

COLD VENTURE

by Darrell Fletcher

Chapter 1

Ice

The stars above offered me no solace. The ones below, on the sides and in front were equally silent. I think the ones behind me were laughing, outright. Anyway, that was what it felt like as I floated next to the asteroid, holding onto the anchor line with one hand. A voice in my head was berating me as I tried to figure a way out of this predicament. *Just had to go after one more. Couldn't be satisfied with this month's haul?* An involuntary shiver ran through my body and I checked the suit's power level, again. Low, and getting lower by the minute. I turned the thermostat down another couple of degrees to conserve my batteries. In front of me, I could see the blinking beacon on my ship, hanging in space . . . half a mile away. Well, it costs money to stay warm, out here in the Belt and 175 was a find I couldn't pass up.

Civilization probably wouldn't exist if not for the pursuit of warmth. Confused? Look at it this way. The basic medium of exchange in any society is some form of money. It could be gems, rare metals, shells, beads, rocks or whatever. This money is then used to purchase the necessities and luxuries of life. The total of which adds up to warmth, or comfort. The events leading up to my hanging out here, next to an asteroid, freezing my behind off, started a long time ago, on Earth. Okay, not that far back. Fast forward a million years . . .

When inexpensive hydrogen fusion was invented, one of the major impediments to individual freedom on the Earth, was removed. Suddenly there was an abundance of power and when a couple of amateur inventors stumbled onto the Inertial Conversion Drive (they were actually trying to make a super-stabilized unicycle), humanity exploded into space faster than you could say 'lift off'. Where there are people there is Enterprise, the buying and selling of necessities, luxuries and services.

Fusion power requires Hydrogen, which is hard to store in any quantity in its free state. It requires very bulky and expensive equipment. Not the sort a lot of people can afford to buy or maintain a million miles from home. The economical answer to this dilemma was water. It is a substance made up of two of the most important elements Space Travelers of Today need, Hydrogen for fuel and Oxygen to breathe. It's easy to store, nonvolatile and it prevents dehydration, something we all have to contend with. So, we have Fuel, Air and Water in one substance. Where do I come in? To repeat myself, Fusion power is not cheap, because it still takes money to drag water up from Earth. It is, however, a lot less expensive to find ice balls up here and tow them to the various ships, habitats and stations conducting operations in the Belt. That's what I do, catch ice balls. *Yeah, good catch,* the little voice taunted me. Ah, shut up! Realizing I was about to get into a heated exchange with . . . myself, I concentrated on recent events and reviewed how I had gotten into this mess.

Number 175 showed up on radar about a week ago and it was giving me a really bright return, which should have woken up the little voice, but he doesn't handle alcohol very well and I

was still feeling the effects of my last stop. When I got within visual range, I fired up the Laser Spectrographer. You can imagine my excitement when H₂O showed up on the display screen. The computer gave it a high water percentage. *Another unnoticed clue, Einstein.* Hey, can the chatter, I'm tryin' ta think, here. Let's see, where was I . . . oh yeah, I applied delta vee to intercept. Them's fancy words for changin' course. When I had closed to less than half a mile, there was a bright flash and main power went down, followed shortly by the backup system. The Inertial Drive got screwed up and suddenly, Icehound was spinning six ways from last week. After an exhausting hour of stabilizing the ship, I matched orbits with 175. Drive units depend on rotating masses and applied energy to move the ship in the direction one wishes to go. When the electronics failed, a little manual labor was required.

My next task was to check out the condition of the ship. The hull wasn't holed and the water tank wasn't leaking. The Fusion unit was dead and wouldn't fire up because the backup batteries weren't up to the task. It was all they could do to keep life support going. There must be a short, somewhere, but I couldn't find it. Well, time to fall back on Alternate Plan Bravo. Unfold the solar array and get the batteries charged. That would take at least a week, way out here, so I figured I might as well go and stake out my ice. I suited up and shoved off for Ice Ball 175.

Now, I happen to be one of those people who have things happen to them in groups and this group wasn't through with me yet. My Vac Suit is the latest in modern space hardware. Instead of gas or liquid maneuvering units, it uses a miniature Inertial Drive. As I approached the ice ball, the suit battery alarm went off and when I finally landed, I had about thirty minutes of power left. This was not nearly enough time to set the net anchors and mark the drill targets.

Okay, so don't waste the trip, do half the job. I got the Hammer out and started to drive in the first anchor. It's not your normal type nail driver, we just call it that. The recoil slammed it back into my stomach so hard it knocked the wind out of me. Not an easy thing to do, in a spacesuit. I collected my wits and examined the spike it was supposed to drive in . . . it was *bent*. It seemed that ole' 175 was not what it appeared. That spike *should* have been able to penetrate nickel-iron. Maybe it was defective, but after that kick in the gut I decided to go at this a little slower. Back to the ship for more tools and power . . . another unpleasant surprise . . . I hadn't kept close enough watch on the suit power and the automatic safeties had disabled the Drive in favor of life support. Now I had a real problem and I had better figure a way out or I was going to be floating out here in the cold, for a long, long time.

Getting back to the ship using only muscle power seems easy. Obviously, this was space and the ice ball had no gravity to speak of, so I could just jump for it. A good idea in theory, but very chancy in practice. If my jump missed, there would be no way to correct my trajectory and instead of dying next to this rock, I would take the scenic route to the hereafter. So I modified the basic idea. I had about a thousand feet of high strength line with me that I had wrapped around the ice ball for something to hang on to. If I clipped the end to me and my jump was off, I could just pull myself back in and try again. After five tries I finally let go of the line . . . if it hadn't been for my suit, I would have kissed Icehound's hull when I landed. That was close. Make a note . . . buy some gas thrusters as backup. It had been getting mighty cold out there.

After some food and a hot drink, I did a status check on the rest of the ship and got

comfortable, to ponder the very strange day I'd just had. The facts are, everything was normal until I tried to close on the ice ball. Then, there was a bright flash. Hmm, come to think of it, the flash hadn't come from the Bridge window but seemed to fill the whole forward cabin. Okay, because of the flash, the ship lost all power? Dead Fusion Unit. Many minutes of frantic activity on my part to stabilize the ship. After that no problems until I suited up and went over to the ice ball. My suit had a failure similar to the ship's. Then, the Hammer almost knocks me out. Obviously, there was something strange about Ice Ball 175. I checked the spectrograph data.

"Computer."

"READY."

"Analysis . . . level three . . . data latest spectrograph . . . GO"

"WORKING." I like my computer to sound like a computer. It makes me appreciate human company when I get it. It isn't the latest model but it works and it's paid for, two very important things out here. "ANALYSIS COMPLETE . . . SOFTCOPY, HARDCOPY OR VOICE."

"Computer, display . . . Save data . . . File ACQ175."

"FILE SAVED . . . DATA DISPLAYED . . . WAITING." I ambled over to the console and checked out the results.

WATER . . . 99%

OTHERS . . . 1% . . . UNMEASURABLE TO WITHIN 30% CERTAINTY.

Now, I've been at this ice ball catching game for a while and I've *never* seen an analysis that was this black and white. The Others category usually runs 20% with a 70% certainty. What the data meant was that either ole' 175 was 99% pure water *or* the data was wrong *or* that 175 was not what it appeared. I was pretty sure the equipment was working, the computer does an extensive system check. That left door number one or door number three.

Door number one didn't have much of a chance because nothing in the belt is 99% pure. Now considering all that had happened today, it is pretty safe to assume that the *Unknown* has a hand in this. Since 90% of the Belt is unknown, using rather convoluted logic, it is safe to conclude that whatever 175 was, it wasn't just an ice ball. I must be tired, that should have been obvious from the beginning. The Comp. is on watch and I'm for the sack.

Day two of the exciting Saga of Ice Ball 175 dawned. The first thing I did was to check the ship vitals, most important, the battery charge. Ship . . . okay, battery . . . still charging. The Comp. seems happy and radar reports that nothing was going to hit me for at least ten years. Not that I planned to be here that long, supplies were running low and it was time to head for Belt Central, to stock up. Belt Central is the main marketplace in the Belt. About a million miles spinward, was Logan's Hole. In my opinion, Belt Central has delusions of grandeur and Logan's Hole was just what it sounds like. Oh well, you take what you can get. Maybe when I get enough cash banked, I'll start my own Rest and Rec. center.

Before I went back out there, I needed to rig up some sort of gas propulsion since battery power had proven to be . . . unreliable. Checking inventory I found some empty oxygen tanks I could fill and use as thrusters. Next, I got my hand tools together. What I figured was that using the line out there to hang on to, I could scrape off the ice to see what was below.

On the trip over I lost 40% of my suit power, again. I had brought a spare battery and it was okay, so I could stay for a full work period. Using the marked line, I measured my catch. The Ice Ball turned out to be 52 feet across and 150 feet long. This was a pretty big piece of something and it wasn't ice. It took me the better part of 24 hours (not all at once) to clear a band a meter wide all the way around 175. What I found was, to say the least, astounding! It seemed that Kilroy had been here. I discovered that the surface below the ice was artificial, intelligence created, Alien! There was an entry lock, with markings in an unfamiliar script and a big hole near one end that didn't look like it belonged there. The lock mechanism wasn't obvious so I decided to use the hole. My Rad meter told me that the area around it was slightly hotter than the rest of the object . . . so, with one ear on the Rad counter, and both eyes open, I pulled my way inside.

It was immediately obvious that something had exploded. I took a lot of pictures of the damage and looked for the entrance to the rest of the ship. *That's a stretch, isn't it?* My internal pest was back, but hey, when you find it in space and it's artificial, it's a ship until proven otherwise. The hatch was easy to find, being at the end of a catwalk. There was a window in it so I lit up the interior with my suit light. Lo and behold, it was an airlock with the other side closed. Up to this point, there hadn't been anything completely unfamiliar and the airlock was no exception. On each hatch, was a large handle, no mystery there, doors need knobs. So, firmly grasping the Unknown by the handle, I pushed in the obvious direction. The hatch opened . . . sorry, no bug eyed monsters were lying in wait, to ambush me.

Inside the airlock, were more cryptic symbols on the walls, cabinets and controls. I moved to the inner hatch, grabbed the Unknown again and shoved. The Unknown wasn't moving, thank you. A few quick seconds of thought and a few long minutes of examination, uncovered the fact that the two hatches had a mechanical safety which prevented one from opening if the other was already open. These folks had a healthy respect for Old Man Vacuum. Okay, close the door and wipe your feet, sonny. So far, I hadn't seen any light nor any indication of power, but when I got the inner hatch open, there was a dim glow from the front of the ship.

Moving cautiously toward the glow, I soon found myself on the Bridge. *Getting a little anthropomorphic, aren't we?* No, where you fly the ship from is the Bridge. To fly . . . well . . . it's handy to have panoramic windows. This area had such windows, ergo, the Bridge. *Brilliant, Sherlock.* I ignored the voice, it was just being a pain. Besides, there were seats at the front and they were occupied. On the surface they appeared human, two arms . . . two legs . . . two eyes, two ears, one nose and one mouth. They were also very dead. This discovery evoked all sorts of philosophical thoughts. Who were they? Where did they come from? Where did I come from? Are we related species or just similar evolution? It was all too much to consider, just standing there. So ignore philosophy and feel sad for them. To have died, way out here, millions of miles from a safe harbor.

I know a little bit about Physics and Biology having knocked around out here for the past ten years or so, but I could see that some high powered help was called for. An Alien artifact that could have been built by man and dead Aliens, which looked a lot like us, was not something to be investigated by an Ice Hunter, like me. Well . . . not alone anyway. After returning to the ship and ditching my suit, I got a hot cup of coffee and had the Comp. orient the High gain antenna toward Ceres.

Ceres, because of it being one of the larger rocks out here, was a natural place to occupy. It was developed by a company trying to invent a Faster Than Light drive. They were out here, because some of their experiments made the Lunatics nervous and Mars was a work in progress. The company was losing money like sand flowed through your fingers so they decided to give it up as a bad deal. The people that were working on the project decided to buy the operation and continue. They quickly discovered that living out here required 'money'. Remember, we discussed that earlier. What they came up with was to operate a Professional Center. You know, Doctors, Dentists, Repair and Maintenance facilities, etc. and in their spare time, some of them work on the FTL Drive. One of the Physics people was my favorite person in the whole System. Besides having an I.Q. in the high triple digits, she had a body that could make the dead rise, so it was with great joy and anticipation that I linked into the Ceres Comm system and keyed her number.

A very relaxing video, of a seashore, came on the screen and her melodious voice filled the confines of my control room. I had gotten her damn answering machine.

"I'm sorry, but, I am unable to answer the Vid right now, please leave a message."

"Hey, Fire, it's me, Ice, answer the Vid!" Did I mention that she's a red head? When we started seeing each other, my friend Brain noted that since I was called Ice and she had red hair, it was only logical she should be Fire. It seemed Fi was screening her calls.

"I hope that this is a life or death situation Ice, I'm right in the middle of something." Came blasting out of the speaker as the sea scene dissolved and my sweetie came on, with thunder clouds over her eyebrows and lightning in her eyes. She has a temper to match her hair.

"Don't cut off, I have to talk to you," I blurted out.

"What is it? I'm very busy." You'd think she'd be glad to see me after a whole month, but she tends to over focus on work.

"Listen, do you remember that vacation we took to Belt Central, last month?" I said, quickly. Her face cleared up instantly and her eyes got softer. She's not insensitive, just kind of single-minded.

"Right, you bet I do, switching now." We really had taken a vacation to Belt Central recently but this only had a little to do with it. The problem with communication by radio, even with a high gain parabolic antenna, is that someone could always eavesdrop on conversations. A first reference to a vacation trip meant that we were to scramble the transmissions using a prearranged seed word, related to the trip.

"What's wrong? Are you all right? Do you need help?" A rapid stream of questions came forth from her lovely lips. I held up my hand to forestall any more.

"Hang on . . . slow down . . . I'm fine. Even better since I called you. Listen, I've found a derelict ship and I need you, Doc and Brain out here as quickly as you can get away."

"Disabled ship! Are there any casualties?" She asked, frowning in concern.

"No, casualties and no survivors, but Fi, the ship wasn't built in this solar system. The markings aren't anything that my Comp. has on file."

"An Alien Ship!" She practically blew out the speaker.

"Yeah, but before the three of you come blasting out here, stow some supplies on board." I transmitted a list of supplies Comp. to Comp., and my coordinates.

"It's about time I took a leave of absence from this madhouse and this find might supply

some info for the Project. Our ETA should be about 48 hours, give or take a few." Her eyes got soft again. "See you soon, love." As I signed off, a worry began to creep into my thoughts. The ETA of 48 hours could only mean that she intended to use the Flinger, or in technicalese . . . Centrifugal Velocity Enhancer. The Flinger is a fusion-powered wheel about a thousand feet in diameter. In operation, a ship is attached to the outside rim. Across the circle from the ship, tanks were filled with water to counter balance the wheel. "Ground power" was used to spin the wheel like a giant centrifuge. At a preprogrammed moment, depending on where you were heading, the ship was released and the water allowed to fill the rim to keep it from leaving the vicinity too fast. This was a tricky operation and more than a little dangerous. The Hospital used it in emergency cases. Once the ship's trajectory was established, the pilot and Comp. spent the remaining time decelerating the ship and dodging small chunks of rock.

Doc and Brain were pretty much what their nicknames suggested. Both of them worked on the Project (they never liked to call it FTL or Stardrive . . . very secretive). Doc, is a Medical type and was out here to study the effects of faster than light travel, on us carbon units, if they ever develop the drive. Brain, is an Electronics whiz and Computer Genius. He also dabbles a bit in language and history, which was why I thought he should be here. Doc, I figured, could maybe prod around inside these two corpses and find out how closely we were related.

The only thing we really had to worry about, was someone else getting out here and trying a little claim jumping. One way to avoid that, was to use scrambled communications, which I had. Another way was to register the asteroid as a mining claim, which I immediately did. The third was to keep a sharp eye out for strangers and the guns handy in case they showed up unannounced.

Fusion power had unhooked people from the power companies and the Power Brokers, both Political and Technical had tried to stop it. Edicts came from the Heads of States about how having all this 'uncontrolled' energy around was dangerous. Money came from the Power Companies to support the bureaucrats in their attempt to stifle Fusion. Well, the accounts of those years could fill a library. The American people finally woke up and took matters into their own hands. When three hundred million people stood up and told said parties, to take their bull and stuff it, there wasn't a lot the Control Freaks could do about it. It's amazing how people can become responsible individuals when they have the power (literally) to enforce that individualism. Government was drastically scaled back, all over the planet. It's also amazing that people tried to take advantage of the situation to further their own agendas. After the smoke cleared it became apparent that the only way people could live together was to follow the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you' and the famous saying 'mind your own business'. The only other 'rule' we have is 'Don't tread on me or I'll tread back'.

The time I spent, waiting for my visitors, was not going to go to waste. Using a Holo camera, I recorded the interior of the Alien ship. Loading this info into my Comp., allowed me to sit and relax in the comfort of my own ship to observe and plan what to do about it. Since Icehound's computer had full 3d holographic capability, I could rotate any view in any direction. This allowed me to study a lot of the visible items and devices and attempt to deduce what they did. Some of those deductions about the ship and its contents were very interesting, to say the least.

First, there was still a little power aboard. As well as the one indicator I saw on the 'main'

control board, two others were lit as well. The one on the main control panel may be a warning light. I made this assumption because it was a little larger than the others and red.

Making the inference that because it was red, it meant *warning* was, I admit, a little shaky. But the previous owners looked so much like humans, I felt the same reason red is a warning to us (blood is red) might apply to them also. The other two lights were green and on a side panel.

Second, the ship seemed capable of supporting four people. *People?* I thought you were asleep. Don't argue about what I call 'em . . . who's telling this story anyway? There were four seats in the main cabin and four smaller cabins containing a wealth of personal articles. There were only two bodies in the ship, although all four cabins seemed to have been occupied.

Third, was the problem of the power drain on my suit batteries every time I went over there. I had the distinct feeling that it related to the lights on the control panels but I was going to wait until the really intelligent people got here before pushing any buttons.

Fourth, after thoroughly checking the damaged rear portion of the Alien ship, I was certain the power source of this vessel had been a Fission plant, fer cryin' out loud. Those things are dangerous. Apparently, wherever this had come from didn't have Fusion power or they wouldn't have been using such an unsafe system. The key to a controlled fusion reaction turned out to be a quantum black hole. By creating a state that neutralizes the repulsive forces between atoms, Apparent Gravity and a little additional energy cause the atoms to collide and fuse. The apparatus to create this condition is about as big as a refrigerator. The power room on the Alien ship was way too large for a Fusion system.

Fifth, there was no Inertial Drive. Regular space movement was by some sort of catalytic rocket engine whose fuel tanks were very empty. As for the propulsion system that got it to our solar system . . . well . . . I guess that would have to wait for better minds than mine to figure out. Just as I was putting these flashes of brilliance down, for posterity, the collision detection alarm got my attention.

"APPROACHING BODY ON COLLISION COURSE . . . 95% CERTAINTY," the Computer bellowed. "ETA 27 MINUTES, 14 SECONDS." Fortunately, this was not unexpected so I didn't jump out of my skin . . . quite. I dabble a little in electronics, and mechanics, hydraulics and a host of other things. You have to, way out here in the middle of nowhere. Repair facilities are few and far between. I had made some modifications in the Search Radar which would have voided the warranty, if the system had been new enough to have one. Standard radar systems, for Belt ships, give about fifteen minutes warning which is normally plenty of time to do what has to be done, but I hate to be rushed. Incoming targets have to be tracked for a while to let the computer determine their course. On a planet the area scanned is a hemisphere, whereas out here in the wide-open spaces, the scan area is a sphere and targets are moving much faster. It helps to have a little more range. This particular target, was only the three wise men. Well, two wise men and a Crimson Haired Goddess.

