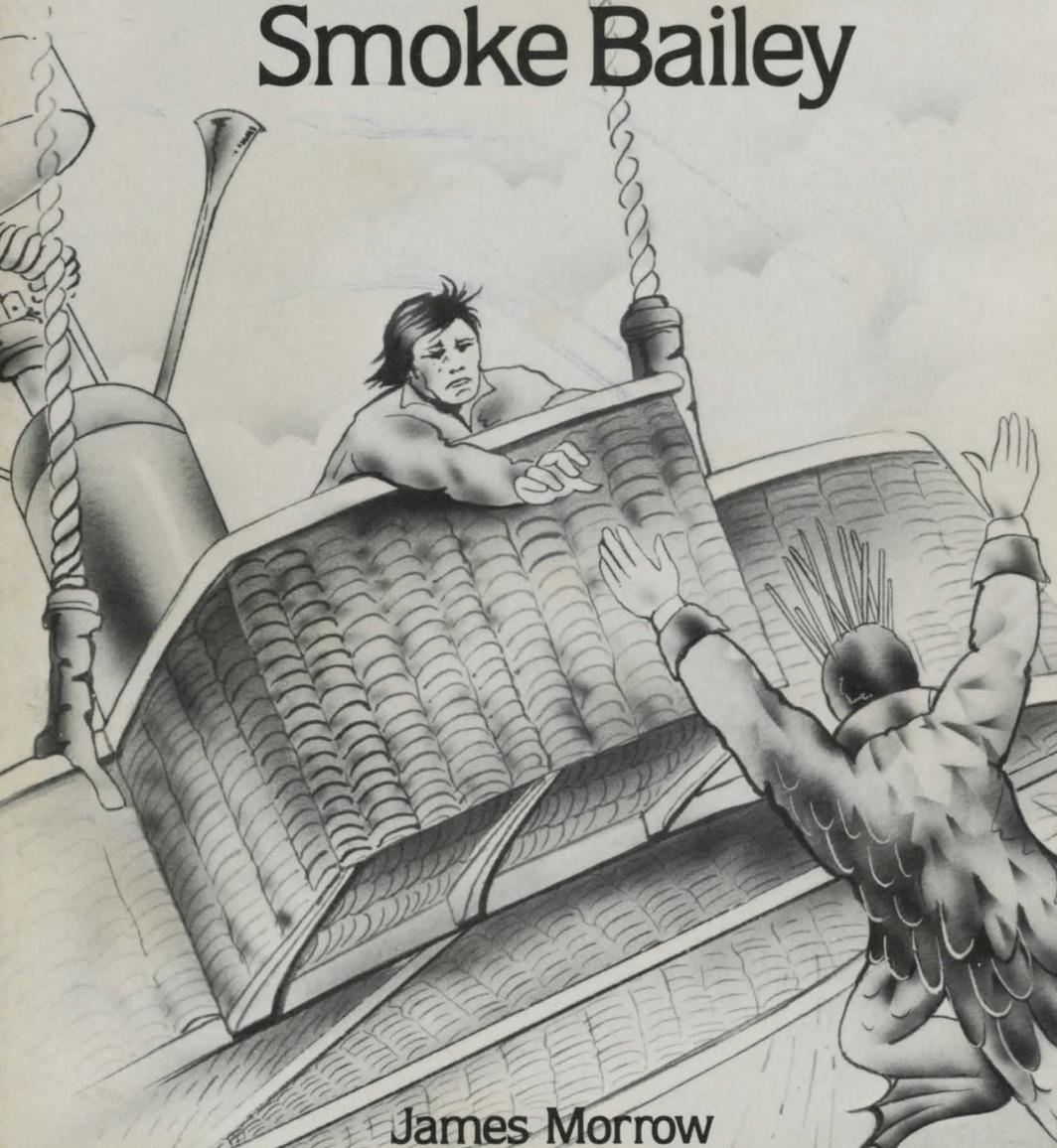


The Adventures of Smoke Bailey



James Morrow

The Adventures of Smoke Bailey

James Morrow

Spinnaker Software Corporation
Cambridge, MA 02142

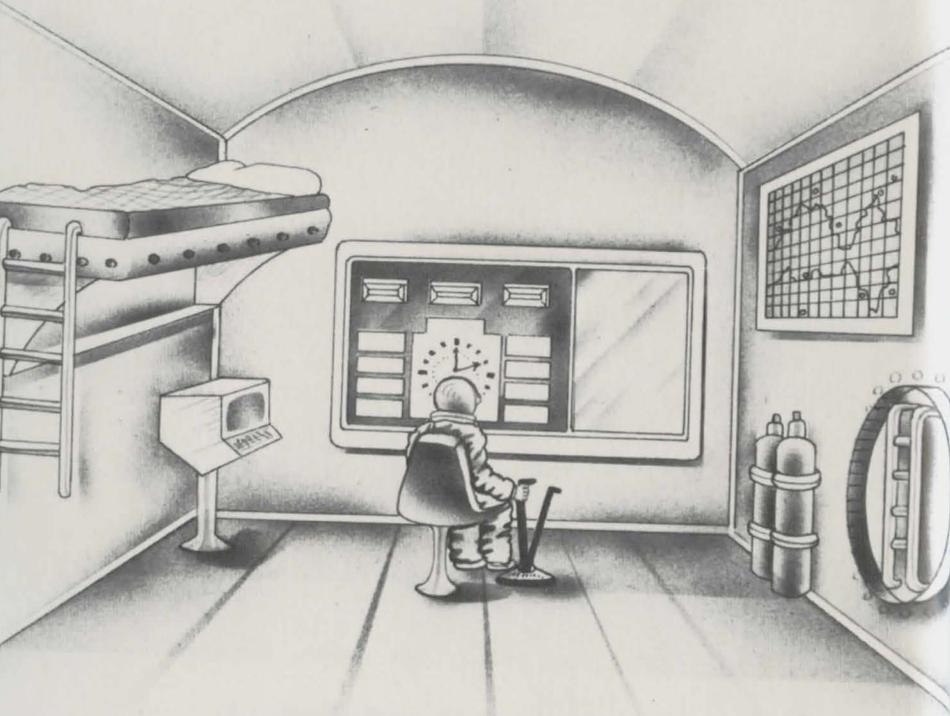
To my daughter Kathy

Copyright © 1983 by Tom Snyder Productions, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Illustrations by Anna Dividian

Chapter One Called Away



I used to think that my home planet was the duller place in the galaxy.

Now I know better. Porquatz, it turns out, is a huge planet. I mean HUGE.

Porquatz makes Planet Jupiter look like a bowling ball. It makes Earth look like a marble. So the truth is that only half of Porquatz—the half where my parents decided to live—is the duller place in the galaxy. The other half of Porquatz is pretty exciting. And frightening. And dangerous. And strange.

We lived in the country. My mother and father raised cows. The breed is called the Spotted Woggle. Spotted Woggles are quite dull, even for cows. If you've seen one Spotted Woggle, you've seen them all. The reason is that Spotted Woggles are all the same cow. They are mass produced, like automobiles and digital watches.

The Genetic Engineering people did some very clever things with the Spotted Woggle. You know the old joke about brown cows giving chocolate milk? In the winter Spotted Woggles really do give chocolate milk. In the spring they give ordinary milk. In the fall they give apple cider. In the summer they give lemonade or root beer, depending on

what you feed them.

A Spotted Woggle is about as intelligent as a barn door.

Until my adventures began, my mornings on the farm went like this.

5:30 a.m. Wake up to buzzzzzzz of the alarm clock.

5:40 a.m. Get dressed.

5:50 a.m. Feed the stupid chickens.

6:00 a.m. Slop the dumb hogs.

6:10 a.m. Water the crummy goats.

6:20 a.m. Go to the cow pasture and count the Spotted Woggles to make sure none have wandered off.

6:45 a.m. Eat breakfast.

7:00 a.m. Start running to school.

Every morning. Day in, day out. Rain or shine. Saturdays and Sundays, too, except for the school part.

By the way, I should tell you that none of the Spotted Woggles ever wandered off. Somehow they knew there was no place worth wandering off to. Maybe the Spotted Woggles were smarter than I thought.

There's something else I should say. I didn't really run to school—I walked. I'm a pretty poor runner, always tripping over my feet. Tanglefoot Terry, people call me. My dad says he's lost track of how many times I've knocked over Spotted Woggle milk pails. And, to tell you the truth, I was never very good at school things, either. I tried to do well in math and geography. I really did. But in the middle of a class my mind would wander, and I'd imagine I was an explorer or an astronaut or a lion tamer.

Maybe I just take after my strange relatives. My family tree contains some pretty odd fruit. Grandfather Wilmur, for example. He used to teach chickens to walk a tightrope. And my Aunt Maude, who lived in a house with 87 cats. But the oddest one of all was my Uncle Smoke. Weird Smoke, everybody used to call him. Nutty Smoke. Crazy Smoke Bailey.

Smoke left the farm when he was just a kid, long before I was born, but Dad never tired of telling tales about him. Like me, Smoke was not cut out for farm life. Or school life. Or any sort of life where you did the same thing every day. No one thought he would amount to much.

"I'm sick of Spotted Woggles," was young Smoke's favorite thing to say. His other favorite thing to say was, "There must be something on this boring planet besides cows."

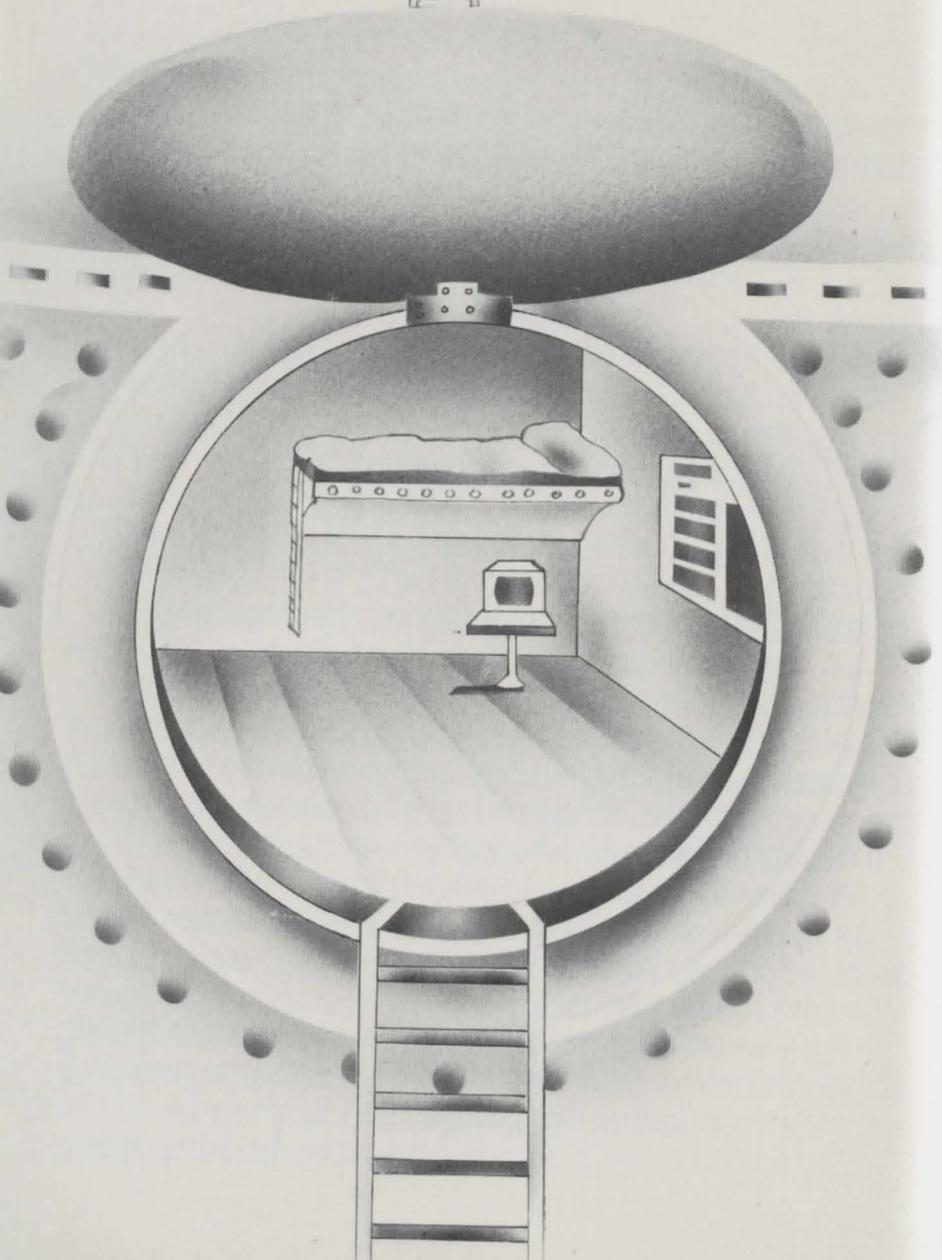
So one day he just flew away. That's right—he flew. He flew away in a hot-air balloon called the A-Liner. Smoke had borrowed the A-Liner from a carnival. Well, Dad says he borrowed it. Mom says he stole it. He was eleven years old, the same age I was on the morning my adventures began.

That morning was different for me in every way.

For one thing, I wasn't awakened by the alarm clock. I was awakened by a funny whirrrrrring. It was like the sound a Spotted Woggle's udder makes when you squeeze it after all the root beer is gone.

For another thing, I didn't go out and feed the chickens or slop the hogs. The whirrrrrring seemed to be coming from the cow pasture, so that's where I went.

For a third thing, a strange object had landed in the



pasture.

Even in the pale light of dawn, I could tell that the object was silver, shiny, and big as a hen coop. The cows were mooing at it. It had windows, but no doors. It also had wheels. Six doughnut-shaped wheels, three on each side.

The object wasn't sitting on its wheels, however. It floated about two feet off the ground, held up by a hot-air balloon. The balloon was orange on top with red and blue stripes on the bottom. There was a name painted on it in silver letters.

The B-Liner.

I thought, Uncle Smoke is back! He's traded his silly carnival balloon for a wondrous airship! After all these years, he's come to tell us tales of unknown lands.

A ladder was bolted to the side of the B-Liner. Taking the rungs two at a time, I reached the roof and discovered a hatch. It looked like the door to a bank vault. I pulled open the hatch and climbed down.

Uncle Smoke had certainly made a wise move in getting rid of his original balloon. As a matter of fact, the B-Liner was more like a spaceship than like a hot-air balloon.

First I noticed the control panel, a glittering array of switches and meters. Then I noticed a computer keyboard with a display screen above it. Then I noticed a bunk bed.

What I didn't notice was Uncle Smoke. Where was he?

I scrambled up to the bunk bed. Two envelopes lay on the blanket. One envelope was addressed to "Mark and Jenny Bailey." That's my mother and father. The other was addressed to me.

I opened the Terry Bailey envelope with one swift stroke of my thumbnail. A letter tumbled out.

Dear Terry:

This is the most important letter you will ever read in your life.

Now that you are no longer a child, I feel you are worthy of the challenge I am about to present.

Believe it or not, there is much more to our planet than farms. As a matter of fact, a great city lies on the far side of Porquatz. I am living there. The city was built in a swamp called Darksome Mire. Lying under a blanket of Nearmist, Darksome Mire is larger than any swamp you can imagine. Darksome Mire is a continent. It is a world. And somewhere in its sticky reaches lies The Most Amazing Thing in the Whole Wide Galaxy.

I want you to find this Most Amazing Thing. I think you can do it. I would look for myself, but my age has caught up with me.

So you have a choice. You can spend the rest of your life counting Spotted Woggles. Or you can come to my city and let me prepare you for your destiny.

If you choose to stay behind, then I say—good luck, my friend. Kiss a cow for me.

If you choose to come, then you must give your parents the second letter. It tells why I have summoned you, and why they must not try to follow, and why you will learn even more from me during the next several months than you would have learned in school. After you deliver the letter,

return to the B-Liner, push the autopilot switch, and wait.

Love,

Uncle Smoke

When my father snores, he makes a sound like a pencil sharpener. When my mother snores, she makes a sound like a dog having a nightmare.

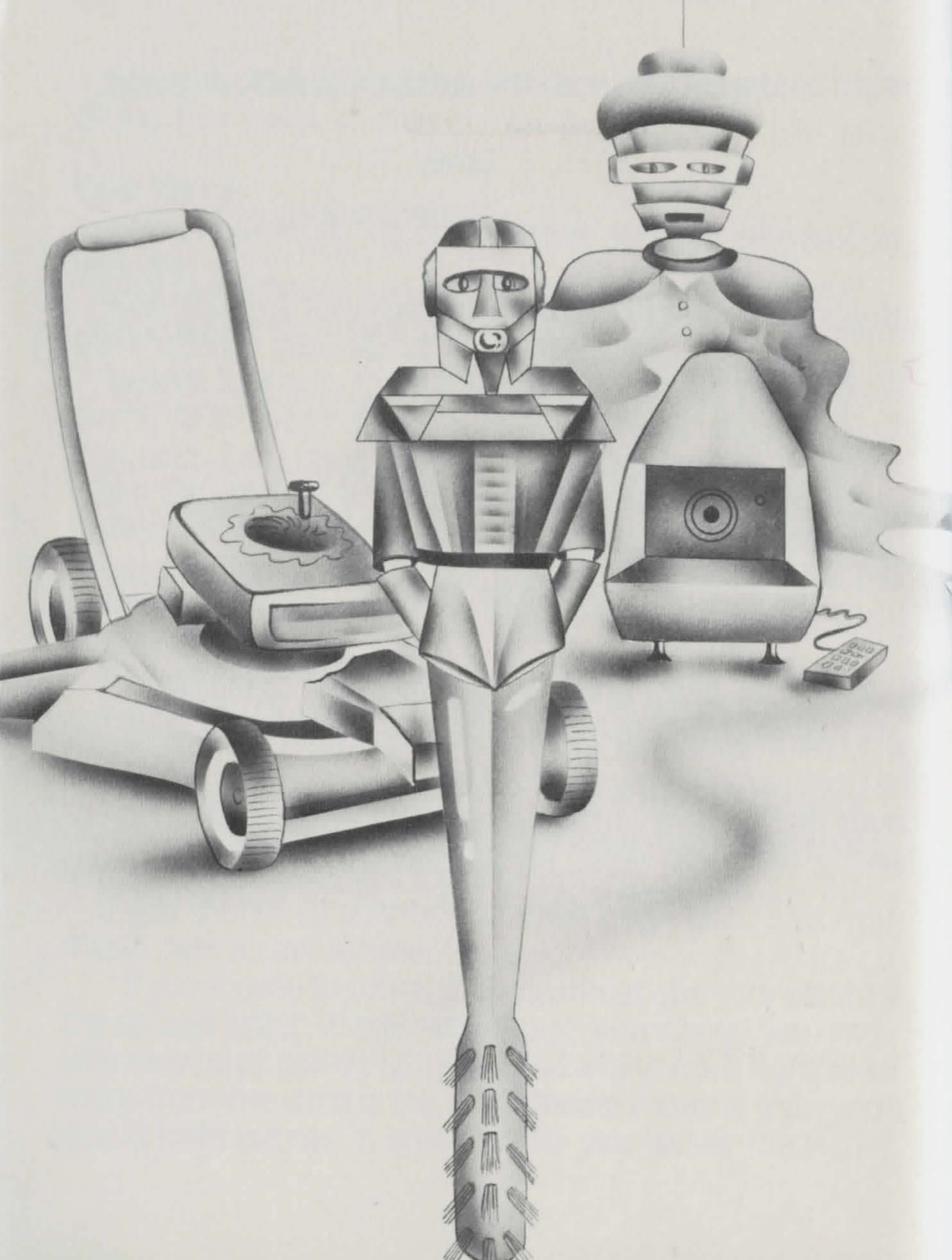
Grrunnggrruunngg went my father as I tiptoed into the bedroom.

Grrrowwwggrrrowwwgg went my mother as I put the letter on the nightstand. Untipping my toes, I kissed my sleeping parents good-bye.

I dashed back to the pasture. The cows were still mooing at the B-Liner. Sunlight glinted off its golden hull. Entering the wondrous airship, I turned on the autopilot, just as Uncle Smoke had told me to, and suddenly felt the sensation you get inside a rapidly rising elevator. The display screen showed the pasture rushing away. The Woggles looked up. I began to count them. There were nineteen. There should have been twenty, but there were only nineteen.

For the first time in years, a Woggle had wandered off.

Chapter Two A Tour of Metallica



The B-Liner sailed over farmlands. On the display screen, windmills, cornfields, and Spotted Woggles flashed by.

I sailed over a forest whose trees were cloaked in purple leaves.

I sailed over a lake. A fish popped out, grew two wings, caught a dragonfly in its mouth, and returned to the waters.

I sailed over a desert. Snakes zigzagged across hot sands.

I sailed and sailed. Day after day, week after week. I was never hungry. Uncle Smoke had stocked the pantry with some stuff that tasted like chicken, some object that smelled like bread, some things that looked like cookies, and some junk that sounded like Crickle-Crackle Breakfast Cereal.

At last the B-Liner began to go down. The screen showed nothing but fog. The fog was white, thick, and impossible to see through. It hung in the air like a great wad of wet cotton. I realized that this was the Nearmist my uncle had described in his letter.

When the B-Liner finally dropped below the Nearmist, I got my first view of the landscape.

Imagine a desert. Flat. Smooth. Shining. An endless

sandy plain rolling to a dim horizon. Now imagine that all the sand has been turned into black sticky tar. That's Dark-some Mire.

But why was the B-Liner going down? If the ship got stuck in the mire, I would probably need a hot-air balloon the size of Porquatz itself to break free. Was the autopilot on the blink? Was something wrong with the balloon? And where was the "great city" Smoke had mentioned in his letter? Had my crazy uncle gone crazy?

Clunk, wump, bump. I had landed. But on what? Darksome Mire didn't look like the sort of place that gave off clunks, wumps, and bumps when you hit it. It should have given off slooshes and burrruppps.

Climbing down the outside of the B-Liner, I found myself on a small concrete island. There was room on the island for myself, the B-Liner, and a rusty hatchway—nothing more. The air was filled with a thick, swampy smell. Meanwhile, fifteen feet above my head, the Nearmist stretched like a rubber ceiling, so that I had the odd feeling of being indoors even though I knew I was out.

The hatchway opened. Out popped Uncle Smoke.

He was an old man now. His skin was crumpled. A great white beard gushed from his jaw like a frozen waterfall.

"Terry?" he asked in a creaky voice.

"Uncle?" I asked back.

"Welcome to the city of Metallica, kiddo," he said, throwing his bony arms around me.

"I don't see any city," I said. "All I see is tar. And where did you get this great balloon? And what happened to the

A-Liner? And how do I find The Most Amazing Thing in the Galaxy? And why are you living out here? And who—?"

"Hold on," Smoke broke in with a smile. "One thing at a time." He stomped his boot against the rusty hatchway. "Metallica is below our feet—an underground city! If you're not too tired, I'll give you the grand tour right now."

Pulsing with excitement, I ran to the hatchway. A ladder of solid stone led into the ground. As we went down, a strange glowing insect buzzed over and began lighting our way. It looked like a giant firefly. Then I realized that it wasn't a real insect, but a thing of metal and wires and glass.

"A robot?" I asked.

"Yes," Smoke replied. "A robot. Everybody who lives in Metallica is a robot. Except me, of course. And my cat."

The ladder took us to a small chamber consisting of three marble walls and a fourth wall made of gold. As we came near the gold wall, it slid upward, glittering in the light from the robot firefly. Beyond, an elevator waited.

We entered, and my uncle said good-bye to the firefly. The bug answered with three bright blinks.

Five buttons decorated the elevator control panel.

"First we should visit the Great Metallica Auction," said Smoke. "That's on Level Three."

"The Great Metallica Auction?"

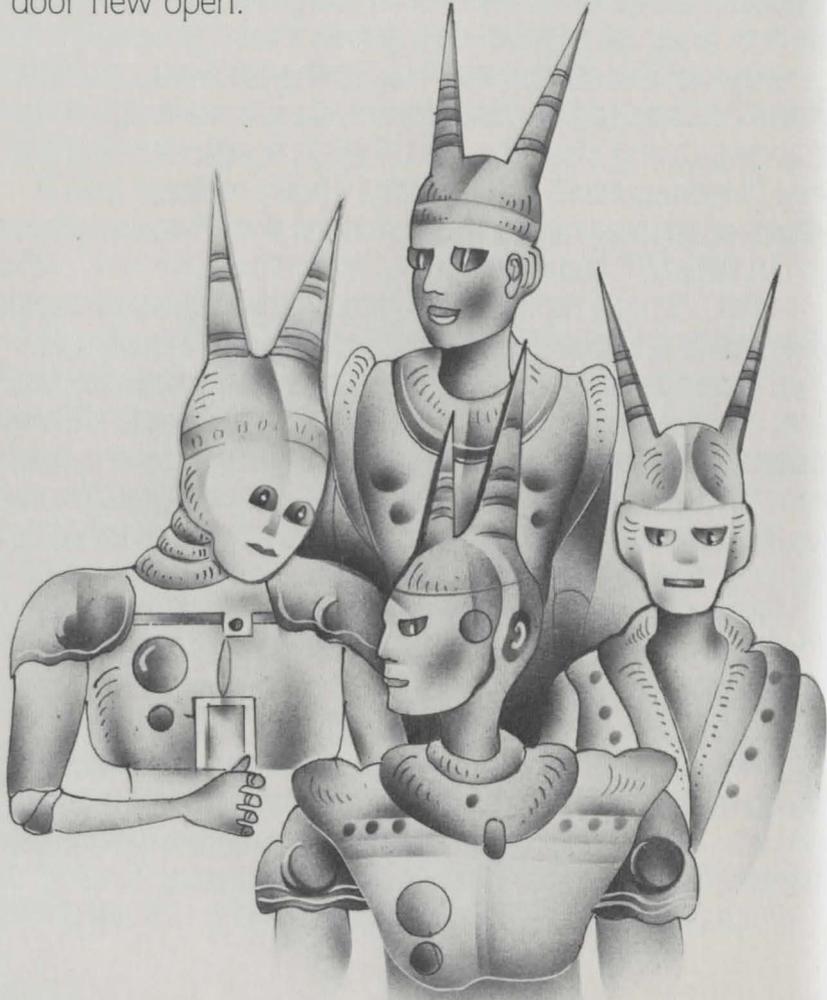
"Yes. Quite different from most auctions. Back home you go in with money and walk out with antiques, gadgets, and junk. But here at the Great Metallica Auction, you come in with those things and walk out with money."

"What do Metallicans use for money?"

"You'll see," said Smoke.

I pushed the Level Three button.

Smoke and I went down. My stomach stayed on Level Five. We stopped. My stomach returned to me. The gold door flew open.



Stepping from the elevator, we found ourselves in a sports arena so huge it could have hosted a football game, a horse race, a circus, and a Bailey family reunion all at the same time. Six Metallican Elders were sitting in the best seats. The place was lit by a swarm of robot fireflies.

I shall never forget my first view of the Metallicans. They looked like what might have happened if you put a tribe of elves and a bunch of washing machines in a matter transmitter and then scrambled their molecules. The Metallicans had pointy metal heads, shiny metal stomachs, and two pairs of thin metal arms. I found myself liking them in spite of their rather grouchy-looking metal faces.

A seventh robot stood in the middle of the arena, holding up a gadget that I took to be a kind of radio receiver. "Will you give me thirty green chips for my latest invention?" the robot asked.

"You're living in a dream world, tin head," an Elder shouted from the grandstand. "Try asking us for twenty."

"Pay close attention to what happens here, kiddo," Uncle Smoke whispered to me. "When you begin your journey, you'll need as many green chips as you can get."

The Inventor Robot and the Elders spent nearly an hour arguing over the worth of the radio. At last the price was set, and the satisfied Metallican walked off with sixteen green chips in his pocket and a big smile on his face.

After we returned to the elevator, Uncle Smoke said that our next stop would be Level Two. The Galactic Store. "It's the place where you'll spend your green chips," Smoke explained.

If I ever end up raising dinosaurs for a living, and need some place to put them when company comes over, right away I'll think of the Galactic Store. The walls were at least a hundred feet tall, and the main aisle was the width of a six-lane highway. Instead of running from one end of the store to the other, however, the aisle went from floor to ceiling, twisting around itself like a spiral staircase. Metallicans were everywhere, busy as ants on a candy cane, pushing their shopping carts in front of them as they looked over the towering racks of goods.

And what goods! Never had I seen such a huge variety of gizmos, gadgets, doohickies, thingamabobs, and whozie-whats for sale. Even the household items were mechanical: electronic toothbrushes, infra-red window washers, laser mousetraps, microwave garbage disposals, macrowave burglar alarms, nuclear barbeque grills, and digital lawnmowers. Glowing spheres the size of Spotted Woggles floated among the racks, bathing the goods in a brilliant light.

"The B-Liner is not yet ready for the kind of trip you'll be taking," said my uncle as we started down the curved aisle. "You'll have to outfit it with gizmos purchased at the Galactic Store."

Leading me back to the elevator, Smoke promised that our next stop would be "the city itself." He pushed the Level One button.

Getting off, we started across a catwalk. Above our heads: a dark, starless ceiling. Below: the night-covered City of Metallica. The windows of its many houses and public buildings were a million chips of light. From the

catwalk, Metallica looked like a great cluster of stars. "Amazing," I said.

"Amazing," Smoke Bailey agreed. "But not as amazing as the Amazing Thing you're going to find!"

This time the elevator took us up. Past the Galactic Store. Past the Great Auction. We got out on Level Four. A narrow hall paved with steel bolts led to Smoke's apartment.

The living room was as simple and snug as the inside of the B-Liner. My uncle was a man of few needs. A fire crackled merrily in a stone hearth, and, as if that weren't cozy enough, Smoke's fluffy gray cat rubbed up against my legs. Before long I noticed an old wooden trunk of the type that Earth pirates would fill with treasure and then bury. The rug we sat on was just as old—it looked like the flying carpets of the Arabian Nights stories, the kind that carried genies and princesses in the days before jet packs.

Smoke gave me a hot mug of root beer, a "local blend" as he put it. I have never tasted anything so sweetly delicious. There's a fortune waiting for the farmer whose Spotted Woggles start producing Metallican root beer.

"Well, kiddo, are you ready to learn about the search that lies ahead of you?" Smoke asked, tugging at his beard.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I replied.

"Then sip your root beer, pat the cat, and listen to my story."



Chapter Three

Night Rocks, Popberries, and Mire Crabs

"I was about your age when I ran away from the farm," my uncle said to me. "Come to think of it, I looked a bit like you, too. A little fatter, maybe. A little shorter. Anyway, the first thing I should tell you is why I left."

So he did.

Smoke's plan had been to join up with a traveling circus called Wintergreen's Floating Carnival. Every spring, as soon as the first patches of grass popped through the snow and the first robins were jumping around, the carnival would appear out of nowhere and set up outside the Village of Freehaven. The boy knew he was too clumsy to work in the clown act, and he was too afraid of wild animals to clean out the gorilla's cage. He wanted something simple—say, polishing the sword swallower's swords or repairing the fat lady's chair.

Arriving at the carnival, Smoke decided to have some fun before starting on his job hunt. First he tried knocking over a pyramid of milk bottles with a baseball—the prize was a stuffed Woggle. But on his first throw he accidentally hit the woman who ran the game. The woman yelled and shook her fist at him as a bright red lump grew on her forehead.

Next Smoke took a ride on the ferris wheel. He came away feeling as if he had four stomachs, all of them upset. Maybe I'll do better at finding a job, Smoke thought to himself.

Wintergreen's Floating Carnival was run by Horace Wintergreen, who had set up his office in a torn and tattered tent on the far edge of the carnival grounds. Mr. Wintergreen had angry eyes, snarling lips, and two warts on his nose. As soon as he heard Smoke's request for a carnival job—some sort of a job, any sort of a job—he told him to forget it. "It looks to me as if you're running away from home, son," said Mr. Wintergreen. "My advice is—go back before you get into trouble."

Tired, discouraged, and not very far from tears, Smoke left Horace Wintergreen's office and started across the carnival grounds. Something caught his eye—a bright red tent with a painting of a giant hand on the flap. A message was written on the palm of the hand. MADAME FATEFUL: FORTUNES TOLD, FUTURES PREDICTED, DESTINIES DIVULGED.

Smoke pushed back the flap, and entered timidly. A lone candle burned amid the gloom. Madame Fateful sat hunched over a crystal ball. She was tall and shriveled. She looked like a long prune.

"The ball . . . shows all," said the fortune teller.

"Wow!" exclaimed Smoke. "Does it show me?"

Madame Fateful held up her palm as if to say, be quiet, kiddo. She fixed her gaze on the bright milky sphere. She spoke.

"I see you on a high, high perch . . ."

"I see you on a long, long search . . ."

"I see you take a gas-bag wing . . ."

"To find the Most Amazing Thing . . ."

Of course Smoke wondered what this Most Amazing Thing could be. When he asked the fortune teller, all she said was, "It's no ordinary Most Amazing Thing, I can tell you that. It's The Most Amazing Thing in the Whole Wide Galaxy."

Leaving Madame Fateful's tent, Smoke came across one of the less popular attractions at Wintergreen's Floating Carnival. This attraction was a hot-air balloon. White painted stars shone on a blue gas-bag. A nearby sign said, "Take the A-Liner into the Stratosphere—One Dollar Per Ride."

A gas-bag! Just as Madame Fateful had predicted! Already his fortune was starting to come true!

Smoke gave a dollar to the roly-poly man who ran the A-Liner ride. The man had a tin whistle slung around his neck on a piece of twine.

"Just climb into the wicker basket and throw one of the sand bags over the side," said the man. "You'll go right up. Maybe not as high as the stratosphere, but pretty high. Five minutes later I'll blow my whistle, and then you should open the valve. Some hot air will escape, and you'll come down."

Climbing into the wicker basket, Smoke noticed that it contained five sand bags. Instead of tossing just one over the side, however, he got rid of them all. One...two...three...four...The fifth one almost hit the roly-poly man. Immediately the balloon zipped into the sky. When he looked down, Smoke saw that the roly-poly man was hopping mad. First he hopped on his left foot, then he hopped on his right foot.

Smoke felt a little guilty about borrowing the balloon. But a destiny is a destiny, he said to himself, and my destiny is to find The Most Amazing Thing . . . or at least to have an exciting time.

The A-Liner kept rising. The winds carried Smoke far past the carnival grounds, far past the Village of Freehaven. He was heading for the unknown side of planet Porquatz!

Whenever Smoke got hungry, he would let some hot air out of the A-Liner and go down to the nearest farm. The farmers he visited were amazed by my uncle's courage, his energy, and his spirit of adventure in going on such a trip. They also thought it was a stupid idea.

"As I heard tell," each farmer would say in one way or another, "there are rivers of acid on the far side of this planet. And hurricanes a thousand miles wide. But the worst of it is the human-eating giraffes."

The farmers gave the boy whatever he asked for—food to eat, clothes to wear, firewood to burn under his hot-air balloon. And so it was that Smoke happened upon the fabulous land called Darksome Mire.

Then the Nearmist came.

His troubles had begun.

It was like being buried alive in marshmallows. No sounds could be heard through the mist. No sights could be seen through its whirly white gobs.

Of course, for a change of scene Smoke could always go below the Nearmist and look at the landscape. But that didn't help much. Darksome Mire—that goopy plain, that gloppy field, that gucky swamp—was every bit as boring

as the mist.

Once in a while, Smoke saw a rock.

Black as moonless nights, big and fat as armadillos, the rocks of Darksome Mire were scattered about the swamp like bread loaves left for a giant pigeon. A strange dark ooze bubbled up around them. Night Rocks, Smoke decided to call them.

As his food and his fuel supplies got lower and lower, Smoke had no choice but to visit the mire several times a day. He would drop to ground level, look for supplies, rise into the mist, sail for a mile, drop to ground level, look for supplies, rise into the mist, sail for a mile, drop to ground level, look for supplies, rise...

And so on.

Smoke got hungrier and hungrier.

The firewood pile got smaller and smaller.

One gloomy afternoon, as the A-Liner hovered a few inches above the ground, the boy set fire to his last piece of wood. He blew the match out and tossed it overboard. The burning log filled the balloon with hot air. The A-Liner began to rise.

Before the winds took Smoke aloft, he happened to look down. And a lucky thing he did.

There was a fire on the mire. Green flames shot from the ooze around a Night Rock. Smoke realized that, when he threw away the hot match, it had hit the ooze and started it burning. The ooze burned just like oil. Or coal. Or wood. Or any other fuel.

So the fuel problem was solved. That left the food problem.

Another day passed. And another.

The hunger in Smoke's stomach felt like an angry woodpecker trying to get out. He was becoming weak. He thought he was going to die.

Then one morning he saw it.

A tree.

A strange tree with long, spiky leaves that looked like porcupine quills.

A fruit tree. At least, Smoke hoped that the bumpy yellow balls hanging among the quill-leaves were fruit.

Smoke steered the A-Liner to within a few inches of the lowest branch. He dropped anchor. The great iron hook sank into the mire. Leaning out of the basket, he touched a quill with his index finger. The quill was so sharp that it almost broke his skin.

Smoke decided not to mess with the quills.

But how to knock the fruit down? Smoke knew he couldn't get his ship near enough to start shaking the branches—not without driving a quill through his balloon and ending the whole adventure right then and there. And, of course, walking over to the tree on foot was out of the question. It is easier to build a skyscraper on quicksand than to walk on Darksome Mire.

Smoke balanced himself on the edge of the basket. He jumped. He landed in the crook of the tree—where the trunk split into two thick branches.

Crawling upward, Smoke stopped in front of a bunch of quills. The nearest quill nicked his nose. He began rocking back and forth. The branch bobbed up and down.

Pop! A big yellow berry shot out of the tree. Splat! It landed a few inches from the balloon basket. The berry lay in the tar like a gumdrop on chocolate icing.



Weak and tired, Smoke waited in the tree for several minutes, gathering together what remained of his strength. And then suddenly—sploosh—the berry sank into the tar.

Smoke's breakfast was gone.

His stomach growling, the boy shook another berry down. This time he didn't stop to rest. Before you could say Spotted Woggle, he jumped back into the basket, reached toward the tar, grabbed the berry, and wolfed it down.

Food at last! The Popberry tasted like an olive stuffed with sardines, but Smoke didn't mind. The fruit was saving his life.

The boy sailed on. He would drop below the mist only to collect Popberries and Night Rock ooze. It was on his sixth fueling stop that he learned something new about Night Rocks.

As usual, Smoke steered the A-Liner until the basket was beside a rock. As usual, Smoke leaned over to scoop up the jelly-like fuel. As usual, Smoke gave no thought to the rock itself.

Then the not-as-usual things happened.

Not-as-usual, the rock started moving. It scuttled like a crab.

Not-as-usual, the rock popped into the air and began zooming in wide circles around the A-Liner. It no longer looked like a scuttling crab. Now it looked like a flying crab.

Not-as-usual, a ray of blue light shot from the flying crab and hit Smoke in the forehead.

Seconds later, Smoke found that he could not move. Or talk. Or think very clearly. Fear shot through him. He was so

scared he expected to start sweating, but then he realized that he couldn't even do that.

Satisfied that Smoke could no longer pester him, the Mire Crab returned to the tar and went back to sleep.

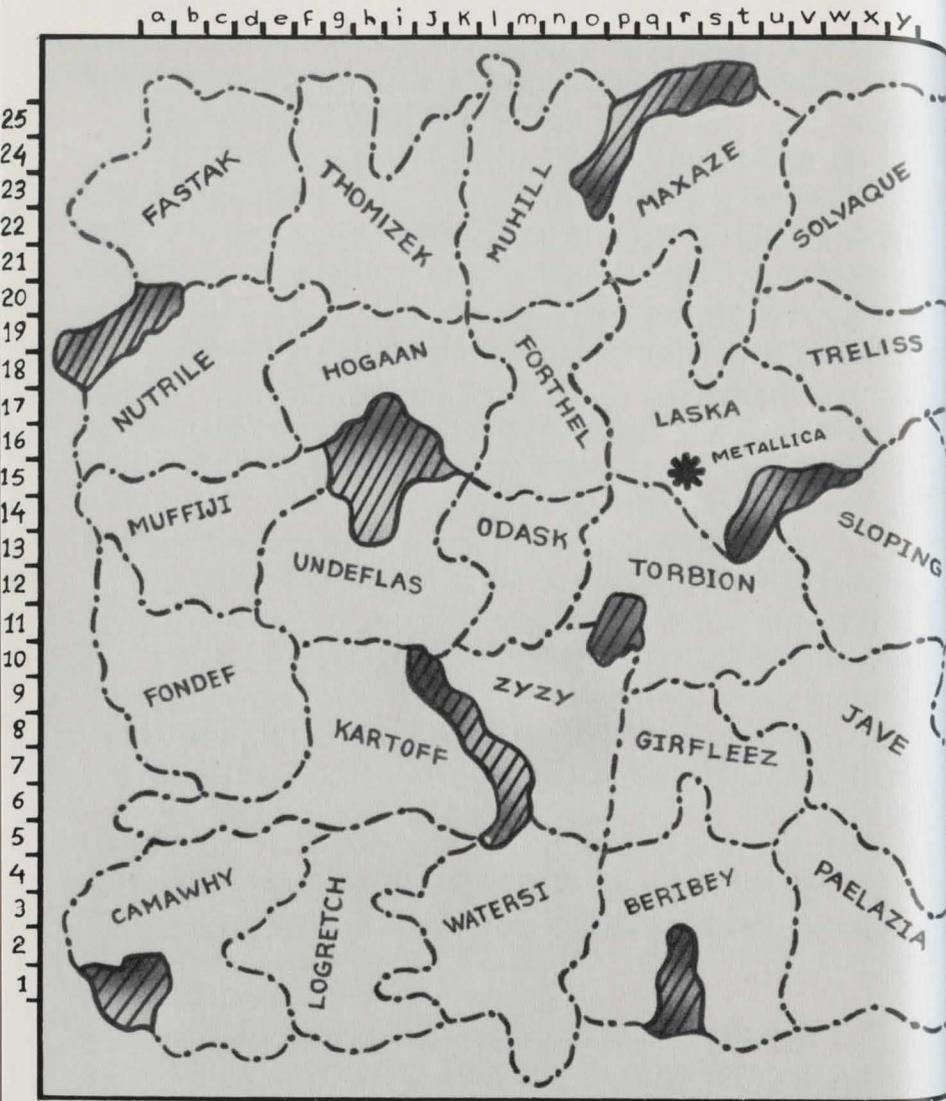
It took hours for the stiffness to wear off.

Ever since that frightening day, Smoke was very careful when gathering fuel. While approaching a Night Rock, he would always keep a hand on the burner controls. The instant that the rock showed any sign that it was not a Night Rock—that it was really a Mire Crab—Smoke would turn the heat up and shoot into the Nearmist. The plan worked well. During the next two months, Smoke met five different Mire Crabs—each one grumpier than the last—and he always zoomed away in time.

A year after entering the Nearmist, the boy realized that he was not having any fun. He realized that he was, in fact, unhappy. He had left the farm hoping to find lost tribes, forgotten cities, secret mountains, marvelous beasts, magical rivers. And ever since his meeting with Madame Fateful, he had been hoping to stumble across The Most Amazing Thing in the Galaxy. Instead he had found an ornery kind of crab, an odd variety of fruit, and a lot of tar.

Period.

It was at this low point in his adventures that Smoke noticed a strange-looking man running across the mire.



Chapter Four
Travels with Merton

Before telling me about the man on the mire, my uncle rose from the oriental rug, went over to the hearth, and chucked in a log. Flames curled around it. The soothing hiss of burning wood filled the room.

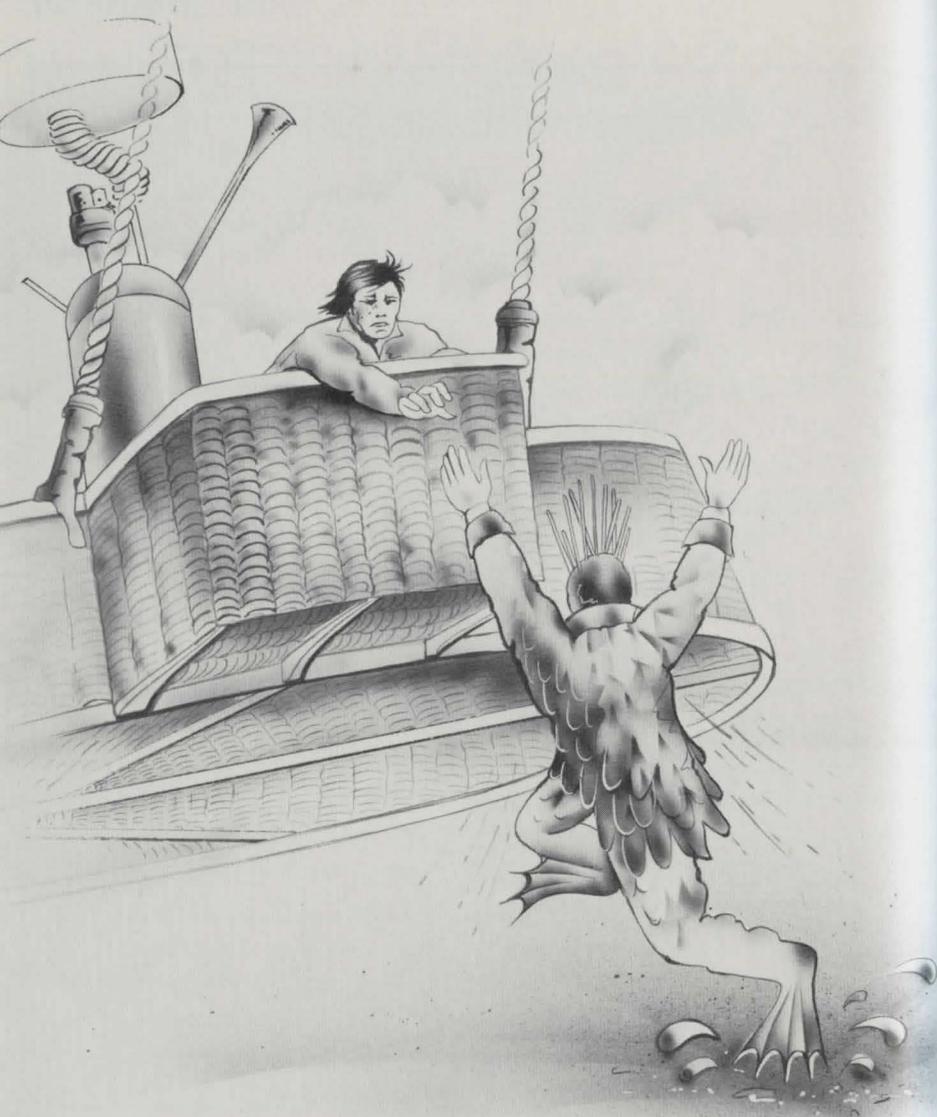
"Gosh!" I said. "I didn't know anybody lived on Darksome Mire. Who was he? What was he doing there? Where was he going? Why didn't he sink into the tar?"

Smoke sat down, stroked his beard, and told me the next part of the story.

It went like this.

The man on the mire was not running for the fun of it. He was not running for his health. He was running because a whole army of Mire Crabs—over twenty of the beastly things—were chasing him. Blue stun-rays filled the air.

The Mire Person was strange. He had antennae growing out of the top of his head, long thin rods that looked like stalks of asparagus. He was very tall. But the strangest feature was the Mire Person's feet. They were as large as a kangaroo's. And they were webbed, like a skin diver's flippers. With those big webbed feet, the Mire Person was able to move across the tar at a pretty fast clip.



“Over here!” called my uncle as he let out some hot air, bringing the A-Liner to within a foot of the tar. But then Smoke realized that the Mire Person and he might not speak the same language. Smoke began waving his hands. “Get in the basket!” Smoke’s hand signs said.

Clearly the Mire Person thought this was a really fine idea. Springing off his great webbed feet, he landed in the basket. Smoke turned the burner up high. The A-Liner zoomed away, leaving the startled crabs far behind.

Smoke looked at his new passenger. The poor fellow was painfully shy. He hunched in one corner of the basket and whimpered like the puppy Smoke had received for his ninth birthday. Smoke had decided to call his puppy Merton, and now he decided to call the Mire Person Merton.

As the A-Liner plowed through the Nearmist, Merton remained shy, but he also began to look happy. He picked out a cozy looking corner and settled down in a permanent sort of way.

Smoke was right about one thing. Merton did not use words. Merton spoke by bending, twisting, curling, and shaking the long rods on his head. As the days dragged by, Smoke learned Merton’s language. He talked to Merton by moving his hands the way Merton moved his antennae.

Smoke learned that Merton, too, was only eleven years old. Merton was running away because Merton’s parents treated Merton’s older brother like a prince while they treated Merton like a broken rocking chair.

Merton was also out to have himself an adventure. “Imagine that,” signed Smoke with his hands. “So am I!”

Merton explained that he belonged to a culture called the Girfleezes.

"The rest of the cultures around here have some pretty odd names," he said. "The Thomizeks, for example. And the Zyzys. And the Laskas. If the winds don't change, we'll soon be entering Laska territory."

By the way, seeing Merton say the word Thomizek using his antennae was an amazing experience in itself.

Flying one thousand feet above a swamp in a wicker basket provides a great chance for talking. These two lost souls soon discovered that they enjoyed each other's company. They talked about Merton's fear that his family would miss him, or, worse, that they would not miss him. They talked about Smoke's fear that he would always feel like something the cat had not bothered to drag in. They talked about Merton's favorite hobby, which was weaving baskets from strips of Popberry bark. They talked about Smoke's favorite hobby, which was collecting anything worth collecting and even some things that were not worth collecting. Back on the farm, Smoke had a shoebox filled with broken rubber bands.

"You've never told me where you were headed when I plucked you from the clutches of those Mire Crabs," signed Smoke one day.

"I was sort of half pretending to be on a search," said Merton with his antennae. "In my culture, a boy or a girl grows up hearing about a hidden object with extraordinary powers. Some people call this object The Most Amazing Thing in the Galaxy. I'm not sure I believe the legend, but I had

to have something to do during my Big Running-Away-From-Home Act."

Smoke's heart began to thump. Hands flashing like batons, he told Merton of Madame Fateful's prediction that he would find The Most Amazing Thing.

"What is The Most Amazing Thing supposed to be?" asked Smoke.

"I don't know," answered Merton. "I'll tell you what I've heard. It becomes different objects at different times. But no matter what form it's in, The Most Amazing Thing holds secrets more astounding than anyone can imagine. It will reveal the meaning of life."

So Smoke and Merton agreed that they would work together to find The Most Amazing Thing.

At dawn the next day, a golden dome appeared on the horizon. As the sun rose, the dome's polished clay surface began to glow. It was as if some wonderful little moon had fallen out of the sky and lodged in the mire.

"This hut belongs to a Laskan family," said Merton. "Laskans aren't as civilized as Girfleezes, but they might be able to tell us about The Most Amazing Thing."

As the A-Liner glided toward the golden hut, Smoke saw a large hole at the top. The hut looked like a cookie jar without its lid. Smoke and Merton dropped anchor and jumped onto the hut. A ladder led into the hole. The two friends went down.

There were round metal chips all over the place. Red chips, yellow chips, green chips. The Laskan children played tiddlywinks with them. The Laskan grownups wore them as

necklaces, bracelets, headbands, belts, and earrings.

Seeing their visitors, all the Laskans ran and hid under the tables and behind the chairs. They were every bit as shy as Merton.

At last a Laskan stuck her antennae out from behind a bureau and signed, "Hello."

"Hello," Smoke signed back.

"What brings you to Laska?"

"We're trying to find The Most Amazing Thing,"

Merton replied.

"We shall tell you all we know," signed a Laskan whose long gray beard ran all the way to his toes, "but we'd like something in return. Do you have any chips?"

"No," said Smoke.

"How about a song, then?"

"A what?" signed Smoke.

"A song. We trade in songs as well as in chips. Give us a song, and we'll give you a clue that may help you find The Most Amazing Thing."

"A song, eh?" The boy was not what you would call musical. The first song he thought of was "Happy Birthday to You." He doubted that the Mire People would like it. Next he thought of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." No, that wouldn't do it either. "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow?" Never! Finally Smoke remembered a song that he and his brother used to sing down on the farm. He stood back, took a deep breath, and belted it out.

Old MacDonald had a farm
That made the people laugh,
He crossed a horse with a maple tree
And got a green giraffe.

Old MacDonald had a farm
That made his friends say wow,
He crossed a calf with an old screen door
And got a holey cow.

Old MacDonald had a farm
That caused the mind to boggle,
He crossed a mule with a lump of coal
And got a Spotted Woggle.

The Laskans loved Smoke's song. They had him sing it five times, after which they gave him a clue plus two red chips.

THE MOST AMAZING THING IS NOT IN DARKSOME MIRE. That was the clue the Laskans gave the boy. Thanks a lot!

Smoke and Merton left the hut, boarded the A-Liner, and floated off. The next three huts they happened across also belonged to Laskan families. All the families adored Smoke's song—they made him sing it again and again. Most of the time he got chips for his song, but he also got another clue about The Most Amazing Thing.

TO FIND THE MOST AMAZING THING, YOU MUST FIND THE MOST AMAZING BEING. That was the new clue. Big deal!

"Perhaps the Muffijis or the Camawhys can help you."

the Laskans would suggest to Smoke and Merton. "They're not very bright, you know. Still, they can probably tell you a thing or two."

By the time Smoke and Merton left the Laskans, their cargo included five red chips, ten green chips, and twenty-five yellow chips.

At last another hut appeared. Smoke and Merton were now in the Muffiji culture.

The Muffiji family took them in, gave them tea, heard the song, and looked at their chips.

A bargain was struck. All five red chips for ten green chips and one clue. This gave Smoke and Merton a total of twenty greens. "And now for your clue," signed the leader of the Muffijis."

The clue was: THE MOST AMAZING BEING LIVES AMONG MOUNTAINS MADE OF GLASS.

"I've heard of those Glass Mountains," signed Merton fearfully. "It's a dangerous place, full of strange creatures and terrible weather. To tell you the truth, I'm not looking forward to that part of our trip."

"If the Most Amazing Thing is in the Glass Mountains," Smoke replied, "Then that's where we've got to go."

The following month found the travelers staying with a Camawhy family. They took twenty green chips in exchange for a hundred yellows and one clue.

THE SMOKE FROM THE MOST AMAZING BEING'S FIRE IS ALWAYS RED.

After leaving their Camawhy friends, Smoke and Merton hoped that the winds would next take the A-Liner to

another culture. They wanted to keep collecting clues and chips.

But the winds did not take the A-Liner to another culture. Instead, the winds gave them a much greater gift, carrying the balloon far beyond the Nearmist, away from the Darksome Mire, into the land called the Otbrak. The A-Liner was blown across a deep, wide sea. The sea was blue-green. It looked like molten jade.

And then they appeared.

The mountains.

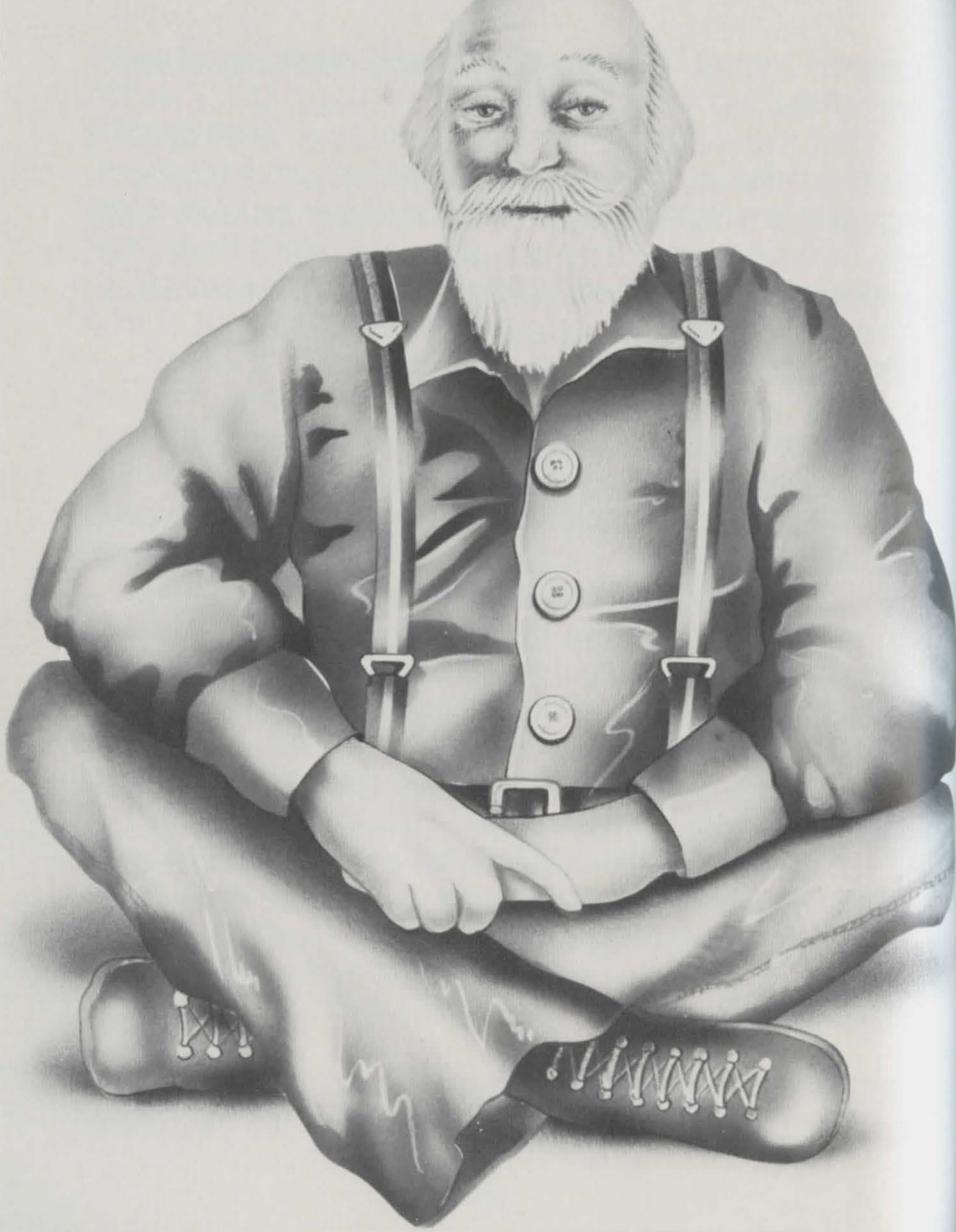
The amazing mountains described in the Muffiji clue. The fabulous realm of the Glass Mountains.

The tallest peaks were five miles high. They rose from the land like glittering knives. Their slopes were mirrors. Slick, silvery, polished mirrors that reflected whatever drifted across their faces: sun, stars, moons, clouds, and, of course, the balloon. As they got closer to the mountains, Smoke and Merton were dazzled by a dozen shining images of the A-Liner.

Suddenly a black bird-shape came sailing out of the nearest cloud.

The noise that the shape made—a loud, high skreeeee—was like a hundred fingernails scraping across a field of slate.

Two spear-like objects protruded from the shape. And, worst of all, the shape and its spears were heading right for the A-Liner.



Chapter Five

How to Talk to a Fuzzle

When my uncle started talking about the bird-shape with the two spears coming out of it, I jumped about a mile off the floor. My root beer spilled all over the rug.

“Don’t stop talking,” I said as Smoke got up to find a sponge. “What sort of a bird was it?”

“Merton called it a Gaxonfrax,” my uncle replied. “I would have called it a vulture. It had a vulture’s mean eyes and scraggly wings. But in one respect, the Gaxonfrax wasn’t at all like a vulture—or like any other bird I’d ever seen. It had two heads.”

“Two?”

“Two. And each head had a beak that looked like the claw of a ten-ton lobster.”

“Let’s get back to the story,” I said anxiously. “You and Merton are standing in the balloon basket, watching the Gaxonfrax zoom toward you. What did you do?”

“There wasn’t much we could do, was there? Except go down.”

So Smoke and Merton went down.

They let out some hot air, and the A-Liner began dropping between two Glass Mountains.

The Gaxonfrax did the same.

Smoke and Merton were about twenty feet from the ground when the Gaxonfrax closed in. With a loud skreeeeeeee, the monster drove both its beaks into the hot-air balloon.

The ship exploded. KER-POW-BAM! The next thing they knew, the basket had flipped upside down, and the two adventurers found themselves with no choice but to fall head-first toward the ground.

Lucky Smoke, lucky Merton! The ground was covered with small, white, cold, spongy balls, a kind of rubber snow. When Smoke and Merton hit the rubber snow, they bounced about two feet into the air.

The boy looked at his ruined ship. The punctured balloon was beyond repair. The basket was a heap of wicker.

The shadow of the Gaxonfrax wheeled across the white ground. Pleased that it had been able to cause so much trouble, the monster skreeeeeeeed and flew off.

Smoke and Merton set out on foot. Everywhere the two adventurers looked, two adventurers looked back at them, reflected by the Glass Mountains.

Squick, squick, squick went the rubber snow beneath the adventurers' boots. Squick, squick—a day passed. Squick, squick—another day passed. Smoke and Merton found a Popberry orchard and ate until they were stuffed.

Squick, squick—another day.

Squick, squick—a week.

Squick, squick—two weeks.

On their fifteenth day in the mountains, the adventurers suddenly found their path blocked by a most unfriendly-

looking animal. Merton explained that this animal was called a Snow Snake.

"What can you tell me about Snow Snakes?" asked Smoke.

"Nothing you want to hear," Merton signed back.

The Snow Snake was about eighty feet long. Its fangs looked like swords. Poison glands bulged from its cheeks like a bad case of the mumps. The Snow Snake was pure white—white as snow, in fact. It lay directly in their path.

At first the situation looked hopeless. The snake was bigger than Smoke and Merton. And stronger. And probably even smarter.

Then Smoke thought of a plan. He signed his plan to Merton.

"What do you think of my plan?" Smoke asked.

"It doesn't matter what I think of your plan," Merton replied, moving his antennae in a slow, whispery sort of way. "If we don't put it into action right now, we're going to be bitten."

So they put the plan into action. They turned around and started running in another direction, away from the Snow Snake. Smoke's feet had never moved quite so swiftly or gracefully. Merton followed just a few steps behind.

"What a plan!" signed Merton.

Squick, squick.

On the twenty-fifth day Smoke and Merton once again found their path blocked. This time it was blocked by a river. The surface was smooth and silver, as if the river were made of liquid mercury.

“To get across this river,” said Merton, “We will need a plan at least as good as your last one.” Merton looked around at all of his choices. Very few choices.

“Can those fantastic feet of yours walk on mercury as well as on the tar of Darksome Mire?” Smoke asked casually.

“It’s hard to say,” replied Merton. He lifted one of his flippers to give Smoke a better look.

“Those are quality flippers,” said Smoke as he hopped piggyback onto Merton. “Let’s try it.”

The two friends jogged to the middle of the silver river. So far, so good. But suddenly Smoke and Merton realized that Merton was no longer standing on the river.

“We’re on top of something!” signed Merton.

“What is it?” signed Smoke. Looking down, he saw a great mass of white fur.

“I know what it is,” signed Merton.

“Yes?” signed Smoke.

“I’d rather not tell you.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“It’s a Fuzzle—related to Mire Crabs, but covered with fur, and larger, and meaner.”

“You bet I’m a Fuzzle,” said the Fuzzle. It was moving in circles now, round and round in the middle of the river, which meant that Smoke and Merton were also moving round and round in the middle of the river. “Frank’s the name.”

“Pleased to meet you, Frank,” said Smoke.

“No, you’re not,” growled Frank. “Everybody hates a Fuzzle, and, as a result, I hate everybody. So if you think I’m going to ferry you across this river, you’d better think again.”



If you're lucky, I'll keep you on my back, taking you everywhere I go. If you're not so lucky, I'll eat you for dinner tonight."

Smoke had the creepy feeling that the Fuzzle was not kidding. To get out of this situation, Smoke knew, it would be necessary to use some imagination.

"Nobody hates Fuzzles where I come from," Smoke began. "As a matter of fact, in my home town the people all love Fuzzles. Absolutely adore them. They worship Fuzzles."

"Really?" said Frank. "What's the name of your home town?"

"The Village of Whitefuzzford, on the other side of Porquatz."

"Never heard of it."

"You should check it out. It's your kind of town. Walk into any house and you'll see a picture of a Fuzzle hanging over the fireplace, right where you'd expect to see somebody's grandfather. You'll see children playing with stuffed Fuzzles. And that's not the half of it. Every second Tuesday of the month, we all crowd into the local zoo and throw a big party for the Fuzzles. There's dancing and cake and singing and ice cream . . ."

"And fish?" asked Frank. "I like fish."

"Oh, yes. All sorts of fish. But the really big event occurs in the middle of winter. National Fuzzle Day. We build an enormous Fuzzle out of snow, and when it's finished we lay great baskets of flounder at its feet, and then we join hands and sing a little hymn called "Without Fuzzles the Universe Would Be a Mistake."

"Tell me this town's name again," said Frank.

"Whitefuzzford."

"You folks have a good attitude."

Frank decided to ferry Smoke and Merton to the other side of the river.

Squick, squick.

The thirtieth day found Smoke and Merton standing near a waterfall. It was the strangest waterfall they had ever seen. The water flowed up.

In the dim distance, smoke twisted toward the sky. Red smoke. The two adventurers remembered the clue they had gotten from the Camawhy tribe. THE SMOKE FROM THE MOST AMAZING BEING'S FIRE IS ALWAYS RED.

"We did it, Merton!" signed Smoke, hopping up and down on a mound of rubber snow. "We found The Most Amazing Being! We've practically got The Most Amazing Thing in our pockets!"

"Wait a minute," Merton replied. His face showed fear, and he was shaking all over. His antennae were droopy.

"What's the matter?" asked Smoke.

"Look, friend," replied Merton. "I didn't mind that Gaxonfrax too much. And the Snow Snake wasn't so bad. And that Fuzzle was really a pussycat. But this Most Amazing Being isn't anything to fool with. If you don't mind, I think I'll wait here by this waterfall. You'd better go on alone. Remember, for me the search for The Most Amazing Thing was just an interesting way to spend my Big Running-Away-From-Home."

"I'd rather have you with me," said Smoke.

"No. Sorry. My mind is made up," answered Merton as

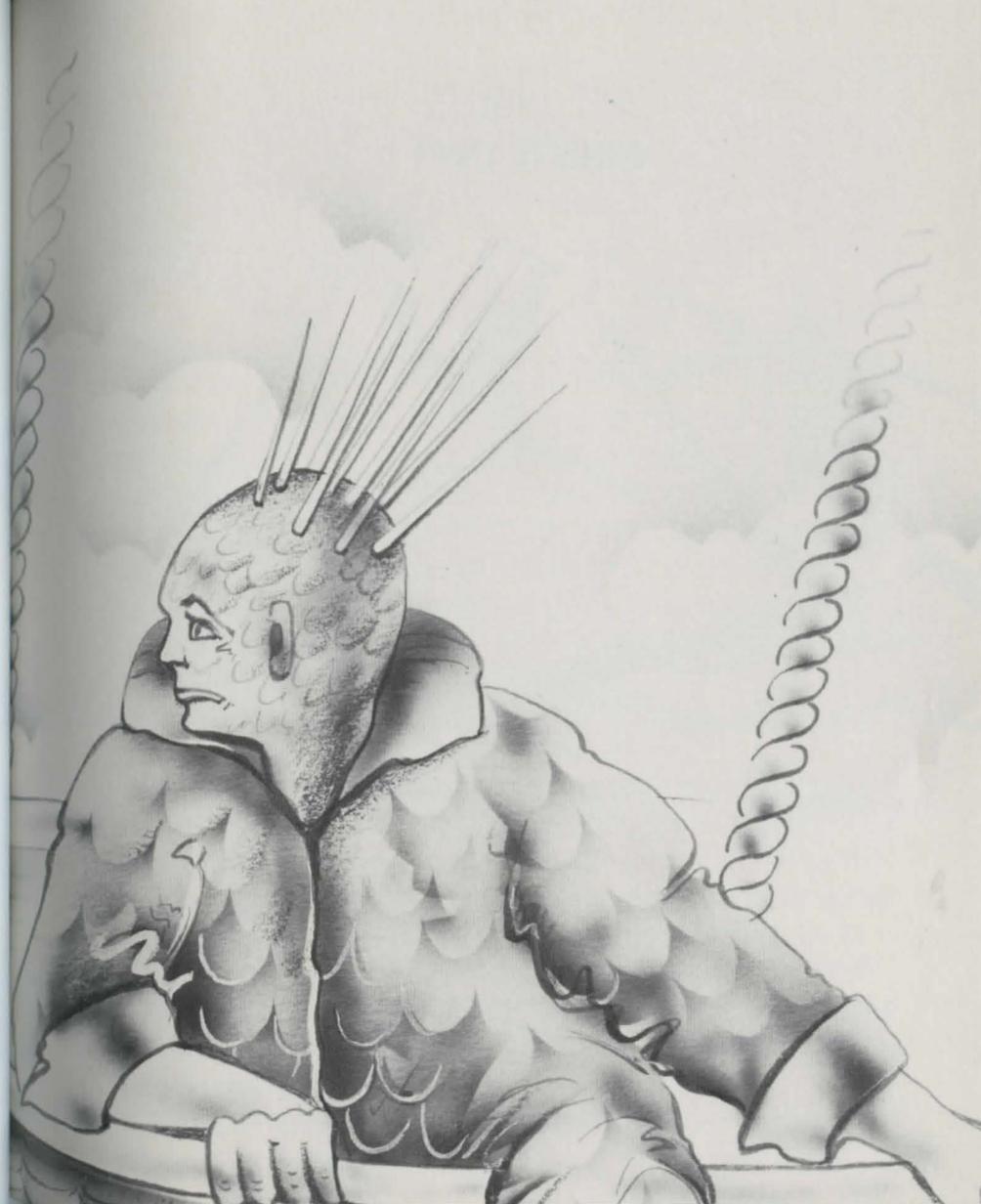
he sat on the rubbery snow.

"Very well," Smoke signed sadly. "I'll be back as soon as I've fulfilled my destiny or as soon as I've made a hopeless mess of things, whichever comes first."

When a Mire Person rubs your nose with one of its antennae, it means, "Good luck!"

Merton rubbed Smoke's nose ten times with one of his antennae.

And then the boy set off, alone, toward the red smoke.



Chapter Six

Two Wishes



At this point in his story, my uncle decided that he should fix us some supper. Anxious as I was to find out about The Most Amazing Thing, I had to admit that I was pretty hungry. Smoke disappeared into his kitchen, returning a few minutes later with two bowls of hot soup. The soup was pale yellow. There were pieces of white meat floating in it.

"Chicken?" I asked, gulping down a large spoonful.

"No," my uncle replied. "A beefy kind of termite raised by the Paelazia tribe. Tasty, eh?"

My hunger vanished. "Let's get back to your adventures," I said.

"Don't you want your termite soup?" my uncle asked.

"I want the next part of your story," I answered.

And that's just what he gave me. The story went like this.

After several hours of squicking across the rubber snow, Smoke reached the source of the red smoke. The Most Amazing Being's huge fire blazed beneath the mightiest peak in the entire mountain range. The mountain looked like an Egyptian pyramid with its top cut off. Sunlight shone on its four glass sides.

An iron cauldron swayed over the fire. The handle of the

cauldron was hooked around a spit made from Popberry branches. As Smoke came closer to the cauldron, he saw a green liquid cooking inside. Bubbles covered the surface like bumps on the back of a frog.

"Good afternoon, traveler!" The voice was like a church bell: clear, clean, metallic.

Smoke turned toward the bell-voice. For the first time, he noticed a dark doorway cut into the base of the mountain. A figure stepped out of the gloom.

"The Most Amazing Being?" asked Smoke.

"You have found me," replied the voice.

The Most Amazing Being looked neither old nor young. In fact, Smoke couldn't tell whether it was a human-like machine or a machine-like human. Its silvery hair tumbled in waves to the ground. Its skin had the smooth sheen of a robot's. But when the creature stared directly at Smoke, one part of it seemed very much alive.

The eyes.

Deep as wells.

Red as hot embers.

Filled with the wisdom of the ages.

Moving swiftly to the seething cauldron, The Most Amazing Being threw a handful of red dust into the fire. The smoke grew thicker and changed shades, red to redder, as it snaked toward the sky.

"You seek The Most Amazing Thing," said the creature. It was not a question, but a statement of fact. There were probably no facts in the universe that The Most Amazing Being did not know. "I've been expecting you."



"Will it be hard to find?" Smoke asked. He had the strange feeling that he had met this creature before. And suddenly he knew. Something in its voice and manner reminded him of the fortune teller at Wintergreen's Floating Carnival.

"Finding The Most Amazing Thing is never easy, traveler. But a smart, strong, brave person has a good chance of succeeding in the end."

"But I'm none of those things, Amazing Being. You should see the grades I get in school. And I'm pretty clumsy, too."

"I know about your grades, traveler. I know about your clumsiness. I also know that, to reach my cave, you've had to locate food and fuel, avoid Mire Crabs, outrun a Snow Snake, cross a river of mercury, and flatter a Fuzzle. Only a person who was smart, strong, and brave could have made it this far."

All that Smoke could think to say was, "Gee!"

"Follow me," said The Most Amazing Being, wheeling suddenly and gliding silently into the mountain.

Like the outside peaks, the creature's cave was a place of mirrors. Floor, ceiling, walls: all mirrors. The furniture was made from Popberry wood. Smoke noticed a low wooden bench, a long wooden table containing a bowl of fruit, and a wooden bookcase holding twelve thick withered volumes.

Smoke and The Most Amazing Being sat on the glassy floor. The wall mirrors turned them into a crowd.

"It is well that you are here," said The Most Amazing Being. "The time left to me is short. I have made a bargain with the Guardians of Space and Time. In exchange for

nature's secrets, I have agreed to become part of nature. Already the change is starting to overtake me."

The Most Amazing Being pointed to its left foot, which had begun to look like the roots of a bush. When the creature opened its right hand, Smoke saw that its fingers were twigs. Soon afterward, the boy noticed that one of its long, silvery arms seemed to be covered by tree bark.

"Luckily," The Most Amazing Being continued, "the secrets I have gathered over the ages will not be lost. Everything I know has been stored inside The Most Amazing Thing."

"What does it look like?"

"At the moment The Most Amazing Thing is a golden metal ball. It changes form with the ages. In the past it has been a platinum helmet, a silken cape, a ruby ring, a silver mirror, a leather book, and a diamond-encrusted crown. By this time next year it may be something else. But for now The Most Amazing Thing is a Sphere. A Sphere containing a song that will end wars. A Sphere filled with a cure for every illness. A Sphere holding the meaning of life. Find this metal Sphere, traveler, and you will have found The Most Amazing Thing in the Whole Wide Galaxy."

"I don't suppose the directions for finding the Sphere are in those," said Smoke feebly, pointing toward The Most Amazing Being's books.

"Ah! You have noticed my Encyclopedia Obscura!" With a swoop of its one remaining hand, The Most Amazing Being yanked Volume Ten off the shelf. "These books were my teachers. Perhaps they alone will satisfy you. This particular

one, for example, tells you how to travel forward and backward through time. It tells you how to see through solid objects. It even offers tips for calming earthquakes and volcanoes."

"No," said Smoke. "My destiny is to find The Most Amazing Thing."

"It is very powerful," said The Most Amazing Being. "As soon as the Sphere falls into your hands, the Guardians of Space and Time will grant you two wishes."

"Two wishes? Only two? Not three?"

"Yes—two. We're talking reality now, traveler, not fairy tales. For most people, two wishes are quite enough. You really can't complain. Remember, you get them without even opening the Sphere."

"A Sphere that can be opened?"

"Indeed. It can be cracked like an egg. If and when you do open it, the Ultimate Powers of the Universe will be set free. Thus, before you dare to crack the Sphere, you must know exactly what you are doing. Mark my words, traveler, the forces within The Most Amazing Thing can be the doom of you."

Smoke had never before felt so sure of himself. "Once I have the Sphere," he said in a strong, clear voice, "I'll decide whether or not to crack it. For now, all I know is that I want to find The Most Amazing Thing. Is it far from here?"

"It is right above our heads. On top of this mountain is a glass plateau. On the glass plateau sits The Most Amazing Thing."

"The slopes of this mountain are pure glass!" Smoke

protested. "How can I possibly climb them?"

"I'll show you."

They left the cave, squicked across the rubber snow toward The Most Amazing Being's fire. Fierce winds rushed up. As the sun began to set behind the Glass Mountains, the slopes exploded with blinding reds, oranges, pinks, and violets.

The creature's hand pushed against the thick red smoke of the fire. "Touch this," it said. The smoke streamed toward the darkening sky.

The boy touched the smoke. His fingers pulled back as if the smoke were hot. But the smoke was not hot. It was just . . . firm.

"It feels like rope!" gasped Smoke.

"Quite so," said The Most Amazing Being. "And tomorrow morning, when you start to climb it, you will find it to be stronger and safer than any rope you have ever used. It will take you all the way to the glass plateau, traveler. It will take you to The Most Amazing Thing."

"Sounds easy," said Smoke Bailey, bursting with confidence.

"Yes," said The Most Amazing Being. "But let me offer a warning. Others have come before you. They all failed. You must beware."

"Beware what?"

"Beware the Keeper of the Sphere."



Chapter Seven

The Most Amazing Thing

Before going on with his story, my uncle announced that we ought to have some dessert. "I can understand why you didn't finish your termite soup," he said, "but I'm sure you'll like Metallican ice cream."

Smoke was right. Metallican ice cream is the greatest thing since Metallican root beer. Shoveling a great, cold, creamy wad of the stuff in my mouth, I asked, "So what happened next? Did the red smoke ladder work as well as The Most Amazing Being said it would?"

"Oh, the ladder worked fine," my uncle replied. "I was no monkey, of course. My climb to the top was not exactly the sort of thing you'd see in Wintergreen's Floating Carnival—unless maybe you're watching the clown act. But up I went, hand over hand, foot over foot, winds tugging at my hair and whistling in my ears..."

To make a long journey short, fifty minutes of climbing, and Smoke stood on the glass plateau.

It was a harsh place: cold, wind-swept, lifeless. Ungraceful birds flapped through the thin air. Mounds of rubber snow cluttered the glass ground. Gray clouds clogged the sky.

Smoke looked over the edge of the mountain and saw

the morning sun pushing between the distant peaks. Fog hung low in the valleys.

In the exact center of the plateau, an object floated about five feet off the ground.

A metal ball.

A yellow sphere.

The Most Amazing Thing!

The boy charged forward. Could this be all there is to it? he wondered. I just have to run up and snatch the treasure?

The Sphere looked dead and cold. But then, suddenly, the clouds moved apart. Bathed by the morning sun, The Most Amazing Thing appeared to grow warm. A rosy-golden glow danced on its surface. Then a series of halos grew outward from the Sphere: purple, blue, green, orange, yellow, red. A circular rainbow. The boy had never seen anything so beautiful.

But Smoke was not the only one rushing toward the treasure. Looking up, he saw his competition. He saw the Keeper of the Sphere.

Until that moment, Smoke had naturally supposed that the two-headed Gaxonfrax who had popped his balloon was a grownup. Now he knew that it was just a child. He knew this because he was staring at the Gaxonfrax's mother. Or maybe it was the Gaxonfrax's father. In either case, it was about the size of a rocketship. Its talons looked like iron gates. The beating of its wings sent the rubber snow whirling. When it skreeeeeeee'd, the sound was so loud it cracked the glass under Smoke's pounding feet.

He ran faster.



The Keeper of the Sphere opened its left beak. A jet of flame shot out, blasting Smoke's hair, making him as bald as a clam. Skreeeeeeee.

The Sphere was only a few feet away. But then, as Smoke reached forward, his legs became tangled up in each other. He tripped. The Gaxonfrax swooped down. Its right talon closed around Smoke's right ankle. Its left talon closed around Smoke's left ankle.

"I've really made a mess of things," thought Smoke.

He was off the ground now, waving his arms like a child having a tantrum. And then, just when all seemed lost, the Gaxonfrax's huge form glided directly over the Sphere. Smoke stretched out his arms as far as he could. His fingers brushed The Most Amazing Thing. He grabbed it. It was incredibly heavy, a hundred pounds at least. To this day, Smoke is surprised that he did not drop it.

Two wishes. According to The Most Amazing Being, that was what the Guardians of Space and Time now owed Smoke. As the Gaxonfrax's talons dug into Smoke's legs, he decided the moment was ripe to try out a wish.

"O, Guardians of Space and Time," Smoke screamed, "vanquish this terrible beast!"

The Guardians of Space and Time answered quickly.

The Gaxonfrax opened its talons. Still clutching the heavy prize, the boy fell into a snowdrift.

Meanwhile, the Guardians of Space and Time continued to take Smoke's wish seriously. A darkness came. At first the boy thought something had gone wrong with his eyes. Then he thought something had gone wrong with the sun. But

then he realized that a vast shadow was slithering across the ground.

Still lying in the snowdrift, Smoke looked up at the shadow's owner.

Another Gaxonfrax.

The largest one yet. It was about the size of the town that Smoke had grown up in. Either of its two beaks could hold a house. Or a herd of Spotted Woggles. Or the Keeper of the Sphere . . . which is exactly what happened.

Snap! Crunch! Gulp! And the Keeper was gone. Swallowed. "Vanquished," as Smoke had said in his wish. About as vanquished as it could get.

And then the impossibly large Gaxonfrax soared away.

In his mind, the boy checked off Wish One.

Getting back down the ladder with the Sphere was probably the most difficult and dangerous thing Smoke had ever done. Three different times the hundred pound ball nearly sent him tumbling into the clouds. But at last he found himself on solid ground.

The Most Amazing Being's fire burned brightly. Its cauldron bubbled merrily.

And The Most Amazing Being itself?

Smoke looked around. Near the entrance to the dark cave, a Popberry tree grew. It had not been there when Smoke had started up the ladder. He knew that this tree was The Most Amazing Being. Strolling up to it, Smoke plucked a bright yellow Popberry and dropped it in his pocket. A souvenir.

One wish left. Of course Smoke didn't want to run

through his entire supply of miracles in a single morning. But he wanted to leave the Glass Mountains as quickly as possible, and there seemed to be no other solution.

Smoke hugged The Most Amazing Thing to his chest. A warm, weird energy flowed into him. The Sphere hummed and shook.

"O, Guardians of Space and Time, restore my ship, the A-Liner, to me!"

Once again, the Guardians of Space and Time did not fool around. One second Smoke was staring at a low-hanging cloud. The next second the A-Liner was dropping out of it.

A brand-new basket hung beneath the gas-bag. The bag was completely repaired. Only by looking closer did Smoke see the thin seam that had once been a hole.

Smoke placed the heavy Sphere in the balloon basket, covering it with a rug from The Most Amazing Being's cave. Then, after carefully tying the A-Liner to the Popberry tree, he ran to get Merton.

The shy Girfleez was still waiting by the upward-flowing waterfall.

"Come on, Merton!" signed Smoke. "You needn't be afraid any longer! The Most Amazing Being is nothing but a tree now!"

As they rushed back to the cave, Smoke told Merton all about the great deeds he had accomplished: climbing the strange ladder, outwitting the Keeper of the Sphere, getting the treasure, and restoring the A-Liner (with a little help from the Guardians of Space and Time).

Before setting off, Smoke and Merton decided to take the Encyclopedia Obscura with them. They figured that, being a tree, The Most Amazing Being would have no further need of it.

And so it was that, when the time came for the repaired A-Liner to rise into the winds, it had to lift the combined weights of twelve encyclopedia volumes, one golden Sphere, one Girfleez, and one Smoke Bailey. Huffing and puffing, the balloon ascended slowly. Soon it was caught by a strong breeze.

Smoke and Merton sailed over the Glass Mountains.

They sailed across the jade ocean.

They sailed into Darksome Mire.

They sailed through miles of Nearmist.

And yet they were still a long, long way from home.

Chapter Eight **Smoke's Choice**



"I'm confused," I said.

"Confused?" my uncle replied.

Although it was very peaceful having Smoke's cat on my lap, my legs were falling asleep. I pushed the cat away and stood up. "Yes. You had the treasure. And you had A-Liner back. So what went wrong?"

"I'll tell you what went wrong," said Smoke.

And he did.

For the first couple of weeks, it appeared that Smoke and Merton would have no trouble bringing The Most Amazing Thing back to civilization. The Night Rocks were many, the Mire Crabs were few, and the Popberries were at their peak of ripeness. They tasted like honey-covered peaches with chocolate pits.

But then the air darkened. Winds howled. The mist began to curl and turn like the surface of The Most Amazing Being's brew. Storm!

Not just any storm, either. Merton claimed it was the biggest, fastest, most violent storm ever to muscle its way across Darksome Mire. The A-Liner was caught in a wildly twisting tornado of Nearmist. The balloon basket

became a roller coaster car. Up and down, round and round, up and down, round and round.

Round and round. That wasn't so bad.

Up. This was all right too.

Down. Ah, that was the problem. Every time the storm pushed the A-Liner toward the ground. Smoke feared that they would hit the tar—hit it so hard that the A-Liner would be buried right to the top of its balloon. They would be shipwrecked!

And so it became necessary to lighten the load. Smoke grabbed Volume One of the Encyclopedia Obscura. Opening it, he saw a diagram for assembling a device that could turn a pound of mud into a pound of gold. Oh well, he thought, I've never had much use for money. He threw Volume One over the side—splat!—and watched it disappear into the tar. The A-Liner moved up a few feet.

But the winds continued to shake the balloon, pounding on it like a hammer pounding a nail, driving it nearer and nearer to the tar.

No doubt about it. Other books would have to go.

Splat! Volume Two. Among its secrets were instructions for building a machine that would make your bed and walk the dog.

And still the storm raged.

Smoke tossed out Volume Three. With it went a method for teaching a six-month old baby how to play the violin, read eight different languages, and program a computer. Next Smoke gave up Volume Four, including a map that showed all the planets in the Milky Way where you could get a really

good pizza.

But it was no use.

So the rest of the encyclopedia went overboard.

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Every last volume.

And still the A-Liner was out of control.

"Well," signed Merton, "it's been dandy knowing you."

"What are you signing about?" asked Smoke.

Merton slung his left leg over the side of the basket. His enormous webbed foot dangled in the air. "There's only one way to save this ship. You've got to get rid of all the extra weight, including the 250 pounds of Girfleez Mire Person you've been carrying around."

"Don't leave, Merton!" signed Smoke. "We'll think of another way to lighten the ship! I'll go on a diet! I'll even toss out The Most Amazing Thing!"

Merton stuck his right antenna in his left ear, which in the Girfleez language meant, "Phooey." He went on. "I belong down there, anyway. I'll be fine. I can't be more than ... oh, I'd say a few miles from home."

"A few thousand miles, Merton. Get back in the balloon, and let's figure out something together." Smoke gripped Merton's arm to make sure that his web-footed friend did nothing rash.

"Very well," signed Merton. "But I simply can't stand the thought of your throwing The Most Amazing Thing over the side. You earned that Sphere and you should keep it." Even as Merton signed, a downward wind, the strongest one yet, pushed them swiftly toward the mire.

Merton reached toward Smoke and placed his palm on



Smoke's forehead.

"What are you doing, Merton? We're dropping to a gooey death and you're –"

"In Girkfleez the palm on the forehead means good-bye," signed Merton as he tore himself free and leaped over the side of the A-Liner. Smoke saw his friend land on the tar-kersploosh! went Merton's webbed feet – and begin jogging toward the horizon.

Freed of Merton's 250 pounds, the A-Liner shot skyward. With equal speed, Smoke's spirits fell. He missed his friend already.

An hour later, the storm ended. And Smoke's troubles – did they end, too? No such luck.

Like the Pied Piper leading the rats out of Hamelin, the storm took with it every bit of wind that had ever blown across Darksome Mire. Suddenly there wasn't enough breeze around to lift a feather. There wasn't enough breeze to make a spider's web tremble. Or to cool the face of a flea.

When the winds died, the A-Liner happened to be hanging about fifteen feet from the surface of the mire. Smoke was becalmed in the exact dead center of nowhere.

Hours passed. At first Smoke decided to be brave. "Fine with me," he signed to himself. Signing without Merton made him feel lonely.

After three days of nothingness, a small breeze began scooting across the sky, somewhere above Smoke's head. He looked up. A Popberry quill sailed by on the newborn winds. Then, a hundred quills.

Immediately Smoke fed the last of his fuel to the

fire beneath his balloon. The added heat lifted the A-Liner several dozen feet, but the winds remained frustratingly out of reach.

I've got to get higher, Smoke thought, as the balloon started to drop again.

He stared at The Most Amazing Thing, his last bit of extra weight. The Sphere sparkled in the sun. It seemed to be grinning at him.

A choice, then.

A difficult choice.

The most difficult, most terrible, most stomach-burning choice a person should ever have to make.

Choice One. Crack open the Sphere. But to do so meant unleashing energies that would

That would what? Turn Smoke into an Amazing Being? Or turn him into a Popberry tree? Lead him out of Darksome Mire? Or lead him toward forces he would spend the rest of his life trying to tame?

Choice Two. Lighten the load.

With both his hands, Smoke grasped The Most Amazing Thing. It had never felt heavier. Slowly he lifted the metal Sphere from the floor to the edge of the basket, his muscles straining, almost popping out of his skin.

Smoke studied the landscape. No Night Rocks. No Popberry trees. No Mire People huts. Nothing. Once the Sphere was gone, finding it again would be a nearly impossible task.

And yet Smoke's mind was fixed. He would take the low

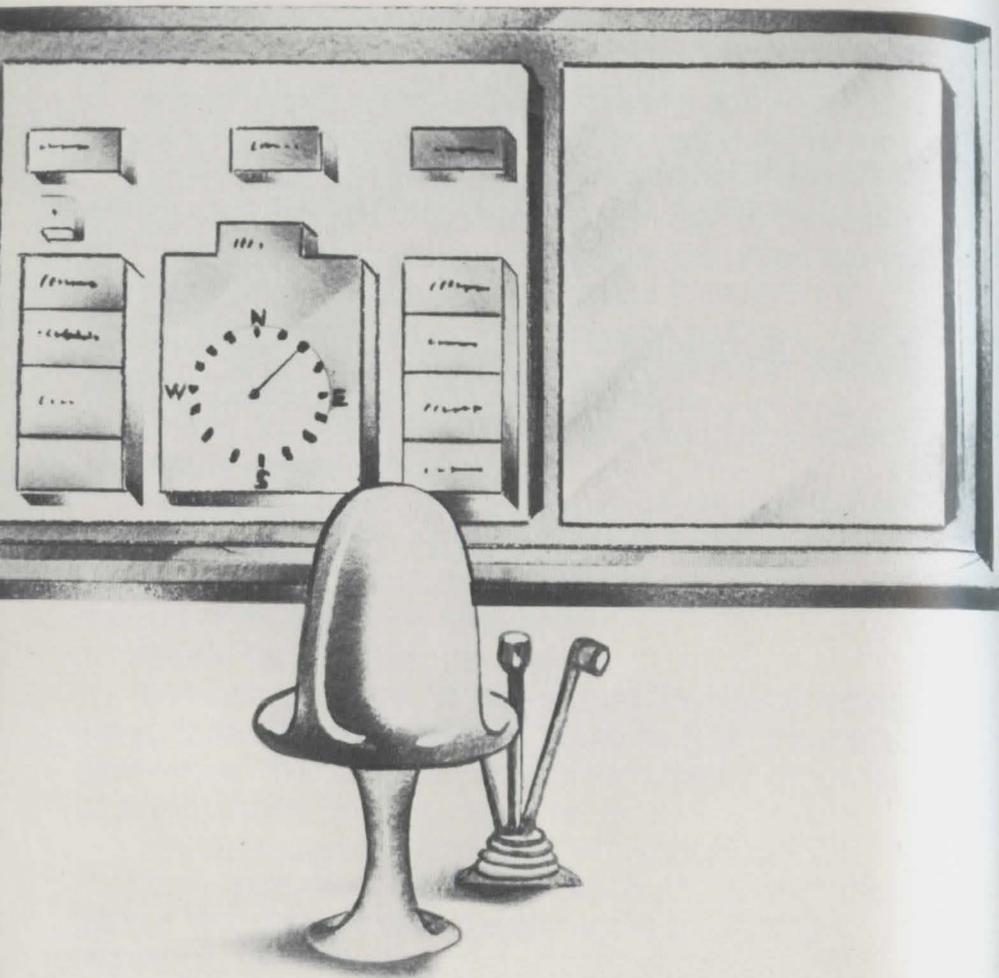
road. The smooth road. The safe road. He nudged the Sphere. It rolled several inches along the rim of the basket. Gravity did the rest.

There was a high-pitched whistling as the Sphere pierced the Nearmist. Then, a THUD as it struck the tar.

Instantly the A-Liner rose up. Higher, higher. How massive that Sphere must have been! Higher. How cold the air was becoming! Higher. How good those winds felt!

As the winds nudged the ship along, Smoke thought about The Most Amazing Thing in the Whole Wide Galaxy. He pictured it sinking into the depths of the Darksome Mire.

And now he had no choice but to leave it there.



Chapter Nine

My Choice

A stillness crept through my uncle's apartment. The cat slept silently atop the old wooden trunk. Nothing remained of the fire but orange embers and a few lingering twists of smoke.

"There's not much more to tell," said Smoke. "The winds continued to push me around the mire—this way and that, hither and thither, yon and beyond. The days piled up and became months. The months piled up and became years.

"But then, at long last, I happened upon the great city of Metallica. At first I was happy just to be living in a place where you didn't have to worry about Mire Crabs or Nearmist storms. But before long I grew restless. I still hungered for The Most Amazing Thing—though by now it was probably not a Sphere but another sort of object. And then I got the idea of making a new and better balloon."

"The B-Liner!" I exclaimed.

"Right. The Galactic Store had all the stuff I would need to build it. Only they wouldn't sell me anything unless I had green chips. And I couldn't get any green chips unless I did a lot of trading at the Metallican Auction."

"So I began using the A-Liner for day trips into the mire.

I'd sing a song or play a tune, and the cultures would hand over whatever junk they had lying around. The Logretches, for example, gave me some feathers from a cockatoo. The Beribeys gave me some fur from a swamp lynx. The Watersis gave me a jar of pickled Popberry rinds.

"The Metalicans went wild over these relics— they love anything that's natural, anything that isn't a machine. Soon they sold me more than enough stuff to assemble the B-Liner. But the project took years and years. When I was finished, I was no longer a young man. I simply didn't have the energy to go into the far reaches of Darksome Mire.

"Then one night I had a dream. In this dream I saw my brother's only child setting out to find The Most Amazing Thing. So I sent the B-Liner to fetch you."

"What a fantastic story!" I gasped. "I've never heard anything like it!"

"Do you think I've been exaggerating?" Smoke asked.

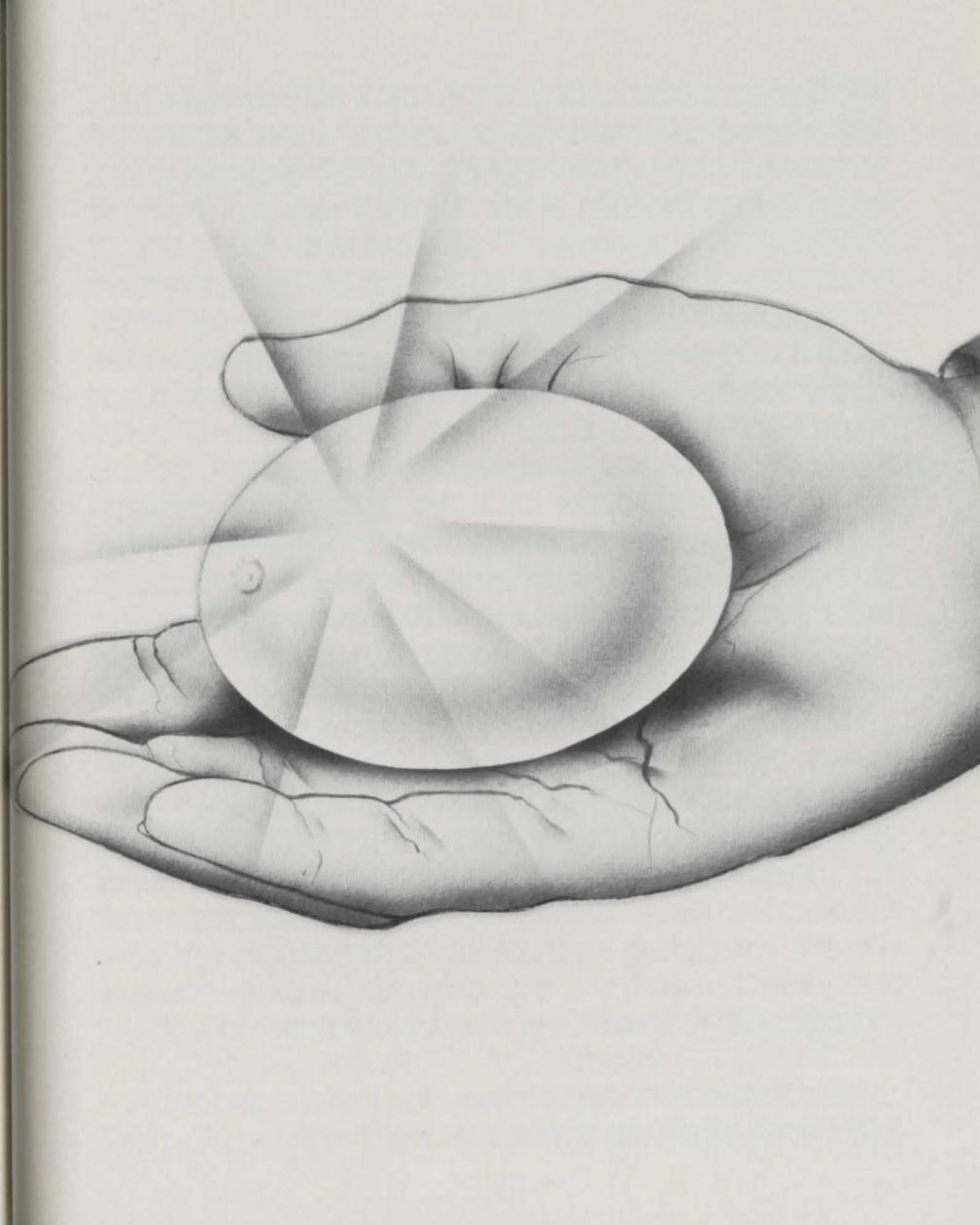
"Well ... some of it is a little hard to believe."

"Such as?"

"Such as the part about The Most Amazing Being turning into a tree."

Instantly Smoke reached into his shirt and pulled out a yellow Popberry. "Here!" he exclaimed. "This should prove I've been telling the truth. It's the one I plucked from The Most Amazing Being!"

Even in the dim light of the dying fire, the Popberry looked shiny. Smoke set it gently on the rug. "So, Terry," he said, "you've got an important decision to make. You can tell me to forget the whole thing, and I'll have the B-Liner take



you back to the farm. Or you can reach into my trunk here, gather up some Darksome Mire relics, visit the auction, get some green chips, go to the store, buy the things that will aid your journey, and then, at last, set off in search of The Most Amazing Thing, whatever form it has taken!"

Smoke snatched the snoozing cat off the trunk and lifted the lid. The hinges sounded like frightened mice. Inside, I saw a wild jumble of artifacts, including a basket woven from Popberry bark, a hat made from a Mire Crab shell, and a petrified snake.

I closed my eyes. I watched the darkness.

Pictures flashed into my brain. I saw myself getting zapped by a Mire Crab. I saw myself shaking with hunger because I couldn't find any Popberry trees. I even saw myself sinking into Darksome Mire and disappearing forever.

"Sorry, Uncle," I said. "I don't feel ready for something like this. The whole idea scares me. After all, I'm just a kid."

"You're a lot more than just a kid, kiddo," my uncle replied. "You're a Bailey. But if your mind's made up... well, then I guess it's made up."

"I'm not going," I said firmly.

"Do me one favor," said Smoke, hauling a blanket out of the wooden trunk. "Curl up by the fire and go to sleep. Tomorrow morning we'll have breakfast together. It gets pretty lonely around here, and nothing would please me quite so much as sharing some eggs with my brother's only child."

"That's fine with me."

Smoke went to the fireplace, fed it some sticks. Once they were blazing, he added a fat log.

A yawn broke through my uncle's beard. He shuffled toward his room. "See you in the morning, kiddo."

I picked up the blanket and stretched out near the fireplace. Finding my uncle, touring Metallica, hearing the legend of The Most Amazing Thing—no doubt about it, this had been a big day, probably the biggest of my life so far. I was exhausted. Sleep, however, did not come to me. I stared at the dancing flames, my eyes locked open.

A tinkling sound filled the room. It was like hearing a bell being rung underwater. As I rolled over, my stare fell upon the Popberry my uncle had supposedly taken from The Most Amazing Being's tree.

And suddenly I remembered Smoke's description of the creature's voice. He had said it was like a bell. Yes, I was sure now. The curious noise was coming from the Popberry.

Someone spoke my name. "Terry Bailey?" said the bell-voice. "Can you hear me, Terry Bailey?"

All I could say was, "Here!"

"Don't be afraid."

A thick, silvery mist rose from the Popberry. Gradually the mist took on a human-like shape, and I knew I was seeing The Most Amazing Being. Its red eyes hovered like candle flames in a dark window.

"Why did you refuse your uncle's invitation?" the creature asked.

"I'm not smart enough to get around on Darksome Mire. Or strong enough. Or brave enough."

"Who says you're not smart?" asked The Most Amazing Being. "Remember that time, back on the farm, when your

mother was trying to figure out how to keep the caterpillars from eating all the leaves off the pear trees? Who decided to put peanut butter on the tree trunks so the caterpillars wouldn't climb up?"

"I did," I said.

"And who says you're not strong? Remember when Fletcher Twilt's kitten fell into the well? Who climbed down to the bottom, grabbed the poor soaking animal, and then got all the way to the top again?"

"I did," I said.

"And as for being brave, I'd say it was pretty brave of you to take a long balloon trip to the unknown side of Porquatz."

"I guess you're right."

"I'm always right," said The Most Amazing Being.

"Good-bye, my friend. Remember what I have told you."

Then all traces of the creature disappeared: its bell-voice, its misty form, its ember eyes. Only the Popberry remained.

For a long time I lay staring at that berry, thinking about everything The Most Amazing Being had said.

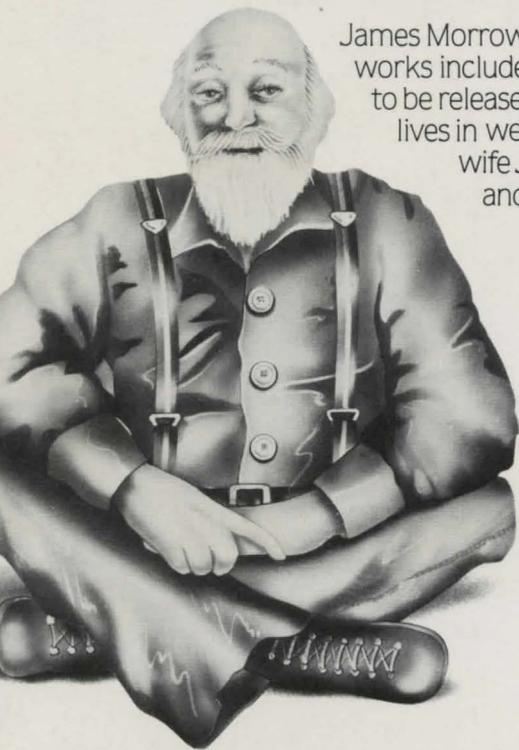
I had a sudden urge to run into my uncle's room and wake him up. But I wasn't so sure he would like that.

No, I said to myself. I'll let Uncle Smoke get a full night's sleep. Tomorrow will be soon enough to tell him that I'm going to find The Most Amazing Thing in the Whole Wide Galaxy.

The Adventures of Smoke Bailey

Born and raised in the farmlands of the planet Porquatz, Smoke Bailey never expected his life to be adventurous. But when a fortune teller reveals that Smoke's destiny is to find the Most Amazing Thing in the Whole Wide Galaxy, he steals a hot air balloon and sets off for the unknown side of his world. There he faces hunger, hardship, marauding vultures, monstrous Mire Crabs, a strange creature called a Fuzzle—and the ultimate secret of the universe.

Anyone who has played the software game IN SEARCH OF THE MOST AMAZING THING™ will want to read how Smoke came to possess—and then lose this strangest of objects.



James Morrow is a science fiction writer whose works include The Wine of Violence and, soon to be released, The Continent of Lies. He lives in western Massachusetts with his wife Jean, his daughter Kathy, and two cats.