

# PART ONE

# ON THE

# ICE

*Shortly after the onset of the Digital Age, with humans living more than twice as long as their hunter-gatherer ancestors, a Medicant research group created a strain of programmable pseudo-bacteria capable of surviving and reproducing within the human neurosystem. The intent of the researchers was to develop a resident biofactory capable of releasing or absorbing a wide range of neurochemicals, thereby offering relief to those suffering from mental aberrations resistant to traditional treatments. These pseudo-bacteria, marketed under the name Neurajust, could also be used to augment certain qualities such as memory, reaction time, musical talent, mathematical ability, and so forth, depending on the needs of the patient.*

*Neurajust quickly became a standard inoculation for all seeking medical treatment. It is probable, though by no means proven, that Neurajust provided the mechanism by which the so-called Digital Plague was unleashed upon humanity.*



# 1 COLD

TUCKER FEYE LANDED FLAT ON HIS BACK WITH A LOUD crunch. The impact drove the air from his lungs. He did not know how far he had fallen, or if the sound was that of his bones shattering. All he could think about was breathing. He strained for air, eyes bulging, staring straight up, seeing low dark clouds pressing down upon him, fading toward black—then his chest loosened, and he drew a shuddering breath.

The air *hurt*.

He coughed, thinking for a moment that he was back on top of the World Trade Center, breathing smoke—but there was no smell of burning jet fuel. There was no smell at all. He breathed in again, more slowly. This time he recognized the sensation: bitter cold. Cold enough to make his teeth hurt and freeze the linings of his nostrils. Swirling ice crystals blasted his face. He rolled away from the wind and pushed himself up onto his knees. He hurt all up and down his back, but nothing

seemed to be broken. The crunch he had heard had been the crusted surface of a snowdrift, not his bones.

He rose slowly to his feet and looked around, squinting into the wind. Only minutes ago he had been running through a forest, pursued by an enormous pink maggot. Now he was standing on a flat glacial surface—an icy expanse furrowed with long, irregular drifts of snow. A few dozen yards to either side of him, ghostly, jagged outcroppings of ice and snow rose up like miniature mountains.

Tucker tipped his head back. The disko that had spit him out hovered a tantalizing thirty feet directly above his head, barely visible, fading in and out of sight against the leaden clouds.

His vision blurred. He blinked. His eyelids dragged across the surface of his eyes. The film of moisture coating his eyeballs had frozen. He blinked rapidly, narrowed his eyes to slits, and once again surveyed his surroundings. The diskos were used by the discorporeal Klaatu to visit important historical events. If there was nothing for the Klaatu to look at, there would be no disko. There had to be some *thing* here that had attracted them . . . unless it was the sheer, raw bleakness.

The wind picked up, tearing at his ears and nose, cutting through the thin gray fabric of his coveralls. Only his feet, protected by his Medicant foot coverings, remained warm. He tucked his bare hands under his armpits and hugged himself.

Growing up in Minnesota, Tucker had known cold—the slablike feel of dangerously chilled cheeks, the nose-cracking,

lung-seizing sensation of inhaling ten-below-zero air, the creak of boots on hard-frozen snow—but nothing like this. Already his ears were stinging viciously. He headed toward the nearest outcropping, a sharp-toothed ridge of snow and ice about twenty feet high. From the top, he might be able to spot some nearby shelter.

He climbed, jamming his toes into the crevices. Halfway up, he slipped and skidded to the bottom, clawing at the ice with his bare hands. Driven by desperation and near panic, he attacked the ridge again, scrabbling his way up, ignoring the pain in his fingers. He reached the crest just as a massive blast of wind-borne ice crystals scoured the ridgetop. Tucker turned his face away from the wind and squeezed his eyes closed, waiting for the ground storm to subside. After a few seconds, the wind eased and he was able to look out over what lay beyond: an endless sheet of snow-swirled ice, interrupted by more ragged icy ridges. A bleary, mustard-yellow blob showed through the haze on the horizon. The sun.

The wind came up again. Tucker backed down the ridge to the relative shelter of the flat ice. His hands had stopped hurting, and he could no longer feel his face. Part of his brain knew that this was a bad thing, while another part of him welcomed the loss of sensation. He looked again at the disk, his only way out. But there were no ladders here in this arctic nightmare. He might as well be on Mars.

He could stay where he was and freeze to death, or he could start walking and die someplace else. The smart move would

be to stay put. If help were to arrive, it would come from the disko. But standing still was an impossibility. He could feel the cold sinking through his skin into his legs and his chest and his brain.

He had to keep moving. It didn't matter in which direction. He turned his back on the wind and ordered himself to move. His legs felt like wooden posts, but they obeyed. He followed the base of the outcropping, taking advantage of what little protection it offered. He walked a few hundred paces, then stopped. Everything looked the same, in every direction. Looking back the way he had come, he saw his tracks rapidly being covered by drifting snow. Fearful of losing the disko, he ran back to where he had started.

The disko was gone. Or he was in the wrong place. Either way, he had lost his only chance at survival. He should have stayed put. He began walking in circles. *Keep moving*, he told himself. Every few seconds he looked up to see if the disko had returned. Nothing but low gray sky. He imagined crystals forming in his skin, rupturing cells, lowering his core temperature. The only sound was the hiss of blowing ice particles.

A loud crack splintered the air. The ice tilted abruptly, throwing him off his feet. On his hands and knees, Tucker scabbled away from the heaving ice. He tried to stand up, but the ice sheet lifted and convulsed and threw him down again. For a moment, he lay half-stunned on the trembling surface, staring up in bewilderment as a dark shape punched up through the ice in a slow-motion eruption.

The thing appeared to be a gray, metallic structure, thirty feet wide, with a flat top and rounded sides. Water sluiced down the metal as it rose; a pale bloom crackled from top to bottom as the water froze on its surface. The grinding screech of metal tearing through ice raked at Tucker's ears as the thing continued to ascend.

Abruptly, it stopped—a squat metal tower, ten feet high, jutting from the ice. For several seconds Tucker heard only the hiss of the wind and the sighs of ice settling and refreezing. A long pipe with a crook at the end telescoped slowly from the top of the tower. It turned this way and that, then withdrew.

Once again, Tucker became acutely aware of the cold. His face felt like dead meat, and his ears—he was afraid that if he touched them they would shatter. Whatever this metal thing was, it might provide shelter. He was about to get to his feet when the ice crackled and lurched again. Tucker scuttled back quickly, skidding across the ice on his butt.

This time the metal structure pushed up to a height of about twenty feet. The ice on either end of it heaved and cracked apart in a long line. The metal tower continued to rise, supported by a hump of steel extending a hundred feet in either direction.

Tucker realized what he was seeing.

A submarine.

The vessel continued to rise until its deck stood several feet above the surface. Three-foot-thick slabs of ice leaned against its sides. The number 578 was painted at the base of the conning

tower. Near the top of the tower, the disko reappeared, flickering dully, then fading.

A few seconds later, the head and shoulders of a man appeared at the top of the tower. Tucker opened his mouth to shout, but a vicious blast of ice-laden wind sent him staggering back. By the time he was able to open his eyes again, the man had disappeared back inside.

The ice pack had shattered for several yards around the submarine. Seawater welled up from the cracks. Tucker made his way carefully forward, testing each step to make sure it was safe. He was within ten feet of the submarine when a hatch just behind the conning tower clanked open. A man dressed in a heavy parka climbed out onto the deck.

Tucker yelled, “Hey!”

The man jerked around in surprise, slipped on the icy deck, and fell with a shout. Tucker started toward him but stopped as he felt the ice shift beneath his feet.

The man stood up shakily, rubbing his elbow, and looked down at Tucker.

“Where did *you* come from?”

“I’m freezing,” Tucker said.

A second man’s head popped up from the hatch. “Everything okay?” he asked.

“No!” said the first man. “I cracked my elbow and”—he pointed a mittened hand at Tucker—“if that ain’t one of Santa’s elves, would somebody please tell me what he’s doing here at the North Pole?”



## 2 ON THE *SKATE*

THEY LOCKED TUCKER IN A TINY, WOOD-PANELED ROOM with a bunk, a metal chair, and a guard outside. Every so often, the guard's face would appear in the round window set in the door, staring in at him as if he were a zoo animal on display. Tucker sat on the bunk, shivering violently.

The door opened. A thin man with graying hair and a doleful expression came in carrying a heavy blanket and a first-aid kit.

"I'm Dr. Arnay. You have a name, son?"

"T-t-tucker."

"Tucker. Like Little Tommy Tucker?"

"Just Tucker. Tucker Feye."

The doctor sat in the chair, leaned forward, and examined Tucker's hands.

"You have a nasty case of frostbite, son." Tucker's fingers were dead white and covered with blisters. He couldn't feel them at all. The flesh beneath his nails was dark purple. "Put

your hands under your armpits, and let's hope you can keep your fingers."

Tucker did as he was told. The doctor wrapped a blanket around his shoulders.

"Not a lot we can do right now except get you warmed up. You won't much like how it feels when things start to thaw."

"I already don't like it."

The doctor leaned close to examine Tucker's ears. "Those ears look pretty bad. Do they hurt?"

"Nothing hurts, really. I just c-can't stop shaking."

Let's have a look at your feet."

"My feet are o-k-kay."

The doctor was staring at Tuckers blue foot coverings and frowning. He touched Tucker's right foot, then jerked his hand back. "Good Lord, I thought that was your skin for a moment! What *are* these?"

"Plastic sh-sh-shoes. They k-kept my feet from freezing."

"They look like they're painted on. . . . Where did you get them?"

"Hospital."

"What hospital? Where are you from?"

"Minnesota."

The doctor peeled back the top of one of the foot coverings. "You say this is some sort of plastic?"

"I don't really know what it is."

The doctor let go; the plastic re-formed itself around Tucker's ankle.

“Strange. Like it’s alive.” The doctor squeezed Tucker’s big toe. “Any sensation there?”

“Yeah. My feet are fine.”

“Well, I’m going to leave them be for now.”

There was a rap on the door. The doctor opened it and accepted a large mug from the young sailor on the other side.

“Your prescription,” the doctor said, holding the mug out to Tucker. Hot cocoa! Tucker reached for it, but his hands were insensate claws. The doctor held the cup to Tucker’s lips. Tucker sipped. A river of chocolaty warmth ran down his throat and spread out from his belly. He drank slowly and steadily. By the time the cup was empty, his shaking had subsided.

“Are you feeling better?”

Tucker was able to nod.

The doctor pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it with an old-fashioned flip-top lighter. He gestured with his cigarette at Tucker’s right ear. “How do those ears feel?”

“They’re tingling.”

“How long were you out there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe half an hour?”

“At twenty-three below zero, even five minutes would feel like forever.”

“It did,” said Tucker.

The doctor took a drag off his cigarette. “What were you doing?”

“Freezing!”

“You know what I mean. How did you get here?”

“I don’t know,” Tucker said. “I mean, it’s a long story. Where are we, exactly?”

“On the USS *Skate*.”

“Is this really the North Pole?”

“Or thereabouts.”

“When?”

“Right now.”

“I mean, what’s the date?”

“It’s Saint Patrick’s Day, son! March seventeenth.”

“Yeah, but what *year*?”

The doctor stared hard at Tucker for what seemed like forever. He sat back, drew on his cigarette, exhaled a plume of blue smoke into the already smoky cabin, then shrugged and said, “It’s 1959.”

Tucker took a moment to absorb that. The doctor continued to smoke his cigarette.

“You shouldn’t smoke, you know,” Tucker said. “You could get cancer.”

“That’s one theory,” said the doctor.

“It’s true.”

“Smoke bother you?”

Tucker shrugged. The doctor rolled his eyes, took another drag, dropped the cigarette butt into the empty cocoa mug, and blew out a lungful of smoke. “That better?”

Tucker nodded.

“All right, then,” the doctor said. “How do those fingers feel?”

“They’re sort of buzzing.”

“You want more cocoa?”

Tucker nodded.

“Let me see what I can do.” The doctor left the cabin and closed the door. Tucker could hear him talking to the guard. He got up and listened at the door.

“I still say he’s a Red,” the guard said.

“He’s just a kid!”

“Yeah, but how did he get here? I bet the Russians dropped him off. Either from another sub or from an airplane.”

“We’d know if there was another sub in the area.”

“Okay, then. Airplane. Maybe the Russians have been monitoring our radio chatter, or maybe they got a spy on board. Maybe they set the kid down right where we’d find him. He’s a Commie spy or an anarchist. You saw him. That long hair? If he didn’t have that peach fuzz on his chin you’d swear he was a girl.”

“He says he’s from Minnesota.”

“So he’s been trained. Brainwashed. No telling what these Reds got up their sleeves.”

“I’m not Russian!” Tucker yelled through the door.

The men on the other side fell silent. The door opened a few inches, and the doctor looked in.

“Then what are you?” he asked.

“American.”

“Oh, yeah?” said the guard. “Who’s the president?”

“Barack Obama,” Tucker said.

He realized his mistake the instant the words left his mouth.

As the guard closed the door, Tucker heard him say to the doctor, “What did I tell you? That name don’t even *sound* American. He’s a Russki for sure.”

For what seemed like a long time, Tucker sat perfectly still on the edge of the bunk. His shivering had stopped, but his face and hands were buzzing. The doctor had implied that he might lose some fingers, but he felt strangely detached, as if all this were happening to some other Tucker. At the same time, he knew it was real. He was stuck in a submarine on the North Pole in 1959, and his fingers were frozen, and they thought he was a Russian spy.

There was nothing he could do at the moment. He might be here for a long time. Maybe the rest of his life. He lay back on the bunk and tried to think what 1959 had been like. Did they have computers? Television? Telephones? He was pretty sure they had phones. Not that it mattered—there was no one he could call. His father wouldn’t be born for another nine years.

His *father*. If not for his father, none of this would have happened.

The doctor returned with another mug of hot cocoa.

“How are you doing?”

“My hands and face are all hot and crawly.”

The doctor leaned close. “What’s going on with your ears?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“They’ve turned pink.”

“They itch.”

The doctor set the cocoa aside, moved the chair over to the bunk, sat down, and placed his palm against Tucker’s cheek. His hand felt deliciously cool. “You’re radiating heat like a furnace!” He touched Tucker’s left ear. “You feel that?”

“It tickles.”

“Never seen anything like it. Let’s have a look at your hands.” He sat Tucker up and unwrapped the blanket. Tucker held out his hands, and both he and the doctor gasped.

His fingers were covered with hundreds of tiny red goosebumps, but these weren’t like any goosebumps Tucker had seen before: these bumps were moving, like tiny insects crawling around just under his skin.

The doctor pushed back in his chair. “What is *that*?”

“I don’t know,” Tucker said, although he had his suspicions. The Medicants had done some things to his body. *Certain of your functions have been enhanced*, they had told him. It was true—they had made Tucker faster and stronger. Maybe they had put something inside him to help him heal. Little machines, like the tiny corpse-eating robots from the recycling center. Only it didn’t feel like they were *eating* him, but more like they were *fixing* him.

“Kid, if you have brought some sort of Commie plague onto this boat, I—”

“It’s not a plague,” Tucker said quickly. “I think this is what happens when frostbite heals.”

“Not that I ever heard of!”

Tucker flexed his fingers. They felt peculiar but didn't hurt. “I'm pretty sure it's not, like, biological warfare.”

“Biological warfare? Where'd you hear that?”

Tucker shrugged. “Look, I'm not a spy.”

“Then what are you? How did you get here?”

“It's kind of a long story.”

The doctor could not take his eyes off Tucker's hands.

“You just sit tight.” He stood up abruptly, left the cabin, and exchanged some terse words with the man outside. Tucker stared at his hands. The little bumps had stopped moving.

A few minutes later, the doctor returned, wearing a surgical mask.

“You are officially quarantined,” he said, the mask muffling his voice.

Tucker thrust out his hands. “I'm not sick. Look.” The bumps were almost gone.

“You're still quarantined. You and I are going to be spending some time together while the captain tries to sort out what to do with you. The aurora is active, so we might be stuck here for a while.”

“Aurora?”

“The aurora borealis.

“Isn't that the northern lights?”

“That's right. They interfere with our radio transmissions. You said you had a story. Let's hear it.”

“Okay,” Tucker said, then stopped.

“Well?” the doctor said after a moment.

“I’m trying to think where to start.”

“Try the beginning.”

“You aren’t going to believe me.”

“I *already* don’t believe you. Go ahead.”

Tucker cleared his throat. “Okay. I guess the beginning would be the day my dad brought home this girl. He said she was from Bulgaria.”

The doctor grunted. “Bulgaria! That’s a Communist country.”

“Except she wasn’t really from Bulgaria. She was from the future.”

“Oh, for crying out loud . . . Kid, you’re going to have to do better than that. I want the truth, not some fairy tale!”

“Do you want to hear this, or not?”

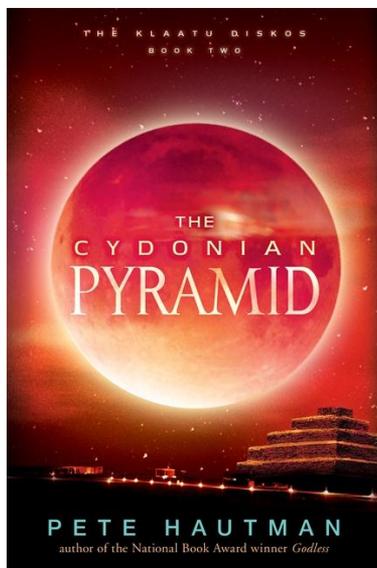
The doctor took a breath, puffing out his mask as he exhaled. “Okay, okay,” he said. “I guess I’ve got nothing better to do. This future-girl-not-from-Bulgaria, did she have a name?”

“Her name was Lahlia. She said she was from a place called Romelas. . . .”



# The Cydonian Pyramid

Pete Hautman



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