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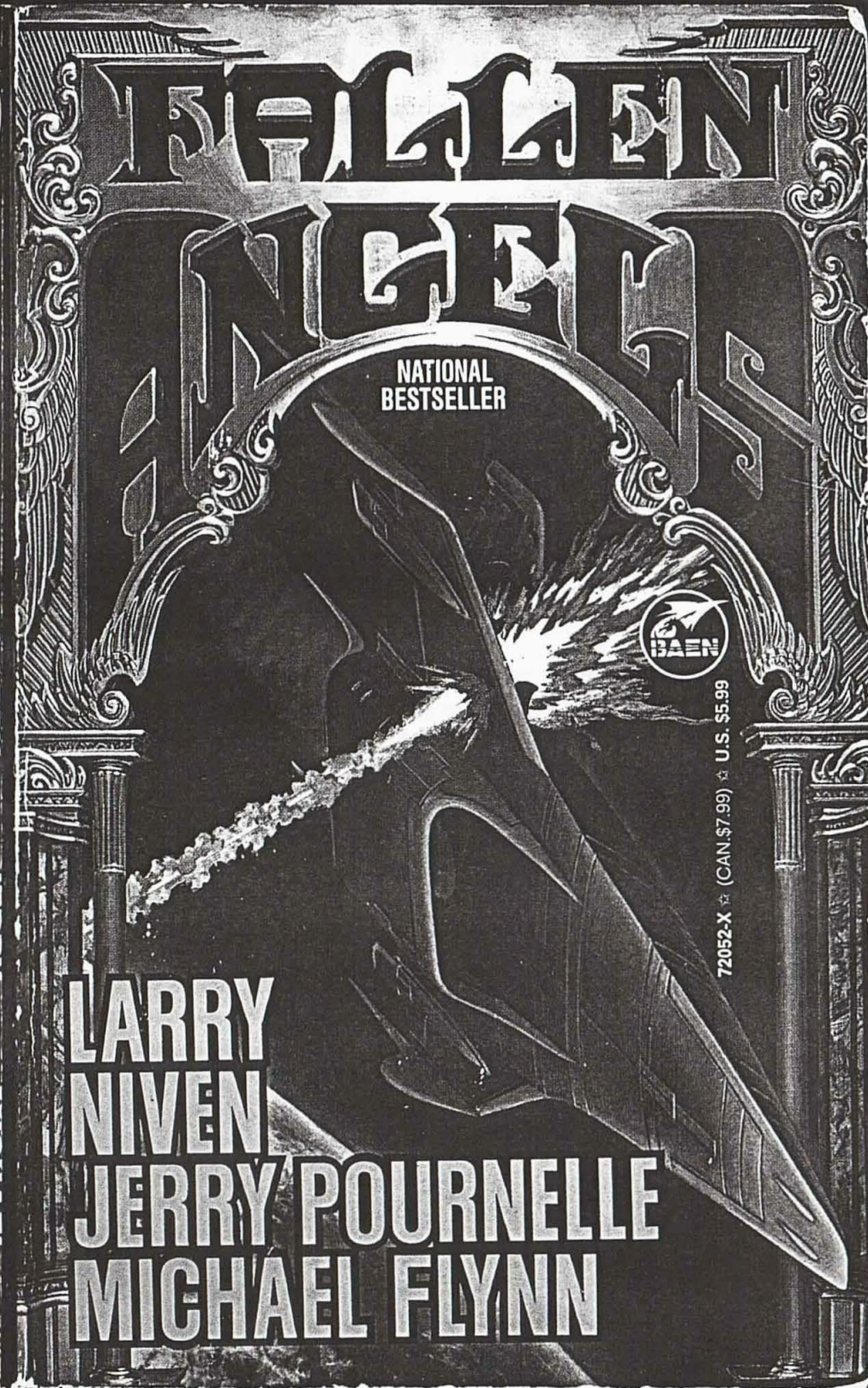


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"I see Harry found you," Bruce said.

"Yes. He said Wade Curtis sent him," Bob said.

"I work for Wade," Harry said.

"Doing what?"

"Gopher. Booklegger. Postman. Whatever needs doing." Harry grinned. "He said go hang around Ron Cole and see if anyone from Minicon shows up."

"But why—"

"He guessed?" Sherrine asked.

"Suspected," Jenny said. "He said maybe someone would come looking for a rocket ship."

"If somebody from Minicon comes looking for a rocket ship, tell 'em where to find one. That's what he told me to do. So here you are," said Harry.

"It doesn't work!" Sherrine said. She was near tears. "It never would have worked!"

"That pile of junk? Naw."

"Until we got here you didn't know that any better than the rest of us," Jenny said sharply.

Harry gave Jenny a pained look. "I knew it wouldn't work. Anyway, we got here just ahead of Bruce and Mike, and they said you were coming. Only you didn't come, and they couldn't wait for you at the museum."

Mike patted his ample bulk. "Too conspicuous."

"What happened to you?" Bruce asked.

"Long story," Fang said.

"So Jenny and I moved in," Harry said. He fished into his pockets and held out a handful of change and a couple of bills. "Not too bad a location. Some people still care. A little."

They heard footsteps outside. Violetta opened the apartment door. "Hi, Mom."

Mrs. Brown was bundled up against the cold so that she looked larger than her husband. She looked at the crowd sprawled around her living room and smiled thinly. "More of your godfather's friends?" she asked Violetta. "Glad to meet you, but I'm afraid I can't feed you all. We—" She hesitated.

"Helga works at the university clinic," Oliver Brown said. "And I write science fiction. She doesn't get paid

much but it's more than I make. What she's too embarrassed to say is that we can't afford to feed you."

"Will this help?" Sherrine handed her bag of cheese to Helga Brown.

"Cheese? Wisconsin cheese? Ollie! It's real, the real thing— But there's too much! I can trade this for a lot—"

"Go see what you can get for half of it," Oliver said. "Violetta, go with your mother."

"Maybe I better go, too," Harry said. "Tough neighborhood—"

"You have to tell your story," Violetta said. "I'll get Roland. My boyfriend, he lives next door. He'll come with us."

"Fan?" Bob asked.

Violetta laughed. "My father is Oliver Brown, my mother is Helga Brown, my godfather is Wade Curtis. You figure it out."

"All right," Thor said. "Just what the hell is going on? We've chased all across Wisconsin. Lived through a blizzard, almost got enslaved by a crazy alderman, damn near caught by the cops, just so we can find out that Ron Cole is mad as a hatter and his rocket never was any good. Now you tell us—what in hell is it you want to tell us, Harry Czescu?"

"If you'll shut up for a minute, maybe he can say it," Jenny said.

Thor glared at her.

"Wade says—"

"Wade says," Thor said. "Look, Wade Curtis hasn't been sober in ten years. Maybe he's not raving like Cole, but he sent us here! He believed in Cole's rocket, just like you did, and I did and—Oh, God, Damn, It."

"Got a letter," Harry said.

Bruce asked, "Letter for whom?"

"Maybe you." Harry took off his left boot. "Wade said I should give it to—I should give it to somebody I thought he'd trust." The inner lining wasn't properly

sewn to the boot shell. Harry reached between the two leathers and took out a dirty envelope.

"What does it say."

Harry said, "It's sealed." The hurt barely showed. "Wade said I should burn this if nobody from Minicon showed up looking for Cole, but if anybody did, give it to somebody with judgment." He looked around the group. Finally he held the paper out to Oliver Brown. "Reckon he trusts you."

Oliver took the paper. "What Harry is carefully not saying is that Wade and I are still collaborating on a book. Harry brought me two new chapters yesterday."

He went over to his desk and got a letter opener. He was maddeningly slow, and Sherrine wanted to scream as he smoothed out the envelope's wrinkles, then carefully inserted the letter opener and slit the paper. There was a single sheet inside, and he took it out slowly.

"I haven't seen Wade, haven't seen Wade for years," Oliver muttered. "Afraid it will cost Helga her job. If they knew. But they do know. They have to. Maybe they don't, though." He spread the paper out and began to read. "Ah. Hmm. Mmmh hmmmh. Yes. Yes."

"For God's sake!" Bob shouted. "What?"

"I'll read it," Oliver said. He cleared his throat. "King David is in the high desert. It's a Doherty project. My wings are made of tungsten, my flesh of glass and steel. Explorers—"

"That's a song," Sherrine said.

Brown looked up. In the silence Harry sang, "*I am the joy of Terra for the power that I wield—*"

Sherrine and Jenny were with him. "*Once upon a lifetime, I died a pioneer. Now I sing within a spaceship's heart, does anybody hear?*"

"The Phoenix," Harry said with just the trace of a bow. "Julia Ecklar."

"Damn drunk," Thor said. "Told you he's just a drunk. Doesn't make any sense at all."

"Explorers in the desert keep bottle shops," Roland read. "Skim milk masquerades as cream. It is time for the merry soul to move on, to see what free men can do.

What man has done, man can aspire to. Love and plenty kisses. W."

"That's it?" Sherrine asked.

Oliver nodded. "I hope it means something to you."

"We were hoping it would mean something to you," Mike said. "Harry, he thought we'd understand this?"

"Thought it was important enough to send me here with it," Harry said.

Which might mean he wanted you out of the way? Sherrine rejected that with a violent headshake. "Start with what we know. He thought someone from the Con would be here. Why? Nobody's come here for years. Because—because he'd talked about Ron Cole's Titan at the Con."

Mike: "Someone might have overheard—"

Bruce: "—and told the Angels!"

"So it's a message for us," Sherrine said. "Why in code?"

"Drunk," Thor said.

"What if Harry got picked up?" Fang suggested.

"No, I was carrying a manuscript for Oliver," Harry said. His big shoulders rolled, free of that weight. "They'd have sent me to mental health for that, letter or no."

"He wasn't protecting Harry and me," Jenny said. "What, then?"

"Who the hell cares what he thinks?" Thor demanded. He looked to Fang. "Maybe it's time to move on."

"No, it's time for the merry soul to move on," Mike said. "That's Cole, of course. Not that it would be so obvious if we hadn't just seen him."

"Skim milk—Cole said that, too," Sherrine said. "Harry, you had a message for Cole!"

"And what were you supposed to do once you'd found us all and delivered the messages?" Bruce asked.

"I can tell you exactly what he said," Harry said. He looked uncomfortable.

"What?" Bruce said.

Harry looked out the window.

"Want me to tell them?" Jenny asked.

"No. No, I'll do it." Harry stuffed his hands deep into

his jeans pockets. "Wade said, 'Harry, I trust your honor with my life, but I don't trust your judgment to go buy the beer. If nobody shows up, forget all this and meet me in—well, where we meet, next month. If anybody from Minicon shows up, go tell Oliver Brown, then deliver the messages, and stand by to help people. I think they'll want help.'"

"And that's all?"

Harry shrugged. "That's all."

"Where is Curtis now?" Mike asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, and I guess I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Great," Thor said. "So we have this nonsense from a drunk writer, and a messenger he doesn't trust with his drunken ravings, and we're supposed to get all excited."

Fang said, "Thor, it's a puzzle."

"Wade always did drink a lot," Oliver Brown said. "But he turned out the stories. He used to be in the space program, you know. Other things. Were you ever in his study before they burned it down? Big place. Books. And a signed picture of *Voyager*—Hey!"

"What?" Bruce demanded.

"'See what free men can do.' That was the inscription on the photo. By, by the man who built it—Dick Rhutan! Who flew *Voyager* around the world on one tank of gas. *That Voyager*."

"Rhutan. *Voyager*. King David in the desert!" Mike said.

"Mike?"

"*King David's Spaceship*! It's a book title. And the Rhutan brothers were working on a spaceship. A spaceship called—" He paused dramatically, holding a wide grin. "Wait for it. It was called *Phoenix*. They were working on it in the Mojave desert."

"Be damned," Bruce muttered. "That was that thing that looked like an inverted styrofoam cup—"

"Single stage to orbit, vertical take off and landing," Oliver Brown said. "SSTO VTOL."

Mike was frowning. "Sure, we all saw the briefing at a Worldcon. Long time ago. Nolacon? Somewhere in there.

Wait a minute and I'll come up with the name of the guy who was in charge of the *Phoenix* project."

"Hudson," Oliver Brown said. "An old friend of Wade's."

"Hudson. An explorer in the desert," Mike said. "Yup. Well, there's no question what Wade was talking about. *Phoenix*."

"A spaceship. Where have I heard this before?" asked Alex. But his blood was beginning to sing. Again.

"Yes, I know," Sherrine said. "But—but *Phoenix* was real! They spent tens of millions of dollars on it. And *Voyager* was real, it flew around the world!"

Steve got up from the floor. As usual he seemed to float up, as if he could turn off the gravity. "*Phoenix* is real, all right," he said. "I've seen it. It's in a museum in Mojave."

"Another museum," Gordon said. "I think perhaps this time we do not bother?"

"Suit yourself," Steve said. "But *Phoenix* flew once. I saw it."

"Flew!" Alex tried to stand. Fang noticed and helped him. "Flew?"

"Not to orbit," Steve said. "The *Phoenix* was just too heavy. Hudson had to make too many compromises. But it could have gone around the world, like *Voyager*, if NASA hadn't stopped him."

Thor said, "Like the *Spruce Goose*? There's always a reason why it didn't work."

Steve's muscles were bunching. Thor was getting to him, though he may not have been aware of it. "NASA said it had to do with flight safety. Gary Hudson got to take the *Phoenix* straight up fifty miles and dump most of his fuel and come straight back down. Then the budget cuts came, and the Green Initiatives passed, and the Greens got in control."

"So where is this *Phoenix* now?" Alex demanded.

"In a hangar on what used to be Edwards Air Force Base in California. It's been preserved as a reminder of Big Bad Science, just like the Space Center here. Actually, I think the military may have had ideas they could use it. They didn't have the money to fix it, but they

never throw anything away either. It's out there 'as a monument.' People are supposed to go out and be scandalized; but . . . When I was there, a lot of the tourists had tears in their eyes."

"Probably for all the money that was wasted," said Fang sarcastically.

Steve nodded. "Truer than you think. I shed a few myself at the waste. That's where I met Hudson. They've got him conducting the tour."

Bruce jumped. "Himself? Why—"

"I thought the Single Stage Experimental Lifter was never finished," Thor said belligerently. "They proxmired the whole space program. They even outlawed private ventures, like Hudson's."

"That's what Gary said when I took the tour," Steve agreed. "SSX *Phoenix* was never finished. Just flew the once. Never fly again, he said. Over and over. One thing, though."

"What's that?" asked Bob.

Steve sighed and smiled dreamily. "It seats ten."

Sherrine felt her heart begin to pound. Seats ten, she thought. Seats ten. "Never finished," she said. "*Phoenix* is too big to hide. Hah!"

"Hah?" Mike said.

"Bottle shop," she said. "Explorers in the high desert keep bottle shops."

Smiles began to form. Bruce said, "Ah. A bottle shop sells miracles, and is not what it seems. . . ."

"And the proprietor of a bottle shop usually lies. So what do we have? A rocket ship, in plain sight, and Gary Hudson who helped *design* the bird makes sure he tells everyone that it can never fly again." *And it seats ten! It seats ten!*

"I do not believe it," Gordon said. "It is one more goose to chase. A chimera."

"Me, either," Thor said. "People, it's been fun, but I am not chasing off to California after another rocket ship."

"So what do we do with the Angels?" Bruce asked.

Thor shrugged. "Not my problem. The Con's over.

You're Chairman. You take care of the pass-on. You don't need Fang and me for that. Time for us to move on—"

Fang said, "Guests are my responsibility."

Thor shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"We all have places to be," Bruce said. "Except you and Fang. Steve, how are you getting back to California?"

"Amtrack. I have a ticket. Don't think I can get any more. Maybe they'll be watching the stations anyway."

Harry had been uncharacteristically quiet. "Jenny and me, we're headed that way. Maybe we could steal another bike—"

"We have a little money," Bruce said.

"Yeah, but—" Harry shook his head. "It's a rough trip, riding double. Don't think the Angels would make it."

Gordon laughed. "Nor do I, Harry!"

"It's all crazy anyway," Alex said. "You know where there is a ship. Single stage to orbit, seats ten. Assume it works, that unlike that ancient Titan, it has been well maintained. I don't believe it, but assume that. It will need—I'm guessing—half a million pounds of fuel? Liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen. They don't leave that stuff lying around."

There was no answer.

"Fine. You don't have the foggiest notion of how to get the fuel, or how to move it if you did—"

"Details," Mike said.

"Dreams," Gordon said.

"I'm with Gordon," Alex said. "Look, we are very grateful, but it is time to give up the dreams. We have to look for ways we can hide. Forever, I guess."

Silence descended within the Brown household. Presently Mike Glider said, "We can get you ID, I think. Permanent convention guests. God knows fans will help."

"Given ID," Bruce said. "Sherrine?"

"If I lose my job—and I will if I'm not back tomorrow morning—there won't be anything I can do." *It's just a dream. A dream that seats ten. Oh, damn—*

"Then we have to get you back to Minneapolis. Fast," Bruce said. "That needs working on. Meanwhile, can they hide here? Oliver?"