

Kingsbury 1944

Michael Cassutt

My name is Alfred Kramer, known for the better part of my life as “Lefty.” I was born April 13, 1920, in Owatonna, Minnesota.

Today is my birthday in 2020, meaning that I’ve reached the unlikely age of one century. I currently live in a geriatric facility in Mesa, Arizona. Though mobility-challenged, I am in decent health, but have learned that my facility is going into lockdown due to a new virus that reminds me of the Spanish Flu that ravaged the country just prior to my birth.

My father died when I was three. My mother, who had attended a teacher’s college prior to marrying him, went to work in a local elementary school.

Aside from the loss of my father, I had an unremarkable childhood. There was always food on the table. My mother always had a position. I was cared for by my grandparents until I was fourteen and entered high school.

I was an above average student, though never much of a reader (something I rectified in adulthood).

What I could do was play baseball. Although not tall, I was strong, and fast down the base paths. I also had sufficient hand-eye coordination to hit a curveball. And I could throw one, as well as a decent fastball.

I was also left-handed, a portsider, a southpaw, a trait that attracted scouts from regional major league teams like the Chicago Cubs and St. Louis Cardinals.

I was signed to a minor league contract during my senior year of high school, and that summer reported to the Cardinals’ minor league team in Duluth, Minnesota, the Dukes. In those by-gone days a major league baseball team had a whole network of minor league affiliates scattered around the country, in classifications from D, the lowest, to AAA.

The Dukes were D. I pitched well enough that I was promoted to the Class C Lansing, Michigan, Lancers in 1939, then the B level with the Decatur, Illinois, Commodores, the next summer.

Math was not then my strong suit, but it was clear that at this rate I would be close to twenty-five before I reached the major leagues, assuming I was promoted every year. My win-loss record of 8-5 with the Commodores was not likely to convince the Cardinals that I was worthy of an invitation to spring training with the big club, since we had three other pitchers with much better records.

My mother encouraged me to have a backup plan, so even as I concentrated on learning to

throw a better curveball, I began taking college courses in chemistry during the off-season.

When the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor I was twenty-one and attending the winter trimester at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. I enlisted as soon as possible, though I wasn't called up until May 1942.

I was sent to Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, with the goal of becoming a combat medic—the army's idea, given my two-plus years of chemistry.

In the third week I was injured in the collapse of a platform I and four other G.I.s-to-be were building for a rope-climbing exercise. I not only tore the cartilage in my left knee, but broke several ribs and separated my left shoulder.

Given that full recovery was not guaranteed, and would take at least six months in any case, I was discharged as 4-F.

Not only was my time in the army at an end, my baseball career was over as well. I would have spent some time wallowing in self-pity except for knowing that one of the other men died because of that accident, and another was paralyzed for life.

I thought that my best chance to contribute to the war effort was to complete my degree and join a manufacturing firm. As I hobbled my way through the fall of 1942 and 1943, then began to walk more steadily and surely by the start of the fall 1943 term—where I began to hear whispers about the able-bodied young man not being in uniform—I doubled up on classes and did little else but study.

I carried my discharge papers, of course, but rarely showed them, because I, too, felt the same. I was fully recovered. I returned to the local recruiting office and asked to reenlist after a physical.

I was turned down. Or rather, encouraged to appeal the decision. The army was still enlisting so many healthy young men that it did not have time to deal with one questionable situation, especially for a student about to graduate from college with a degree in chemistry.

During this time I wrote to the Office of War Production, and I learned of various munitions factories all over the U.S. One of them was the Kingsbury Ordnance Plant in LaPorte, Indiana, which wrote back inviting me for a visit as soon as I took my degree.

I did so at the end of the winter trimester, March 1, 1944. KOP's letter had reached me on February 28th.

By that time I had also learned, via letter from the War Department, that my appeal for reenlistment was "under consideration," but no decision could be expected before May 1.

Telling my mother that any future correspondence could reach me at KOP, I set off, with my one good suit, several white shirts, and other bits of clothing and personal items in a single suitcase.

My trip took two days longer than planned due to snow, which reduced hitching targets and also slowed every driver. And my left knee, which I had thought rehabilitated, gave out when I was forced to walk several miles from a drop off to good old Rockford, Illinois, where I had briefly endured basic training. I spent the night in the one hotel I recognized.

I arrived at the plant on Wednesday, March 8th, having hitched my way from Minnesota in order to avoid the challenges and expenses of getting travel authorization in those days of rationing.

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In the greater world, in the Pacific, American marines were engaged in heavy fighting with the Japanese on the island of Bougainville. Two continents away, the American Army was making progress in pushing back the Germans at Anzio. To the east, the Soviet Red Army was in a brutal battle with yet more Germans near the Estonian town of Narva.

The Allies were making progress, but the war was far from over. People were dying by the hundreds every day.

My first view of the Kingsbury Ordnance plant was inspiring only for its scale. Spread out across almost twenty square miles of former farmland (dozens of farmers had been evicted in 1940, when the War Department decided to locate an ordnance plant here) four miles south of the town of LaPorte, population 16,000.

Having changed into my suit in the men's room of the LaPorte Greyhound station, I had walked that last leg, after being dropped by a trucker in downtown. Fortunately, that morning dawned clear if cold.

Aside from the sheer size, what struck me first about KOP was the number of railroads, literally running east-west and north-south on the facility's perimeter. (This was surely why this location had been chosen for the plant, allowing for easy shipment to both coasts and to the south.)

I was also mesmerized by the sight of seven huge concrete structures—they were too large and too long to call bunkers—laid out in a row with what appeared to be half a mile's distance between. Rail sidings ran from the main tracks to the north side of each super-sized bunker. Trucks were lined up at the south.

South of these was a burn pit, which belched a toxic cloud I could taste at a distance of at least a mile.

The structures and pit were enclosed by barbed wire. Outside it, on a broad flat dirt road that led back to Highway 35, was a collection of administrative buildings that looked like taller versions of the barracks at Camp Grant.

People were scurrying between the buildings and not, to my eye, having an easy time of it. There were still patches of snow on the ground, and I could not see any actual sidewalks, just bare frozen paths, so lumpy and pockmarked with ice that pedestrians hobbled much as I did with a torn-up knee.

Following the directions in my letter from February 28th, I located Building One, marched inside, and presented myself and my letter to the first secretary I saw.

As I waited for her to disappear into her boss's office and return, I realized something: at least half of the people I had seen so far were women.

I would soon learn that KOP employed close to twenty thousand people, making it a bigger "city" than LaPorte.

And that, yes, half of them were women, a fact that was then beyond my experience in school and baseball.

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The secretary told me that Mr. Swenson would see me, and I entered a standard office where a fat, tired-looking man in his forties waited, frowning.

"Good morning, Mr. Kramer, welcome to KOP." He had my original letter on his desk along with what appeared to be other related paperwork. "Everything seems to be in order. I believe we can get you started right away."

This seemed precipitous, but there was a war on. And no doubt munitions plants like Kingsbury were desperate for chemists of any kind, even newly minted ones.

It may tell you my frame of mind that it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be hired, or that I would have any objections.

He told me the salary, two thousand a year ("it would be more if you had a master's, of course"), and assigned me to housing in a dorm at Kingsford Heights, another two miles to the south, out of the danger zone. "There are buses every morning and afternoon, fare's a nickel each way. You will be charged twenty-eight dollars a month for your room. Food is available in the dorm for a small fee. Everything else is up to you."

"Where will I be working?"

Swenson opened his mouth to tell me, but at that moment the door opened, and another man entered so quickly I thought he would bounce off Swenson's desk.

The new man was much younger, close to my age and height, with the darkest eyes I've ever seen. He rushed in, all smiles and hail-fellow-well-met.

"Kramer! Glad you made it! I'm Charlie Finley!"

It's worth saying that in 1944 men wore suits unless they did manual labor. I was wearing my best, only, much-mended gray item, and even Mr. Swenson was garbed in a blue suit with shiny elbows.

This Finley was wearing a frankly beautiful new brown three-piece that must have cost two

weeks' wages.

Yet, as we shook I was surprised to find that his hand was rough, that of a steelworker, not a personnel executive. He turned to Swenson. "Is he all signed up?"

Swenson seemed flustered, surprising to me, since I assumed that he, as personnel manager, out-ranked this exuberant young man. "Nothing we can't handle later. Let me give him a temporary badge."

Finley clapped me on the shoulder. "Come with me."

Before I realized it, I was outside in the cold wind, trying to remain upright on the frozen path leading first to the gate surrounding the pillboxes, a quick entrance past the armed soldiers at the gate, then on a long march toward the middle one.

"Each of these monsters," Finley said, "is devoted to a single kind of ordnance. They call them 'lines.' Twenty-pound fragmentation bombs on One Line, fifty-caliber on Two, forty-millimeter artillery shells on Three, and so on."

I was finally able to return to my question of the day. "Which line am I working on?"

"None, in that sense. Most of the line work is done by women, our WOWs, Women of War. Small hands and patience, and they like wearing those white gloves. You're going to be in the Chemical Lab." He pointed to a smaller bunker near the base of Three Line. "They work on everything there, supervising the initial mix and manufacturing, and riding herd on the loading and testing."

"I don't know anything about any of this," I told him. "Why there?"

"Son, nobody knew anything about any of this when they arrived, least of all me." He laughed. I was about to ask him what his job was when he said. "How's the pitching arm?"

"Good enough. Is it going to be important in my work?"

"Oh hell no. But we not only have a company league, we have an actual traveling all-star team, and I'm the manager." He smirked in a way that would become very familiar to me. "It can be a great way to, shall we say, supplement your income."

"I'm going to tell you a secret." And here he put his arm across my shoulders and pulled me close. There were no humans within five hundred yards, if not more. "Your F.B.I. check had several pages on your baseball career, which caught my eye, let me tell you."

"It must have mentioned my injury." I rotated my left arm as a demonstration. It didn't hurt, but I hadn't thrown a baseball in two and a half years.

"In great detail, but come on, Lefty, you know the difference between a professional-level ballplayer and a good amateur. You could probably throw right-handed and strike out most of the batters you'll face. I'm a good amateur player, and I know the limitations."

"We can also use your speed and hitting."

Even seventy-six years later, I can still recall how angry and disappointed I was to learn that my new career in chemistry, my contribution to the war effort, was due to baseball.

"You never told me what you do, Charlie."

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that. I'm sort of a deputy to the chief engineer, technically in production, meaning that I oversee everything that comes into KOP and everything that goes out. I don't know much about science, frankly. I see myself as a manager, cracking the old whip."

None of this was encouraging. I was beginning to regret my hasty choice of Kingsbury, and I'd only been on the site for an hour. But we had reached the solid-looking door to the Chemical Lab Building.

"Speaking of managing, how do you get along with . . . eccentric types?"

"What do you mean?"

"Weirdos. Bookworms. Head in the clouds, men like that. Nothing like ballplayers."

"Well, Mr. Finley," I told him, "I've been in a liberal arts college most of the past four years."

My glib response belied my anger and frustration. If Finley noticed, he pretended that he didn't. All I got was a big smile and another clap on the shoulder.

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"Everyone calls us the Siberians."

Ten minutes later and I was perched on a folding chair in the "bullpen" of the Chem Lab, an

open space dominated by an ancient conference table that looked to have been salvaged from a garbage dump: it was weathered and scratched, and one corner had somehow broken off.

The chairs were mixed, also appearing to have been salvaged. There was a scarred and stained Formica counter along one wall with a sink and a coffee pot. Cupboards held some snacks, I would learn, though not many and very little variety. (America's food industry was still rationing sugar.)

There was a large bulletin board on the facing wall, filled with a calendar and a multitude of notices from KOP ADMIN—and several strange images, covers from what appeared to be a pulp magazine called *Astounding Science Fiction*. They showed a strapping man in what I assumed was futuristic garb in front of fanciful shiny vehicles of some sort.

There were seven Siberians scattered around, some sitting like me, others leaning against the walls. All of us wore the same type of white shirt, most with ties as well. A couple of them had jackets.

Most appeared to be under thirty-five, except for the speaker, a fit, bespectacled man in his fifties named Edward E. Smith. He had gray eyes and graying hair with a hint of red. "Ted to my family, Doc to these characters," he had said upon introduction.

"I'll play along," I said, seeing the eager looks on the Siberian faces, like children with a secret. "Why Siberians?"

"Because we've been exiled here," Smith said.

"To keep you safe?"

"Oh, these walls are sixteen inches thick where they face the Lines, and no less than a foot everywhere else. A whole bunker could blow up and we'd barely know about it.

"No, Siberia because we're all ornery cusses who are only interested in making the best weapons to end this war fastest. We don't give a hoot about the money or the perks—"

"—Or the damned quotas." This from a burly, dark-haired man of maybe 29, later known to me as Tug Tugwell, Ph.D. He had played football at Michigan State.

"Especially the quotas," Smith said. "We pour tetryl, we monitor production, we test for quality. Munitions pass perfectly or they don't get shipped. No one wants some mortar to blow up on a G.I. who's trying to save his buddies and himself."

Who could argue with that? "Then I'm proud to be a Siberian."

"You'll be a Siberian when you prove yourself," another man said. This one was the oldest-looking, aside from Smith himself, floppy-haired, red-faced, his eyes hidden behind thick lenses. He looked so shaky that I feared for any one sharing a tetryl lab with him.

"Steady there, Comrade," Smith told the man. I would learn later that the territorial one was literally named Carl Marks. "We all have to prove our mettle. But we're not a country club. Far from it."

(For the record, in addition to Tugwell and "Comrade" Marks, the other Siberians were:

Harold "Swede" Gunderson

Roy "Hawk" Hawkins

Lawrence "Garbo" Garby

Marvin "Ivy" McCann IV

Another slightly older, high-strung individual named Hubert "Blondie" Wanacek.)

Then the door opened, and, to be a bit melodramatic, my life changed.

A woman entered, shedding an overcoat to reveal a polka dot dress. She was, I judged, in her mid-twenties, raven-haired, blue-eyed, slim, and a bit jittery. "And this is Kay Brannick," Smith said, fondly, and saving me one half of an introduction I immediately desired. "Without her we'd all be deported to someplace worse than Siberia!"

"Because none of you can follow simple rules." She held out her hand. "You must be Mr. Kramer. Nice to meet you." Her voice was—can I describe it after all these years? Eager and amused?

I choked a response as Kay glided to the end of the conference table and sat down, pulling a steno notebook from her purse. She seemed to be in a hurry. Smith resumed his briefing, running through a tedious list of status reports on various explosive mixes and deliveries, each

statement punctuated by some raucous comment from one of the Siberians. It was like watching a junior high science teacher trying to wrangle an unruly mob of twelve-year-old boys into making a baking soda and vinegar volcano.

Smith didn't seem to mind. At that time I thought he was a weak leader. (I could only imagine the managers of my baseball teams, each one more gruff than the last, hearing this kind of back-talk. The offender would have been slammed into the nearest locker.)

All through this cacophony Kay took notes with a serene confidence notable only for what I took to be a charming gesture: as she wrote, using her left hand like me, she frequently placed her right hand over it. To steady herself? Or just an unconscious tic? I didn't care. Other than Smith himself, and silent Lefty Kramer, she seemed to be the only adult in the room. The only woman, obviously, and perhaps that was no coincidence.

I did catch one or two Siberians glancing her way with undeniable longing after some jocular remark, exactly like that of high school boys pining for attention from the cheerleader. It was silly rather than sad, the silliness enhanced by the truth that these men were old enough to be in combat.

I never had a steady in high school or at Carleton, and certainly not while playing minor league ball. I had dates, of course, more than most of my fellow students and teammates. But as I look back on it, see that I was always reluctant to commit, feeling that a relationship would lead to marriage and the end of ambition.

And with my baseball home shifting every summer to a different Mid-American tank town, I had no chance to build a relationship. I was worse than a traveling salesman of that era, since those loverboys hit the same towns every year if not several times a year.

Well, on that day in March 1944 I knew I would probably be at KOP for some time. Kay's presence promised to make it more interesting.

"Say, Doc, got our man all squared away?" Finley had arrived. This was the first, but nowhere near the last time, he demonstrated an uncanny and disturbing ability to appear like magic. I later realized that he wore soft-soled shoes for exactly this purpose.

"We've covered the basics," Smith said.

Clearly he wanted to say more, but Finley didn't care. "Let me have him for a while; then he's yours for the duration." Hearing the word "duration" reminded me that we were making armaments, that there was a war on, that men like me, and Finley and the Siberians, were dying on beaches and hillsides and the seas. In those days we would occasionally concentrate on matters unrelated to war—but trust me, it was never out of our thoughts.

It was obvious even then that Smith and the Siberians, and Kay Brannick, all seemed resigned to interruptions like this from Finley. They simply turned away from me as if I'd never been introduced.

Finley led me down a path that was different from the one connecting the Chem Lab with the main gate.

We were walking south, away from the lab and the line structures beyond, the admin area to our right. There was nothing in front of us but a few storage tanks and some idled trucks. "What's out here?"

"Patience, my son." I found this irritating: Finley was essentially my age. "Did Smith tell you anything about his background?"

"He only talked about things I needed to know here, where I might fill in."

"Smith is also a writer!" Finley grinned. "He's published about a half dozen pulp serials, Buck Rogers stuff, 'scientifiction' is the word. Clearly a sideline, he says, and he's given it up for the war. No wonder. Seems like a lot of work for the money."

"How much money could he make?"

"I asked him. Says his best rate was a penny a word for one of those things, the last one. Seven hundred and fifty bucks for months of work, and no guarantee that anyone will buy the silly thing. There are better ways to make a living, believe me."

"But pulp writing aside, Smith had a job as a chemist before coming to KOP. And get this . . ." Finley smiled as if he were about to deliver the punchline to the best joke in the history of

humor. “He made doughnuts.”

“What?” I was picturing Smith in a white smock and a paper hat behind a counter, a tray of old fashioned or glazed donuts in his hand.

“He spent, I don’t know, twenty years designing the mixes for doughnuts. I guess they’re not just some old family recipe. And, even better . . .” Here Finley grabbed my lapels. “He was considered the champion donut mix guy in the whole damn country.”

He found this hilarious. I thought it spoke well of the man. “He must have given up a lot of money to come here and do war work, at his age.”

Finley liked this even more. “Oh, the F.B.I. found out he’d been laid off back in 1940. I’m sure he had some kind of dispute with the management. He was lucky the war came along. Now,” he said, before I could hear anything else that made me dislike him, “I present ‘Finley Field!’”

As we walked around one of the storage tanks, we came to a broad flat area that was, like most of the terrain at KOP that day, still mostly hard-packed snow or dead grass.

But even with that I could spot a low mound of earth and base paths.

“This is where we play?” Yes, it was a baseball diamond, but without stands or even a few benches and no backstop. “No fences?”

“Oh, we put everything up when the season starts. We have a bunch of intramural teams that play here, but the real action is with the plant team, the Kingsbury Koppers. For the past two seasons we’ve been competing against town teams all over Indiana.”

“How have you done?” Town ball was big in the Midwest in those days. There were teams that could have done well against D, C, or even B level pros.

“Not nearly as well as I’d like, which is why you’re here.”

“Other than making explosives for the American military.”

“You’ll get plenty of that. But all work and no play, right?”

I didn’t remind him that for a professional ballplayer, the game really wasn’t “play.” And standing in the cold late winter breeze on this muddy stretch of ground, I was in no mood to think about testing my injured shoulder, ribs, and knee.

“We’re going to start practicing next week. First game is April 7th against Rolling Prairie right here.”

As we made our careful way back to the Chem Lab, I asked about the rest of the team, hearing pretty much what I expected: a couple were veterans of town ball, one had played in college, the rest were high school “stars” from cities big and small. Our likely opponents had the same mix. “Except for an ace like you, Kramer.”

Back at the Chem Lab, Finley opened the door as if the place belonged to him. Smith’s briefing had ended, and the Siberians dispersed to their caves, I imagined.

Only Kay Brannick remained, firing up the coffee pot. I will admit that all I wanted at that moment was for Finley to depart and leave me to spend time Kay.

But when Finley said to Kay, “Why don’t I walk you back to admin?” she said, “Thanks but no. I have to deliver messages to Four Line.” And with the briefest of smiles at me, she picked up her notebook and her overcoat, and walked out.

I have already noted the general Siberian appreciation of Kay Brannick and characterized it as immature, almost puppy-like.

Watching Finley watching her depart, however, was to witness such pure and obvious lechery that I was embarrassed and suddenly protective.

Not that I had the courage to speak up. What I said was, “What’s the story with Kay Brannick? Is she married, involved?”

“Oh you baseball boys with your girls. The lovely Miss Brannick is indeed single, and I got here first. Am I clear?”

I had been in situations where baseball teammates and I found ourselves chasing the same woman. How these resolved depended on the nature of the chase—was the woman in question simply thought to be an easy lay, or was there an emotional attraction? With the former, the solution was quick, if sometimes involving shoving or some other form of male dominance nonsense. Or whether one party had seniority over the other, as in coach to player.

If one of us had a crush on our target, it was more difficult. (The woman's feelings rarely concerned us. The possibility that a woman might find both men of interest was, well, scientific.)

"Sure thing," I said. So articulate.

Finley smiled. "There are other fish to fry here, Lefty. Ten thousand of them."

I think I just grunted at that. Finley was headed out the door, but turned for one last word. "By the way, you should thank me for keeping you out of uniform."

"What do you mean?"

"The army approved your reenlistment last month, but I wrote them and got you classified as a vital defense worker for the duration."

Thus ended my first and best day with Charles O. Finley.

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And thus began my indoctrination in the art and craft of creating bombs. I spent several weeks learning all about pelleting and testing chemical compositions for different kinds of explosives, from incendiary to tracer to igniter. Opting to specialize in forty millimeter, I became an expert in TNT "pours," in "miking" them to size and ensuring that they were free of cavitation prior to their transfer to the Three Line.

My melt-pours had a very low rate of rejection, better than most of the Siberians who were, I learned, considered to have the highest quality explosives of any ordnance plant in the country. Very soon I had the sense—familiar to me from my season with the Commodores during a winning streak—that I was on a great team, and helping it become so.

I even had a small office next to Tug Blackwell's and across the hall from the larger one Doc Smith shared with Kay Brannick.

However, I was not yet a full member of the Siberians. Even with Doc Smith's graciousness, and Tug's grudging instruction, I was an obvious outsider—like a ballplayer newly traded from a rival team. Conference room chatter still ceased whenever I entered, at least for a while. I was invited out for a beer by Tug, but only him and only once. When I rode the bus to and from KOP, none of the other Siberians sat with me—though to be fair, it was rare to see any of them on the same bus. I believe they took the earlier one to, and the last one from, the plant.

They were a clannish bunch to begin with, and I began to suspect that they saw me—in spite of any skills I might have demonstrated—as the man from Charlie O. A spy or a stooge.

I resolved to change that belief, starting with Doc Smith.

* * *

During my first week I had taken a moment to examine the items on the conference room bulletin board.

The magazine covers promoted something called *Lensman*, apparently written by a "Skylark Smith." At least those from 1939 issues did.

But there was one from November 1941 that identified the author of "Second Stage *Lensman*" as "E. E. Smith, Ph.D."

I had never been a reader of scientific fiction. To my mother's disappointment, I had never been much of a reader at all. (You can't spend hours with your nose in a book, as we used to say, and still be a good athlete. The other guy is going to be out there bouncing or throwing a ball.) I worked my way through a few boys' book adventures, mostly historical or biographies of people like Ben Franklin.

I had seen Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon in the funny pages, of course, and had some memory of a movie serial starring one or the other. Comics and serials were amusing in the same way Superman was, but flying superhumans, rocket ships, rayguns, other planets? Alien beings? They just didn't interest me.

(Here is where honesty compels me to add, "then.")

One morning perhaps three weeks after I arrived at KOP I was in the conference room in search of coffee. No one else was present and the pot was empty.

So I began opening cabinets in search of some Folger's or Chock Full O Nuts.

What I found was a stack of pulp magazines, the very same *Astounding Science Fiction*

whose covers graced the bulletin board. (Several of the volumes were coverless, obviously the source of the art work.)

I had twenty minutes before I needed to be on Line Three and sat down to sample the epic.

I chose to start with "Second Stage Lensman," the most recent and, frankly, the one with the most intriguing covers.

I had barely opened the magazine, which was already shedding flakes of pulp paper, and read the first few pages before I was plunged into some ancient conflict between Mentor of Arisia and entities from a place called Boskone as a man named Kimball Kinnison prepared to marry the brilliant Clarissa, but might not have time as Earth was in danger—

"Well, what do you think?"

I looked up and Doc Smith was in the doorway, empty coffee cup in hand.

"Very imaginative," I said, adding quickly, "but I've only read five pages."

"It's not mandatory. In fact, it's perfectly jake with me if you never read another page." He filled his cup, then sat down. "If you do persist, however, I would suggest going back to the beginning of the saga. *Galactic Patrol*."

I carefully shuffled the pile of pulps until I found several issues from 1937. "Here they are."

It was obvious that this discussion embarrassed him. He actually blushed. "See here, Kramer. Writing was always a part-time activity, a way to exercise my imagination and possibly make a little extra money, at least now. When I wrote my first story, *The Skylark of Space*, I couldn't get it published for ten years, and even then I made \$125 that I split with my collaborator!" He found this more amusing than I would have.

"I did several sequels, then started the Lensman series. I have some devoted readers, including some of these Siberians. Tugwell is the best, or worst, depending on your point of view." He tapped the pile of pulps. "He was the one who brought in his collection. I never mentioned the stories at all, when I arrived. To me this is war work and pulp writing is just a distraction."

"So I'd be hurting my work by reading these?"

"I wouldn't go that far. A man needs balance in his work or the work suffers. Besides . . ." And here he peered at me with an entirely new look, as if testing me. "There is a lot of wild speculation in those stories. We live in an age of super-weapons and jet aircraft and even rockets. Writers in *Astounding* and similar magazines, not to mention a genius named H. G. Wells, thought of these things years ahead of time."

"Ah. Reading these stories, not just yours, might inspire me?"

"If you have that kind of mind," he said. "Not everyone does, and it's nothing to be ashamed of." Though his voice suggested that it absolutely was something to be ashamed of.

Just then Kay entered, papers in hand, apparently surprised to find Doc lollygagging with me. She told him, "I looked these over and the math checks out fine. Not sure that the number of units will satisfy production."

"The war is a hungry beast," Doc said, checking Kay's calculations, making a single annotation with a pencil before handing everything back to her. "As always, please make sure we get Finley's signature."

"He's never far away," Kay said. Forcing a smile, she left.

"She seems smart and capable," I said, a general statement when I wanted to grab Doc by the lapels and compel him to tell me everything he could about his secretary. I suspected such passion would not be welcomed.

"Very capable and objectively brilliant," Doc said. "She's got a degree in physics, or at least most of it. I think she left school a few units short because of the war."

This was one of the most surprising statements I heard at KOP. "I didn't know that was possible. Where did she go to school?" There had been co-eds at Carleton since it opened in the 1860s, but they were limited in what they could study, and forced to live off-campus. I was vaguely aware, then, that a small number of universities would admit women to engineering or science programs, though I could have counted them on one hand.

"Case Western in Cleveland," Doc said.

I had been hired almost sight unseen simply because I had a degree. "Then why is she just a

secretary?"

Here Doc laughed so hard I thought his glasses would fall off. "My father used to say that women could be pretty or smart, but not both. I tend to agree, though Miss Brannick has forced me to reconsider that belief at times.

"But what else can she be, especially here? Women have a place in this world, and it's not calculating tetryl or using a slide rule. If not for the fact that she has a slight tremor, she'd be wearing white gloves and working as a WOW.

"And don't say 'just a secretary.' She's the one who keeps this operation running smoothly and corrals these Siberians when they get rambunctious."

I changed the subject. "What do you think of our Mr. Finley?"

Given the time it took for him to answer, I believe I had stumped Doc. Finally he said, "He's an intelligent young man, has experience as a miner so he knows what it's like to work with your hands." During my single session with Tugwell I had learned that Doc Smith had done a great deal of manual labor, from lumberjacking to farming to railroad work, and if not for an accident—jumping out of a second story window to escape a fire, breaking a leg, several ribs and his wrist, making manual labor impossible—he might never have gone to college. Given this, I sensed that Finley's background as a steel worker was one small point in his favor. "He possesses a great deal of energy."

"And yet."

"I'm not sure he is as devoted to the war as he is to his own pursuits, political and financial."

"And sexual?"

Now I had made Doc Smith uncomfortable. "Isn't there a pour starting on Three?"

"There certainly is."

I stood up and carefully placed the various pulps back in their cupboard, in chronological order.

When I turned around, Doc Smith was gone.

I was encouraged by the encounter. Certainly I did not get the idea that Smith considered me a hopeless outsider, at least not yet.

But I also realized that I ought not to play cards with this man.

* * *

Several days later, the first lovely spring Sunday encouraged me to explore the inside-the-fence grounds instead of grimly marching from the main gate to the Chem Lab as I did most days.

To my surprise, making my first circuit on foot of the entire structure, I discovered a door on the north side of the building that didn't open. It bore a painted sign, long faded, calling it the "Nitrosyncretic Storage, Keep Out!"

I had a degree in chemistry and had never heard of "nitrosyncretic."

There was no obvious lock, but the door was not going to be opened by the likes of me. In fact, when I touched the knob I had the distinct sensation that my hand never really touched the metal fixture.

Mystery 1.

The next day I did some exploring from inside the Chem Lab, which, while a fraction of the size of the Line structures, was still a big building—and honey-combed, I found, with dark, many-angled hallways, offices ranging in size from normal to those, like mine, that were little more than cubby holes, the conference room, various lavatories, and several other locked doors, most of them unmarked.

Somewhere on what appeared to be the inside north I found a door that, while locked, appeared to be opened and closed frequently. (Some of the other mystery doors had cobwebs on them.)

This one was labeled "Wreck Room—No Admittance Without Authorization!"

It, too, appeared to be not only locked from within, but slippery to the touch.

Mystery 2, or at least 1, part B.

I had no time to play detective, however. The quotas for forty millimeter seemed to rise every other day, and that pressure spread across all the Lines. Doc Smith said, "I am not revealing any

secret, since I don't have access, but I believe the need for munitions is due to the imminent invasion of Europe."

No one tried to argue the point. It wasn't just our own production quotas. All of KOP seemed to be doubly busy. The trains that rumbled up to each of the Lines every day were now constant and constantly noisy.

It made our work more difficult, but was also exciting.

During this insanely busy month, in addition to twelve-hour days and adjusting to life in my Kingsford Heights dorm, I had to devote time to my secondary career—semi-pro baseball player.

The day I arrived at KOP was, as I have written, in early March, still too early for proper baseball weather. The ground was frozen in places, and where it had thawed, it was mud.

This did not deter Charlie Finley.

He acknowledged the situation to the extent that our first workouts took place in the corner of a large warehouse inside the fence, where I threw my first pitches in something like two years, to a catcher named Harold French, known, naturally, as "Frenchy."

Twenty-six years old and a fork lift driver by trade, Frenchy was a large block of a fellow, a good target for a pitcher with a suspect arm. I remember him as gentle and very soft-spoken. I knew that Finley had briefed him on my background and injury. "I don't want you doing anything more than lobbing the pill," he said. "I don't care if you roll the ball to me."

That's really what I did in our first session, under the lights a week after I arrived at KOP. I didn't try to fully extend the arm and certainly made no effort to throw hard, merely hefting the ball and first tossing it underhand.

Success in that encouraged me to throw overhand, nothing more than a lob.

This seemed to go well. I wasn't actually pitching, and in fact was barely throwing. But without pain in my shoulder and especially in my knee, since it bore the weight of my throwing motion, serving as my anchor.

All through this I was aware that Finley was off to one side, watching me intently. He was joined by a man of forty in an army uniform. I was too far away to see the rank insignia, but later learned that this was Colonel Bruck, one of the Army Ordnance officers who "commanded" KOP.

Glancing at them, between pitches, I noticed a change in Charlie O's posture and mannerisms. Gone was his cock of the walk, hail-fellow superiority. He was actually kissing up to Bruck, laughing all too loudly at every sentence the man uttered, and hastening to offer him a cigar.

Here was another clue to his remarkable personality . . . the ability to make friends with power.

Perhaps energized by this realization, I finally broke one off, firing what may have been a seventy-mile per hour fastball, still a bit less than my velocity prior to the injury, and not only felt no pain, but heard a loud, satisfying smack in Frenchy's glove.

He pulled it off and shook his left hand. "Goddammit, that hurt!"

"Get used to it," Finley boomed. I looked at him, and he was smiling like a new father. "Don't overdo it, Lefty! Maybe take a few swings!"

In another corner, Finley had set up a batting cage surrounded by nets. There was a long, narrow alley of sorts, with one of the Kops' other pitchers hurling slow straight pitches.

Given the confines of the building, though, this contraption was wildly asymmetrical—a right-handed batter could belt a ball some distance, but a player who hit from the other side of the plate, like me, had netting almost in his face. The first swings I took found me quickly dodging balls that rebounded toward my head.

To great laughter from Finley and Bruck. (There weren't many left-handed hitters on the Koppers.)

Remember this, however: pitchers were often the best all-around athletes on any baseball team, especially in those long-ago days when they were required to bat—no designated hitters.

Once I conquered my immediate fear of bouncing balls, I concentrated on making good contact and quickly blasted several balls into the furthest reaches of the net, each impact resulting in a sharp, echoing crack that was louder than anything generated by previous batters. (I will immodestly state that while I was a good pitcher, I was a better hitter. But if you are left-handed in

baseball, you are urged to throw.)

Finley's pleased laughter echoed in the hall. "That's my superstar!"

Bruck having departed, Finley was waiting for me when I emerged from the batting nets. "You don't have a glove of your own."

"Mr. Finley," I said, "I don't have any proper equipment."

"Let's get you some."

"Sure." I didn't have much cash, so I was hoping this would be some days later, after I'd received my first paycheck.

"Now." Finley read the look of financial panic on my face. "Don't worry about the money."

* * *

I have already described Finley's suits, which were new and expensive, the kind of clothing almost impossible to obtain during the war years.

He also had a car, a 1941 Packard Clipper, a four-door, two-toned beast that looked to have been the last car off the assembly line before American automakers shifted to war work. Parked in a place of honor in front of the Admin Building, it shone like a lighthouse compared to the beat-up, dusty, ancient models used by even the KOP senior staff.

"Where are we going?" I said, climbing into the shotgun seat and sinking into luxury. (Most of my travel across the Midwest had been in buses.)

"Downtown LaPorte, to Maston's Department Store."

"They're open on Sunday?"

"We all have to make sacrifices for the war." He smiled. "Especially when you've got twenty thousand customers who can't shop the other six days a week. It's only a little past four. We've got an hour before they close."

The trip from KOP to downtown LaPorte was swift, though we drove right past Matson's. "Wasn't that the store?" I said.

"I want to show you something."

After several turns and twists in the sprawling residential section of the city, we entered a dreamland of large, well-kept homes on good-sized lots.

We slowed in front of a white mansion that vaguely resembled the White House. "Home sweet home," Charlie said.

He pulled to the curb.

"Are we going in?"

"The wife frowns on sudden visitors."

This was the first I'd heard that Finley was married. I wasn't surprised, even though it was obvious that he was chasing every woman at KOP, not just Kay.

Now he seemed to be seeking a comment from me. "Beautiful house," I said, not knowing what else to offer. "You're a lucky man."

He smiled and put the Packard back in gear. "We make our own luck, Lefty."

(It will be no surprise that I later learned that the mansion on Arbor Lane was not his.)

Back in downtown, in two-story Matson's, we found the sporting goods section and a pleasant woman clerk named Edwina who was probably twenty. "You're new here," Finley said to her, as I concentrated on the skimpy selection of baseball gloves for left-handers.

There was, in fact, exactly one new glove, a Rawlings Deep Well Pocket model not unlike ones I had used in high school. Finley picked up a new baseball, pulled it out of its box, and told me to step out back and "test before you buy." I glanced at Edwina, who nodded uncertainly.

The alley behind the store was empty and lined with brick walls, suitable for a few moments of bounce-catch, though it did pain me to rough up a shiny new Wilson in that way.

When I went back inside, Finley and Edwina were at the cash register. "As I promised," he said, "all taken care of, the glove and the ball. Consider it an early birthday present. I'll meet you at the car."

I thanked Finley, smiled at Edwina, who was giggling about something, and headed outside.

Finley joined me a moment later. "Say, do you think you can make it back to Kingsford Heights on your own?"

Edwina was locking up the store, and it was obvious that she and Finley were going off together. "Sure," I said, "I can take the bus or hitch." At that time I didn't know if the buses ran on Sundays, but with stores in LaPorte open for shopping, I had hopes.

Especially because I wanted to be far away from Charlie Finley.

Who was beaming in delight. "Great! Oh, I have a special task for you."

Picture this: I have just witnessed one of my supervisors making open arrangements for an adulterous liaison, requiring me to get back to Kingsford Heights on my own.

And he still had a "request."

I was weak, perhaps with anger, though I can't be sure that hunger and stupefaction at the depths of human folly weren't contributors. "What?"

"Smith's Siberians, they're up to no good."

"They're meeting every quota and apparently putting out the highest quality armaments in the entire country."

Finley was nodding, even seemed proud of those facts. "Yes, yes, I know. But they are on site almost around the clock, and some of those hours they are doing work that isn't putting out quality armaments."

"I don't believe it."

"I found out that the electricity use in that damn Chem Lab runs twenty-four hours with almost no break. It's higher after midnight, in fact.

"Come on, Kramer, even with the war we shut down the Lines for a few hours every day." We had to, in order to perform repairs on the feeders and belts if nothing else. "I warned you that they were clannish."

I mumbled words to the effect that the Siberians were still treating me like a probationary member.

"Exactly. And that's just wrong on the face of it." He drew me close, a salesman closing the deal. "I tell you what, loverboy. You find out what Doc and his merry men are up to, tell me . . . and Kay Brannick's all yours."

I was not especially enlightened by standards of the 1940s. As I've mentioned, I was familiar with the whole obnoxious business of men swapping women like, well, baseball cards.

But this seemed worse.

Nevertheless, I said yes. I told myself that I wanted or even needed to know what was in the Wreck Room. And if nothing else, I might have spared Kay Brannick some unwanted attentions.

Oh yes, that glove: a month later I received a bill from Maston's for six dollars.

Finley had never paid for it.

* * *

"Catching up on your reading?"

Two days later I was in the conference room taking a fifteen-minute break while Line Three reloaded for its third run of the door, when Kay appeared.

I brandished the magazine. "Isn't that why they're here?"

"Take it easy, Kramer. It's not *Spicy Stories*. I will confess that I read the first two installments of *Second Stage Lensman* myself when I first got here."

"How many installments are there?"

"Four," she said, smiling wickedly. "Twice as many as necessary. Though perhaps that isn't fair. There's so much . . . space battling and raygun war that the story could probably do with some breathing space. Some real people with human problems. A love story."

"This hardly sounds like a recommendation."

"If the Siberians are typical *Astounding* readers, romance is wasted."

I found this encouraging, since it seemed to eliminate them as rivals for Kay's favor. "You don't see Blondie Wanacek pining for more love as opposed to space battles?"

"You boys and your damned nicknames." Even as I agreed with the sentiment, I was mildly shocked by her profanity. (Boy, times really changed in that regard.) "They aren't even accurate. Wanacek is 'Blondie' but Gunderson, who really has light-colored hair and a ruddy complexion, is 'Swede.' What you all afraid of? That if you use a man's given name you'll be seen as soft?"

"I apologize on behalf of the male sex."

She grunted, hardly a sign of forgiveness or understanding. "Do you have a cigarette? And why am I asking, you don't smoke."

"Sorry." I felt that I had just failed a key test. (A Kay test?)

"Don't apologize. It is a filthy, dangerous habit. You're better off without it." She held out her hand, which trembled ever so slightly. "I have an essential tremor, unfortunately. It's something I've lived with for years, and really only notice when I need to perform fine work, like needlepoint, where I am, let me assure you, a menace."

"But when I go without a cigarette for too long, it just gets worse."

"I'll be sure to have a pack on hand, next time I see you. For emergencies."

She blinked, was silent for a delicious second, then laughed. "You're not bad, Kramer, all things considered."

"Thanks. Neither are you, given the company you keep."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"These *Astounding* readers, the icy Siberians."

"Freezing you out?"

"I can't complain about anything on a professional front. Tug has been a good teacher, and Doc always seems to be available when I have a question."

"But you're left out of, what, Friday beer call? The Siberians don't do that."

"I just get the feeling that there are things going on here that I'm not privy to." I pointed toward the north side of the building. "This Nitrosyncretic Lab or Wreck Room, for example."

"Do you have keys to every office in admin? Or to any of the Lines other than Three?"

"Clearly not."

"They why does it matter?"

I shrugged and tried to be honest. "I'm a member of the team, the team is clearly doing something that excludes me. Call it petty jealousy or a genuine need to be a real part of the team."

"As in possibly contributing?"

"Depending on what they're doing."

She glanced at the scattered pulps on the table. "I'm not sure you have the proper aptitude."

"I'm not smart enough?"

"That is not what I said at all." She shook her head, as if to say, men and their egos.

I was never then, or since, good at lying or any kind of deception. I was never going to be Charlie Finley's spy. "Kay," I said, "you should know this: our friend Mr. Finley suspects there is something strange going on here and has given me the unwanted job of finding out what it is."

"All the more reason to keep you in the dark, Mr. Kramer." She smiled. "What is the word? You will have deniability."

"Yes, in case he tries to beat a confession out of me. But if Finley has *me* skulking around, you can bet he has others."

"True, you wouldn't be the first."

"So bring me into the tent."

"How does that help, assuming the Siberians need your help?"

I was operating on impulse, not logic. I had no plan. But I said, "If I know what's happening, I can better understand rumors and statements from those who don't. I can be an early warning system, or maybe I can even engage in those conversations and turn them into jokes."

Kay's expression evolved from slightly raised eyebrows and a patient skepticism to crinkly-eyed bemusement to a series of nods accompanied by pursed lips. "What a load of malarkey, Kramer."

Before I could protest, she took my hand. "But heartfelt malarkey. You need to know something first, for your safety."

That was alarming. It was wartime, and there were soldiers with guns everywhere you looked, but they were there to protect engineers like me, weren't they?

And Finley was tough-talking, no doubt, but violent?

"No one told you about Quinton? Not even Finley?"

“No one. I never heard about any Quinton.”

“Well, it was just—one of those things, a tragedy. He was in Line Five doing final quality checks on land mines, and one of them just blew. We later—well, Doc Smith later discovered that the firing pins in the mines hadn’t had a final inspection. About 3 percent of them were brittle and would simply break if you jostled them.”

She actually got tears in her eyes.

“And it only took one, right?”

She nodded. “The whole side of the building blew out. There was nothing left of him, I mean nothing. It was as if he never existed.”

“It is dangerous work. Doc made that much clear, and, well, look at the work we’re doing.” I had spent a lot of time, even in those first two weeks, wondering what it was like to be in the field surrounded by our products, needing to use them to save lives.

Hoping to lighten the mood, I said, “Did Quinton have a nickname?”

She laughed through those tears. “Heavens yes! They called him ‘Q-ball,’ something stupid like that. He was bald, you see.”

“At least it was accurate.”

She laughed again, wiping her tears. “Let’s go see the magic. Before I come to my senses.”

* * *

Even opening the Wreck Room door was a mysterious process. Kay had brought her purse, but instead of drawing out a metal key, she came up with a small metal cylinder much like cigar case, but with a light bulb on top and several studs on the side.

Kay pressed them in some obvious sequence, and the door clicked open.

“Interesting,” I said.

“Just wait.”

Immediately inside there was a screen, intended, I assumed, to keep the interior from being viewed through the open door.

The place was dark until Kay triggered the light switch. Again, it was not a normal unit, but a flat metal panel that seemed to be triggered by the cylinder in Kay’s hand.

The lights showed that the Wreck Room aka Nitrosyncretic Lab was a full two stories tall. And when we edged around the screen, I saw—well, even years later it’s difficult to describe.

Wonders and marvels, devices unlike any I had ever seen in my twenty-four years of life to that point, and not since.

Each corner held a workstation or table with instruments and wires running from it to a central panel. In the first corner there was a helmet that seemed suitable for a deep-sea diver, though smaller and studded with metallic additions as well as a pair of antennae.

In another, a metal platform that hovered above its workstation.

On the third lay what could only be a ray gun.

The fourth station was topped by a device much like an oscilloscope, its screen pulsing with a regularity that suggested waves on a lake.

In the middle, near what I was already thinking of as the central control console, were two other items covered in tarps. One was taller than a man and suggested a doorframe.

There were other instruments and devices, various tubes and lights. In that sense it reminded me of Dr. Frankenstein’s lab.

“What is all this?”

“I guess you’d call them Siberian hobby projects.” She slowly walked toward the first station, acting like a clerk demonstrating beauty products in a store. “Here we have a device that allows thought-to-thought transmission, the telepathy helmet. Your friend Blondie.

“Next to that, the inertialess drive from Swede Gunderson. Don’t touch it or it might blow through the front door.”

“What’s it supposed to do?”

“It would eliminate coal costs for railroads, for one thing. But it might also take humans into outer space.”

“Wow.”

In spite of those marvelous possibilities, I was already looking at the next table, where the tele-helmet rested.

"Now this item," Kay said, "the telepathy helmet, only works inconsistently, only when there's an especially receptive contact who is aware of what's happening. This is Tug's baby. He thinks it needs to be helmet-to-helmet."

"Makes sense." It strikes me now that I accepted this wild-eyed stuff very easily. "If that's true, it's a shame. You could listen in on Finley and wouldn't need me to warn you."

"Charlie Finley's thoughts are never a mystery."

I turned to the ray gun. It was the size of a large handgun, but silvery, with several studs on its grip and a reddish bell for a muzzle. "Is it wrong that I want to pick that up and shoot it?"

"You and every Siberian. I wouldn't advise it, in here."

"It works?"

"It emits a beam of concentrated light, not really powerful enough yet to do much damage, but it will burn a hole in a metal plate."

"Or a human being?"

"If only," she said. I wondered how many potential targets she had besides Finley.

Finally I reached the oscilloscope. "And what about this?"

"It's supposed to be a detector for, well, communications or at least signals from outer space."

"Who came up with that?"

Kay squared her shoulders and said, "I did." Before I could register the predictable astonishment, she continued. "Smith believes that there are intelligent beings elsewhere in the Galaxy, possibly even within our own Solar System, and I agree."

"Have you gotten any results on your signal scope?"

She considered her answer, then slipped into a mode I knew well, from every professor I had, saying, "I've actually collected pulses from above. They seem to originate from a single point in the sky, arriving every sixty days or so, just a weird bleep, then nothing."

"What could they be?"

"I've spent two years running through the possibilities, never forgetting that it might be some radio station in Chicago." She laughed. "My latest wild notion is that the pulses are from an alien race that just lives slower than we do. . . ." She saw the confusion on my face. "I believe that different creatures experience time at a different rate. Humans are slower than insects, for example."

"Have you ever wondered why you can't catch a fly by snatching at it, but only by moving very slowly?"

"I have to run and put up my glove to catch flies." My baseball joke failed instantly. "Sorry."

She tilted her head, offering a bit of forgiveness. "Anyway, I'm thinking the pulse people are sending us a letter or a number or a word at a time . . . but because they live at a different rate, it's almost too slow for us to comprehend." She tapped another machine on the workbench, a more familiar one for cutting wax records. "This records each pulse."

"Have you tried sending a pulse of your own?"

I was blessed by the prettiest smile Kay had yet shared with me. "That kind of effort requires more power than we have, and an actual transmission tower, among other things. Maybe after the war."

"That sort of contact would be the discovery of the age," I said, "even better than telepathy or the inertialess drive."

"Well, *I* think so." Implying that others did not.

"Kay," I said, "this was your idea, and you have a degree in physics—"

"Almost. I have six more credits and a thesis yet to do."

"As much as many these days. You should be one of the Siberians, or at least doing lab work, not . . ."

"Typing Doc's letters or filing? Don't worry, I resent it with a passion and resignation you can't begin to understand."

That statement certainly stopped me from pursuing that subject. So I said, "This seems like a

remarkable set of accomplishments for a small group operating in secret.”

“The Siberians actually self-selected for brains, imagination, and, frankly, bull-headedness. You put a barrier in their way, like lack of materials or money, or just tell them that something is impossible—it only lights a fire under them.”

“Are you telling someone about these discoveries? Not at KOP, I bet, but—”

“Doc has a good friend, another science fiction writer who works for the navy in Philadelphia and has contacts in the War Department. He has been trying to let them know that breakthroughs are being made, but the military is resistant.”

“Not invented here?”

“Yes. Also, what my father used to say, ‘old cavalry men want better horses, old sailors want faster ships.’”

I was amused by the quote but more fascinated by this bit of personal information. She had a father who was a bit of a wit.

Finally I stopped in front of one of the hooded items. “And these?”

“Failures or generous incompletes.” She gestured around us. “These are the successes, so far. For every one of those we had several complete failures. I mean, the whole project began with Tug’s attempt to build a better explosive, but we realized that our team was too small. And there are rumors that such work is being performed elsewhere, along with advanced aircraft and rockets.

“And now you know.”

“Thank you. I’ll do everything I can to protect this.” A thought occurred to me. “Do I tell the Siberians I’m onto them?”

“I would prefer that you not tell anyone right now. I’ll let you know when it’s safe.”

As we were leaving, I said, “Are the locks another project?”

“This was Quinton’s idea—the entire door is actually shifted out of phase.”

“You’ve lost me. I’m only a chemist.”

“Out of phase in time and space.” She held up the cylindrical “key.” “Unless you use this, you could hit that with an axe or a forty-millimeter shell, and it not only won’t open, it won’t show a mark.”

In spite of all the amazing inventions I’d seen in the past hour, this one impressed me the most, probably because I’d actually experienced it. I was dazzled by Kay’s attention and her presentation, but had not actually seen any of the Wreck Room inventions in action. I wondered if this whole business might be a form of Siberian hazing—“Let’s see how much malarkey we can get the new guy to believe.” (The fact that Kay had urged me to silence on the subject argued against this, of course.)

This mild skepticism didn’t stop me, the moment we were back in the conference room, from saying, “Would you like to have dinner sometime?”

“I’d like that.”

“This Sunday, six o’clock.”

“Perfect.”

“Details to follow.”

* * *

I had left the details vague because I had no idea where to take Kay for dinner, or how to get there. I’d faced problems like this before, in Decatur and elsewhere. Baseball players generally lived in boarding houses in the team towns, where there were usually several restaurants within walking distance.

(I went out, once, with an older divorcee who owned a car. That proved to be an interesting experience in many ways.)

There were no handy dining options at KOP, other than one of the cafeterias, of which the less said the better.

At the intersection of Highways 6 and 35, between KOP and Kingsbury Heights, where I lived, there was the JR Roadhouse. It was a converted barn that had once belonged to one of the farmers evicted from the area in 1940. It was where Tug had taken me for a beer my first

Saturday at KOP. It was not an impressive place even by roadhouse standards, with an uninviting layout (the bar immediately to your right as you entered, dining tables toward the back, cooking, however you might describe it, performed in a shed off to one side) and lighting that was too bright. It also smelled, well, like a barn.

As might be expected, the clientele was 90 percent KOP personnel, male laborers and soldiers, and of course WOWs. In addition to the WOW contingent, I suspected that a number of the women there were working gals.

In any case, the fact that it was the KOP company bar made it a no.

I thought about asking Tug for more palatable options, but he had taken me to the JR. So I asked Doc where he might take a date, should he be a single fellow.

“Jeannie and I,” Jeannie being Mrs. Smith, I knew by then, “have found a couple of spots in LaPorte. May I ask whom you’re taking out?”

“Kay Brannick.”

I had the satisfaction of seeing Doc Smith react with surprise. “In that case, I would suggest Jaeger’s. German food and a bit on the heavy side, but there are a variety of lighter options. And it’s off the beaten path, so to speak.”

I thanked Doc for the recommendation even as I wondered why he linked Kay and a specific restaurant.

* * *

Skulking around the Wreck Room wasn’t my only extracurricular activity, not remotely. After my first session in Finley’s indoor “training camp” I spent part of every workday hitting or throwing, often for as little as fifteen minutes (before my shift at Three Line, or after).

As the days grew longer, the weather became more tolerable, and the field took shape—with mowing, raking, the addition of portable bleachers, and even a scoreboard—practices moved outside.

I had little to do with my fellow Koppers outside of practice. Most were line haulers, truck drivers, even guards. I was the only scientist or engineer.

Several were 4-F, meaning we had more players wearing spectacles than any team I’d ever played on. The rest were II-B, deferred for war work.

They were decent fellows, though, ranging in age from eighteen to mid-thirties. And decent players—better than your best high school team.

To judge from the sidelong glances and the deference, my teammates had been told an exaggerated tale of my history and prowess. I saw no reason to disabuse them. They’d find out soon enough—as would I—how much better a player I was, if at all.

Finley was technically our manager, and he made a point of appearing at every practice, to no great effect. What he did was assign our positions and batting order. The rest of the time he played the tour master, escorting army officers and members of the LaPorte gentry to our field where he would demonstrate his authority by shouting loud, pointless encouragements on the order of, “Good contact, Frenchy!”

When we took a break, Finley led us all to a pile of cardboard boxes, which turned out to contain flannel uniforms, jerseys, knickers, and even stirrurred hose. “White sox and cleats are up to you.”

I was surprised that, given war shortages, Finley had been able to produce uniforms, until I saw that they had once belonged to the LaPorte High School Slicers. (The SLICER lettering had been removed and KOPS stitched over it.)

Which explained why so many of my teammates looked as though they were wearing a size too small: they were.

Our hats were a mix, making us look less like a team and more like a random collection of men with bats and gloves.

At our first game, the Prairie Run Runners looked even worse. Several of its players were wearing sweatshirts and dungarees rather than uniforms.

I had found, during my workouts, that while my arm would tolerate a fair amount of pitching, my knee was not suitable for running. I could cover ground and get around bases without pain,

but not at full speed. Part of this was due to three years of inactivity—with an injury, an academic schedule, and Minnesota weather, which can be miserable summer and winter, it was easy to avoid working out. I hoped I would be more mobile and faster as I got back into shape.

Finley was more interested in my bat and arm, of course. He told me I'd be batting clean-up, number four in the order, traditionally the spot for a power hitter. And playing right field, where there were fewer balls hit.

"And for the first few games, let's not strain your arm. We've got Goose McCutcheon pitching." Goose was a burly right-hander who ought to have had blinding speed, but really relied on a wicked slow curve.

I will admit that Finley was smart and solid on the basics of baseball.

He did, however, stray into uncharted territory with other innovations, such as tinting our baseballs a bright yellow.

We discovered this when we arrived at the KOP field and found the Prairie Run team, already present, in an uproar. The umpire, some LaPorte local (no doubt a crony of Finley's) was patiently explaining that there was nothing in the rules of baseball about the color of the horsehide, only that it couldn't be damaged.

That day was cloudy, threatening rain, and it was already late on a Saturday afternoon. Even from a distance, I had to admit that the yellow balls were easier to see.

* * *

Through six innings the score was tied, 5-5. I was actually overjoyed to be back on a ball field.

I had seen several of the Siberians in the crowd. Were any of them baseball fans? In those days the sport was second only to boxing in popularity, but my munitions colleagues didn't strike me as fans of any competitive physical activities.

From my post in right field, I thought I saw Tug Blackwell trying to explain matters to Blondie Wanacek. I would have paid money for a transcript of that exchange.

When we came off the field for the bottom of the sixth inning, I found Doc Smith lurking behind our bench. "You're looking good out there, Lucky."

I had just run down a long fly ball from one of the Runners, an effort that drained me. All I could do was nod and smile and say, "Don't congratulate me until I get through a couple of innings on the mound." Finley had told me that if the game stayed close, he would have me pitch the last two innings.

"I'll be here."

He actually seemed to be enjoying himself. "You ever play ball, Doc?"

"Only sandlot stuff. Well, at Idaho I played some intramural. Catcher."

"Where they put the smart guys."

"Or the guys who can't run. I couldn't throw well, either." He flexed his right hand, the one he had injured escaping a fire. "I was not a prospect, let's just say that."

His voice was genial, as always, but his eyes kept searching the crowd. "I saw a bunch of Siberians down the right field line," I said, assuming that was his target.

"I'm sorry, being rude. I was just . . . studying the crowd. Who comes out for a ball game and spends a dime on admission, and twice that for a hot dog or a Coke. Amazing what you learn counting the customers in each line." Smith grinned.

The concessions were being sold at tables, three on each side of the field. It appeared that as many people were lined up as were watching the action.

I had not considered the financial angles Finley might be working. "I hear that most movie theaters make their money on popcorn and Cokes, not ticket sales."

"I have heard that, too," Doc said, without making it clear that he believed it. "I think you're back in the field."

Right, our side had been set down one-two-three by the devilishly effective Rolling Prairie hurler.

Not long later I was to remember this passing conversation and note that Doc Smith was paying a lot of attention to Charlie Finley's finances.

* * *

With the score still tied, I took the mound in the top of the eighth inning, Frenchy behind the plate.

Having watched how the Runners flailed at McCutcheon's twisty offerings, I figured I could get by with a curve of my own, and the occasional knuckleball. I wouldn't need to throw 80 percent fastballs, which is what most amateur hitters expect.

I did, however, make my first pitch hard and high, sailing right over the un-helmeted head of the Runner pitcher. He ducked, of course, and then took his place in the batter's box with must less swagger.

Which made him easy pickings for a changeup, a slow curve, a fastball out of the strike zone, and he was gone.

I had the same kind of luck with the next two batters, and we were out of the inning.

Unfortunately, whoever was pitching for the Runners was equally adept. The Koppers went down in order.

I walked back to the mound, determined to set the Runners down one-two-three, then hope for a run from the Koppers. (I would be batting in the ninth, too.)

I still had commanding stuff, but where in the eighth the Runners hadn't been able to put a bat on the ball, now they were at least fouling off my pitches.

And then putting them in play.

On a decent field, with decent fielders, ground and fly balls would usually result in put outs.

Not at Kingsbury, not with my Koppers behind me.

Runner batter 1 slapped a bouncing grounder to third, which went right through the third basemen's legs, confusing him so thoroughly that the batter wound up on second base.

I struck out 2 after seeing him foul off six pitches.

Batter 3 took a ball and two strikes, then connected on a fly ball to right field, where my replacement failed to catch it.

There was no outfield fencing at the KOP field yet—the rolled-up wood and wire material was still piled down the right field line. It would be available for the next game.

The lack of fencing allowed Batter 3 to circle the bases, an "inside the park" home run, Batter 1 scoring ahead of him.

We were down now 7-5.

A bit angry, I threw nothing but fastballs to Batter 4, striking him out on three pitches. Two out.

Then I threw two curves to Batter 5, watching him watch them swoop past before blistering the heart of the plate, and Frenchy's hand, with the fastest fastball of the afternoon. Strike three.

In the bottom of the ninth, I batted leadoff and had the unsurprising experience of seeing a fastball from the Runner pitcher directed at my un-helmeted head, clear retaliation for my first offering.

I knew his next pitch would be away from me, on the outside corner, and was waiting for it, ripping it down the left field line over the Runner third baseman and far from the left fielder.

I could have walked around the bases.

7-6 now.

But my teammates let me down. Yes, they scabbled out a hit and a walk and had two on base, but ultimately a pop fly and a last strikeout sent the Koppers—and their "pro" pitcher—down to defeat.

I don't like losing, never have, and have come to believe that this drive is the single factor—not physical skill, coordination, speed, size—that separates superior athletes from the also-rans.

So I was in a bad mood as the game broke up, the Koppers scattering with various friends.

The Siberians went their way, Smith another.

"Tough break," Finley said.

"We should have won that game three or four different times."

"True. That's how it bounces, though."

"You don't seem to be unhappy for a losing manager."

He shrugged. "I made three hundred and forty dollars this afternoon."

“Even though we lost. You bet against your own team?”

He smiled. “Oh, I bet money on your victory, but little birds told me that Rolling Prairie had hired several ringers, so I made a series of side bets to protect myself, including a big one where the Runners had to win by two. So thanks for your home run.”

I suppose I mumbled “you’re welcome,” but I don’t really remember. I was too angry and confused.

* * *

Kay Brannick shared an apartment with three other women, two of them WOWs, a few blocks south of LaPorte’s main drag, Lincolnway.

Jaeger’s was on Lincolnway, so this date would be walking. I had forty fresh dollars in my pocket and, in spite of the fact that I was wearing my best and only suit, felt like quite the man about town. The King of LaPorte, if Charlie O. hadn’t claimed the title.

Catching the 4 P.M. bus from Kingsford Heights, I found myself with an hour to kill before picking up Kay at five to six.

Since my only previous visit had been to purchase a baseball glove and bear witness to Finley’s shenanigans, I had not had a chance to explore the town, which was nothing remarkable, based on my experiences in a dozen or more communities of similar size. I saw Matson’s, of course, but also spied a haberdasher’s and a barbershop, both open on these war Sundays, and regretted not taking the earlier bus so I could separate myself from some of my earnings.

There were dozens of people on Lincolnway, almost all of them walking. Several cars passed, not one, I was pleased to see, occupied by less than three passengers.

Some of them seemed to be family units, mom and dad and children, usually two. I wondered how many of these good people had sons or fathers or brothers or even women relatives in the service.

And where I would I be when the war ended? At this point in 1944, victory was still believed to be two or more years in the future. (Europe had to be conquered, and then Japan.) Would I be working in some other chemical plant, since KOP was likely to wind down with end of hostilities and the need for great amounts of ammunition?

Or would I go back to school, get a master’s or possibly a doctorate? And thence to a lab rather than a factory, something in Chicago or Detroit or Minneapolis, those being the cities I knew. Or even far off, mythical New York? I liked the image.

Would I be alone, or would I be married . . . possibly with children? Married yes, children? That would depend.

But if married, to whom? Someone like Kay Brannick, certainly. Smart, educated, attractive—and most of all, someone who seemed to like me.

In this hopeful, romantic state, I arrived at her apartment.

* * *

Half an hour later we were well engaged in our entrees at Jaeger’s. (It occurred to me that, given Kay’s quickness if not outright impatience, the speed of service might have been what caused Doc Smith to recommend it.) The whole date had been a joy, at least for me, first just seeing Kay’s obvious pleasure at my arrival, how pretty she looked in a floral dress, how proud I was to escort her to Lincolnway and for several blocks along that street, feeling the jealous stares of other men.

At Jaeger’s we had beers and ordered, and I learned that Kay had grown up near Cleveland in the town of Painesville, that she had two older brothers and a younger sister, that her father was a doctor and a drinker. “So lovely at times, and so horrible at others.”

She offered no information on prior romantic attachments, and frankly I had little to share in turn. “No long term girls, certainly no engagements or promises. I’m a free man.” Hoping to move off that subject, I then said, “What drew you to physics?”

“I wanted to be Marie Curie making discoveries about radiation and other things.” She laughed then. “Even though I tease Doc and the Siberians for all their scientification, I first saw the word ‘radium’ in a comic book. Fortunately I had access to a library, where I was able to learn about her.”

"It must have been tough, though. So few colleges accept women at all, much less in physics." Her brief nod only hinted at the obstacles.

I persisted. "How long have you been working for Doc Smith?"

"Almost two years."

"And you were hired as a secretary."

"I didn't actually have a degree, so I could hardly have applied as anything else."

"What did Doc say when he learned that you had studied physics?"

Another nod, this one accompanied by a faint smile. "Let's just say he was surprised and sort of pleased, I think. He began to give me more to do, I'll say that."

"More clerical work, not lab work."

"There are limits, right?"

Our entrees arrived then, putting a stop to my increasingly unwelcome enquiries.

Perhaps it was the war, which encouraged us to sweep away convention and rush to our goals—or to feel that we had license to do so—but I was already picturing Kay in my arms, my bed, my life.

Kay was the first to resume speaking. "Siberians still giving you the cold shoulder?"

"Yes," I said, then told her I had seen them at the ballgame.

"That figures. You're sort of a new science project for them. A man of obvious intelligence and good looks who happens to be an athlete. To them, something doesn't add up."

Her sly compliments surely gave me more encouragement than the situation warranted. "I do feel as though I've fallen between two stools," I said, "maybe more than that."

"How so?"

"Well, look at what you just said about the Siberians, who can't decide whether I'm fish or fowl. And speaking of fowl, I've got our friend Charlie Finley trying to decide which of his teams I'm on. Baseball, yes. Chemical engineering, maybe, as far as he knows. But spying, being one of his boys? I'm not, and I think he's finally realizing that."

"A word of advice—don't get on his bad side."

"I'm not sure he has a good one."

This attempt at wit failed. Kay said, "He's not an evil man, at least as I would define it." Here I wondered if she were thinking of her own father. "He's actually rather typical, a man who acts as if the world belongs to him just because he's a man. He wants what he wants, whether it's money or power or . . . women. And the pain of others just doesn't matter, assuming he's aware of it at all."

"He made a pass at you?"

"Surely you mean when, and how many times."

"You don't have to worry about him any longer."

She raised an eyebrow. "He's come down with a fatal illness?"

"He told me that if I did some tasks for him—including literally playing ball—he would stand aside."

Kay's reaction was swift and sharp. "Charles Finley actually gave you *permission* to pursue me?"

I had little in the way of experience with mature women, but I knew I was in the deepest of waters now. "I can see where it might look like that."

"It absolutely does." She had her arms crossed and was looking everywhere but at me—as if seeking escape. "And you . . . you accepted this as your right? As if I were property being swapped?"

My face was growing red, and I was sinking into my chair, at least mentally. "I didn't look at it that way."

She gently folded her napkin. Her voice was as cold as Indiana in January. "Thank you for the meal, Mr. Kramer. Would you please walk me home?"

As we were leaving, to my surprise I saw Doc Smith and a lovely dark-haired woman, surely Mrs. Smith, arriving for a dinner of their own. If I hadn't been so shaken by Kay's abrupt change of heart, I would have been alarmed at what was either fatherly interest, or unwanted

interference in my life.

* * *

The next morning and, in fact, the next two weeks were difficult. The Siberians kept me in the cooler, and my social temperature was lowered further by Kay. Oh, she and the boys were polite, telling me what I needed to know when I needed to know it.

But nothing else.

There were times when I passed the Wreck Room door and thought I heard voices or humming from within. It took a great deal of resolve not to start pounding on the door, shouting, "I know what you're doing in there!" or similarly pointless expressions.

Even Doc Smith was distracted and distant, when he wasn't absent. Which meant that I had no chance to ask him what he and his wife were doing at Jaeger's that fateful evening.

I was ridiculously busy: quotas for shipping seemed to rise every time I looked up. I was in and out of Three Line a dozen times a day, checking on pours, and listening to complaints from the WOWS, who had to work harder, faster and yet not sacrifice quality.

The weather was grim, cold rain and gray skies, including a few snowy blasts of a lingering winter.

The only light in my life was baseball.

After that first, to me devastating, loss to Prairie Run, the Koppers had solidified as a team, and perhaps face less capable opponents, since we had easily defeated teams from Walkerton and one from far away Gary. I had pitched in both games and had yet to give up an actual hit, though, as in my first outing, poor fielding allowed three different baserunners. (Town ballplayers just could not deal with a curveball, much less curveballs thrown at different speeds.)

My hitting was solid. Through three games I had come to the plate twelve times, been walked twice, and had seven hits. To my teammates, this performance only confirmed the exaggerated tales Charlie Finley had told. I was the ultimate ringer, the baseball Superman, and they seemed happy to have me.

And, frankly, I was happy to be had. Even on the several nights where I didn't bother to go back to my dorm, sleeping on the couch in the conference room (the other Siberians were putting in the same ridiculous hours, but they slept in the Wreck Room . . . if they slept), I would try to spend some time in the indoor facility.

I think it kept me from going crazy.

I was at practice that evening at 7 P.M. or so when I found Charlie Finley waiting as I emerged from the batting cage.

"Done any throwing tonight?"

"A bit. Arm's feeling better." In the three games so far, I'd worked up to five innings in two of them. The effort seemed not to have hurt me.

"Good. I may need you to start the game with Westville."

"They have even more ringers than Prairie Run?"

"They're all ringers."

"And you want to actually win this game."

"Don't get cute, Kramer. It's not your style."

I was emboldened by the workout, or perhaps just feeling reckless. "What do you really want, Charlie?"

He took me aside. "I know you've been in there," Finley said. "That Wreck Room."

"How? Spies?"

He grunted. "There are few secrets at KOP, and none for long."

Which told me everything I needed to know, mostly that there was no point in denying it. "Yeah, I got a look around. It's a bunch of hobby projects,

"Anything of real value?"

"Not yet."

"Get me in there so I can see for myself."

"I don't have a key, and why don't you just ask Doc Smith?"

Finley smiled, though not with pleasure. "The man hates me."

“Doesn't he work for you?”

“Only on paper, and only in certain areas. He has a special relationship with Jack Conway, who indulges the man.” I had heard that Smith's work, and, hell, personal charm had won over Conway, who was KOP's permanent civilian deputy director (the military directors seemed to change every six months). Conway had decreed that the Chem Lab was Smith's territory, where he was “lord and liege,” according to Tugwell.

“Then what do you want me to do?” I said, growing impatient. “I've told you what's in there, neither of us can access it, and what does it matter?”

“It matters to me. Everyone is under a lot of pressure here. This diversion of time and resources is a real problem. And if you won't help, better hide.” And then, for the first time in our brief relationship, Finley walked away without a smile or a clap on the back.

* * *

The next morning there was a problem with Line Five, the land mine production unit. I knew of the fragile firing pins issue that had caused Smith to suspend production some weeks back. The supplier in Texas had promised to do a second round of tests on everything that left its facility and had done so.

Until the change in production rates. (KOP wasn't the only plant that was being hit, of course.) Either they made a mistake, or thought that KOP and Smith no longer cared, but when that morning's assembly commenced, a pin broke immediately, “almost the first unit down the line,” Wanacek said.

Smith halted production and began testing the whole supply, and when he found a second and third broken pin in the first fifty he examined, sent all the WOWs home, locking the bunker and putting soldiers around it in case anyone got any notion of bringing in a relief team.

He marched off to admin, intending, he said, “to kick butt and take names.”

He reamed out the inspectors of all the Lines, fought with their production managers, refused to take orders from uniformed Army Ordnance officers, and threatened to take the whole matter to the War Department—or the press. (That was an empty threat, given wartime censorship.)

Smith was in direct conflict with Colonel Bruck and with Finley, too. He had a good relationship with Conway, the harried but well-meaning director of KOP, but not that morning.

All of us in Siberia waited through the long day. This was the first time I had felt any sort acceptance from them.

Kay was not keeping vigil with us. We knew she was with Doc.

As the hours ground slowly, some Siberians came and went—to the Wreck Room I assumed. I spent my time reading more of *Second Stage Lensman*. Tug noticed this, saying, “You know, right now Doc is Kimball Kinnison going up against Boskone.”

“Our leaders are an ancient criminal organization?”

Tug seemed embarrassed, but said, “By their actions you shall know them.”

Shortly before five o'clock, Kay returned to the lab, going for coffee while refusing to tell us anything other than, “Gather the troops.”

Tug went off to summon the missing Siberians. Kay looked drained, ten years older. Clearly there was bad news to come.

Doc arrived fifteen minutes later, and he looked older, too. “You boys know me. I don't hide bad news. I've been fired.”

Besides Doc and Kay, there were nine of us in the conference room, and all nine began complaining loudly, the tone ranging from Swede's simple protest to, surprisingly, Blondie's call to arms. “We've got the troops on our side, Doc!”

Doc shook his head. “I don't think we can storm the admin. Look, part of my agreeing to go quietly was that Five Line will remain shut down until the army recertifies those pins. Meanwhile, all the other lines reopen tomorrow at 7 A.M.”

“Okay,” Tug said, “we don't stage a revolution, but what if we walk out? It will take them days to replace us with qualified people.”

Doc was already shaking his head. “I've never liked job actions of any kind, and I won't support this one. And you should know—Conway's already put word out for men to replace you.

"I think it's more of a threat than a real move. But you all need to know that tying yourselves to me will be like signing on to the crew of the *Titanic*. I'm fifty-four and can't be blackballed, but all of you will want jobs when the war is over. Conway, Bruck, and Finley can make sure you never get one."

That certainly ended any talk of revolution. I will confess that it concerned me, too, and a bit unfairly: I had never been a full-member of the Siberians, yet I was facing the same penalty.

"What do we do now?" Tug said.

"I suggest we repair to JR's for a celebratory beer," Doc said, words that seemed to surprise everyone, especially Kay. "I will be buying and will tolerate no dissent."

* * *

Getting to JR as a group was uncomfortable. We all had to walk back to admin, to buses or, in the case of Doc, automobiles. We were being watched every step of the way by soldiers, by burly truck drivers and haulers (some of them my Kopper teammates), and by WOWs with crossed arms.

By some kind of arrangement, Kay and three others rode in Smith's Buick. The rest of the Siberians managed to get on the first bus heading south.

I was a few steps behind when a soldier took my arm. "You're needed in admin, Kramer."

It was shocking enough to be needed in admin under these circumstances. To have a soldier know my name was even worse.

Actually, what was worse was realizing I had been summoned to see Finley.

For all the time we had spent together, I had never been in his admin office. It was on the corner of the top floor, an actual suite, with two secretaries, one a striking redhead, the other equally striking but blond. After I was handed off by the soldier, the redhead took me into the inner sanctum.

Finley was looking out at the expanse of the Kingsbury Ordnance Plant like a feudal lord. "You're failing me, Lefty."

"I'm performing my war work, I'm playing on your baseball team, and I told you everything I know about Smith's Siberians and their projects. What else do you require?"

Only now did he turn. As I've said, he was probably three or four years my senior, still a young man, but he had the gravitas of a titan of industry twice that age. "Loyalty. You haven't demonstrated it, not to my satisfaction. It's sad, really."

"For which of us?"

"More you than me. I can always find another chemist and another baseball ringer, though I will concede that I won't find both in the same body."

He slid into his giant office chair, settled himself, and pulled out a cigar. I don't smoke and never have, but I doubt Finley knew that. Nevertheless, he offered me nothing.

And said, "Well, Smith is gone and it's going to be a different deal around here."

"We're going to stop pouring tetryl? Or stop doing quality checks? The boys in the field aren't going to appreciate that."

"That's unfair. No one, certainly not me, wants substandard ammunition in the field. But if we did it Smith's way, there would be no ammunition at all."

I had said my piece and didn't want to engage in a debate with Finley, but I couldn't let that statement pass. "Now who's being unfair?"

That seemed to get to Finley. "Look, Smith is a decent fellow, but never really suited to this day and age. He's some kind of, I don't know, Victorian."

"Doc Smith is the most modern man I've ever met. You probably haven't read any of his stories—"

"Oh, I have indeed." That surprised me.

"Well, then, you know he's not only thinking about today's technology, but the future's."

Finley was shaking his head and smiling as if being lectured by a child. "Fantasies. Dream machines. When I mean modern, I'm not thinking about gadgets. I mean . . . human nature. The power of money, the power of power itself. Who wields it, and how. We're fighting wars on two fronts against opponents who do understand it. Thanks to people like Doc Smith, living in

some fantasy world of the past, where ‘gentlemen don’t read each other’s mail,’ or we shut down a whole ordnance plant because of a few rejected items, we almost lost. Modern man needs to be tough, he needs to be smart, and at times he needs to be ruthless.”

Here Finley rose from his desk and perched on a corner. He was in full sales mode. “Look, Kramer, I know how I strike some people. Brash, greedy, selfish.

“But that’s what I’ve had to be. My father worked in a steel mill, not the greatest job in the world but the best he could do, until the Depression came along. He moved us all to Gary and he was lucky to get some work—and that’s where I started, my friend. I worked in a steel mill from the time I was sixteen until I got laid off, too.

“It wasn’t because of my work or even because of money. Roosevelt’s big war build-up was already making steel a big steady business.

“No, it was because I got sick! I developed a cough that just wouldn’t go away for days, bad enough that I couldn’t work. I didn’t expect them to give me sick pay, but I didn’t expect them to lay me off.

“So I came here, only this time I was going to be different. My feeling is, unless you’re tough, unless you’re brash, unless you’re ruthless . . . well, you get screwed, and everyone you love and care for does, too.”

He actually seemed shaken by his recitation. Frankly, he won me over, for that moment. But all I said was, “I understand.”

He slid off his desk, pacing like a predator now, gesturing with the cigar. “Here’s what I need to know about those damned Siberians and their Wreck Room. Is there anything in there that will help the war effort now, or be a valuable commercial product the day the war ends.”

I confess that I didn’t have to think for long. Ray guns? Inertialess drive? Telepathy?

Alien signals? All fascinating stuff and, in success, likely to be seen as major discoveries . . . about 1960.

“No,” I said.

Finley nodded, apparently satisfied. “All right.” He smiled. “I just need to get those boys back to work.”

I was dismissed, but I left Finley’s office feeling better than when I had entered. He was not a total monster, for one thing.

And I believed that my relationship with the Siberians would be better. I was sure I had saved them.

* * *

The gathering at JR started out in a jovial mode. There were a few jokes, none of which I understood, and a lot of significant glances between the Siberians, especially Blondie and Tug and Ivy.

Kay was present, nursing a beer, largely silent and distant until Swede suggested that the team’s “other work” would go forward even in Doc’s absence, adding, “We’re going to make you proud! Soon we’ll be exploring space and communicating across vast distances, and encountering alien beings!”

He aimed this last comment, tipping his beer, toward Kay. She put her own drink on the table. “Don’t be an idiot, Swede. Our projects won’t be here a week from now, much less long enough to change the world in any way.

“We like to think we’ve been doing all this marvelous research in secret, and we’ll just spring it on the world like, like . . .” And here she nodded to Doc. “Like Richard Seaton.” (This was the scientist hero of Doc’s first epic, *The Skylark of Space*.)

“It won’t happen. It was never going to happen, not like that. Yes, we’ve expanded the boundaries of physics because we’re all smart and creative and obsessive.”

Blondie Wanacek seemed disgusted by her comments, though sourness seemed to be his most common state. “This again.”

I had always sensed some tension between Blondie and Kay, but this was the first time it became overt. I couldn’t help saying, “Again?”

Blondie pointed a bony finger at Kay. “If we’d listened to her, we would have been holed up

in some farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, like this.” He redirected his finger toward the ceiling of JR’s. “We’d have spent all our time going back and forth, everything would have taken five times as long—”

“—And we wouldn’t have pursued half of the things we did.” That was “Carl” Marx, speaking in my presence for the first time since the day we were introduced. I wondered what radical project he’d been pushing.

“You boys believe what you want,” Kay said. Her voice was steady but her tremor more agitated. “Doc has indulged you, KOP has given you everything you wanted, even when no one in admin knew what it was.

“You think you’ve been mistreated because you’re oddballs and secret geniuses, but let me tell you . . . try being a woman.”

At this point Doc placed his hand on Kay’s, giving it a squeeze. “It’s been a rough day for all of us. I hope you know,” he said, looking directly at her, “that we appreciate you and all your help.”

Kay managed to summon a weak smile.

And then Dock raised his largely untouched beer and offered a toast: “To the forces of good.”

It was a pleasant, vague toast, but in retrospect it revealed Doc Smith to his core—as if the Lensman stories didn’t.

He was an idealist. He believed in Good and Evil, in a universe where Knowledge and Science and Fidelity, all of the copybook virtues, were universally acknowledged as the ideal operating system for all sentient life forms. I recall looking at him, his grey eyes a bit misty, and thinking what a superior human being he was, so underserving of ill treatment.

That was, for me, the highlight of the evening. I left before it broke up, walking half a mile down the road to my room at Kingsford Estates.

It turns out that the Siberians did not go home.

* * *

Late that night, a squad of army guards under the direct supervision of Charles O. Finley surrounded the Chem Lab, then forced entry into the building itself, and as many offices and storerooms as they could. The conference room, too, of course.

What happened next is still unclear, seventy-odd years later.

I was witness to some of it. An hour after I’d returned to the Estates, the phone in the hallway rang. (None of us had telephones in our rooms, of course.) One of the other tenants answered it, and in an ill-tempered voice, yelled, “Kramer!”

It was my catcher, Frenchy. “I shouldn’t be telling you this,” he said, telling me anyway, “but something is happening out at your Chem Lab. Soldiers and some of the guys from the team. You better get out there.”

I knew that one of my fellow tenants, a man named Pearlman, had a car and fortunately was in his room. He lent me his keys with only a minimal amount of pleading, and I was off.

When I arrived at KOP it was after eleven. Fortunately the overnight guards knew me from baseball and late hours, so I was able to drive onto the site, then run from admin to the Chem Lab.

When I reached the site, I found a team of a dozen soldiers, in helmets and uniforms for God’s sake. And another dozen Kop rowdies, including at least three members of the Koppers, notably big Goose McCutcheon.

For some reason, he and the other Koppers were carrying baseball bats.

The soldiers had spent a fruitless hour trying to force either the inner or outer doors of the Wreck Room.

So they began pounding and shouting, demanding a response from anyone inside.

And heard nothing.

I found Finley pacing impatiently. I told him, “This won’t work! You need one of the Siberians to open this up. Send these guys home.”

Finley stared at me as if he couldn’t place me. “Oh my. Be smart, Kramer. Go home.”

He turned away, signaling to a pair of soldiers, who were carrying an M-37 demolition kit . . .

a satchel charge with eight pounds of TNT.

“Don’t do that,” I said, rushing toward them and grabbing their arms.

At that moment I was tackled from behind, pitching forward into the cold ground. A soldier held me down.

I watched the sappers placing the charges around the Wrecking Room door, and with more strength than I thought I possessed, threw off the soldier and started toward them.

McCutcheon appeared then, swinging a bat at my head.

I went down as if shot, pain and starbursts exploding in my head. And then he and, I don’t know, some of the others, began pummeling me with boots and bats.

“Everybody back!” Finley shouted.

Barely conscious, tasting blood, feeling dizzy and torn, I was dragged perhaps fifty feet.

Just far enough away, and flat enough, to be out of the line of fire when the eight pounds of TNT—ideally enough to blow a small hole in a concrete bunker—blew up the entire Chem Lab building.

Even in my half-conscious state I realized that the M-37 had triggered emplaced explosives, origin and design unknown. The larger-than-expected eruption launched chunks of concrete, shards of wood and who knew what into the distance, later judged to be half a mile away.

Three of the soldiers suffered impact injuries, two of them serious. Even Finley himself suffered a blow from a chunk of concrete, bruising his shoulder and back.

I was taken to the hospital in LaPorte with the others, though separated from them. I had a concussion, two missing teeth, broken ribs, torn ligaments in my already-damaged knee and I had landed poorly on my pitching arm, twisting it.

With all that, I was discharged the next day—bandaged and furious.

* * *

Director Conway and Colonel Bruck ordered an immediate investigation. It was telling that Finley wasn’t fired, suggesting that both knew of his attack on the Chem Lab—and had endorsed it.

The next morning, while I was still in my hospital bed, several staffers at KOP, those who were either acquaintances or neighbors of various Siberians, began to report them missing.

None of them reported to work, not even Kay.

KOP coworkers and friends did a frantic search, including a sweep of each individual’s quarters, and reportedly found nothing unusual. It was as if each had simply stepped away, then vanished.

Soon the grim conclusion was obvious . . . they had all been in the Wreck Room (its name now horribly ironic) when it exploded.

The lack of human remains in the wreckage was curious, but not impossible. My predecessor in the Siberians, Quinton, had been vaporized in an earlier explosion. There had been two other such incidents since KOP opened in 1940 . . . these were said to be an unfortunate side effect of dealing with vast amounts of high explosives.

I learned that the War Department even had a term for such total annihilation: “extreme thoracic trauma.” For death certificates, I guess.

These bland words in no way convey my emotional state when I learned this, my sorrow and fury burning throughout the next week, even that month.

I blamed Finley of course and wanted to confront him. But he received a promotion soon after the accident and was essentially absent from the site.

I was savagely unhappy with the Koppers who had beaten me. My injuries meant that I would not be playing baseball, of course, so I was not in contact with any of my former teammates including Frenchy.

Recall that KOP was a big place, with more workers than the population of LaPorte itself. It was easy to lose people in that crowd.

There was a memorial service staged on the baseball field a week after the explosion. Smith was there, given a one-hour pass, I heard, and essentially isolated from dangerous associates like me. I saw him from a distance, and he seemed shrunken and broken.

If Finley was there I didn't see him.

The investigation proceeded without me, of course. I was walking wounded, and as the only surviving member of the Chem Lab team, I became acting de facto chief engineer, in charge of all Lines—and of finding new chemists to replace the Siberians.

Within the month I did, just in time for the D-Day invasion of Normandy on June 6th, which confirmed Doc Smith's prediction.

The action in Europe and in the Pacific required vast amounts of ammunition. I supervised the Lines as best I could, keeping faith with Doc Smith's standards, having numerous battles with Conway and the succession of military supervisors.

I had one or two brief and fruitless encounters with Charles O. Finley in all that time, passing him in admin hallways while both of us were walking with associates—and no words were exchanged. Rumor had it that he had started another side business, selling insurance in the evenings.

Also that he was ill. I will confess that I hoped this was God or the universe smiting Finley for his sins.

The War in Europe ended on May 8, 1945. Victory over Japan was announced on August 15th of that year.

I tended my resignation the next day, walking out of KOP a week later, never to return.

* * *

After his dismissal from KOP, Doc Smith went back to the food business until retiring in 1957, though he also spent considerable time on his scientific writings. He published many books and seemed to be quite popular. I never read any, though I did see colorfully covered paperbacks like *Second Stage Lensman* and *The Vortex Blasters* and such.

We exchanged three or four letters over the years, most of the wordage concerned with changes in our lives. There was always a mention of the Siberians, and Kay, and KOP itself, but nothing significant. To both of us these coworkers were lost comrades, casualties of the war.

I will note that Doc's responses took a long time to arrive, longer than I would have expected for such a precise, generous man.

A popular and much-loved figure in the scientific world, he died of a heart attack in 1965, age seventy-five.

* * *

After the war, Charles O. Finley was hospitalized for over two years, suffering from tuberculosis, no doubt due to his overwork since 1944. It will surprise no one to learn that he had sold policies to most of northern Indiana by that time—but had neglected to write one for himself, causing serious financial difficulties.

He recovered both physically and financially, eventually building a huge insurance empire that made him a rich man.

He used his fortune to buy the Kansas City Athletics baseball team of the American League in 1961, swiftly abandoning that city and moving the team to Oakland, California.

Where he proved to be a controversial and creative owner, building a team that won three straight World Series as well as five straight division titles.

He also pioneered the use of brightly colored uniforms and white cleats for his players among other innovations that did not catch on.

He died in February 1996 three days before his seventy-seventh birthday.

To this day, I cannot watch a baseball game in which the Oakland Athletics take part.

* * *

As for me, Lefty Kramer, the blows from the Koppers' bats ended my baseball career for all time. I went back to school at the University of Indiana in 1946 to get my master's and Ph.D., then worked for Bell Labs for thirty-five years.

Due to my injuries and, I now believe, post-traumatic stress, I suffered from depression and other ailments through most of my working career. I was a capable engineer and chemist, but you will search in vain for technical papers or patents in my name.

I married Eleanor Bowen, a fellow Ph.D. chemist I met at Indiana, and we had four children

during a relatively happy fifty-three years. She died in 2003, at which time I moved from New York State to Arizona to be near my youngest daughter.

But this is not the end of the story.

* * *

As I said, well into the 1950s I mourned the loss of Kay Brannick and the Siberians.

Sometime in 1958, at the height of the post-Sputnik panic in America, when every technical organization was suddenly judged to have “fallen behind the Russians,” I learned of an experimental transportation system involving magnetic levitation being developed at Brookhaven National Lab. This was the kind of thing that was rarely discussed outside technical circles, but in 1958 was suddenly worthy of a brief article in *Look* magazine.

The accompanying picture showed a team of five white males, aged mid-20s to perhaps fifty, all in spectacles and wearing white lab jackets. On the far right was a man of forty who was the spitting image of Swede Gunderson.

For a good while I dismissed this as coincidence, or even wishful thinking. How could Swede Gunderson be alive after the destruction of the Wreck Room at KOP in 1944?

Five years later I chanced upon a classified paper—at Bell we had clearances for such things—dealing with laser weaponry, and the attached biographies of the two writers included one “Ralph Blackwell,” a heavysset man in his late fifties who answered well for Tug Tugwell plus nineteen years and sixty pounds.

The authors were described as working at Hughes Research Labs, Malibu, California.

Curious, I sat down and composed a letter to Dr. Blackwell, obviously not suggesting that he had somehow survived an accident in Indiana in May 1944 and changed his identity—but just to express my enthusiasm for his work and ask about his education and training. I knew it was unusual for a classified technical work to receive “fan mail,” but thought that a writer from Bell Labs might be welcomed.

The letter was returned, marked “Addressee Unknown.” Oddly, this message was printed by hand, not stamped as it usually was.

I tried calling directory assistance in the Malibu area, and several adjacent ones, in search of a Ralph Blackwell, but found no listing—not even an unlisted or unpublished number, which would have at least confirmed the existence of such a man.

(Looking back from fifty years, in a world with the internet and Google, it seems ridiculous that my searching tools were so limited, but they were.)

Busy with work and family, I let the mystery sit until 1973, when I happened across a newspaper article from the *Santa Rosa Press-Democrat* about the founding of some institute dedicated to research in ESP and related “science.” I recall that I paid attention because one of the Apollo astronauts was involved.

In any case, one of the group pictures included a man in his sixties—again, lurking in the back row—identified as “Hubert Seaton.” With thinning hair, Siberian Hubert “Blondie” Wanacek had looked older than his years in 1944 . . . he seemed not to have changed in all that time.

Wanacek’s work in telepathy would fit this institute.

With more time available to me, I phoned the newspaper and spoke to the reporter, identifying myself honestly as a staffer at Bell Labs. Unfortunately, while there was ample information on the retired astronaut and several others in the photo, “the older man with the wild look in his eyes” had apparently inserted himself into the event (so like Blondie!), then vanished without saying anything of note.

In frustration, and still doubting my theory, I actually considered hiring a detective, if you can believe that.

What stopped me was the realization that the sort of detective I wanted to hire really existed only in fiction or the movies. The queries I made convinced me that I would be paying someone to repeat my own research, and paying a lot for the pleasure.

Also, to be honest, I still had doubts.

Until September 1979 when, again by accident, I chanced upon an article in a scientifiction

publication—science fiction being the new term. (I don't know why I picked up that publication that day . . . perhaps I liked the cover art, or a story title reminded me of Doc Smith's works.)

Inside was a nonfiction piece, a solid survey of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, an effort I had always followed with some interest, not just due to my early exposure in the Wreck Room. Several paragraphs were devoted to the National Radio Astronomy Observatory run by the University of Virginia.

Apparently NRAO had been receiving and recording anomalous radio bursts originating from a single point in the sky—one burst every month or other month now going back over twenty years.

No one had been able to explain them, and the most likely theory was that they had some terrestrial source, perhaps some radar emitter behind the Iron Curtain. Supposedly there was a good-sized collection of these pulses now, and they were being analyzed.

I immediately thought of Kay Brannick's "pulse" project, off to one side of the Wreck Room, and its record of several extraterrestrial transmission bursts—and her belief that they might indeed be a message, but sent by beings who lived at a different rate. I was pleased to think that her work had been rediscovered.

Then, in the footnotes to the article, I saw references to several papers about the NRAO signals.

The coauthor on each was Kay Brannick Rose.

I immediately made a long-distance call to the university, to get contact information for the NRAO.

Then called, and asked for Dr. Brannick Rose. I spent a considerable time on hold, then heard a young male voice: "Analysis, this is Solstein."

I identified myself and asked for Kay, wondering what my first words to her would be.

This time Solstein paused. "I'm sorry, Dr. Brannick Rose died last month."

That simple statement hit me like a punch. I no longer doubted my theory that Kay and the Siberians had escaped death—at least in 1944. And now, to be this close, to hear this news.

"She had, uh, been battling illness for years," Solstein said. "Were you a friend?"

"A coworker from long ago, World War II," I said.

"Wow," he said, sounding even younger—and by using that exclamation reminding me of KOP and its women of war work. "Kay never said what she did then, or where."

"There may have been some bad memories," I said, thinking of my own struggles and also the more severe ones of those who saw combat. "And much of what we did was classified."

"I get that. My condolences."

"This may seem like a rude question, but how old was Dr. Brannick-Rose when she died?"

"Fifty-eight, I believe." Which fit with my Kay, too.

I thanked young Solstein and ended the call before I gave way to tears.

* * *

Some hours later, when I was able to think clearly again, I reviewed my discoveries and theories.

Kay had escaped the destruction of the Wreck Room. So, it seemed, had Tug, Swede and Blondie, and if they had, perhaps the other Siberians had, too.

How? Then I remembered that mysterious doorway, that odd-looking frame covered in a tarp.

Had it been a portal of some kind, allowing the Siberians, and Kate, to escape destruction with their discoveries?

That theory was as good as any. It made me wonder which Siberian had come up with that gimmick—or breakthrough of the age, and what had happened with it since.

Had they planned their escape, however it occurred? Presumably they emerged in a single location, but went separate ways, and secretly. (What did their families know, if anything? Kay was estranged from hers, and I had had the impression that the other Siberians were largely lone wolves in that regard.)

Clearly they had a plan, or created one, to take their “breakthroughs” and pursue their work in different venues. Kay had gone to the NRAO, Swede to Brookhaven, Tug to Hughes, and Blondie to some oddball organization in northern California.

What about the others? Would research find them at Cape Canaveral? In Palo Alto?

Were these Siberians secretly guiding the course of study in breakthrough technologies all over the U.S.?

A larger question came to mind: what had Doc Smith known? If nothing, he was surely consumed with guilt over what had apparently happened to his “boys” and to Kay.

If he had some idea . . . well, either fact might have explained his reluctance to engage with me post-war.

* * *

This memoir has consumed two weeks of my time and a considerable amount of energy. I’m feeling unusually punked right now. I’m going to take a few days, and when I return, will tell the tale of the Secret Siberians and what further proof I’ve discovered over the last forty years.

I can’t help thinking about Doc, who for all his virtues was so blind when it came to women. What if he had listened to Kay from the beginning, basing the secret Siberian research away from KOP and interference or destruction by Finley and others?

What if he had pursued projects that she proposed?

What if he had been a more complete human?

You could, of course, say the same about me.

* * *

ONA POSTIT: This document, unedited and obviously unfinished, was found on Mr. Kramer’s computer after his death from COVID on June 7, 2020.

* * *

HISTORICAL NOTE:

Edward E. “Doc” Smith, chemist and author of the *Skylark* and *Lensman* novels, and Charles O. Finley, insurance salesman and owner of the Kansas City, later Oakland Athletics major league baseball team, did overlap at the Kingsbury Ordnance Plant between 1942 and 1944.

The best, possibly only account, exists in the chapter titled “1941” in the 1948 edition of Smith’s novel, *Triplanetary*, which I mined for technical details and terminology.

Everything else is an invention.

Michael Cassutt’s father was a professional left-handed pitcher in the St. Louis Cardinals farm system in the 1950s. He can turn the double play, too, when he’s not publishing SF in Asimov’s, on <https://www.tor.com> and elsewhere, or writing TV for Twilight Zone, Max Headroom, Dead Zone, Z-Nation or Foundation. He dedicates this story to Howard Waldrop, who didn’t want to write it.