

SEA TO SKY

CHAPTER FOUR

Tony Power

(Whistler Mountain, British Columbia - April 1970)

Seven thousand feet up... stretched out in the snow atop the peak on a pair of black garbage bags... backs propped against their obliquely planted skis... faces lifted to the mid-morning sun...

Leo lowered his head and opened his eyes and sat up, blinking behind his Polaroids. He yawned and stretched and yawned again, then unzipped the blue nylon pack by his side and slipped a hand inside and brought out his cigarettes. Gauloises Caporal. Preferred brand of serious writers, existentialists (whatever those might be) and artistes; hence his own, though they were too harsh to inhale properly, in the months since his Art 12 teacher, dubiously identified him as a potentially 'promising young artist' and recommended him for an extracurricular night-school drawing class. Generally Leo limited his consumption of the Gallic stinkers to Thursday nights, when his class met at the art school downtown, but his deck of Player's Filter had gone missing in action last night at the party he attended in North Van, and Russ claimed that the Rothman's he was smoking at present was his last, so Gauloises it was...

Sheathed in cellophane, the package was a pale and soothing shade of blue, the blue of robins' eggs and



today's sky and the tissue-thin aerograms his mother sent him from all over Europe two summers ago as she honeymooned with new husband Frank.

He stared at the package, captivated by the occult device emblazoning it, a winged helmet. The Flash—DC superhero—was his immediate association, though on second thought he supposed it more likely belonged to the messenger god, whose name escaped him just now. Vibrant with enigma and mystic energy, the trompe l'oeil helmet seemed about to fly off the pale blue paper at him. He thrilled with excitement, with a feeling that he was on the verge of something amazing, that magic was imminent.

Then the moment passed and the feeling was gone.

He turned the package over and shook out a stubby, unfiltered cigarette into his palm, then got sidetracked looking at his hand. Soft colours were playing across the skin—pastel greens and blues and reds—and there was something terribly strange about it. Had he ever really taken a good look at it before? It seemed an entity separate from and other than himself.

Distracted by the one hand, he lost his grip on the package in the other. It slipped from his numb fingers, dropped to the snow beside him. He stared down at it, skyblue against the fresh powder, then looked up and beheld a snow-white, package-shaped cloud drifting across the Gauloises-blue sky. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and he began to tremble. He looked back down at the package, then up again at the cloud. Then down, then up, back and forth. The perfect inverted symmetry was uncanny... surely too perfect for coincidence.

He retrieved the package and set it down on the edge of the GLAD bag next to his fanny pack. Placing the cigarette between his lips, he gazed out at the snow-covered, blue-shadowed mountains—stretching out before him forever—

to the southern horizon at least; beyond which, he knew, they continued across the border into Washington, where they took a new name, the Cascades (here in B.C. they were the Coast Mountains), and on down the coast through Oregon into California, where he spent most of his first ten years.

The thought was comforting somehow. It gave him a feeling of connection, of being linked by mountains to home—after five years in B.C. he still sometimes thought of California as that... of connection, too, to Karen, who lived there still with Frank and baby Adam, his new, unknown half-brother.

The view was amazing, enough to rouse the most apathetic observer, and to set a person to pondering the Big Picture: Geology and Time; the immensity and antiquity of earth and cosmos; one's own puniness and transience in the scheme of things.

Not Leo, though. Not this morning. He was too preoccupied just now with a more immediate question that had been posing itself ever more insistently since they attained the summit a quarter of an hour ago, namely: How to get back down?

Specifically, how to get back down on a beat-up, dulleddged pair of Head Standards, with his brain registering ever more powerfully the effects of the little lavender tablet?

He plucked the cigarette from his lips and with some difficulty—his hand was trembling—inserted it back into the blue paper package, then brushed bitter dark shreds of Middle Eastern tobacco from his tongue.

Gauloises were, he was convinced, as essential to artistic endeavour as cigars were to new fatherhood, pipes to deep thinking, and Marlboros to riding the range—but 'cleaner, fresher, smoother' they were not, and he didn't think his lungs were up to the challenge just now.

He dropped his hand to the snow beside him and with his fingertips scooped up a little and placed it in his mouth and let it melt down his throat, deliciously icy; then pushed the Gauloise package back inside his fanny pack and rezippered.

When he looked up again the world had brightened, as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud, though this was not the case.

Had he somehow lost his sunglasses without noticing? He reached up to the bridge of his nose and confirmed that they were still in place. Hesitantly, he raised them and was by zapped the glare off the snowfields below. Cringing like a vampire caught out at sun-up, he set the glasses back in place, then settled back against his skis and shut his eyes and tipped his face to the sun again. The skin of his brow warmed and tightened. The screen back of his eyelids flooded with tangerine light. A Technicolor fluid geometry began moving across the screen, slowly at first, then faster, giving way to an accelerating stream of images, a *torrent*. Faces at first... faces of all ages and races, male and female, familiar and unknown, beautiful and grotesque... each one vivid and distinct though barely glimpsed as it flashed past and was succeeded by the next...

Glimpses too of women's bodies and men's and sex... of dark acts and strange rituals... manic cartoons and weird scenes inside the gold mine... strange cities and fantastic architecture... landscapes both paradisaical and infernal...

forest and desert and ocean... a bird's-eye view of a city by the sea at night... a cliff-house with a pool below shining like a turquoise jewel... at the deep end on bottom, a shadow...

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He surrendered to the images, let them rush through his head, purely sensual and without thoughts for some indeterminate interval, surfacing at last only in response to a slight fluttering agitation in the air nearby and the sensation of something lightly brushing his left foot.

When he opened his eyes a bird was perched on the toe of his ski boot. Robin-sized, grey-feathered and white-breasted with black head markings. A whiskey-jack. Shameless beggar and bold lunch thief.

The bird was so perfectly still and its gaze so unflinching that Leo began to wonder if Russ might be subjecting him to some kind of taxidermic tomfoolery. But, no—suddenly it flitted down to the snow beside his foot, seemingly vanishing and re-materializing.

In the same instant a strange little voice piped up inside his head. 'Feed me feed me feed me' it demanded shrilly, tonelessly.

Leo stared at the creature, which looked back at him with beady, black eyes, then vanished and re-appeared next to a plastic-wrapped wedge of navel orange at the edge of the GLAD bag Russ was sitting on. It gave the fruit several sharp, assaying jabs with its short, black bill, then withdrew, put off perhaps by the plastic.

Then vanished again, this time for good—and so

abruptly that Leo was left questioning not only the bird's telepathic powers but its very existence.

Now the question that had been nagging him since he arrived at top asserted itself once more: How to get down? His heart was pounding. He drew a deep breath, reminding himself that it was only half a tab, and turned to his brother: "Russ?"

Nothing. Propped against his Dynastars Russ was as still as the whiskey-jack when first encountered. Since his run-in with the silver-haired man he had been very quiet, saying little during the long ride up on the Red Chair and the trek to the peak, and now, amazingly enough, appeared to have fallen asleep. With mirrors covering his eyes again it was hard to be certain, but the inch-long ash drooping from the cigarette in his right hand seemed to support the hypothesis, and the low snores pretty well clinched it.

Leo was impressed. He knew Russ to be hung over and behind on his sleep today; knew too that his brother was possessed of a quirky metabolism. Still, to fall asleep at this juncture seemed to him remarkable. Though not without precedent, come to think of it: Just a couple months ago on a Whistler weekend like this one, Russ had defied the fundamental laws of pharmacology and stunned his associates by lying down for a nap shortly after partaking of uppers, a fistful of whites from which Leo had accepted a single, token hit. As his brother slumbered peacefully on the loft waterbed of their uncle's A-frame (Jack had lent them it in his absence that weekend, as this), and long after the associates had jittered out the door in search of après-ski action Leo had: cleaned

the place from top to bottom; filled several pages of his sketch pad with tiny intricate drawings and sub-Kerouacian stream-of-consciousness gibberish; evacuated his bowels three times; and ground down his molars several fractions of a millimeter. Sleepless, his mind racing, he tossed and turned and twitched and itched till dawn in a bed he came to suspect of verminous infestation—red ants or the like—though repeated inspections failed to turn up any evidence of such.

(Together with this remembrance came the realization—a bit late to do him much good—that there may have been a lesson to be drawn from the episode. One concerning the wisdom of accepting hits, token or otherwise, of controlled substances. It was a lesson that would have served him well back at the Red Dog this morning had he but taken it to heart. Why, he wondered, had he not?)

He cleared his throat and tried his brother again, this time in a louder voice in which the anxious edge was all too audible to his own ear: "Russ?"

Now the question that had been nagging him since he arrived at top asserted itself once more: How to get down? His heart was pounding. He drew a deep breath, reminding himself that it was only half a tab, and turned to his brother: "Russ?"

"Unh."

"You awake?"

"Unh."

"Yeah?"

"Am now." His brother raised the cigarette to his lips, spilling ash down the front of his T-shirt. He dragged sharply on what was left of his smoke then snapped the butt out over the sheer slope that fell away before them and sat

up and reached for the orange slice that the whiskey-jack had spurned. Removing the plastic-wrap, he stuffed it in his mouth and bit down.

“So uh do you feel anything yet?” asked Leo. Though he tried to keep his voice offhand the sentence got away from him; his inner ear was buffeted with the full range of tonal inflection and emphasis available to his simple question—YOU feel anything yet? FEEL anything yet? ANYthing yet? AnyTHING yet? Anything YET? His utterance concluded on a weird, rising note that Russ, for all his sluggishness, did not miss. He turned Leo’s way, his nose and lips glistening with zinc oxide, the fruit rind bulging from his mouth like an orange mouthguard. Silently, he regarded Leo from behind his mirrorshades.

The effect was unsettling. Leo could see himself clearly in his brother’s lenses and the glasses of his reflected image seemed to mirror a tiny Russ. Whose glasses would give back an even tinier image of himself... and his in turn an homuncular Russ, the two of them shrinking to microbial dimensions, like Raquel Welch and the crew in FANTASTIC VOYAGE...

The notion gave him a woozy, vertiginous feeling.

Now Russ turned away and spat out the rind in his palm, then sailed it into space. Tipping his head back, he yawned then tipped back down and turned to Leo. “Check out the clouds, man,” he suggested.

Leo looked up. Fleecy puffs of cumulus were racing across the sky, surging along on a stiff westerly. They were really moving, at time-lapse hyper-speed almost. There was

a word for it... it was on the tip of his tongue...

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He waited and eventually the word bobbed up to consciousness like a bloated corpse surfacing at sea: Scud. A harsh, ugly word with harsh, ugly kin—scum, crud, scud—but even so it was good to know that his retrieval system was functioning still under present conditions of adversity. Confidence bolstered, he ventured to speak again, this time with better success: “They’re really scudding, man.”

“Say what?” His brother shifted position slightly and crossed his feet at the ankle, drawing Leo’s eye once again to his boots. Redder than ever, the things were slowly expanding and contracting now, pulsating sluggishly like some bizarre, colourful set of external lungs.

Russ’s twin mirrors were trained on him now. Leo stared back blankly, having lost the thread entirely, as who would not in the face of preternaturally red ski boots that BREATHED!?

“Uh what was that?” he inquired.

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘What’.”

“Oh... so what did I say?”

“Something about the clouds.”

“Clouds?”

Russ grimaced. “Get it together, Lee. You sound like fucking Ritchie... or that burn-out at the bar last night, that

Gnome dude..."

"Sorry."

Russ hawked loudly and spat over the edge of the precipice at their feet. "So what are you trying to say about them, about the clouds?"

"Uh right... the clouds... they... they're scudding! Clouds scud... don't they? Like when they're really hauling ass?"

Russ kept the mirrors fixed on him without passing comment. His ointment-whitened nose and lips gave him the look of a sinister clown. After a long, uncomfortable moment, he raised a forefinger in the air before him in the manner of a guru paving the way for some pearl of wisdom and recited in a plummy, Oxbridgian sort of voice: "Da-dah da-dah da-something pale... And scuds the cloud before the gale..."

"Right! Wow! ... What is that?"

Russ shrugged. "One of the Nutty Professor's guys."

"Wow."

Said guys being the English Romantic poets, subject of their father's doctoral dissertation and subsequent scholarly investigations.

"Bedtime reading for eager young minds," added Russ. "Remember?"

"Uh sort of," Leo said. Actually he didn't. Much of Alan's high-minded bedtime reading had taken place at a

time in his life when he was too little and sleepyheaded to take it in—in family legend he was celebrated for invariably nodding off within the first thirty seconds of storytime...

A world-mythological theme seemed to be shaping up overhead. The heavens were filling with anthropomorphic figures outfitted in the dress and accoutrements of heroes and deities.

Now Russ turned away and Leo's attention reverted to the sky. An eagle was circling to the southwest, way up. What was it he had been reading about them recently? Some arresting fact that had struck him at the time, though not so strongly that he could recollect what it was just now.

He looked from the bird to the clouds beyond and watched as a succession of huge metamorphic figures emerged from the billowing cumulus, swirling into focus and out again; distorting and dissolving, then cohering again into other forms and figures.

To the southeast a towering, grey-bellied cloud mass had constituted itself into a Rushmore-sized cloud-god, who underwent a quick sex change, metamorphosing into a giant goddess or nymph, then a mermaid, then a fish standing on its tail for a moment before toppling slowly to one side, gently imploding and disintegrating...

For the first time since boarding the gondola Leo relaxed a little and managed to recapture some of the feeling that had accompanied him on the drive up from the city this morning—excited anticipation of the long weekend ahead, three days of skiing and après-skiing and who knows what else; and then, stretching into the future like the mountains into the southern distance, another full week of Easter vacation before it was back to school and into the final few months of twelfth grade. Suddenly elated, he delighted in the beauty of the mountains and sky, marveled at his cloud-sculpting powers.

A world-mythological theme seemed to be shaping up overhead. The heavens were filling with anthropomorphic figures outfitted in the dress and accoutrements of heroes and deities. It was a mixed, syncretic bunch, including among its number Egyptians, Hindu, and Norse representatives, as well as various freelancers. The dominant faction, though, looked to be Olympian, many of them decked out in winged helmets. Rendered in a muscular, realist manner reminiscent of the Mexican muralistas (just last session his sketch class had been looking at slides of Rivera and Orozco and Siquieros) they busied themselves plucking at lyres, imbibing potations from heavy goblets, and brandishing spears at wild beasts and one another...

Leo lowered his gaze to a massive dark peak that thrust up against the southern horizon, sheer and bare of snow, at a distance of seven or eight miles: The Black Tusk, core of an

ancient volcano from which time and weather had eroded the outer layer of cinder that once had sheathed it, laying bare the basalt core, black bone beneath the crumbled flesh of the bygone mountain.

Last summer he climbed it with Russ and their cousin Kenny, camping overnight in the blooming meadows at its base and spending a couple hours the next morning perched on the summit like a bug on a spar, munching cheese sandwiches and smoking cigarettes and pondering the view with a slightly uneasy feeling that such majesty should inspire grander thoughts than was in fact the case.

Now a burly, bearded cloud-god—one of the ones with the winged headgear—sailed past the great black spire, disporting himself in a non-missionary position with a cloud-nymph.



Philip Timms photo, Vancouver Public Library VPL 18636

The rest of the heavenly host were quick to follow this couple's shameless lead. The sky filled with amorous deities, a vast ecumenical orgy in which the Hindu contingent figured prominently, assuming all manner of supple positions in the manner of the temple carvings at Khajuraho, photos of which Leo had examined attentively last month before class in the art school's reading room.

Flesh stirred in the depths of his red thermal underwear; he let out a little involuntary sound.

Russ turned to him and raised an eyebrow.

Leo's face warmed. Casually, he threw a foot atop a knee in an effort to dissemble the embarrassing bulge in his longjohns.

Russ grinned and wagged a finger at him in mock reproach, but didn't pursue the matter. The X-rated tableau overhead went out of focus and subsided, and his bulge likewise.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back and gave himself over again to the manic movies that were playing still back of his eyelids.

When he looked outward again—a minute later? ten?—Russ was on his feet against a brilliant blue backdrop of sky. With his arms flung wide and head tipped back, his glistening white face-paint and long dirty-blond hair hanging down his arched back, he looked to be in the middle of some ecstatic rite of sun worship.

But no, just stretching.

Leo struggled to his feet and lurched around till he found his balance. He rubbed his hands together briskly; then, keeping them together palm to palm, raised them to his lips and huffed warm breath between his conjoined thumbs and rubbed them some more. He windmilled his arms, bent to touch his toes—and almost blacked out, though 'black' wasn't really the word for the swirl of colour and light that

filled his head.

Russ meantime pulled on his ski jacket and balled up his GLAD bag and stuffed it in the pocket, then put his hands on his hips and did a few deep squats, the cartilage of his bad knee crackling like a crepe sole on a sticky floor. After four or five he stopped and looked over at Leo: "Ready?"

Leo didn't reply. Generally speaking, things seemed to have simmered down some in the last little while -- the world was less rife with corner-of-the-eye shooting stars and hallucinations and déjà vu and whatnot—but not so much that he felt inclined to budge from his present position. He had little confidence in his depth perception—things were flat and cartoonish and too-bright—nor in his hand-eye coordination; nor for that matter any of his other sensory-motor faculties.

Russ yanked his Dynastars from the snow and slapped them together a couple times, then fished out a pale-green bar of wax from his pocket and began stroking it on to the mustard-yellow base of one of the skis.

After a moment he looked up and brandished the bar at Leo. "'Ski wax' en français. 'Ow you zay?'"

"Wax?"

"Le fart. Rhymes with 'noir', spells like 'fart'. F-A-R-T." He lifted a leg and reinforced his instruction with an explosive example of the English homograph, then smiled demurely and returned to his task.

Leo stared at him, struck again by his brother's apparent immunity to the effects of the little lavender tablet. Napping, farting, skiing—Russ on mescaline was little distinguishable from Russ straight. It made him wonder about his own susceptibility.

Now Russ left off waxing the ski and brought out the Swiss army knife with which he halved the tab back at the Red Dog a century or two ago. He unfolded a blade and began to

whittle away at the translucent green bar, but stopped after a moment and held up the knife for Leo's inspection. Clearing his throat, he pushed his sunglasses down his nose slightly and blinked over them in parody of their father's myopic lecture-hall manner. It was a relief to see his eyes again; his pupils were huge and black.

"Consider if you will, the genius, so to speak, of the Swiss, as it were." His voice mimicked the bombastic cadences of W.C. Fields. "That mild-mannered, boring nation of white-bread zombies... The Canadians of Europe, one might perhaps style them, might one not, were one so inclined, n'est-ce pas? Though then again, on the other hand of course, one might not were one not... so inclined, that is to say." He removed the glasses and polished them on the sleeve of his jacket, then set them back in place and resumed his discourse. "Switzerland. Land of the army knife... the cuckoo clock... the Montreux Jazz"—he shut his eyes and pursed his lips and fingered an invisible saxophone, then continued in a *Pépé Le Pew* sort of voice—"ze private number' bank accoun'... ze Family Robinson... ze meelk choc-o-la'... Not to mention"—a dramatic pause—"ze drog psychédéliques!" Raising his hands, he waggled his fingers near his ears and pulled a freaking-out heebie-jeebies face; then folded the blade back into the cherry-red handle of the knife and dropped the waxed ski onto the snow beside its mate and stepped into his bindings, toe then heel, first one then the other. Looking up at Leo, he spoke in his own voice. "Ready?" he asked again.

"Uh not really." Even so, Leo dropped to one knee and started to do up his boots. Unlike Russ's snazzy new plastic

pair, they were the old-fashioned leather kind, and laced up rather than buckled.

"Well, ready or not, bro..." Russ shuffled ahead toward the brink of the hill. "4:30 in the bar if we get separated, okay?"

...he favoured a more life-affirming approach whereby one strove, ideally, to descend at a moderate rate of speed in a controlled fashion, executing in transit a series of sweeping turns, as gracefully as one was able, arriving at bottom in a state of mild exhilaration sans compound fractures.

The chances of separation were good, Leo suspected, for all his brother's reassurances when he was promoting the little lavender tablet back at the Red Dog. In fact probably he could count on it. Russ didn't much distinguish between recreational skiing and competition. In either case his style was the same: Flat out. Straight down the fall line, caution to the winds, speed of the essence. It was an approach that had won him a shelf-ful of regional downhill and GS trophies, and predictions of a future with the national team—up until the day two winters ago when he caught an edge on a socked-in, icy downhill course and went through a safety fence at 50 mph into a stand of whitebark pine, from which he was fetched on a toboggan-stretcher with contusions, abrasions, a broken nose, two broken fingers, and a shattered kneecap that the attending physician, an Irishman, had characterized as

'up to I.R.A. standards'.

The accident had ended his hopes for World Cup glory, but didn't slow him down so much that more than a few of the very fastest could keep up with him on the mountain.

Which counted Leo out. An 'advanced intermediate' at best, he favoured a more life-affirming approach whereby one strove, ideally, to descend at a moderate rate of speed in a controlled fashion, executing in transit a series of sweeping

turns, as gracefully as one was able, arriving at bottom in a state of mild exhilaration sans compound fractures. It was an approach his brother couldn't stand. He seemed to take it personally, as a betrayal, an insult, a slap in the face...

"4:30, right?" Russ repeated.
"Lee? ... Earth to Leo, do you copy?"

"You said you'd wait! You said you'd ski with me today!"

"I'm talking about just in case. Plus I have to be down early for the sound check... remember I told you? At three? You may not want to head down that early. Right?"

Leo nodded hesitantly.

"You'll remember? 4:30? The Highlander?"

"Okay."

"Cause remember I need you to drive me down to Squamish to pick up Alison." Alison was Russ's new girlfriend and prospective overnight guest. "And then we'll need to get back pretty quick so I can make the gig... I'm counting on you."

"Okay. But I'm counting on you too, like to wait up for me. Till I get warmed up at least, okay?"

Russ snorted derisively. "When do you ever get warmed up, Lee? You ski like an old fucking woman."

"Seriously, Russ. I feel sort of weird."

"Yeah, well, you are sort of weird."

"Come on, man! You said you would... you promised!"

His brother sighed heavily. "Okay okay... don't get

worked up... you gotta keep up though."

Even so, Leo was not reassured. As he watched Russ reach down to fasten the top buckles of his boots (they were still intensely red but were no longer breathing, thankfully), then straighten and pull on his gloves, it sunk home that the moment he had been dreading was at hand. "Russ?" he quavered.

"What now?"

"What if I can't get in the bar? Like what if I get carded?"

Russ rolled his eyes. This was the third time the question had been asked. "I told you already, it'll be cool... Kevin's working." Kevin being a ski bum from Down Under in his late twenties who tended bar weekends at the Highlander; an associate of Russ's, and in fact impresario of the band's gig this weekend.

"I don't think he likes me."

"Sure he likes you... I mean, he doesn't dislike you."

"He's always hassling me."

"He hassles everyone, he likes to give people a hard time, he's just joking around, he's got a weird sense of humour..."

"Kenny said he was in the war, like Viet Nam."

"Yeah, he was a medic supposedly. He doesn't like to talk about it though... Are you ready?" Russ looked a little edgy, Leo thought, as if he didn't much feel like talking about it either —no doubt because he himself was sitting the thing out here in Canada. And in fact keeping him clear of the draft and Viet Nam was the main reason for Alan and Julie's decision to move the family north five years ago.

Leo pushed the hair out of his eyes. "That's weird. Isn't

he Australian?"

"Of course he's fucking Australian... you've heard him talk, what else could he be?"

"So what's he doing in Viet Nam?"

Russ gave him a look. "'Cause Australia has troops there, dummy."

"It does?"

"Uh-huh... He got drafted... just like all those poor fuckers over there from stateside."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well can't he get busted or lose his union card or something? Like for serving minors?"

Russ flipped his hair back impatiently. "How many times do you need to hear it, Lee? He'll let you in... he won't card you... he'll serve you! The guy knows you, right? He did his medic thing on you that time you chopped yourself, remember?"

Leo winced, remembering all too well. An embarrassing mishap last spring, a slip of the axe whilst splitting kindling back of his uncle's place. Alcohol had been a contributing factor.

Russ was poised on the brink of the hill now. "Plus he scored us the gig this weekend, he's a friend, sort of... and even if he wasn't he'd serve you anyway, he serves everybody. Okay?"

"I guess."

"And if anyone does try to card you, which they won't, just say you're with the band. Alright?"

"I guess."

**He looked up.
The sky was still
incredibly blue,
but the clouds had
settled down, the
gods departed. The
eagle still circled
overhead, riding
a thermal on fixed
wings. Or maybe it
was a different one.**

"And try not to be such a wimp for once, would you?" Russ moved closer still to the brink, then in a voice mimicking the bad-dub English of an Italian gladiator flick called out: "We who about-a to die, salute-a you!" He grinned over at Leo, then planted his poles and lunged between them over the edge.

Leo experienced a surge of panic, which subsided quickly, leaving him feeling merely anxious and abandoned.

He looked up. The sky was still incredibly blue, but the clouds had settled down, the gods departed. The eagle still circled overhead, riding a thermal on fixed wings. Or maybe it was a different one.

Now he remembered the surprising thing he had read about them in an old issue of National Geographic in his dentist's waiting room last month: They're fratricidal. An eaglet stands a good chance of being pecked to death by an older sibling before making it out of the nest.

Lowering his gaze, he looked down the mountain in time to see a tiny figure far below—his brother—crest a ridge at speed and disappear from view on the far side.

Sighing, Leo fumbled a red rubber band out of his pocket and hastened to tie his hair back in a ponytail

The band snapped, stinging his thumbnail.