better. Their medical science is far in advance of anything we could possibly have imagined. They’ve been studying us for decades while we’ve spent most of our time figuring out how to take advantage of them. Charley, they have the power to heal just about anything and anyone.”

Charley “How do you know this? How did you get away from UPSA Med Labs?”

Bull “I know because they told me. But it’s a little more complicated than that. You see, Charley, they’re still with me. Right here, right now. My body is the vehicle they used to leave their world and take their first interplanetary journey. During the billions of years they’ve existed, they’ve become complete masters of the art and science of morphomimesis. They’ve known from the beginning that with the arrival of the right host, they could assume whatever forms were necessary to adapt to living conditions elsewhere in the universe. I’m that host, and it was easy for us to elude UPSA Security by taking the shape of different objects and people. Would you believe it? When the guards on duty let me past the gates, they thought I was a guy named Stokes. I have to wonder what happened when the real Stokes tried to leave later that evening!”

Charley “This is incredible, Bull. I just can’t believe it.”

Bull “Would you believe it better if I became Mr. Stokes again? Here. See!”

Charley “Oh, my God! Please don’t do that! Change back again—now!”

Bull “Sorry to upset you that way, Charley, but you needed proof, and proof’s what you got. There’s something else you need to know. Something wonderful.”

Charley “What more could there possibly be? I can hardly take in what you’ve told me so far. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Bull “Gimme your hand for a second. There. You see how that works?”

Charley “I feel—so much better! How’d you do that, Bull?”

Bull “It’s just a little trick I picked up from the IMOs. But I’ve saved the best for last. The IMOs have come to Earth, with me as their host, to unite with their Creator.”

Charley “Their Creator? Here?”

Bull “Big Black. Big Black is their God, Charley, and as it turns out, ours, too.”

Charley “Are you saying you’ve entered into some kind of symbiotic relationship with the IMOs, and that they—and we—were *created* by that thing that caused every man on the planet to go sterile?”

Bull “You got it! Big Black, Jehovah, Allah, Brahma, the Great Mother—the IMOs have another name I couldn’t begin to pronounce—they’re one and the same. Big Black made us all in our infinite variety and spread us around the universe, and S/He’s watching us to see what we do when we come into contact with one another. I’m sorry to say the obvious, but *Homo sapiens* hasn’t been performing too well, and that’s made Big Black pretty upset. So upset, in fact, that S/He’s turning custody of the Earth over to the IMOs. That’s what I want you to tell the rest of the world.”

Charley “Me?! This all sounds so fantastic no one would listen. Why can’t you tell them yourself?”

Bull “Because I have an important rendezvous in a subglacial lake smack in the heartland of Antarctica and will be very busy there for a while. In fact, I’ve got to get going in just a few minutes. But rest assured, they will listen to you. They’ll listen to you because if they don’t all the spesium in the universe won’t cure what ails them. I’m about to hand you the key of life, the most complete compendium of medical knowledge in the solar system. There’s nothing you won’t be able to heal with the information contained on this disc. With the help of my friends—and thanks to the good offices of your mother, I’ve managed to put the whole thing together in just a few months. Mamma’s the only other person in the world who knows what I’ve told you, and she’ll stand totally behind you, just as she’s supported me ever since I arrived here. By the way, haven’t you noticed her arthritis is completely gone? Now all you have to do is go out and work a few miracles of your own. The whole world will see, hear, and believe. No more waiting and wondering if there really is a God. I hereby appoint you Healer-Prophetess of the Sacred Order of Big Black!”

Mamma “Hello, again, my dears! I bring you a pitcher of fresh-squeezed lemonade, so nice and cool on a hot day like today.”

Bull “Thanks so much, Mamma Stevens, but I really have to fly if I’m going to make it by this evening. Take good care of each another. I’ll come back to visit often. Good friends should never stay apart too long.”

Charley “We’ll miss you, Bull! Both of us.”

12. Crete, Balcony of the Stevens Home, Later that Day

Mamma “It looked so strange, Charley, don’t you think? A big white bull flying over the sea with a naked lady on his back? That boy, he always had such a wild imagination!”

Charley “Actually Mamma, I’ve seen something like that before, but until today it never seemed quite so original.”