

Anti-Grav Unlimited

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For Maggie, Nicholas, Kristen, and Chad, with much love.

There's a new "Man in the Moon" — and the corporations exploiting Mother Earth are in for an ugly surprise.

Chapter 1

I drove up the gravel shoulder to the edge of the highway and held my steering wheel as the giant vehicle trained its guns on me. I tried to look friendly. I gave a quick wave to go with my biggest, fake smile. As the road train thundered past, the gun crew waved back and then I held on as my van rocked in the wash of the twenty-six car chain of gray and black composite.

I let out a deep sigh of relief, thankful the gun crew hadn't done a Swiss-cheese number on me and my van. Then I pulled onto Interstate 70 and quickly matched speed with the road train so I could tag along behind it at a steady 150 klicks per hour.

We hurtled down the ribbon of concrete traveling westward through the barren, treeless grassland that had been baked brown by the summer sun. Only a few abandoned farms and remnants of fencing showed that men had once lived in the area. The only trouble I had from there on was avoiding the wreckage that bounced alongside us from time to time as an old wreck was swept off the road by the train's "cattle guard."

The rest of the trip to New Denver was pretty much uneventful except when the road train smashed through a roadblock and shot up some hi-pees. I hoped the gun crew knew what they were doing; the government generally frowned on blowing away their employees. But since the road train kept going without having a fighter plane pound it into the pavement, I decided that the hi-pees must have been renegades.

Which just goes to show that you can't trust anyone on the interstate.

Hours later, we left the grassland and crossed most of the barren Col-Kan desert. Soon the shadowy, cloud-like Rocky Mountains were barely visible in the distance, and shortly thereafter the spires of New Denver came into sight. Gradually, black charcoal piles that had long ago been houses started to dot the rock and sand alongside the roadway, slowly giving way to rows of rubble separated by sand laced with burnt bricks, bits of charcoal, and scrub brush. I was in one of the suburbs that had surrounded old Denver in its heyday.

It was hard to imagine what the sprawling city must have been like before the water shortage and the terrorist attack. The destruction of this city and a few others had also spelled the beginning of the end for national superpowers; filling the vacuum were the international corporations which took over and formed the world government.

Seeing my exit, I turned off the interstate with a wave to the tail gunner on the road train, then headed down the new plastic roadway leading to New Denver. Fifteen minutes later I neared the glass and steel buildings that looked like tall glistening jewels which had sprung out of the desert around the space port. In the distance, a rocket thundered upward to arch toward some far away

part of the earth; the crackling of hot air crackled as the plume of white smoke and fire lifted the vehicle.

After driving through the valley formed by the high, needle-like skyscrapers on either side of the street, I parked three blocks down from Craig and Nikki's high-rise complex.

And waited.

I wanted to be sure that someone wasn't onto me before I headed for my friends' place. After the deaths of my lab team, I didn't want to bring any trouble with me.

Hearing a scratching sound at the window, I whirled around, drew my Beretta, aimed, and nearly squeezed off a shot in a blur of motion. Realizing my mistake, I eased up on the trigger, and the hammer lowered to half cock. My breath came rattling out as I realized that I had nearly shot a bag lady.

The scraggly woman had more wrinkles than a prune. She didn't seem to see me through the van window; she twitched a little, brushed at the dust on the van, and then turned away. I decided the light must be shining so she couldn't see me, or my embarrassment, through the heavily tinted windows.

I tried to gulp down my heart which seemed to be beating in my neck as the rag-covered lady stumbled on down the street. Finally collecting my wits, such as they were, I stepped out of the van and carefully locked its door, shivering in the cold shadow of the buildings. I pulled my jacket down to be sure it covered my pistol which I'd stuffed back into my waist band. Yes, I was definitely becoming paranoid.

But that gun made me feel a lot safer.

I paused a moment and wondered if my friends could really help me or if I was just dragging two more innocent people into hot water but I just couldn't see how the Kaisers would be endangered as I approached their building. But surely no one could know where I was.

In front of the condo, I stopped a moment and toyed with my shirt collar while looking into the blue-mirrored front of the building, glancing as covertly as possible all around me. A few cars hummed by quickly and a modif-horse and rider clomped a block away. The only person on foot was the bag lady, now rummaging through a pile of garbage at the side of the street. The bot that seemed to be with her liberated a bit of newsfax as they rummaged in the trash and the sheet tumbled in the wind down the sidewalk, paused, and then was swept past me by another gust of wind.

Satisfied there was no danger, I tried to look nonchalant and walked to the portcullis of the crystal building and pressed the call button to Craig's apartment.

The TV camera along with a remote laser gun swiveled toward me, "Phil?" It was Nikki's voice.

"Yeah. Could I--"

"Hurry up. Get off the street." The door flashed open and I stepped into the small cubicle behind it; the door quickly hissed shut behind me.

"Tenth floor?" the elevator asked and I nodded. It whisked me upward at a speed that made my feet swell as my blood tried to stay at ground level. With a gut-wrenching stop that sent the blood back up to my head, the elevator doors opened.

"Tenth floor, the apartment is to your right, number 1018," the elevator told me. I glanced down the wide hallway before stepping out. Ceiling, floor, walls, and doors were all made of the

same tough blue mirrored plastic. The doors to each apartment were almost invisible with only small seams and numbers marking their positions up and down the hall. I stepped onto the mirrored conveyer strip down the center of the hall and counted the door numbers as my infinite reflections. It looked safe. I started down the hall, quickly gliding by each door until I came to 1018, and touched the numbers to announce my presence.

I waited.

No doubt they were checking to be sure it was me. Without a sound, the door dilated opened and I stepped onto the ocean floor.

Or, at least, it looked like the ocean.

Fish, plants, a sunken ship was off in the background, barely discernible through the murky turquoise of the distance. A wicked looking shark seemed to be eyeing me from a nearby cave. The door closed behind me before I could jump back into the hallway.

Fortunately, Nikki stepped from behind a tall bed of pink coral and waved, "Just a minute..." She stepped back behind the coral and suddenly everything dissolved as she turned off the 3V. I discovered myself standing in a stark, white room with thick cream carpeting that looked like fur. The room was windowless and completely bare of furnishings.

"Sorry. You got up quicker than I expected," Nikki said with a smile that turned into a quivering frown. She stepped toward me and, with a sob, was in my arms before I knew what was happening, her body shaking.

My first thought was that she was glad to know I was alive.

"Craig left me," she said between tears.

So much for my theory glad-I-was-alive theory. But I could see why Nikki would be pretty torn up if Craig was gone. He was all she had in the way of family. Nikki was a clone. A modified clone.

Craig's old man was a bioengineer. By the time Craig was fourteen, he was working on his doctor's degree in MKC and knew more than most of his professors about bioengineering. While the other kids were making frogs and dinocows, he--we later discovered--was growing his own girlfriend on the side.

Not just any ordinary girl, either. Nikki had started out as a bit of the marrow from Craig's bones but was altered to the point that she became almost nothing like him. Craig had, of course, started by altering the XY pattern of his cells to a double X to make her female. But his major accomplishment was in throwing in a lot of special odds and ends to demonstrate how much he could do. The end result was a black-haired, oriental-looking beauty with a well-built, full-in-the-right-places figure. And she was as smart--if not smarter--than Craig and had super-fast reflexes. If ever there had been a candidate for a new super race, it was Nikki.

Yet her manner didn't reflect her superiority. She never lorded it over people, was always friendly. And attractive: The girl that as a kid you always wished would move in next door but never did. She also was always loyal to Craig.

Perhaps that was because he'd left her in vitro the four years he worked on his degree (how he kept her a secret from the authorities is beyond me--such work was illegal back when we were kids). When he brought her out of "the vat," as he called it, she was a full-grown woman with the mind of a baby. His next step had been to give her a three-year crash course in growing up via machine and human tutors. Craig was about the only "family" Nikki had ever known and they were closer than any two people have any right to be.

By the time I'd finished my schooling, Craig had turned twenty-one, had made his fortune, and had retired with money to spare. (After all, he was the guy that perfected the Martian goat and the Aqua-retrofit virus that's used to turn ordinary people into Aquanauts. Yeah, *that* Craig Kaiser. He's the famous one if you hadn't already guessed. So you can imagine the money.)

But Craig had become as bored as he was rich and had a nearly terminal case of narcissism; last time I'd seen him he'd become about as boring as he was bored. That was one reason I hadn't seen Craig or Nikki much over the last few years. Though I considered him a friend, his restlessness made me uncomfortable. And he'd developed a cruel streak that often was vented on friends and especially Nikki. It irritated me and I had gradually seen less and less of them.

And yet, he *had* been my best friend; when the trouble began, it had been his home I had headed for. As for Nikki, I'd never gotten as close to her as I might have liked. It is hard to relate to someone who seems perfect even if they don't act the part.

Now Nikki told me her story quickly between sobs and crying jags.

There wasn't much to it. Craig had cloned himself--again in secret--and--two days before-- had left with the new clone. He'd given Nikki three days to get out of the apartment and never be seen again.

If that weren't cruel enough, the clone was male this time. An exact duplicate of Craig, only younger. And Craig had made no secret of the fact that the two were lovers. Certainly the ultimate in narcissism. When I heard it all through Nikki's tears, I had to wonder how I had ever considered Craig to be my friend. Now, I felt nothing but disgust for him because of his abuse of Nikki. As far as I was concerned, Craig would give scum a bad name.

Poor Nikki. I held her tightly and tried to figure out what to do.

Finally, I pulled away to arm's length, looked into her dark, bloodshot eyes, and said, "Can you make enough to get by as ship's navigator?" She worked for the rocket line and I figured she must be getting top credit these days.

That question caused her lower lip to quiver, and then there was another outburst of tears.

I held her again and wondered what else was wrong.

"Oh, Phil. They fired me."

I'd heard that the rocket lines were economizing, but had never connected that to Nikki. As a senior navigator, and a whiz when it came to computers as well as the ability to calculate trajectories in her head, I'd assumed she'd never have to worry about a job with the rocket lines. Was I wrong.

"Everything's being automated," she sobbed. "No more... Humans. In the cockpit."

(At that point I made a mental note not to fly any more in rockets. I knew how dependable bots were. Very. But not all the time. It wasn't too hard to imagine that once in a while a computer might hiccup, sending a rocket flight on a quick trip to nowhere. Ending up in the ocean or at the bottom of a crater in the ground isn't my idea of a fun-filled flight.)

I held Nikki tightly. Then let go because I felt guilty. I was beginning to enjoy the feel of her lush body against mine.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and laughed. "Well at least I'm not dead," she said. "What in the world happened. They said on the news you were dead. I thought..." Her chin started to quiver again.

"No more crying. I'm very much alive."

"Yeah. Enough crying. We're all still alive. Sit down." She kicked a hidden spot on the floor and the carpet twisted and a couch, which was covered with the plush fur as the carpet, popped up.

"Let me get cleaned up. I've been packing." She retreated back toward the bedroom.

I sat in the quiet of the apartment for a moment.

The door chimed.

"Could you get that?" Nikki hollered out. "Must be Sarah. From next door. She's been helping me pack."

I got up, fumbled at the door's peep hole and instead of opening it, accidentally dilated the doorway instead.

I was pretty certain it wasn't Sarah standing face to face with me. It was the bag woman I'd seen on the street. But not the way she'd been. Now, she cradled a needle rifle in her arm, pointing it with a very professional manner right at my navel. I watched as her finger tightened on the trigger.

Chapter 2

I stood there trying to get my feet to run while I fumbled with the door control. I couldn't get the thing to close because with her standing in the doorway, its safety feature kept it open. This was anything but a safety feature for me.

Finally, my body got the message and I dived to the side just as her trigger finger activated the rifle. Though the gun itself made little more than a whishing sound, the tiny needles it fired raised a racket as they broke the sound barrier inside the apartment, their loud cracking was followed by the tinkling of broken glass and plastic as they crashed through the wall.

I was on all fours, dog paddling on the carpet toward the couch as the bag lady coolly trained her weapon on me, pulling the trigger so needles chewed up the carpeting behind me then clanged against the couch as I dived behind it.

I had lucked out; the couch was lined with some mechanical device, and it was thick enough to stop the tiny projectiles.

Remembering I was armed, I fumbled with the Beretta which thus far had only served to put a gash in my stomach when I'd hit the floor. Once the weapon was out of my waist band and in my hand, I peeked from behind the couch.

The bag lady spied me the same instant, racing toward me as another stream of needles bounced off the couch.

Now I wished I'd plugged the old bat on the street by mistake.

I heard her hit the couch with one foot and I fired upward twice as she jumped over it.

One of the bullets caught her on the left side of the head as she hurtled through the air. She flopped down on the floor, her fall releasing a chair that rose from the carpet a moment after she dropped, so she sprawled over it like a broken rag doll.

"What's going on out here?" Nikki said as she stepped into the room. She was clothed only in a white towel that contrasted with her smooth, dark skin.

"Uh... Look out," I cried. The bag lady was moving, turning toward me to reveal a crack down her face, the break radiating from a large dimple where my bullet had hit. "She's got armor on," I warned Nikki. "Get out of here."

Nikki retreated down the hall and around the corner. I pumped four more bullets at the bag lady then decided to camp out behind the couch again as a swarm of hot needles chewed the air where I had been, then plowed into the wall behind me.

In theory an old antique Beretta 92 pistol holds a lot of ammunition. Fifteen rounds in the

magazine; and I kept a sixteenth in the chamber. And even the new body armor can't take multiple hits very well from the tungsten bullets I had loaded into the firearm. But the chances of hitting the exact same spot twice are small. The three or four times needed are almost impossible to achieve, even at such close range.

Especially since the old bat wouldn't quit blasting away with her rifle.

But the pistol was the only thing I had so I decided to make the best of it and hope for a lucky shot.

Things had quieted down and I figured she was ready to make another charge. But she had another tactic; suddenly the room was again filled with the ocean. She had turned on the 3V.

Great. I peeked out from behind the couch and squinted through the water that a small school of rainbow-colored fish was swimming through. The bag lady was nowhere to be seen.

I ducked back and rolled toward where I knew the outer wall was, continuing in that direction until it stopped my movement. Even though it looked like a limitless expanse behind me, it wasn't. Only a 3D projection. So now I knew that the bag lady wasn't behind me.

Okay, I thought. Now, where is she?

A shark darted to my left. Beyond it was a large octopus. *There.* Her ragged yellow dress stuck out from behind a boulder.

I fired three times through the boulder and then rolled behind a large, pink fan coral. Just before I got there, I saw the bag lady fall, hold her head a moment and then straighten up. *I might not be stopping her but she'd have a whale of a headache,* I thought, firing another three shots.

I made a dash for where I hoped the couch was. A rain of needles followed me and licked through the heel of my right shoe. Finding the couch by feel, I dropped behind it, safe for a moment. After taking a deep breath, I peered around the now invisible couch and fired two more rounds at the bag lady who was standing in plain sight on the ocean floor. She stumbled as both bullets hit her. I took careful aim and placed two more hits on her face and saw a bit of her mask break away.

I held my breath and watched as she again fell. Then she struggled to get up again.

She was one tough old battle-ax.

I crouched out of her sight and realized the slide on my Beretta was locked open. Empty. *I'm sure glad I have a box of shells out in the van,* I thought grimly.

I peeked around the couch again. The bag lady was slowly rising to her feet once again.

Escape out the door? Maybe. But where was it? I looked in the direction where I knew it must be, but could see only endless ocean with a small saucer sub in the distance. I turned back and--

There she was standing over me, the muzzle of her smoking weapon trained right over my chest.

I froze.

Her broken plastic ballistic mask fell away as she tugged at it to reveal a leathery, wrinkled face with a number of red welts and a cut where my bullets had hit her mask. She didn't look at all happy. Her rifle moved up from my heart to my face in her rock-steady hands.

At least it will be quick, I thought. She suddenly got a funny, twitchy grin and her whole face contorted into a wicked smile.

I waited for a swarm of needles to rip off my face.

Instead, her head rolled off her shoulders. Her decapitated body stood for a moment, spurting blood, then crumpled. It didn't look like she was having any fun at all.

"What the... ?" I muttered.

The ocean faded out and I was again in the living room with a grinning, scared head at my feet. I stepped back as the old lady's blood soaked into the thick carpeting.

"Sorry I took so long," Nikki said, trying not to look at the body.

She stood in the hallway with a power laser whose beam had been deadly if invisible. " It took a while to find where Craig had stored this. And I didn't want to cut too low and...Hit you by mistake."

She put the laser down on the couch and was crying again, back in my arms. And I was ready to add a few sobs of my own.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Nikki was cried out and I was at a loss as to what to do next. Run? Looked like I'd have to; bag ladies don't just go berserk for the fun of it. Not with all that garbage down there on the street. This gal had been working for whoever was after me and I was betting there were others to take up where she'd left off.

Nikki? Undoubtedly she was in great danger, too, thanks to me.

I led Nikki into the kitchen. "Look, I've really messed up. I should never have come here. Now I've managed to get you into the middle of things. These--people--whoever they are, knew I was coming, or were waiting for me... They play for keeps. You're going to have to lie low for a while. Or something... Hell." I didn't even know what to say.

"What's going on, Phil?"

Good question. I explained what had happened during the last few days, talking as fast as I could because I knew we didn't have much time.

Chapter 3

It all started when Hampton Weisenbender stomped into the sunlit lab. When Hampton comes into a room, it's kind of like having a normal person walk out. I could almost feel clouds crossing over the face of the sun as he spoke, "What in the world are you doing in here this early?"

This was a new twist because normally Hampton is after me for being late--he thinks I get paid by the hour rather than for thoughts and ideas. Putting me down for being in the lab early was one of the few times he's ever engaged in creative thinking.

"I've been here since last night. Never went home. We've made a fantastic breakthrough with--"

"Forget it. We gave the pink slips to your crew on their way out last night. That explains why yours wasn't picket up last night. So here's yours."

"Wait a minute, sir. There's something you need to know. Last night I--"

"Forget it, Hunter." (After working there for six years, we were still on a last-name basis.)

While I stood tongue-tied, Hampton looked past the electronic equipment, magnetic bubble smelters, and bots directly at the rods which were floating in a group about eight centimeters off the ground, swaying slightly with the air movement in the room. They were anchored by chains, but it was obvious to anyone who cared to study them that they were floating. I figured even a simpleton like Hampton could see something very special was going on here.

Instead he looked right at the rods and didn't even blink. "Get this junk stowed away and get cleared out by noon."

"But..." I sputtered. "Can't you see? We--"

"No back talk. That's how it is. You're leaving."

I decided to take a new tact. Hampton 's a stickler to the compulsive cubed. I tried a proper-paper-work-and-forms angle. " I'll need to get the inventory and records straightened out..." Surely he would bite on that.

"The new owners are closing your section up. We're to junk your equipment; sell it for scrap. World tax write-off. Now get your personal stuff and clear out by noon or I'll have the guards toss you out."

So much for my paper-pusher strategy.

I couldn't speak. I was in shock. Here was the greatest break-through since fire (in my humble opinion) and Hampton the cave man was going to pass it up so he could continue to chew his mastodon blubber cold.

I was also getting a little mad at the thought that I, and my lab crew, had been fired without any notice at all, while we were in the middle of a scientific breakthrough.

While I stood doing a quiet melt-down, Hampton checked the dust on the clear silicon counter like he usually does--my crew says that's a carryover from his military space service--and turned to leave the lab. "Pick up the rest of your month's pay on your way out," he said over his shoulder. Since the labbots didn't get pay chips so I figured he must have been talking to me.

I watched he wiggle out the door my mouth open. Finally I closed it and then asked, "Now what?" That was what I thought and I guess I even said it to the empty room.

Now what? Who would have thought that while I'd worked through the night a takeover deal had been arranged by World United Oil half way around the world... Blasted Corporations had taken over the world and now they were shuffling things around to play their games. While I perfected and put the final touches on the rods, a group of men in expensive glow suits had probably been signing away each member of my group, totally oblivious to what we were doing.

I guess it isn't too surprising.

Our whole end of things had been developed as a pet project of the chairman of the board who retired a year later when she went senile. That always looks bad on paper.

And if I hadn't been in the middle of our project, I would have thought our anti-gravity lab was probably next door to the UFO research bureau and the grow-hair-on-cue-balls research lab.

OK. It probably made sense to think about closing us down.

But the irony was that in their haste to close us down and save a few credits, the "yes sir, no sir, cover my posterior" guys probably missed the greatest chance for money since the Arabs sold their oil fields at the point of Russian bayonets.

After Hampton Weisenbender had broken the news to me, at first I was tempted to call someone higher up and tell them what kind of a mistake they'd made. But then I got to thinking about how things always work out.

It's simple really. No matter who I work for, I always lose my job. And this time my crew of lab assistants--who'd become good friends--had lost theirs as well. All because some group of money grubbers didn't have the sense to check out what they had and some manager like Hampton Weisenbender couldn't look past the dust on the tables to see what was floating under his fat nose.

During those few minutes, something inside me changed. I decided their loss would be my gain. I would go into business for myself. I could imagine it already.

Anti-grav, Unlimited.

As I stood there, I also realized that Hampton had managed to give me some interesting information, now that I had made my decision. According to him: No real inventory would be taken of the lab,

I knew that my crew didn't know if we'd succeeded or not. I had achieved the miracle after they had left. So I was really the only one who knew that the rods existed and worked.

A grin crossed my face as I hatched my hair-brained scheme. It was bold and simple: Steal everything I could.

First I supervised the labbot while it got the last load of rods out of the molds (without launching any more!) and got them clamped to the other rods floating in the room.

Maybe I should explain a little so you'll know what makes the rods so wild to handle. (No, no

boring science lecture...just the basics.)

The anti-gravity rods are a lot like bar magnets. Only instead of having a north and south pole, they have a positive and a negative gravity end. One end is attracted toward other matter while the other "pole" is repelled by normal matter. Yeah, sounds crazy but that's how it works. (If you want to come by and spend a week with your compucalc, I'll show you the fundamental concept--but remember we'd been working full time for six years to get these things straightened out and you'll need to understand how math works in six dimensions.)

My lab team had thought things out before I ever started making the rods the night before I was fired. The rods were quite dangerous. They each weighed about fifty kilograms if the plus side were pointed toward the earth while they could lift about fifty kilograms if they were pointed up (more if there was something over them). But...you have to remember that for every reaction there's an opposite one; we're not dealing with magic here.

That means that if you happened to get your foot under one of the rods that was trying to lift off just a few inches from the ground, your foot would be pinned under it by the fifty kilogram push. Have a bunch of them hover near your head and you could be turned to jelly.

They weren't for fooling around with.

Likewise, if two--one up, the other down--were put on a pole that pivoted in the center, you could have a virtual perpetual motion machine. The catch was that it was pretty hard to such a device stopped. And if the pivot burned out (as it quickly would since all that kept the rods' speed down was the friction of the air)--well don't be in the area when the things took off at who-knows-what speed. And stand close to it while your perpetual motion machine is running and the gravitational wake could literally beat you to death.

Now you know what I had--something as dangerous as a swimming pool of nitroglycerin but also capable of making almost endless free energy if harnessed up right.

Even though I was aware of how dangerous the things were, I was still fuming from Hampton's visit and was getting tired, punchy, and careless--so when the last group of rods were released from the mold, one rod departed right through the roof leaving a hole the width of the rod. (I spent a few tense minutes waiting for a plane or pleasure dirigible to come crashing down...Fortunately for all involved, none was overhead when the rod departed for deep space.)

After a quick check of the vidtables, I found that the moon and all listed manned stations were not in its path (as near as I could figure--I was never too patient with plotting those things). Provided the rod made it past all the spy eyes in orbit, it was beyond worrying about--I hoped.

I tried to be a bit more careful after that.

I'd been fastening the rods together. One rod up and one down so that they had a weight only equal to the fasteners. The last rod was then fastened to counteract the weight of most of the connectors so the whole thing weighed about five kilograms (though it still had the real physical sideward mass of the rods).

So I then had:

- 1) The rods.
- 2) My van.
- 3) And a friend who--I hoped--was on duty as the head security guard.

The catch to my steal-everything plan was to get the van to where I could load the rods into it. So that was the next step to my caper. I made a quick call on the vidphone to my friend at the

front gate.

Ralph answered. I was glad to see him but tried to hide it.

"Hi, Phil," he said. "Sorry about the job."

"That's all part of the game," I said, trying to look the part of the forlorn rather than the criminal element. I haven't done anything crooked--except maybe for last year's regional tax form--since cheating on my second grade computing quiz. But Ralph didn't seem to notice anything wrong. Or maybe he was hoping I'd even things up and would look the other way.

"I'll be needing to bring my van around to the side door to get some stuff packed, Ralph. Any problem?"

"Nope. I'll pass the word. And--"

I held my breath. Please no inspection on the way out.

"--keep in touch, Phil."

"Yeah. Will do."

"And good luck."

"Thanks." I knew I'd be needing it.

A few minutes later I had my blue van parked at the side door. I managed to get it there without running over anyone or wrecking it. To say I was a little nervous would be an understatement. Between the two days without sleep, liters of caffinex, and my lack of practice at being a criminal, I was a little shaky.

Once back in the lab, I felt like a kid at Christmas. It's one thing to work with expensive equipment day after day...another to take it home with you. The main thing was to pick up what I needed and what wouldn't be missed. I figured that if Hampton Weisenbender thought I'd taken anything, he'd personally lead the SWAT commando raid on my house.

So I had to split the difference between being overly cautious and bloodsucker greedy.

We had about eight super mini-computers and umpteen compucalcs; in went three compucalcs and two computers (which I told to shut down so they'd not chatter at me when I drove through the check point later on).

What next?

I plugged a power cable into my van's batteries. Might as well use a little power for my last day at work.

Then a lot of odds and ends of equipment that I thought I might need, one labbot (a very small one--the space in the van would be a bit tight with the rods), a whole box of notes that hadn't yet been given to the computers to read, and a nice array of tools--including the laser cutting/welding torch. That should all just fit into the van.

The tricky part was getting the rods into the van. They weighed five kilograms if they didn't get tilted. There was a little leeway, but if they passed the point of no return, they went from weighing five kilograms to almost a thousand! Obviously I didn't want to let them tip over in the van. The disaster would be hard to explain if I survived the experience.

So two of the large labbots and I inched them into the van after I had checked to be sure no one was around to see what was going on. The bots helped me anchor the rods in the van. Then I shut down all the bots in the lab.

By 11:30 it I was finished. I looked around. "OK, what did I forget?"

My pay chip for the rest of the month. I needed that. It was crazy, but while I had a bit of priceless technology in my van, there was no capital to work with. Especially since my Mastivisa account was in borrowed-to-the-quick condition. And I knew my local friendly electric banker wouldn't be giving me a loan to work on a whacko idea like anti-gravity devices.

A few moments later, with pay chip in my hot fist, I headed around the huge plastic bubble that formed the lab and administration complex, got into the van and--very carefully so that the rods wouldn't break lose from their moorings--eased toward the front gate that was the only exit through the mass of mines and electrified barbed ribbon surrounding me.

That's where things started looking bad.

Ralph wasn't there; in his place swaggered Frank Small, whom my staff maintained was Hampton Weisenbender's bastard son. They were half right at least, if not about the son part. If anyone would make an effort to go through my van and give me fits, it was Frank.

I slowed down very carefully.

"Hear you got canned," he smirked.

"Yeah."

"I'm surprised they didn't do it sooner."

I gave a weak grin, trying to play the part of someone who'd lost his job. I'm pretty good at swallowing my pride when it might keep me out of jail. I eased the van forward.

"Wait a minute!" Frank yelled.

I stopped, swallowing hard. "Yes?"

"I need your badge and compukeys."

At this point I was hoping Frank couldn't smell fear. I tried to swallow again and discovered I couldn't. "I already turned them in," I explained. "At the front desk when I picked up my pay chip." How ironic. Here cowboy Frank was worrying about next to nothing while I was trying to sneak out with the crown jewels. I looked at my scared face reflected in his mirrored glasses and wondered what it would be like to be in jail with a three hundred pound synthpunk who called me Honeybunch.

I don't know why, but instead of playing it cozy, I said, "Go ahead and check, you'll just be wasting your time." I said it half-heartedly because I was afraid that Frank was about to search the van.

Instead he thought I was lying about turning in the compukeys and my badge.

So he thought it was his big chance to catch a petty thief. "Yeah, we'll see," he said, a broad grin crossing his face with his icy eyes putting the lie to his smile. He turned to the vidphone and told it what extension to contact for the head desk. He murmured to it for a few moments while I wished I had a machine gun to fire at his fat rump.

After what seemed an eternity in neck high slime, he turned back with a look of sheer disappointment. "OK. You can go."

I started to ease forward again when...

"Wait a minute. What's in the van?"

Well, my last smart answer had paid off, why not try up the ante and try again?

With a big fake smile, I told the truth, "A stolen labbot, two computers, several boxes of lab tools, and anti-gravitation rods worth more than anyone can probably imagine. Want to look?"

He didn't even glance toward the back of the van. Lucky for me he couldn't see into its dark interior with his sunglasses. "Yeah, right," he snarled and waved me through.

We probably both thought goodbye and good riddance. But I had the valuables and he only had the bad taste in his mouth.

* * *

The noon Kansas City traffic leading to my home was the usual hassle. All the crazies were out with the usual unipeds, bikes, modif-horses--and my blue van. All the while I was trying to accelerate/brake without causing the massive rods to come loose and either drop out the back doors of the van or come sliding forward to crush me. If I had to choose between driving those things through rush hour traffic or juggling primed RAW grenades, I'd go for the grenades every time.

I was doing well until I almost smacked into the robed figure of a Dweller on a bicycle when he suddenly cut into the van's path. As I bore down on him, it was the first time I've ever seen one of those guys show any emotion; also the first time I've ripped anyone's robes off their back when passing.

No police unipeds or traffic eyes were about so I just speeded up a little and left the guy before he could get his privates covered and get my van's tag number.

Needless to say, I was very, very glad to get to my little green bubble dome and open the garage door with my scramble coder. If I'd been more alert I would have noticed the bars had been pried off the side window with all the finesse of a cosmetic surgeon using a machete. But I was too preoccupied for the sight to register as I glanced at the bent bars.

When the plastic garage door closed behind the van, I opened my van door and heard the intruder alarm inside the house. *Great.* I quickly closed the van door.

The house system gives off a false alarm about once a month (which is why I removed it from the vidphone cable; if the police come, they charge per trip for false alarms, plus you're apt to get on their black list.) I was cautious but had that old "It can't happen to me" attitude. Nevertheless, I reached down under the driver's seat of the van and pulled out the plastic bag that contained my old Beretta 92-F nine millimeter semiautomatic pistol.

Now before you go moral on me, I know that having a firearm is illegal. But if you're fair, you'll also admit that just about everyone has an unregistered gun squirreled away somewhere. I'm no different than the next guy.

So I pulled out the weapon and clicked off the safety (I always carry it with a round in the chamber, ready to fire once the safety is released).

While I was fumbling around with the pistol, the door from the dome to the garage opened and two "gentlemen," who were unmistakably pukers, stepped through the opening: Mohawks, flowered shirts, chains...you know the look. They acted like they owned the place.

Maybe they did.

There I sat in the van, trying to look invisible.

Since the alarm was blaring in the house, they had apparently not heard me come into the garage. Lucky for me since they were armed; one had an old Colt M4 assault carbine--old but deadly--and the other had a three-shot rail gun. In my book, an assault rifle and a rail gun beat out one pistol. Especially a pistol manned by someone who hadn't ever fired the thing in anger.

And pukers aren't noted for leaving behind breathing victims. These guys definitely didn't

look like they'd be leaving without checking out the van. I knew I couldn't race out of the garage without the rods crunching around--which would be even worse than anything the pukers could do--so I was going to have to take care of the guys or get shot trying.

I sat tight, slumped down in the van, sweat pouring out of my arm pits. While they were looking away, I slowly opened up the side vent on the van, waited, and prayed my "please God, just this once" prayer asking that they would walk over where I could get a clear shot at them.

They took their time and didn't cooperate at all with my brilliant tactic.

After an eternity, they finally headed toward the front of the van, walked past (*whew...without looking in*), and started pawing through the tools on my work bench.

That also lined them up with my open window vent. Ever so quietly and carefully, I brought my Beretta up to the window and tried to aim at the one carrying the rail gun. (I am here to tell you that aiming is not easy when your hand is doing a little jig out on the end of your arm.)

I jerked the trigger and down went one while I screamed from the painfully loud report of the pistol--magnified inside the van.

Fortunately, the remaining pucker wasn't too bright. Or maybe he just hadn't watched the right 3V ads. At any rate, the one left turned and brought up his rifle and proceeded to spray the van's windshield with automatic fire.

Like most other folks who can afford it, I had gotten a van with carbopolythene glass. It's just as tough as the ads say and--as proved by my independent, highly personal, pucker tests--bullet proof. If the pucker had fired through the door or side windows, I would have been dead meat. But instead he only fired directly at me, sending a spray of bullets careening off the windshield.

After a few noisy moments of full auto fire, he was standing there with an empty rifle, his mouth hanging open and I sat in the van with my jaw clenched shut. Suddenly we were in a race. He went for his partner's weapon and I fumbled with the vent window, finally got it open, and fired three times.

The pucker crumpled.

The spectacle over, I carefully got out of the van and enjoyed the dry heaves while my ear rang.

Of course most people would tell you I'd made the world a better place since two pukers were dead. But I would not be truthful if I didn't tell you that I was more than a little upset; this was the first time I'd actually had to defend myself and I didn't relish it.

Sure, legally you can kill anyone that's in your house uninvited. At least you can in our region. Also, using an unregistered weapon to do it is not too big of a deal as far as the police are concerned when the end result is two dead pukers and a little bribe on the side.

But I also had a load of stolen rods and equipment. And I really couldn't afford to take the next few days filling out forms, telling compupolice my life story, and maybe even feeling the wrath of other pukers should they find out what I'd done.

So I calmly got two body bags out of the locker in the garage and filled them up.

Maybe you're wondering why I happened to have two body bags.

I traded for them on the black market after I'd talked to a friend who had reported a killing to the police. I didn't care to go through the ordeal myself after hearing of the hassle. Life is just too short and the government already does its part to make it as tense as possible.

At the same time, don't think I was callous about this. I still had a bad case of the shakes and

these were the first dead bodies I'd ever had the pleasure of working with and at the time hoped they would be the last as well, thank you very much.

I finally got the guys zipped up and--with a lot of straining on my part--pulled the two bags into the corner of the garage for the time being. That done, I turned off the alarm and enjoyed another bought of the dry heaves.

That ordeal once again over, I opened the van and could have kicked myself for straining with the bags--the labbot was sitting right there waiting to move at my beck and call. Some days I could give absent-minded scientists a bad name.

"Labbot 3 on," I told the bot. It perked right up and swiveled its camera to look at me. With the tedious instructions needed to control a bot, I got it to do what I wanted, and we managed to move the rods out of the van and fastened them to the side of the garage. Provided we didn't have an earthquake, I figured they'd be pretty safe there for a while.

We--I seem to think of labbots as living entities so I say "we"--unloaded the equipment, and the labbot stuffed the two corpses into the van. I closed and locked it and then had the bot stand in the corner where I covered it with a drop cloth.

I went inside for a quick, hour-long nap but slept for the next eight hours instead.

Chapter 4

My head felt three times its normal fat size. Guess I must have slept on my face or something. Anyway, when I woke up, I felt awful. It was still gloomy out so I checked my thumbnail watch through blurry eyes; it was *very* early in the morning. But I couldn't get back to sleep...too much to do.

And the smell was awful. My clothes seemed to have taken on a life of their own --an existence that, judging from their odor, would have fit right into an organic barn yard somewhere.

So the first order of business was a hot shower followed by two aspers, and some clean clothes.

One hot mug of caffinex later, I felt like--if not a new person--a reasonable facsimile thereof. I decided to skip shaving and headed for the garage.

As I stepped into the garage, I tried to figure out what I had done to myself the day before. I now:

- 1) Had two ripening bodies in the back of my van,
- 2) Was responsible for the theft of a small fortune in equipment,
- 3) Owned a total of three illegal weapons (including the two pukers'),
and
- 4) Was the owner of the one hundred three stolen anti-gravity rods.

I felt like going back to bed. But it was early morning. That was something I needed to take advantage of since that's when the roads are least traveled.

Shortly, I was moving down the street in front of my dome. Driving carefully so that I wouldn't get stopped by a random spot check (no drugs, officers, just two bodies...), I headed out of the city with its traffic eyes and got onto the interstate.

Two hours later, the body bags were dumped at an all but abandoned rest stop whose spy cameras had long ago been dismantled by the electro-renegades in the area. I hightailed it back to my house, feeling like a great weight had been taken off my shoulders. I was once again a free man. It is amazing how much pressure was removed when I kicked those two thugs out of the back of my van and returned home without getting stopped.

The alarm was silent when I got back: A welcome change.

After another cup of caffinex and a good-sized meal from the instawarm, it was--finally--time to get down to some worth-while work.

The first project would be creating my own power company. Don't laugh. I told you these rods had potential. The work I had in mind later was going to take a lot of electrical power and I was already paying an arm, leg, and some other major body parts just to keep the light, 3V, instawarm and van recharger going. An electrical generator made a lot of sense.

As I soon found out, it would have been easier to have left the electric engine in the van. Instead, acting rashly, I had the labbot jerk the engine out of the van; only after it was out did I realize that it would be hard to get it back in. Too, I should have experimented with an old motor--if I'd failed at my task, I would have ruined a perfectly good van. But by now, caution had been thrown to the wind. I wanted to get to the nitty-gritty of practical use of the rods. I dived into the job knowing that failure was not an option, unless I wanted to get another job and save up for a new van. Which I did not.

After the bot had placed the van's engine on the concrete floor, we went to the corner where the rods were, anchored them more securely in place, removed one, and clamped it on its side to the vise on the work bench.

The idea was to slice off several sections of rod so that they could be mounted on the electric motor of the van. This would enable me to power the van and--since the motor would also become an electrical generator if it moved on its own--would become a source of electricity. (I told you these rods had a lot of potential.)

You'll notice I didn't say "just" slice off several sections of the rod. That's because the force exerted down the length of a rod is pretty great. Though the metal that the rods were made from was relatively soft, if a regular synthadiamond saw were used to cut into them it would soon become all but locked in the gravity field. Though it could be moved, the friction would melt either the rod or the saw blade before the job was done (unless you wanted to take sixteen years doing it or had a waterfall to cool the metal).

So I used an industrial laser that I'd "borrowed," compliments of Weisenbender and company.

Even the laser was tricky to use since the rod tended to reflect the light and burn holes in the work bench and me, but the laser did its job fairly quickly.

The bot and I got most of the rod sectioned, though one small piece did get away. It was spinning with a slight wobble when it escaped so that it went twisting off on a zigzag tangent that finally ended when the projectile lodged in the rafters of the garage.

Even the bot followed the action with its unblinking camera eye.

By noon my able--if dimwitted--electronic assistant and I had gotten the lengths of rod welded to the armature of the van's motor. Standing back from the plane they'd be operating in, I crossed my fingers and had the bot remove the restraining chains (I figured I'd rather lose one bot than some important part of *my* anatomy).

The rods started right up in their tight little orbit and very quickly the shaft was spinning at its maximum speed.

I sprayed it liberally with sililube and started taking measurements of how much electricity and mechanical power the thing was giving off. It put out quite a bit of power. Only then did the full impact of the last six years' work set in. Generators like the one I'd created could be the solution to any number of mankind's energy and travel problems. Those who had invested in public utilities would be fit to be tied; the rest of us were going to be enjoying almost free, unlimited power.

Now the cynical among us would probably figure I had wired myself into a corner: the motor

was going lickity split without a load on it and the van's motor pod was empty. But it wasn't quite like that. The problem of stopping the motor had--more or less --been planned on ahead of time.

Remember that the greater the load that is placed on a generator's circuit, the more slowly it tends to turn. Short the thing out and it practically stops. That was the theory. And I had also already connected a load to the motor's shaft just to be on the safe side.

My problem was that the rod-driven generator I'd created from the van's electric motor put out a lot more energy than I'd expected. Shorting the thing out was a little dangerous and tended to melt the heaviest of cables. Finally I got the bot ready to latch onto the motor when I gave the order and then I used a pry bar to short out all the cables I'd connected into the generator.

Somehow we managed to stop the metal whirlwind I had set into motion, and we did it without burning down the garage or ripping the bot apart. (Since the gear box of the van would slow down the motor/generator in the future once the motor was back in the van, I knew getting it stopped would be easier once the motor was in place.)

After a short break to collect my wits and replace one of the bot's arms with a spare stored in its chest, we carefully chained the lengths of rod so they couldn't start spinning, and the motor was placed back in the van.

Easier said than done.

At this point I realized that I would have saved a lot of time if I'd left the motor in the van and modified it there, but there was no way to undo what I'd done. Many curses and skinned knuckles later, it was back in place.

The motor mounted, the shaft was connected into the transmission and I was ready to say good-bye to the household vehicle transformer (I hoped). I left the rods locked in place while I removed the batteries from the van, leaving just one small bank for back-up power, though--if the rod-driven generator went down--the batteries would do little other than power emergency lights or the like since the motor would probably be shot in such an event and beyond the help of battery power. But I knew the batteries would be of use for the project I had planned several days later.

I cannibalized the van battery charger to create some outlets inside the van to create an inverter to supply regular household current for appliances or my shop tools. Finally, I placed a water-proof outlet inside the front bumper so that I could power appliances with electricity generated from the van's motor. With a long extension cord, the van's generator could even be used to run household appliances when the van was in the garage--and thereby lower my utility bills (I didn't want to quit using the government's power completely since that would attract too much attention).

The bot risked life and limb once more to remove the restraining chains and the motor again hummed to life. Though it sounded a bit more beefy than a normal van's electric motor, it wasn't strange enough to attract attention--I hoped. (It would be a little strange if I had to park since the motor would continue to hum along when I left it. That would attract notice, so I decided I'd have to figure something out on that count but decided not to worry about that until later.)

I tested the outlets and found that they furnished all the electrical power I could ever need. The job finished, I stood back and was thankful I didn't own any stock in the major conglomerates. Or--worse yet--was a member of the great business minds who had decided to sack my team's six year's of work just as we were achieving success. They would be lucky to keep their heads connected to the proverbial neck bone.

For some reason, that reminded me that I'd failed to get in touch with my lab team. They had to be on pins and needles wondering what had happened to me and whether I'd be forming a new team. I thought it all over for a bit and decided to bring them back together with me later, but at this point I wanted to keep them in the dark about our success. It would be better for them and my "company" if they thought we'd failed. The new power we could generate was going to make some major changes in society, and the fewer people who knew that ahead of time the better.

So my plan was a little hazy at that point. Basically, what I hoped to do was get a few working examples of the anti-gravity rods' possibilities cobbled together to attract investors, and then get my team back together to refine the various generating systems we might market. In the meantime, I didn't have the space or money to get the group going. And there was security. I knew that a lot of people would like to get rid of us if they ever knew what we were up to. We stood to make money, but a lot of someones were going to lose a lot. A whole lot. That doesn't make for friendly feelings among the businesses we would be displacing.

Thus I figured my best bet was to convince the members that the project had finally failed but that they should keep in touch so we could restart our project when I finally got some money for continuing.

Before giving the van a test drive, I called all eight of my lab team members during the next hour (Linda was the hardest to get and I spent 45 minutes tracking her through her pager). I broke the "news" to them that the rods were a dismal failure but that we must be on the right track, we'd get back together soon, keep in touch, etc.

That done I raced back into the garage after a side stop to keep from having kidney failure.

The test of the rod-driven motor in the van was about to begin!

I got the bot into the corner, ordered him off, then jumped into the van like a kid on World Freedom Day.

Almost backing through the garage door, I remembered to use the scramble coder to open it and--barely containing myself--put the van into reverse and eased out.

It worked like a charm.

I tooled up to the interstate (consciously going the opposite direction from the rest stop that I'd dumped the two body bags in) and tried out the motor's full power for a mile or so. (Luckily no hi-pees were about.)

I quit when the van hit 200 clicks. That's just a little fast considering that the top speed for a brand new van is only 80. Besides becoming a bit worried about the van shaking itself apart on the bumps in the road, it was apt to draw someone's attention. And I figured bureaucratic someones would probably like to get their hands on the van to create a new tax category if nothing else.

So I drove back to the garage at a sedate speed.

With one side trip.

I headed to a telebank where I deposited my pay chip and then hit my favorite Radio Dome electronics store where I spent every centime I'd deposited on equipment for the next project I had in mind. It was crazy, but it seemed to me that the next step for the van would not only demonstrate what the rods could do, but also help me realize one of my longest held dreams. To fly on my own.

Only this time, the sky would *not* be the limit if things worked out.

Chapter 5

I won't bore you with the details. My team always said I talked them to death and after a while I started to take the hint.

Here's basically what I--and my able labbot assistant--did: First we got several of the complete rods and welded them to the frame of the van so that it had an apparent weight of only a few kilograms. That done, we cut about half the rods to manageable lengths (I used the outlets in the van to power the laser), welded the short lengths to the thousand and some military surplus step motors I'd purchased (the clerk must have thought I was trying to corner the market, though he didn't say anything), anchored the motors all over the inside of the van, tried to locate the center of gravity for the van and place the gyroscope there, and wired the motors and the gyroscope so that they were controlled by one of the lab computers which was also securely anchored in the van between the driver and passenger seat. (Figuring how to place the rods was harder than wiring them up; they had to go where the combined forces of the anti-grav rods wouldn't tear the van apart--that could be embarrassing.)

Even with the labbot doing most of the work nonstop on autoprogram, the work took two days. The next day was spent trying to tell the computer how to control the array of step motors properly. It's one thing to make a van float, it's another to make it float where you want it to. And I also had to make the computer realize that pointing the rods the wrong way could crush the passenger and/or the computer itself (and I quickly learned that even the new sentient computer's don't have much sense when it comes to fear for their own well being).

Suddenly the computer and I both got the hang of it and there the van was, floating about two feet off the garage floor. It sort of hovered while several of the step motors moved back and forth to counterbalance the hole thing.

It took a moment to sink in: *It worked!*

Before dashing out, I was a little cautious and placed the other computer into the van. It would be my backup to control the step motors if computer one failed. (Number one assured me it wouldn't, but who ever trusted a computer? So number two went in and number one whispered all its secrets into its little electronic ear.)

I loaded up more tools than I could ever possibly need in case I would had to make some repairs "on the road," and then I hopped into the van. This time I fastened my seat belt very tightly.

I stayed close to the ground until I got the hang of it. Though the computers normally work with spoken commands, I was afraid that wouldn't be fast enough so I had connected the regular

controls into the system: the steering wheel controlled directions, the brakes and accelerator pedal regulated the speed, the turn signal became the upward/downward control. (And in case you're wondering, the computer too the brake lights and turn signals off line when the flying mode was engaged.)

Later that night, a blue van-shaped UFO moved across the sky and barely set down to become a van again just before three World Military fighters came screaming through the area looking for the UFO that must have appeared on radar. They darted to and fro like angry dragonflies on their flex winds; they hovered a moment, searching in vein for their prey, then wheeled on a silent command and streaked out of sight.

I decided to drive home--or at least hover close to the road. Fighter planes can get mean and I didn't want to see if I could outrun a missile with my name on it.

While I was out flitting around, playing with the van, someone blew up my house.

That's right. When I got home, only a pile of burnt plastic and black ash marked the square of land where my dome sweat home had been. Bits of the building and my belongings had dented the domes around it; there was nothing left to claim.

If I had been crazy enough to try to claim anything. I wasn't because it was obvious that a real pro had played demolition dynamite with my home. That was when I realized that in all likelihood the project hadn't been canceled by mistake at all. The whole purpose had been to get my team out of sight--then out of existence.

I glanced at the rubble that had been my dome, and then got out of the area as fast as I could. I don't know why I knew that my dome had been destroyed by someone who was after me. Sixth sense, maybe. Maybe just some odds and ends in the back of my mind that hadn't added up. At any rate I didn't stick around the area.

Talk about mixed emotions...One minute I was gliding through the air with the world on a string and the next I felt as if I were a hunted animal.

I didn't have a cell phone. And if I had, I wouldn't have used it since that would most likely have resulted in someone homing in on me. Instead I stopped at the first Mastivisa vidphone booth and tried to call some of the team members, figuring they were in real danger, too. The machine told me my card had been canceled.

I got out of that area as quickly as I could since I suspected that someone was probably coming to check me out who was using my card. At least, I was paranoid enough at this point to think so. Since I never carried money, I was now not only homeless but also centimeless.

I did have some tools, however, and soon an old fashioned coin phone had given up its change. Racing away, I stopped at a third phone to try calling again.

None of the members could be reached. All out? It was getting late and now I was beginning to sweat. *What is going on?*

I parked the van in a hedge on a back road and slept fitfully with my Beretta across my lap.

* * *

The next morning the last of my stolen money was spent for a news sheet.

The day's plastic sheet carried my death notice along with those of my lab team. No details. I knew I was alive, but were they?

I hoped so but knew that it was just by the slimmest of chances that I hadn't been at home in bed when my house had been ripped apart. I had a queasy feeling they had all been killed.

I had other worries, too. There aren't that many vans on the road these days. I knew if anyone was looking for me, my blue van stuck out like the milk glands on a dinocow.

The first order of business was a trip to Nervous Eddy's. Ed was where I did all my black market business. I hid the van behind his store and walked into the old concrete building he worked out of. I stood just inside for a moment so my eyes could adjust to the dark interior.

Nervous Ed sat on a tall stool behind the front counter. He looked just as apprehensive as his name suggested. I always wondered why he persisted in carrying on his illegal business--camouflaged as a tool store--if it made him so jumpy.

"The walking dead," he said with a twitch of his left eyelid.

"Yeah, I need some help."

At this point his black sentinel bared its three rows of teeth and gave a growl that danced up and down my spine. Ed didn't say a thing to the sentinel but gave a quick hand signal which made it leap over the counter and vanish out of sight. "What'd ya need and what'd ya got?" Ed chanted, a tic pulling his leathery face into a scowl.

I was glad I'd left the dome with a lot of extra tools. I slid two electric wrenches and a compucalc--that I hoped I wouldn't need--across the scratched glass counter top toward him. Ed normally doesn't betray any emotion but he raised one eyebrow at the wrenches. He's a sucker for electric wrenches.

"I need some clean tag decals and instapaint. Red and white. And some swirl controls for the paint."

"You can get most that stuff at a retail store. The decals are illegal; that's harder," he squinted at me trying to figure out what my angle was.

"If you have a card; mine's been revoked," I told him.

"You *are* in trouble."

He thought a moment, then started collecting cans of instapaint, swirlers, and the illegal tag decals from various cubby holes in the store. I've never known Ed to be generous or trade without dickering. The fact that he was pulling out everything I needed without a fuss drove home the fact that I was in pretty deep trouble and that he probably wanted to get me out of his store as quickly as possible so he wouldn't be there with me.

"Anything else?"

I thought a moment and then remembered the magazine I'd taken out of the pukers assault rifle (which was in the back of my van). I pulled the magazine out of my hip pocket, "Got any ammunition for one of these? And I need some more nine millimeter, too."

Ed held the magazine a moment as he studied it, hiked up his thick spectacles on his broad nose, then handed the magazine back. "Hummm." He turned and sunk from sight behind the counter. I heard him rummaging about in a drawer.

"These are hard to come by. Cost ya extra." He shoved three dog-eared boxes of ammunition across the counter toward me.

I fished for a moment in my front pocket for my last barter chip: an electric screwdriver.

Ed's eyes twinkled, "Done...And..." He reached under the counter. "Here, you'll be needing this, too."

My eyes must have displayed my surprise: A Mastivisa card.

"It's stolen. But should be good for another day or two. Just don't go over fifty creds at a time. I figure you'll need it."

I didn't know what to say but just nodded. I scooped everything up and headed toward the door, "Thanks Ed."

"Be careful."

* * *

After inspecting the lot behind Ed's store, I backed into the abandoned building next to his. Out of sight, I quickly placed the decals onto the tag impressed in my rear bumper. Soon the numbers of a different van appeared on the bumper. It wouldn't pass a check, but if they were looking for my specific tag number, it might get me by. The tag number changed, I set up the instipaint on the swirl pattern controller and painted the latest of bopper designs on the van.

I hoped the van would now look enough different enough to get me out of the area. I stowed the extra cans and the controller in the back of the van, jumped in, and pulled out onto the street.

There was just one place to go. I started the long trip with the sound of my growling stomach filling the van.

Chapter 6

About a full minute into the journey to New Denver, I realized that using the stolen Mastivisa card could get me killed because using it would leave an electronic trail that, once the authorities figured I'd been using it, would lead them directly to me. Until I knew just who was trying to ace me, I didn't want anyone to be able to track me.

That meant retracing my route for about fifteen minutes, crossing back into Missorark under the east side of the old and--in the smog of the late evening--nearly invisible KC dome. As I traveled under the edge of the giant dome that spanned most of the New City area, I left the darkness of the night, and the blue-green of the city's sky lamps startled my eyes; I turned off the van's headlights and darkened the tint of the windshield.

Knowing I'd need food, I watched the old concrete storefronts which were interspersed with new plastic buildings and slowed at the first auto-grocery store I came to and turned pulling into the line of vehicles in front of the huge yellow bubble store that proclaimed: Happy Dog Groceries and Supplies.

After waiting in line a few minutes, I eased the van to the window and opened the van window so that I could place my order. My nose was assaulted by the stale fumes of garbage and burnt coal that seemed to always float in the decrepit city's air.

"Good evening. Generic or name brands?" the purple dog asked with a crazy, toothy grin.

I wondered why adults would want to talk to a robot dressed like a dog. "Whichever is cheaper for each item," I answered, figuring paupers with stolen cards had to get the most they could for their money.

"Please speak slowly as you give me your list of needs," the "dog" instructed with a wink.

Off the top of my head I recited a quick list of the freeze-dried and irradiated foods I might need, wishing I'd thought to make a list while sitting in line. "And a few of my favorite unsugar candies," I finally finished.

"Is that all?"

I nodded.

"Total is 65 creds. Card?"

Great, I thought. A card can't go over 50 creds without a quick scan. That would be a disaster with a stolen card.

"Uh... I don't have that much in my account," I said with a blush creeping up my neck. "How 'bout cutting it down?"

At this moment I noticed the growing din from the group of vinyl-and-leather-clad bikers just behind my van. They were tired of all the waiting and expressed their anger by loudly voicing obscenities. I glanced into the rear-view mirror to see what kind of brain-dead beings I might have to contend with.

"Any preference as to what we remove?" the bot asked, its mechanical smile now having vanished.

"No. Anything. Just get the total to...Uh... 48 creds. Leave the candy."

"OK. Card?"

"Yeah," I handed it over. The bot held it in front of its eyes and videofaxed it.

Obscenity, obscenity "Hurry up!" came from behind me.

Just what I need; a nice, unobtrusive riot.

"Retina, please," the bot said.

I gave the bot a wide-eyed stare while it videofaxed my eyes.

"Drive on around to the loading dock and have a good evening." The smile was back on its face. The card had passed the cursory check and all was forgiven. I let out a sigh and was thankful that my actions hadn't tripped any programs in the bot to cause it to do a detailed credit check on my card so that it would compare my retina to that of the card's owner. As it was, when the banks discovered that the card was stolen, the authorities would be able to find out who had used the card by checking my retina pattern. But that would take a while and I would be long gone by then.

Besides, I figured my death had already shot my credit rating to hell.

I eased the van around to the back of the building and stopped. I ordered the bots to be careful when they placed the food into the back of the van. But like typical work bots, they managed to throw the packages of food around despite my instructions. Added to their clumsiness was the fact that they were all configured as pink dogs, all the while barking as they worked. As I leaned against the scarred loading dock, I made a mental note never to shop at a Happy Dog store again.

No sooner had the Happy Dogs finished than the bikers came around the corner of the building to snarl at me since I was between them and their order of synthjuana. They quit griping when I stood up to face them for a moment and pulled back my jacket to reveal the Beretta I'd stuffed into my waistband. I put the worst look I could on my face--which wasn't hard since I was down-wind of the bikers (most bikers must develop body odor to attract attention).

The sight of the firearm brought a quick mood change; one of the greasers even flashed a reasonable imitation of the Happy Dog smile at me. Bikers can be friendly given the proper motivation. The old saw that an armed society is a polite one quickly was proven.

I didn't hang around to see how long the transformation would last. *Life in the Twenty-first Century isn't all it's cracked out to be*, I decided as I kicked a Happy Dog bot which had apparently broken down out of the back of the van. I slammed the cargo door shut and got into the van, speeding off before the bikers could retrieve their stash.

* * *

I spent the next two hours hitting every store that had any type of supplies I might be needing. Soon my shopping spree had the van pretty well stuffed with loot. My final stop was at a hardware store where I picked up some carbonylon rope, managing to get out just before the place was held up. No sooner had I eased through the door than the store sealed itself up with the

criminals, customers, and owner inside its structure to wait until the police finally got around to checking things out. Knowing it could be days before the law arrived, I left the van parked and carefully tied everything down inside the van so that things wouldn't fly about if I should have to do a little impromptu flying. While I wasn't anxious to do any flying (not after seeing the world government's fighters in the air the last time I played birdie), I figured it might allow me to shake a hi-pee if I ran into any trouble on the road.

With the gear stored as securely as I could get it (Boy Scout knots never being one of my *fortes* since I was always interested in the Girl Scouts), I left the Kansas City Dome and the drizzle which was starting to fall as the moisture from the hot air collected on the dome's cool metallic under surface to drip back down onto the city. The dirty drops of rain splattering against the windshield abruptly stopped as I left the protection of the dome and was again under the open sky.

As I ventured from the area guarded by the KC police, again heading for the route that would take me to New Denver, things became wilder and slummier. Finally I was in "Troll Country," in the no-man's land of the old interstate 70. The four-lane wasn't much worse than when it had been put down in the middle of the last century, but traveling the open road is always a scary proposition. And at night, it's downright treacherous because the Night Creeps were just as bad as I'd heard.

One plus was the speed I could get out of the van with the new power system I had created. Since there weren't any police eyes--in working condition--on the interstate and the hi-pees didn't patrol at night because of the danger, I didn't have to worry about attracting undue attention. So I kept the van at an even 100 kilometers per hour with occasional peaks of 150 when it looked like it would be good not to stay in an area too long. That was my top speed since I figured any faster and I would probably plow into one of the wrecked vehicles that littered the road; any slower, I chanced getting stopped by the Night Creeps. (And even with my speed, I was forced to clip a couple of them just after I got up on the highway; that's hard on the body of a van and leaves a nasty dent.)

The Night Creeps were out in full force. The few new vehicles that I saw on the road had been stopped by the Night Creeps; stretches of darkness were broken by the red glow of fires along the way as the vehicles were slowly dismantled and bits of their plastic bodies burned. I didn't see any victims and didn't slow to look. I figured it was everyone for himself for those of us who were crazy enough to be out on the interstate at night. Each of us knew we risked being eaten.

After several hours of dodging and weaving and holding my gun in sweaty fingers from time to time, I was pretty well worn out. And that meant I was starting to be careless.

I just missed hitting a black truck that was all but invisible to my headlights. It was turned on its side and blocked all of the lane I was in and extended into the shadows of the ditch. I wove around it with a screech of rubber.

As I got up my nerve and speed again and had just started to relax, I discovered that a group of crazies had apparently removed the bridge ahead of me. Or maybe there had been some road work the day before... If so, the Night Creeps had removed the warning signs if there had ever been any.

All of a sudden, the road ahead of me was gone and my lights showed only an empty expanse between me and the roadway across a large, shadowed chasm.

I didn't feel at all sleepy any more. Nothing like an unexpected plunge into empty space to

wake a guy up. And at 100 clicks per hour, things happen quickly.

As my van hurtled toward the edge of the abyss, I slammed on the breaks. In a long skid, I could see that there was no way I could stop in time. A group of Night Creeps was standing at the side of the road croaking and cheering as I whizzed by.

Words of wisdom formed in my mouth. Repeat your favorite four-letter word five or six times and you'll have the general idea of what I shouted in a very heroic manner as the space between me and the end of the road quickly vanished.

Then I realized that I did have one chance: *Fly!* Like a bat out of Hell. At this point, I would have flapped my arms but, fortunately, had a better idea: "Computer on," I sputtered above the squeal of the rubber.

"Yes."

"Anti-grav mode," I said, wishing that I hadn't made a code to keep other people out. The road sounds quit and we were suddenly falling, weightlessly.

"Code, 3...Uh...4...6," I gasped with a dry mouth. I pushed the turn signal up--the direction I wanted to go. It started blinking crazily since the anti-grav units weren't engaged yet.

The front of the van was now pointing down as I arched through the darkness. The headlights revealed the ground that raced up to smash me. All I could hear was the purring of the engine and the sound of the wind whistling outside the van as it plunged downward.

Suddenly, the turn signal stopped blinking; the anti-grav units were in operation. I was thrown against the seat harness and felt my eyes trying to bug out of their sockets as the earth continued to rush toward the front of the van. This ignoble situation resulted because I'd programmed the computer to avoid a crash at all costs--my greatest worry in flying--and it was now busy doing its job. At the moment I had to reflect as to whether crashing might have been a better option. As I pondered this weighty situation, the seat harness cut into my skin and my eyes continued to head for the ground in the rapid deceleration. Along with this active demonstration of inertia, a rain of small candies sprinkled onto the inside of the windshield, followed by a hail of small freeze-dried food containers as a plastic grocery sack behind me gave way. I steeled myself, preparing for some of the larger gear stored in the van to come loose and come smashing into me from the rear. A vision of my skull with a large screwdriver poking out of the back of it formed in my brain.

Fortunately, that didn't happen.

Instead the van righted itself and hurtled upward; my eyes blacked out as the blood left my brain and headed for all points south. I struggled to lift my hand, placing the turn signal into its middle, hover position and the van slowed, my vision coming back as we decelerated.

I was in one piece! I sat there a moment, remembered to breathe, and listened to my hair turn gray.

As my anger replaced my fear, I was tempted to try out my rifle marksmanship on the Night Creeps I could hear hooting behind me.

It would just be a wasted effort, I decided. There were plenty more to take their places and I had neither the time nor ammunition to spare in venting my anger. Stones were starting to ding off the van, too. I pushed the accelerator down and flew to the other side of the overpass, hovered over the road a moment, and did a 360-degree turn to be sure the area was clear of Night Creeps on the side of the Great Divide I was on; then I set the vehicle down.

The howls of rage on the other side of the chasm continued. I wiped off my shaking, sweaty

palms, and spoke with a quavery voice, "Anti-grav off."

"What?" the computer replied.

I cleared my throat, "Anti-grav off."

The signal started flashing a left turn (rather than its downward travel sign) and the van settled down with its full weight on the road. I floored the accelerator to put as much distance as I could between me and the monsters on the other side of the divide behind me, wondering how many people they'd catch before sunrise.

Fear is a great stimulant; it took several hours before I became sleepy again. At dawn, I turned off the roadway, floated the van over a stretch of burnt grass, and headed down a small gully toward a grove of Cottonwoods that glistened in the morning light. There I put the van into a hover at the top of one of the giant trees where I could be hidden and out of reach to anyone on foot. As the van was gently rocked by a low-moaning breeze, I reclined the driver's chair and almost instantly fell asleep.

* * *

Several hours later, I awoke to the noise of traffic on the interstate. The sun shone through the cottonwood leaves, creating patterns of gold and green; the heavy leaves sounding as if drops of rain rattled through them as the wind clapped them against one another.

After opening the door and relieving myself, I brought the van back down and tried to decide--as I ate some Munchies--how to get back to the road without being seen. There was no easy way to do that. I carefully drove over the rough terrain and waited at the gully edge until no traffic was within sight, then flew across the chasm and nearly scraped the far rim in my haste to get across. Settling the van down, I drove on over the sand, up the grade, and pulled onto the interstate as a road train went thundering by. I followed it into New Denver to meet Nikki.

Chapter 7

When I'd finished my story, Nikki just said, "Anti-grav rods? Phil, are you feeling all right?"

"Yes... No!"

We both laughed.

"Well," Nikki said, "crazy or not, it looks like you're my best bet, even though you seem to be a real lightning rod for trouble."

"What? No. You need to get as far away from me as you can. I'm trouble and--"

"I was already leaving. I'm packed. No doubt whoever's after you will figure you've told me your story--which you have, you dummy."

"Sorry."

"So, now I'm a marked woman. And you're my fastest ticket out of here. I've nothing to lose at this point by going with you."

"But--" I argued with all the intellect I could muster.

"Let me get dressed." She got up.

"But--" I expounded.

"No 'buts.' You're the only chance I've got. And quit looking at me like that. This towel is anchored on very securely."

I blushed. It was hard not to stare at a body like Nikki's. I knew better than to try to talk her out of coming with me. She had a mind of her own. And, quite frankly, I was glad to have a partner in my lunacy. I just regretted the danger that I'd managed to get Nikki sucked into.

In a few moments, Nikki returned fully dressed in a tight in all the right places, green jump suit, "Come here."

She handed me a men's shirt and unlatched the shirt I had on, "Take off your shirt and see if this fits. It's one of Craig's. He has dozens squirreled away here."

It fit.

"OK," Nikki said, "We'll pack up a bag for you. Bet you haven't any other clothes judging from your outfit."

"That bad?"

She nodded. "One more thing. Come in here." She led me into the dressing room. "Since your van's been changed and you were careful coming here, I have a feeling you got spotted by your sorry face. Maybe they've stationed an agent at each area where they thought you might show up.

Whatever happened, you need a change of face."

"What?" Then I saw what she had in mind. "Oh, come on, Nikki--"

Before I could do anything she had the instaface kit slapped on me. "Any preference?" she asked.

"Just make me look handsome," I muttered through the machine.

She snickered. "Don't ask the impossible." I felt the synthaskin growing into my face. It felt foreign for a moment then became a part of me. "Now open your eyes," she said.

"Nikki--"

Too late, I didn't blink in time and felt the lens pop onto the surface of my eyes.

"What color of hair?"

"Green."

"OK--"

"No, wait--"

She just laughed. Fortunately it only became blond. She removed the machine from my face. "Now not even your own mother would recognize you."

I studied my face in the mirrored wall, "My own mother wouldn't want to recognize me."

Nikki changed her own face as well. In reality neither of us looked a lot different. Just different. And plain. Both of us were blond which caused--I hoped--a person's eye to notice our hair rather than our plain faces. Nikki had done a good job. And it would stay that way for at least a couple of weeks until our bodies rejected the synthaskin and it sloughed off our faces.

Fifteen minutes later we sneaked out the rear service door of the building with three bags--one filled with Craig's clothes that had been appropriated for my use--and two of clothing and odds and ends for Nikki. We also had two bundles: one a slightly used needle rifle and the other an industrial laser. Each "tool" was wrapped in a pillow case. If nothing else, I was picking up quite an arsenal.

No one was on the street. That looked good but I figured someone might be hiding, waiting to nab us when we got into the open. We waited a moment. "Stay here," I finally ordered Nikki. "I'll pick you up in a minute."

"No way," she said and stepped out onto the street with me. I stood there a moment with two bags and the needle gun and decided it was useless to argue. A bag lady came around the corner a block away and looked at us.

"Come on," I whispered and tugged Nikki in a brisk walk toward the van, somehow managing to resist the urge to run like a scared rabbit.

After enough lifetimes to make a cat feel lucky, we reached the van. We looked back. Now one was on the street. We eased away from the curb and drove down the street.

We hadn't gone many blocks when the next problem appeared.

"I want to see you fly this thing," Nikki announced.

I had seen it in Nikki's face the first time I'd mentioned flying the van. It was that we're-going-to-do-that-first-thing look. I new I might just as well have been trying to talk a Seeker out of using his joy circuit. Nikki wanted to fly. So Nikki was going to fly.

I tried to explain to her again about my experience with the two fighters that had tried to down my flying turkey.

But she refused to take "no" for an answer.

She had even figured out a safe way to fly without being detected by radar.

And what red-blooded man is going to not give in to anyone as beautiful as Nikki?

"Look, Phil," she said. "This would be safe to do. The new rockets--which I was flying on as navigator before I got sacked--use powdered aluminum in their fuel to pep up their lift-off. The metal in the rocket's exhaust messes up the radar."

"Say no more," I said. It didn't take an Einstein to figure out the possibilities there. "Just because it is possible doesn't mean we'll do it. That's final," I added, as forcefully as I could.

After stopping near the ruins of what must have once been a large home, we repainted the van (a nice pink--yes, Nikki picked it), changed the van's license imprint, had a picnic, and tried to stay cool during the hot afternoon that's so common in the thin air of the Denver area.

By the time night fell, Nikki knew the vehicle inside and out and had even done some reprogramming of the computers to make the van fly a bit more faster. And a bit more safely.

I hoped.

She was a navigator and knew what she was doing with the computers; but flying in a vehicle designed to hug the ground is not without its more terrifying--if challenging--aspects. My limited experience had suggested that white-knuckle flights are the norm in a flying van.

As the sun set behind the distant, snow-topped mountains, we drove over a worn, plastic road to get as close as we could to the rocket port. We parked the van next to the barbed ribbon-wire fence surrounding the field. I used the needle rifle to put out the few flood lights in the area so that no one could see us.

We waited.

Nikki tried out the controls and took the van up ten feet--still below the ground clutter which would keep us hidden from the radar--then went through a few maneuvers to get the hang of things. My stomach stayed on the ground somewhere below us then jumped into my throat as I heard, in the distance, the crackling thunder of rocket engines becoming super-hot. The boom carried through the night as the sky in the direction of the rocket port glowed red. I sat back in my seat and tried to relax, muttering, "She knows what she's doing. She knows what she's doing. She knows what she's doing."

"Do you know what you're doing," I asked.

"Relax. Here we go."

We took off at a speed that I hadn't imagined possible. Not black-out acceleration, perhaps, but certainly fast enough to put permanent wrinkles into the side of my skin facing the seat. Nikki had certainly changed the computers' programs, I reflected in what I was sure would prove to be the last moments of my life.

As we rose, Nikki guided the van toward the rocket field and kept the cloud of vapor the rocket was riding on between us and the radar installation of the port. "Fantastic," she laughed. "Want to follow the rocket a ways?"

"Sure," I said hoping my voice didn't betray my sheer terror.

We hurtled upward.

After a bit, though, I started to get into the spirit of things. The only sound was the wash of the air past the van. We were still alive. Nikki really did know what she was doing. We were still alive. The van had stayed together. We were still alive.

It was fantastic.

"Will we remain hidden?" I asked after a bit.

"Should. Sometimes the radar here in Denver has ghosts anyway. They won't think much of it as long as we're matching speed with the rocket. That isn't hard." She whispered something to the computer and we speeded up a bit more. "Unbelievable," she said.

We arched upward with the rocket, following its plumed path toward the south. The sky above us turned jet black and the stars became sharp points of light; we saw a second sunset which looked almost like a rainbow framing over the mountains to the West of us. It became more than a little hard to breathe.

"I'd like to race the rocket, but we'd only have space to inhale at the top of its path," she explained. Her voice sounded thin because of the lack of air in the van. "They leave the atmosphere at the top of their ballistic arch."

Fortunately when the rocket's booster dropped on parachutes, we followed it down, falling back into nighttime, dropping in free fall until the wind caught the chutes of the booster so that we could slow our descent. My stomach again felt as if it had made a left turn while the rest of us traveled to the right. Once the free fall had ended, I settled down and enjoyed--as much as possible--the sight of the ocean racing up to meet us. "We ought to get an altimeter so we can keep from smashing into the ground," Nikki said.

Very reassuring, I thought, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth until we finally stopped our fall. The wind whipped the chutes down into the Gulf of Mexico; we hovered over the water just off-shore from Texas.

I opened my eyes and watched the twinkling lights from the shore as they danced in the ocean in front of us. "Won't the radar pick us up?" I asked.

"Yeah. But they won't recognize us as a moving thing. We'll be part of the waves at this height."

The moon rose so we could see the water clearly in its yellow glow. Nikki pushed the van's accelerator pedal and we hurtled toward the shore, then slowed, skimmed over the beach for several hundred meters, hopped a weedy hedge, and parked under a tall, gnarled palm tree.

After sitting for a few minutes looking out over the ocean, we climbed from the van, kicked off our shoes, and walked hand-in-hand in the gentle surf of the Gulf. The moon rose higher and lit the white sand of the beach as a cool, gentle breeze blew in from the sea. Almost an hour later we were again in the van. I fell asleep almost instantly in the reclining seat that was beginning to seem like home. (And, no, there were no romantic going ons... Nikki and I were on a strictly brother/sister relationship. Despite my tries at incest.)

I don't think Nikki slept any that night. She and the two computers whispered and plotted and made lists of things they would be needing for a project that would have had me wide awake had I known what kind of scheme the three of them were hatching.

Chapter 8

The morning sun woke me. In the distance, sea gulls were squawking while the waves added a low hissing rise and fall to the din of the birds.

I sat up and inspected the bright, white sand that stretched into the deep blue green of the ocean, sprinkled with splotches of turquoise that were the shallows. Waves formed in the deep water and chased themselves to the shore where they sputtered their energy in a roll of hissing, white foam, only to be dragged back from the sand and swallowed up by the next incoming wave.

Directly in front of me Nikki abruptly rose up out of the water like some ancient goddess, rivulets of water streaming down her firm, dark arms and thighs as she wadded ashore. A pink T-shirt clung tightly to her body in a way that might have been obscene on almost any woman but Nikki. Somehow, her demeanor always made her seem innocent--even though her speech and dress often argued otherwise. I pulled my tongue back into my mouth.

After she had dried off and wrapped a towel around her curves, my next task was pushing my eyes back into their sockets. Then we had a picnic lunch in the shade of the palm trees around our van.

After a polite amount of small talk, Nikki eased into telling me what she and my computers had been discussing the night before, "Phil" she said around a huge bit of reconstituted dinosteak, "did you ever want to travel into space? Maybe even explore space?"

"Sure. And be a cowboy, and a fireman, and a policeman. Instead, I got a nice calm job where everyone's trying to kill me."

"No really."

"Sure, I've always wanted to travel into space. Yeah. I even tried to save up money to buy a trip once. And I enjoyed last night's ride--except for not being able to breathe. Why?"

Silence. Nikki seemed to be studying her sandwich.

If I had had any sense, I would have gotten up and run away right there. And maybe drowned myself for good measure. But Nikki is like a flame to a moth. Rather than fleeing, I fluttered closer and proceeded to get singed.

"I was thinking," she munched, "that we could take that van into space if we--"

"Woe, there. You must be kidding."

"No, really."

"Nikki, there's no way that--"

"Now listen. You've got the power from the flywheel generator to run all kinds of life-support

equipment. The van can accelerate with a constant speed... It doesn't need fuel... And the computers can be programmed--in fact are...I took the liberty last night--for Earth orbit. All we need is a couple of suits and some gear. We could--"

"That's crazy. Too dangerous," I popped open a can of pop and toyed with the idea of hiding inside it.

"Phil, things aren't exactly safe here on the ground for us."

"Right. But what would we gain in space?"

"That's just it. They'd never think of looking for you on... Oh, say the moon."

She said that a bit too casually. I felt a cold chill dance up and down my spine. "The moon?" I asked, knowing I didn't want to hear what was coming.

"I did a little figuring and..." She launched into her sales pitch.

I fought a losing battle from there on.

Of course I had always wanted to go into space. What boy who became a man didn't. Never mind the deaths that resulted with the collapse of the space elevator, or the fact that no more glamorous sci-fi shows ever graced the 3V broadcasts any more. Most kids of the male persuasion dream of going into space.

It's just that I had never expected to really do it. And especially not in an old van. But the more Nikki talked, the more enthused I got, perhaps proving that insanity is contagious. But the truth be told, I had toyed with the idea of a space ship propelled by the rods when they'd first been perfected; I just hadn't expected to be using a van to travel into space rather than a nice sleek conventional space ship.

Nikki explained to me that the time was perfect, too. The world government had, without fanfare, closed the few moon bases that had been put on the moon, and liquidated the surplus gear left over from the space program almost faster than consumers could buy it. In fact all the rocket jocks she'd known had been buying all sorts of hardware and toys, while bemoaning the fact that the space program was all but officially dead. So, Nikki reasoned, we could probably outfit our expedition for just centimes on the dollar.

Slowly she wove her spell the way a spider weaves a web. Before I knew it, I was trapped and we were off in the van to buy some used space suits.

After crashing through the scrub brush for a while, and making low flights that--I hoped--were off the radar, we finally located a road that led to a highway. I parked the van at the first electro-charge station (hoping the attendant wouldn't become too curious as to why the van didn't need to be charged) and found out we were on Galveston Island. Using an Internet map we bought from the attendant, along with a phone book disc, we finally found the name of a nearby surplus dealer which--we hoped--might lead us to a source of the gear we'd be needing.

Several hours later, and despite the errors on the map, we finally located the surplus store at Hitchcock, west of Galveston.

As we neared it, it became apparent that the store was once a huge old barn. Crates and old freight trucks littered the area around it. A chain-link fence enclosed the cemetery-like area around the barn where--it appeared--all vehicles in the area crawled to when it came time for them to die. With a bit of originality, the owner had painted, in huge amateur-looking letters, "Space and Military Surplus" over the chipped, red paint of the wooden structure.

We brought the van to a stop in front of the huge eyesore. No other working vehicles were in

the customer parking lot. The hot, Texas wind pummeled sand against the side of the van.

"Are you sure we want to go in?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"Assuming we find anything of use, what are we going to pay for things with? I chucked my card outside New Denver."

"I've got some jewelry."

"That's not cash"

"These guys like to barter. Anything else we could trade?"

"I hate to drag a needle gun in--might give the owner a heart attack. How about your laser? Industrial lasers get good prices."

"Sounds good. I have no attachment to it."

"It still ought to get us a lot. *If* we work our trading right. Let's leave the laser in the van 'til we see if there's anything here." I had my doubts.

We got out of the van and sauntered toward the gate. I squinted at Nikki in the bright sunlight. She looked so different with her blond hair and the synthaface.

"What are you smiling at?" Nikki asked. "You look like you know something I should know about."

"You don't look like Nikki any more. I was just thinking I liked the way you looked better *before* you changed your face."

"Well, I like you better the way you are *now*." She laughed and gave me a shove, then raced ahead of me toward the store.

I chased her to the barn door; both of us were giggling like teenagers as we pulled it open and stepped into the cool darkness of the interior of the building. Once in, we grew quiet.

It was like a museum.

I couldn't believe what all was there. Spotlights, hung in the ceiling, cut through the gloom with beams that caught the dust particles in the air and bathed equipment on the floor in pools of light. Other piles of machinery sat hidden in the dark and under dust tarps looking like large animals waiting for their prey. The contrast between the highly lit areas and those in darkness made it necessary to study what you were looking at before your mind could make any sense of the jumble.

Large bins holding small parts spread out along one unpainted wall in a haphazard manner while space suits of various designs hung down the back of the mammoth room like a long line of alien soldiers. An ancient space capsule was suspended from the rafters of the barn and slowly turned in the cool breeze of an air conditioning duct that was bolted to the ceiling. In one dusty corner, a convention of space-bots stood frozen as if waiting for a command to get to work.

"Help you folks," a voice that made us both jump called out of the gloom.

We turned to see a beefy-looking man with black whiskers shuffle into the light. Dressed in dirty white space overalls with a vintage NASA baseball cap, he bumped and dragged on a pair of crutches as he came toward us. One leg seemed to be paralyzed and scraped along behind him as he approached. The twisted member looked out of place on his otherwise perfect, muscular body.

"We need some gear," I said. "Is any of this operational?" I asked, pointing to a space suit.

"Most isn't. Some is. All looks good, though. Unless you're needing it for a project of some sort, you can save a bundle by buying things that are just lookers." He laughed. "Guess I'm talking myself out of some money, here."

"We need equipment that's functional. For...experimental work," I said, trying to be as vague as possible. Not that he would believe that we were about to fly to the moon in a van. I just didn't want to tell the truth and have him call the loony bin.

Nikki pulled her list out of the hip pocket of her green coveralls and handed it to him, "We're interested in these. Do you have any of this stuff."

He took the list, pushed back his cap, and read as he balanced his weight on his crutches. I walked away from him to inspect some of the space suits more closely, wondering where I had seen his face before? The bum leg suddenly jarred a memory: A supply ship that had fallen into the moon. One man rescued the survivors in a heroic effort that cost him the use of his leg and later his career. The black beard and athletic frame... There was no doubt in my mind. Jake Jozek. "Big Jake."

Or was it. I walked back to Nikki's side.

He gave us an odd look. "I think I've got most of this. You folks planning on going to Mars or something?"

Obviously he knew his business. Neither Nikki nor I knew what to say.

He went on, "You know, I've been in space. Even on the moon once. You folks have something pretty specific in mind. It's none of my business but--"

"Big Jake Jozek?" I asked, desperately trying to change the subject.

"Yeah," he laughed. "Didn't know anyone still remembered. Anyway... I think we can work something out, here. Come on back to where I keep the good stuff."

We followed him as he scraped and dragged himself across the concrete floor toward a small door at the back of the barn. "Didn't know anyone still remembered me," he said. "They just brought me back, pinned a medal on me, and that was that. Now, they're dismantling everything. We should be going to the planets... Instead the fools are abandoning the Moon. Just when Earth needs other resources, they're quitting." He turned and smiled, "Please ignore the rantings of an old fanatic."

. I tried to smile reassuringly so he wouldn't jack up his prices. Nikki said nothing

He paused before the door, took out a magnetic key, unlocked the padlock, and pushed the door open. The hinges gave a high-pitched squeak that ended in a moan. He reached into the darkness and flipped on a light.

The door opened into another huge room filled with more equipment. Unlike the room we had seen, the equipment in this room looked spotless, obviously arranged in an orderly fashion. Several bots glided about with dust rags as if to demonstrate how carefully the equipment was being cared for.

"This is my good stuff. No one but the folks that deliver and unload the gear I buy even know it's back here. Been saving it for the time when I can buy a rocket--if and when one becomes available--and make my own way back into space. Earth's not home anymore. Not with this bum leg. It holds me back. It doesn't matter in space."

"What kind of prices are we looking at for the gear we need," I asked.

He laughed. "The stuffs not for sale. Woe there. Don't give me those long faces... I do have a

proposition to make to you." He paused a moment and turned to stand directly in front of us. " I can see from your equipment list that you have something special in mind. You get me back into space and I'll make it worth your while. Get me to the Moon with enough gear to get set up in an abandoned base, and I'll supply you with what you need for free."

Nikki and I stood still, not wanting to betray ourselves. Was this guy on the level?

"Uh. Just a minute. We need to have a conference here," I pulled Nikki over to one of the spotless corners of the room as a bot scurried out of our way.

"I don't know about this," I whispered.. "We should probably get out of here. This guy might not be on the level and he's already guessed what we were planning."

"He wouldn't have admitted knowing what we were planning if he were just going to turn us in. I think he's serious."

"But there's no way we can mount an expedition for all three of us to the Moon. And how do you know that he won't turn us in?"

"Why would he turn us in?"

I paused. "That is a point. He did get booted out of space. Probably has some real grudges, too..."

"Why not trust him? I bet he's serious about getting back into space."

"OK. That's probably right. But I'm not sure if we have enough lifting power to carry all we need. Let alone another--"

"If we accelerate constantly, the trip could be short and--"

"Can you really lift the three of us and some gear?"

"Sure. Well, almost sure that we can do it. I did the calculations last night for two of us. But I think we could squeeze in three. And I'm sure we can trust him. We could use a little help from someone that knows what's on the Moon."

"Well... I doubt that we'll find anyone else with this much good equipment. OK. But let's not let him know too much at first."

Having said that, I spilled my guts. More or less. We didn't tell him HOW we were getting to the moon. Not at first; I didn't want to scare him off. But I did admit that we were going. "But our first trip will be without you until we get the hang of things," I finished up.

He was equally forthcoming. "No way. If you have enough lift to get the gear you're needing into space, you can take one more hand on board. Either I go or you look somewhere else for your gear. And I can promise you, you aren't going to find anyone else with this quality of equipment."

I bit my lip. He was like the kid that owned the bat and gloves and ball; he was the only game in town.

"I tell you what," I countered. "Let me show you what we'll be traveling in and you'll probably want to wait for the second round trip. But you can't tell anyone what you've seen. It can be hazardous to your health."

Once we'd gained his promise, we drove the van into the barn. He looked at it and then at us as if we were crazy. I smiled as the little wheels started to move in his head. He tilted his head to listen to the constant whirl of the engine. "What the..." He walked around the van. Nikki was driving so I got out.

I motioned to the open door. "Get in."

He handed me his crutches, backed into the passenger's seat, and pulled himself into place. Nikki flew him around the inside of the barn.

"I can't believe it. I must be dreaming," was all he said when he settled back on the floor and hopped from the van.

After a moment of thought, he put a huge "Closed" sign on the front door, locked up, and almost without another word we started assembling everything we would be needing for our trip. We stopped for a quick lunch and then worked well into the night. About every fifteen minutes Jake would say, "I can't believe it. I must be dreaming."

First we made a big pile of everything we needed, then we started figuring the lift potential as well as trying to figure how to store everything in the van. I could see it was going to be one tight fit. At best we'd be like a bunch of soso's stuffed into a vacuum-packed can. At worst, Jake would have to stay behind. And I wasn't so sure he would agree to that.

Jake was a big help. He knew a lot of little things that we hadn't thought of which could easily have gotten us killed before we ever even got to the Moon. Things like the need for a radiant heater as well as a cooling system. And which Moon bases would be easiest for us to settle in without being detected.

By midnight he and Nikki had hammered out the lift potentials and possible rates of acceleration the van could achieve and we'd figured out--more or less--how to fit three people and all the gear they'd need for a short trip through space into the van.

Nikki got the computers out of the van and jacked them into the Net, while Jake got a stack of dusty reference books out; the two of them sat at the table in the small living quarters Jake had set up in a lean-to on the old barn. They started plotting various orbits that might take us to the Moon. Time after time, they came up with too long a trip for the supplies we could carry or which wouldn't quite get us there. Added to the problems was the fact that the van had to make the first leg of its journey following a rocket flight (to keep us from being detected) even though the van was capable of nearly constant acceleration/deceleration unlike a rocket. I sat at the table a while and then quietly sneaked out when I realized that the conversation was way over my head.

I reentered the barn and studied the van which was in the center of one of the bright spots, looking like an exhibit in a museum. It certainly didn't look like a space craft. If I had been forced to choose between it and the cow that jumped over the moon, I would have chosen the cow ever time as the most likely candidate. The van looked like the most unlikely way to get into space. The thought was the proverbial mind boggler.

I also felt... Jealous. Seeing Jake and Nikki hitting it off so well together didn't seem to go over well with me. Mentally, I didn't see anything to be jealous about. Emotionally, I felt jealous. Unfortunately, the heart wins out over the brain when it comes to feelings.

So I moped around in the shadows of the barn thinking I might well be the most childish man on the planet. Finally, I started exploring the barn and ended up in the hay loft. There, I opened an old wooden door leading to the outside and stood staring at the rising Moon, not quite full tonight, as it rose in the East.

"There you are."

I turned to see Nikki coming up the ladder.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Baying at the Moon."

Nikki looked at the Moon a moment. " It's hard to believe. But I think we've figured out a way to really do it. The figures are there and we have the vehicle. All we have to do is go. We might be standing on the lunar surface in a few days." She looked at my face. "Why do you look so sad?"

"Well, I guess it's a little bit of a let down, somehow. Part of me is excited and part of me would like to be sitting on a sofa watching the 3V."

"Even if bag ladies try to zap you?"

"Maybe we could skip that part. Come on, it's my dream. Don't throw in your bag ladies."

Silence for a bit longer. Nikki reached out and gave my hand a squeeze. "Listen, Phil. I know that... Well, don't rush things. It's going to be a while before I get over Craig. He may be a mess, but he was my mess. All I ever had. Give me time."

I wasn't sure I understood. But enough to be quiet. She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and pulled me toward the ladder. "Come on, Phil. Jake's so charged up he'll start flying around the room if there isn't someone to keep him grounded."

We spent the next few hours listening to Jake spin his tales about his times in space and what the Moon was really like. As he told his stories, a bond was woven between the three dreamers who were hoping to claim a chunk of the moon for themselves.

Chapter 9

The next morning, Nikki and I slept late. Jake was up welding an extra storage bay to the top of the van. It looked like the dickens, but gave us the extra space we needed. By the time things were rounded up and we were ready to go, the day was half gone. Jake's nephew, Mark, had arrived and was to take over the business while Jake was "out of town" as he put it.

Nikki left her jewelry and the industrial laser for Mark to sell if he needed cash to pay Jake's bills. Jake didn't want to sell any of his surplus gear until we had taken our maiden flight and returned with a better idea of what we'd be needing for future trips.

With the sun overhead, we drove the van into the hot, Texas daylight and waited for Jake to climb in. He jumped into the old business chair that he'd welded just behind the two front seats of the van. I hoped his welds were good; I didn't relish the thought of him dinging about inside the van like some piece of loose baggage at some critical moment in our flight.

We drove through the slums of Galveston and up to Highway 45 which led directly to the Houston rocket port. Because of the poor condition of the road and the number of vehicles that had been abandoned on it, we didn't reach our destination until nightfall. Fortunately the rioting going on in Texas City had diverted the hi-pees into that area; that left us free to fire at highwaymen and weren't stopped as we slowly made our way toward Houston.

Arriving at dusk was perfect for our plans since we were going to follow a rocket into space, again under the cover of the night. If all went well, once in space, we'd alter our course and then depart for the Moon. While we wouldn't remain hidden from radar detection once the rocket started its arch back to its destination halfway around the world, there would be little chance of being "seen" and--if we were located--the fact that our speed and directional changes would be so different from those of conventional spacecraft would probably make an Earth-side watcher think we were a gremlin rather than an actual spacecraft. Too, we'd be headed out so that, even if they wanted to, it would be impossible to intercept us.

Now as we sat in the dark outside the rocket port, Jake bled most of the air out of the van's tires so they didn't pop when we got into space. Then the three of us slipped into our space suits and connected them into the support system powered by the car's generator, leaving our helmets off so that we could talk freely.

Jake sat behind us; Nikki was in the passenger seat and I sat behind the wheel of my van. Jake's balding head somehow looked ridiculous without his NASA cap. "According to the schedule we picked off the Net, the Paris-bound rocket should be launched in a couple of minutes," Nikki said.

"Okay then," I said. "Everyone get buckled up."

Jake reached forward and gave my hand a shake that threatened to crack some bones, "Good luck, Captain Hunter."

"Where'd you get this 'Captain' stuff? 'Major Hunter' to you, mister."

Nikki and Jake laughed.

Nikki leaned back and gave Jake a quick kiss. Now I really felt jealous.

I lifted the van off the pavement and floated over the fence and onto the rocket field, the force of the anti-grav rods sagging the fence nearly to the ground as we crossed, leaving it looking as if an elephant had crawled over it.

Right on schedule, the nighttime sky glowed red and I waited for Nikki to double check to be sure we were following the right rocket. She studied the computer/radar tie in that we'd improvised from Jake's surplus equipment while the surplus radio picked up transmissions from the port and made a garbled sound that Nikki seemed to be able to decipher.

"That's it," she announced.

I hit the "auto" button on the dash and leaned back, hoping that the computer would follow the radar blip of the rocket rather than a flock of gulls. One malfunction was all we needed to have a major catastrophe. After vowing never to ride a machine-controlled rocket, I was now hurtling through the atmosphere chasing a rocket controlled by a machine in a van controlled by a computer. I whispered a silent prayer to ask forgiveness for my stupidity.

I also wished that we'd had room for three parachutes.

"Phil," Nikki said.

"Uh."

"Your helmet. Or are you planning on holding your breath for the round trip."

The choice wasn't hard to make. I got my helmet off the floor and turned it the proper direction.

"Phil, just a minute."

As I turned to look, Nikki leaned over and gave me a long, passionate kiss, then pulled on her bubble helmet before I had time to try for a second kiss. I wished I could see her face in the dark van; Nikki was an enigma wrapped in a space suit. All that showed on her mirrored helmet was the reflection of the lights from the dash panel and the various odds and ends of instrument lights on the equipment we'd added to the van.

Satisfied my helmet was fastened, I sat back for our ride as our van accelerated upward, following the directions fed to it by our computers. Jake gave a long yelp for joy that threatened to ruin our suits' communications gear as we started our journey toward the Moon. And after Nikki's kiss, I felt like I could have flown to the moon without the van.

Chapter 10

Although we were hurtling around the Earth at orbital speed, the blue and white globe below us looked like it was only slowly meandering by while we hung in space. We had followed the passenger rocket up through the atmosphere and then passed it from a distance as it stopped its acceleration and started its downward descent back toward the ground. We continued to accelerate as we headed on around the Earth picking up more velocity to jump free of the Earth's gravity and commence our jump across space into the gravitational field of the Moon. Soon, the sun sank behind us and we spiraled over the nighttime sky, through the Earth's cold shadow and outward, toward the Moon.

That sounds exciting. It was. For a few hours. Then we discovered the boredom of space flight in cramped quarters. We did little during our flight. We sat and talked, tried to get the pasty food through the intake port of our suits (Jake was the only one who was very successful at this), and tried to discreetly use the waste disposal system in the suits with a minimum of fuss. (After having a pint bottle of urine escape my grasp and nearly vanish into the back of the van--save for the fast action of Jake in grabbing it--I was not too impressed with the freedom enjoyed by the glamorous astronauts of the 3V shows. And there is nothing like a plastic sack of excreta sitting in a pouch on your suit to take the romance out of things.)

We didn't suffer having to be totally weightless. While we weren't under anything approaching zero G, Nikki and Jake had plotted our course with an eye toward maximum speed since the van didn't have to worry about expending its motivating energy. Because of this, we had almost constant "gravity" as the van pushed ahead and our bodies tried to stay behind. About the only time we were in micro-gravity to the point of being weightless was for the few moments when the computer maneuvered the van about--so we wouldn't feel like we were hanging on our heads--to start pushing against the Moon's gravity as the lunar gravity overcame that of the Earth. I was thankful for the lack of weightlessness; after the few moments of weightlessness there was little doubt in my mind that I would have endured space sickness while Nikki and Jake sat beside me perfectly blissful of my sufferings. Whining about stomach ailments is not a good way to impress either an attractive member of the opposite sex or an old space pirate.

So about the only major problem was cramped muscles; you can't just stop and step out to stretch when you're hurtling through space. It wasn't fun, but it wasn't as bad as it might have been.

During the first few hours of our flight, Nikki was quite busy with an electronic astrolabe and a computer file which gave the correct coordinates that we needed to take. After a while she became convinced that the computer was doing a perfect job of flying us and only made an

occasional sighting in for my peace of mind. (And I noticed that once she didn't even bother to turn the astrolabe on, thus proving it was only being done for my benefit; talk about trying to soothe the pilot's nerves... Nikki knew all the navigator tricks.)

We orbited the Moon one time to allow the computer to adjust our speed and then located our first destination. Our whole trip took less than 24 hours--considerably less than the three days taken by conventional rocket flights to the moon.

Our computer dropped us quite close to the airless surface of the Moon; I tried not to scream as we dropped through space. We skimmed across the barren, pock-marked gray land whose lack of atmosphere made it hard to judge distances. After the computer made one last, stomach-wrenching adjustment and burped a warning in our helmets' radios, we found ourselves hanging over the Copernicus Mining Base a little off the Equator of the Moon in the Carpathian Mountain range between the *Oceanus Procellarum* and the *Mare Imbrium*, east of Kepler Crater.

It had happened. The computer had flown us flawlessly to our destination on the Moon. "Well, you and Jake did a perfect job in calculating and programming our flight," I announced needlessly.

Jake gave a grunt that a frog would have recognized as meaning "thanks."

Nikki, a bit more conventional, spoke English, "It's nice to have a new type of problem for a change. I'm afraid rocket-flight navigation made me a little rusty at figuring orbits. Ready to go down for a landing?"

"Yeah. Now or never, right? I hope I can do as well as you guys did in programming the computer." I wiped my hands against my legs, even though the sweat remained on my palms thanks to the fact that they were wrapped in heavy space gloves. "Everyone ready?"

"Take her down, Captain," Jake's voice said in my helmet's speaker.

I flipped the turn signal out of its hover position and we slowly fell downward. Though there was really nothing to worry about, it seemed a bit anti-climactic after the long, computerized trip to get to where we were going with a flip of a turn signal. Hardly first class. I decided to have Jake get us some flashing lights to wire into the van's dashboard before we took anyone we really wanted to impress on a flight.

The mining base was dwarfed by the sheer size of the Copernicus crater. The one-sixth gravity of the Moon made for spectacular contrasts of heights with the scraggly, un-weathered crater walls jutting up unlike any mountain range on Earth. Because of the greater curvature of the Moon, the far side of the crater walls dropped almost out of sight as we neared the rough floor where a giant meteor had impacted on the Moon before mankind had even started chipping away at flint knives.

The rocket sled ramp soon came into sight and the artificial smoothness of man's handiwork showed on the rock around it. The ramp stretched down toward the base which was nestled in the northern end of the crater. Though the sled had been designed to launch the metal ingots mined and processed on the Moon, Jake said that the base had been closed just before it had gotten ready for automated production. (And the question none of us could answer sprang up to puzzle my mind again. *Why had the base been closed down?* Earth needed the resources. The best guess among the three of us was that the powers-that-be on Earth just couldn't make enough money at it. It was easier to let people starve on Earth, perhaps. *Who knows?*)

After an eternity, we reached the floor of the crater and I carefully steered the van to land on the smooth field built for supply rockets. It was nestled among the huge boulders that jutted from

the lunar dust that had filtered in around them. Beside it was the small, solar-powered beacon that had allowed our computer to home in on the base.

A slight jolt marked the end of our descent. I looked over at Nikki. "We made it."

I could barely see a smile on her face inside the mirrored bubble helmet, "Yes. We're really here."

Then it sank in, in the peanut gallery: "We're here!" Jake yelled.

I jumped when he yelled and would have bumped my head if my seat belt hadn't held me down. "Jake, let's try not to rupture our eardrums again."

"Sorry."

"How about a little stroll?" Nikki asked unfastening her seat belt, soundlessly since there was no air in the van.

"Don't mind if we do," I unbuckled my harness and popped the door of the van open. I sat a moment looked at the Earth which was the one splotch of color in the gray and black lunar landscape. Then I studied the ground and tossed myself from the van with what I had aimed to be the proverbial "one small step." I banged the back of my helmet on the van roof, fell out the door, bounced off the dust, somersaulted, and landed on shaky legs. Lucky for me, there were no sharp rocks about and the lunar gravity is not too great. Nikki hadn't seen my acrobatics so I tried to act like nothing had happened.

"Everything OK?" Jake asked.

"Sure," I said, hoping my panic didn't show in my voice. I wasn't in such a great hurry after my impromptu tumbling routine.

Needless to say, the weak lunar gravity takes some getting used to. It's kind of like walking in chest deep water without the resistance of the water to hold you back. A gentle jump can bounce you four or five feet into the--airless--"air." By the time we'd gone the short distance across the plain separating us from the base's entrance, both Nikki and I had pretty well mastered the kangaroo hop that can get you around so quickly on the Moon. Jake's suit had the legs tied together and he functioned like he'd been born on the Moon; his hopping motions were both graceful and functional.

I half expected the base to be locked up. But of course it wasn't. There aren't many unaccounted-for persons walking about on the Moon; burglary is not a problem. The main question was whether or not the air locks on the door would be operational.

Jake rotated the heavy ring on the door and it popped open. It led into an white plastic airlock barely big enough for eight or nine people at the most. We entered the small room and I closed and twisted the lever of the door behind us; sunlight came through the translucent plastic walls so that we could see. Nikki pushed the "Cycle" button. Nothing happened. The lock wasn't functional.

"Power's down," Jake said. "The air locks all have an emergency switch in them so that it's impossible to accidentally get locked out."

"What's it look like?"

"Probably a panel. Small metal plate door. Something like that."

We searched about inside the white plastic lock. Finally, I spotted the thin lines of a panel cover. For some reason it was designed to blend into the rest of the wall; it made everything look nicer but was a very poor practice for such a critical emergency device. "Is this it?"

"Must be," Jake replied. "Can you get it open?"

Obtaining purchase on a small, hairline opening is impossible in a space suit. "Remind me to grow fingernails on my gloves next time we come to the Moon."

"Here." Jake handed me a small-bladed screwdriver from the tool kit that he'd mounted on his suit.

I put the blade into the crack and jimmied the plastic apart. It suddenly popped off and the plate went cart-wheeling through the space in the chamber, silently bounced off a wall, and slowly fell to the floor. *Getting used to the low gravity and airlessness is going to take some time*, I decided as I handed the tool back to Jake.

There was one red button under the panel.

"Hey, they don't have auto-destruct buttons on these bases, do they?" I asked.

Nikki laughed, "I know a good way to see if that's it."

"Cross your fingers," I pressed it hoping we were only kidding. I pressed the button. An electric overhead light came on in the chamber to augment the small amount of light coming through the plastic walls. But nothing else happened. There was no build-up of pressure inside the airlock. "Now what?" I asked.

"Try the cycle button again," Jake said.

Nikki pressed the button and in a moment a low hiss started that gradually grew louder. Our suits quit acting like balloons as the chamber filled with air.

I cautiously cracked my helmet of my suit as Nikki and Jake removed theirs and unlatched the inner door of the chamber to create a small pop as the pressure differences between rooms evened out. I took a deep breath; stale, recycled, but still air. And after the humid conditions on the inside of the suits, it felt very refreshing, cool, and dry.

We stepped into the first room behind the lock, carefully sealing the door behind us. It was basically a larger version of the airlock: a huge, white bubble that filtered sunlight through it so that the interior was dimly lit. The electric lights seemed to be off. Flipping the switch beside the door didn't do anything. The power was off inside the base. Fortunately, with a lunar day of fourteen and a half Earth days, we still had several more "days" of light and there was no big hurry to get things started up.

We put our helmets on a small dispatcher's desk sitting next to the door. Nikki and I followed Jake's lead and took off our gloves and laid them beside our helmets, followed by our backpacks.

"Now, let's see how this station is set up," I said, feeling light as a feather once I was freed of the pack and helmet.

"Our first task will be to locate the radio link." Jake had told us that the station sensors were connected to an auto radio-link to Earth. If we didn't disconnect it, it would eventually send back enough information on changes within the base, power systems in use, and so forth, to alert those on Earth that something was going on in the camp. We'd decided that if it suddenly stopped its transmission, anyone monitoring from Earth would assume that it was just an equipment malfunction; for us this was better than having detectors in the base showing that it was occupied (even if those on Earth would be at a loss to explain by whom or what).

Since we were standing in the command center of the base, a quick search allowed us to locate the monitor.

"Say good night," I said as I jerked the electric cable from the back of the equipment. To be

on the safe side, Jake also disconnected the antenna from the transmitter, noting, "Can't be too careful. I'd suggest we spit up and see what sort of supplies we have here. Hopefully enough for a few days — I hate to make the return trip too soon."

"Ditto," I said, my stiff legs making me shudder at the thought. "Let's split up... Where should we check?"

Jake gave us a rough layout of the domes that comprised the base. Half an hour later we rendezvoused at the control room again.

"What did everyone find?" I asked. "It looks to me like they left in a hurry. All sorts of stuff left behind in the crew quarters. Most of it is junk but..."

Nikki answered first. "There's enough food and water to supply us for at least a year. My only question is what about the air?"

"We have a problem there," Jake said. "When they pulled out, the hydroponics area wasn't properly shut down. All the--now dead--plants were left in their trays. We'll have to put in some elbow grease to get the greenhouse cleaned up and new seeds planted. But I think we'll have enough air until they come online. There's a pretty good reserve of oxygen in the tanks and we can scrub the air of CO₂ for quite a while."

"The mining operation doesn't look like it ever got started," I said. "I didn't see a single bot anywhere in the shaft."

"I can check that quick enough," Jake said, bouncing over to a control console. He tapped some keys and an inventory came on screen. He moused his way through several links and then tapped the screen. "There you have it. It looks as though the mine was ready to be worked but, if this is correct, the are still stored in their crates."

I nodded. "I saw a bunch of crates in the storehouse."

"Then we could probably program them to clean out the hydroponics tanks and growth tanks," Nikki suggested.

"Fraid not," Jake said, turning back from the screen. "According to the data here, the brains for the units were never shipped. But we should be able to clean up the hydroponics ourselves."

"But that won't help us start up the mining," I said. The main reason we chose to land at the base had been to produce metal from the ore deposited by the impact of the ancient giant meteor that had created the Copernicus crater. The same metal which--with the help of the solar panel's energy and some other odds and ends of equipment which could be scrounged or even dragged up from Earth, could then be converted into gravity rods.

But there were no bots to do the work.

"Apparently the last shipment to make the base operational was aborted," Jake said.

No one said much else about it then. But we knew we'd have to find the bots before it would be possible to build more rods which we all saw as the key to creating our own little business that might do about anything from supply unlimited power to create a full-fledged space ship capable of traveling through the solar system with about as much ease as we now traveled around the surface of Earth.

After a quick meal of insta-rations, we were ready to call it a day. We made our way to the crew quarters which extended down into the lunar rock, consisting of forty cabins reached via a long, underground hallway leading from the command center. Each cabin was large, ten by twenty meters, and contained a pair of bunk beds, desks, two retrieval monitors, a 3V set, and a

small bath as well as a Net device, the latter being dead. Each room was also a jumble as the tenants had apparently been forced to sort hurriedly through their belongings to try to decide what to take back to Earth. A few rooms had even ripened due to dirty clothing having been left behind to take on a life of its own. But most also had the towels, soap, and other supplies we'd be needing.

Despite my dream of sharing a bed with Nikki, she picked out a room of her own. I said my "good nights" to Jake and Nikki--I was ready to sleep. I heard Nikki laughing out in the hallway; apparently she and Jake had decided to stay up a while. Feeling like a school boy, the thought sprang to my mind, *Is Nikki interested in Jake?*

I didn't know. I was too tired to worry about it. The weak lunar gravity made the thin mattress softer than anything on Earth. That--coupled with my exhaustion—quickly dropped me into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 11

"Rise and shine," Nikki's voice ordered, drifting in from nowhere.

I felt a tug on my nose and opened my right eye to see what was going on. My timing was perfect; the overhead light flipped on with blinding clarity. I groaned and pulled the sheet over my head.

"We need to get going if we're going to get things done today," Nikki said as she left the room.

"Right..." With a brown taste in my mouth, I all but fell from bed then staggered a moment trying to get my footing in the light gravity of the Moon. I finally made it into the bathroom where a shower of hot, slowly-falling water got my eyes to where they'd stay open.

After rifling through the closets in my room, I discovered a pair of yellow coveralls that more or less fit me. A pair of slip-on sneakers--which I hoped hadn't been owned by someone with a fungal disease--completed my pre-owned outfit. I wondered why I hadn't had the good sense the night before to bring along a container of caffinex--in the instant-hot packages that filled the storage area of the mess hall--back to my room before retiring. On the other hand, thinking about getting out of the room and getting some caffinex gave me the will to live.

I bounced into the control room on my way to the mess and was surprised to see that the whole front of the room facing the airlock was now a clear plastic window which showed the panorama of the plain formed by the crater bottom. The gray stillness of it seemed alien when viewed from inside the safe confines of the room. Quiet, unfriendly, and lifeless. The pink van sitting in the distance looked like some sort of advertising joke that a used-car dealer might pull. The pink was the only splotch of color on the whole plain.

Jake sat at a console speaking to a computer in a low tone and occasionally punching at a key with a beefy finger.

"How'd you do that?" I asked.

"What?" He turned toward me.

"How'd you get the view?"

"Plastic. When a current goes through it, it becomes transparent. Instant windows. Just had to throw the right switch. We're using so little energy right now that the solar cells have already fully charged the base's storage batteries. We've got power to waste." Jake grinned, then went back to his work.

Nikki sat with another computer across her lap and waved as I entered the mess hall.

I half floated through to the food storage room and hunted up a packet of caffinex. *I have to wake up.* I popped the seal on it and breathed in the fumes of the brew a moment before drinking, then shuffled back into the control room, trying to get the liquid out of the cup and into my mouth rather than having the caffinex wiggle around in the weak gravity and depart for parts unknown. "What's on the agenda for today?"

"Good question," Nikki answered. "We'd better have a council of war."

"Jake?" I asked.

"Yeah. Uh... Just a moment." He spoke one last command and the printer next to the computer started coughing out figures. He rose and hopped over to where we were. I noticed that he'd tied his shoe laces together to allow his good leg to pull his bad one along, bouncing as if he were on a pogo stick.

"Since sleeping all day doesn't seem to be an option," I half suggested, raising an eyebrow suggestively as I glanced at Nikki, who in turn, looked as innocent as usual, "we need to decide what we're going to do. Need to get organized. Have you two been able to pull anything of interest out of the computers?"

"Yeah," Jake said. "Got a list of mining equipment and set-up procedures from the computer bank before you woke up. We can go over it later, but it looks like we have all the stuff we'd need to keep the base operating and complete the mining operation. Almost. Everything but the bots' brains. It's just a matter of getting the thing up and running except for the bots."

"Nikki?"

"Yeah. It was among the last of the transmissions they received here before closing up the base. But I find something of interest. The Eratothernes Base had the same model of bots and, as near as I can tell, they were operational."

"Where in the world--excuse me--where in the Moon is the Eratothernes Base?" I was having trouble making conversation; I kept looking at Nikki's figure that was temptingly displayed in a tight yellow jump suit, unzipped to "see level." I was distracted a moment as I speculated whether this noticeably tempting display was for my benefit or Jake's. Or maybe Nikki just didn't give a rip and was dressing for comfort. Who knew? My mind returned to what was being said.

"Eratothernes Crater is just a hop and a skip from here," Jake said. "The van would get us there in a couple of hours at the most."

"But would they leave the bots behind?" Nikki asked. "I really couldn't find anything to show the bots are still there."

"Bots, even those for mining operations, aren't as expensive as shipping them home. I suspect that the Eratothernes Base will be like this one. About all they'll have taken out is the crew."

"Do we know that the Eratothernes Base is closed?" I asked. I could imagine stumbling into the base and then having to high-tail it out again.

"I don't have the inside information," Jake said, "but based on the amount of surplus gear that's been hitting the market, I'm willing to bet that none of the lunar bases is operational."

Nikki spoke, "That certainly fits in with what I heard before I lost my job. The gossip among the rocket jocks was that the moon had been abandoned."

"So...," Jake said, " *If* we could sneak into the base... and get some bots, we'd be able to get the hydroponics started in a hurry--"

"And then," I continued, "get the metallurgical plant and mining operation ready to go as

well. That would be perfect. I'd like to see if it's practical to manufacture the anti-grav rods but I'll need the bots."

"If we could do that..." Jake said, his voice trailing off.

"There's about not limit to what we might achieve," Nikki finished, looking me straight in the eyes.

"If," I said. "Building the magnetic furnace and other equipment needed to make the rods won't be easy. And we don't even know if the other base has the bots."

"But if you could build the rods here," Nikki said, "and then mount a full-scale mining and manufacturing operation if it all looked practical..."

"The sky's the limit."

We all thought about it for a moment.

"There are still a whole lot of 'if's' in all this," I reminded them.

"But we have to have the bots," Nikki said.

"We've nothing to lose," I said. "Any problem with going over right now to check it out?" There wasn't.

* * *

Forty minutes later, I met Nikki and Jake at the front air lock. Jake had some spare oxygen tanks and a carbonylon cable wound around his suit. "We'd better replace our suit tanks. Most of the tanks in the van are depleted."

Jake and I crunched helmets together trying to help Nikki. While we struggled trying not to look too clumsy she slipped off her own tank and replaced it. When we'd gotten all sorted out, we refilled the empty tanks from our suits and carried them with us through the airlock and on out toward the van.

The surface of the Moon is hard to become accustomed to. The Earth is always in the sky. A different side of it, maybe, but always there. Though the sun was setting, it, too, seemed eternally rooted in place. To an Earther, the scene was totally unreal after living on a planet where ALL the heavenly bodies rose and set in twelve hours. It made it seem as if time had stopped.

We unloaded everything from the van which we wouldn't be needing for our short flight so that we'd have more room for transporting bots or other equipment back from the base (if it was actually abandoned).

Unloading the van was quite a job.

We'd really wedged a lot of stuff into it and getting it unpacked while wearing heavy gloves was no small task. It was a half hour before we lifted off and started traveling up and out of our huge crater. I headed the van toward the north east and the computer took over when it picked up the homing beam from the Eratosthenes Base. It was another white-knuckle flight since Nikki had programmed the computer for maximum speed while Jake and I had finished unloading the van.

Maximum speed on the Moon is very fast since you don't have atmosphere to contend with and you're keeping your craft as close as is practical to the surface to minimize the chances of radar detection. Because there's no atmosphere, everything looks closer and especially so when the surface you're traveling over is comprised of lunar mountains--with their sheer grades--the size of those in the Carpathian Range. We accelerated the first half of the trip and then decelerated the last half, the tops of boulders and mountains whizzing by seemingly close to our feet. It was fortunate that the suites had gloves so the others couldn't see how tightly I gripped the

non-functioning steering wheel from time to time.

Chapter 12

As we neared the crater containing the Eratosthenes Base, we came to a stop and "sneaked" up on the complex from behind, just in case it wasn't abandoned. We kept low and used the mountains-like hills of the area to screen our approach. As we got within several kilometers of the base and had dropped over the crater rim, we hid behind any boulders that were large enough to conceal a floating van.

When we had flown to within a couple hundred meters of the base, Jake pointed from behind me, reaching over my shoulder, "Look at that. Something's very wrong there. See the crack in the front dome."

A large, jagged opening stretched across the dome of the control room. "What's the white stuff on the ground?" I asked. "Paper?"

"Looks like it," Nikki agreed. "And other garbage from the looks of it."

"I'm betting the stuff was blown out of the dome," Jake said. "A sudden decompression that caused the air to push things out as it escaped through the crack there on the side."

"That's not all," Nikki said. "There's melted plastic down the south side of the dome--along the mining shaft. An industrial laser... But? What? Used as a weapon or something. An accident?"

"Don't think so," I said. "The burnt plastic's in a pattern. Crude letters--reversed--on the wall. If you were standing inside they would read 'K F.'"

"Why'd someone do that?" Jake asked.

That was the fifty-four thousand credit question. I had a feeling we were about to find the answer. In the meantime, none of us could think of any code or words that had any important meaning. KF? And why would anyone do such a dangerous thing? They were lucky they hadn't punched a hole in the mining dome.

I circled the base slowly before landing. Everything looked quiet. "What do you think? Shall we land? I'm not too keen on meeting a crazy with an industrial laser." I remembered what had happened the last time I'd seen an industrial laser fired. Having my smiling head sitting out in the lunar dust didn't seem at all appealing, and I figured it had to hurt getting into that sort of condition, even if only momentarily.

"Nothing seems to be going on down there now," Nikki said. "Nothing's lit up inside."

"Let's land and sit a minute," Jake suggested. "See if anything happens."

Good plan, I thought. If someone uses a laser to carve the van into little pieces, we'll figure

something's wrong. But I also wanted the bots for my project, and I guess greed can overwhelm caution. I didn't think about the danger for long and brought the van down, settling in front of the main airlock of the base.

"We can't stay too long," Nikki said. "We don't have much spare oxygen for the return trip."

I wished we'd loaded up a few more spare canisters. We'd planned on picking up spares in the Eratosthenes base. Now that didn't seem like such a wise course of action.

We sat for ten minutes.

Nothing happened.

"I'm going to take a look," I said. I was tired of waiting for a disaster to happen; it was more nerve-racking than doing something. I popped open the glove compartment of the van and pulled out my Beretta 92-F.

"Will that work without air?" Nikki asked.

"Yeah. The firing pressure is hundreds of times higher than Earth's air pressure. The loss of the sixteen pounds of air pressure outside won't be a strain on it. Jake, why don't you grab the needle rifle. Nikki, you take the wheel of the van in case we need to make a fast run for it."

Jake and I extracted ourselves from the van.

"Let's split up," Jake suggested. "You head for that boulder next to the air lock and I'll cover you."

"Ready?"

Jake steadied himself against the van and aimed at the entrance of the base. "Go."

I hippity-hopped toward a boulder near the airlock like a rabbit that had feasted on jumping beans, finally getting behind it where I caught my breath and aimed my pistol at the front access door. "Look's quiet. I've got the Come on. I've got the entrance covered."

Jake bounced across the plain like a kangaroo and stopped by the door and waited a moment, his rifle at the ready. "OK. Come on up, Phil."

I bounced toward the door and stopped on the other side of it with the grace of a dancing hippo, plowing into the side of the dome hard enough to make my teeth rattle when my head bounced off the inside of my helmet.

We waited another moment.

"See anything, Nikki?" I asked.

"Looks clear from back here."

"Just a minute," I told Jake. "Watch the door." I crawled over to the wide crack in the dome and peered into it, trying to see through the darkness inside. Throwing caution to the wind, I switched on my helmet lamp and inspected the interior of the dome in its bright beam.

The inside had been trashed with paper and equipment scattered all over the floor. There didn't seem to be anything moving inside. "The place is a mess," I told the others. "Looks like the communication gear is smashed." I moved to the other side of the crack and checked out the rest of the room. "No one's in sight. No bodies either. The crack's just a little too narrow to get through. Has pretty sharp edges."

"The shell's too tough to break or pry open, " Jake said. "Let's use the door."

Wish I'd thought of that. I told myself with a grim smile. I skipped back to the airlock. Jake opened up the outer door, peeked in, then motioned and we both entered.

"We have a problem," Jake said. "The inner door's designed so it can't be opened without cycling air into the air lock. That's normally a safety feature; now it's bad news since the dome doesn't have any air in it."

"Maybe the system is out of air," I said.

"Yeah. Could be. Let's try." He pushed the cycle button. The door closed behind us and the chamber filled with air.

"Damn," Jake said. "We shouldn't open the inner door with the pressure up in here and a vacuum on the other side. It's pretty dangerous. Might rip our suits open if it sucked us in."

"There's a pleasant thought," I said. I aimed my Beretta at the wall leading out to the plain. "Maybe if the instruments think the airlock is pressurized but it isn't... Stand back... This looks like a good spot? No hidden wiring or anything."

"Good as any. Stay away from the hole when you've made it. It'll create some real suction at first."

I pulled the trigger. The discharge exploded loudly in the air-filled chamber and a small hole appeared in the plastic wall. The air hissed out slowly as our suits ballooned as the pressure dropped.

Then the suits draped back against our skin as air rushed into the chamber with a steady hiss.

"So much for that idea," I said.

"Forgot about the auto cycle," Jake said. "Let's see if we can turn off the power. Don't get against the bullet hole!"

I was glad he cautioned me since I about put my posterior end against it. Having the seat ripped off your pants in a vacuum would be more than embarrassing. I grimaced at the thought of getting a little "behind" into my work, as it were.

Jake pulled off the metal plate over the emergency button which was located where the other one had been at our base. He punched it and the air quit running into the chamber and again leaked out through the bullet hole and our suits inflating once more.

But, due to safety features, the inner door would not open. "Any suggestions?"

"Fix thirteen."

"Which would be?" Jake asked.

I laughed. "Whenever we had equipment that didn't work right in the lab, we often resorted to 'fix thirteen.' Brute force or some other override that the manufacturer never planned on seeing with his equipment."

Jake held up his rifle.

"Yes," I agreed. "I'd aim about there." I tapped a section of the door that I suspected held the latching system.

"What are you guys doing in there?" Nikki asked. "Everything okay?"

"Don't worry," I said. "Just a little problem getting through the air lock. We're about ready to go in now."

Jake fired his weapon. The shower of sparks produced when the high energy slug hit the panel was spectacular in the closed quarters and I hoped it hadn't peppered our suits with fragments. Not seeing any immediate leaks, we seemed to have met with success. Jake hit the button again and I pushed the door ajar, glanced inside and saw no one, then jumped on through

the opening where I slipped, falling on my back, with a curse.

Nikki said, "Hey, are you guys all right?"

"Blasted lunar gravity," I said picking myself up. I looked around to be sure it was still safe, saw no one, and straightened up. "Looks clear. Let's give everything the once over."

"Don't get side tracked looking at the damage," Jake warned.

That was easier said than done. The computers and machinery had apparently been smashed by a crow bar that was sitting on one of the control consoles. Spray paint had been used to write four-letter words as well as a lot of gibberish on the white walls of the control room. A madman seemed to have been in charge of the area.

We moved into the crew quarters, several of which were completely gutted by what appeared to have been a flash fire. The hydroponics area was sealed off with air pressure having apparently been maintained in it. We looked through the clear door panel and could see that all the plants inside were dead .

We continued through the complex. I held my pistol ready, wondering who or what might be waiting for us. In the mess hall, things appeared normal. The pantry storage area was full of food just as our base had been. The water tanks were full as well.

The mining area was a disaster. An industrial laser had been left on for sometime and had created a pool of molten metal and rock where its beam had been shining. How long it had been on was hard to tell, but its tube was black, indicating that it was worn out. "Look at that," Jake said pointing to the frozen metal pool.

As with the base we had left, the mining operation itself had never been started.

We moved back into the command room.

"Nikki, how's it look out there?" I asked.

"All's quiet."

"We haven't found anyone in here," I said. "But there are plenty of intact oxygen tanks. Why don't you come on in. Uh... Do you have the key to the van? Why don't you lock up. I don't think anyone's here, but..."

"Will do. I'm coming in. Don't shoot."

In a few moments, Nikki came through the doorway, "Looks like you guys could use a good house bot."

"Which brings up an interesting point. Where're the bots?" I asked.

"They said in storage shed eight, on the computer records" Jake asked.

"Given the chaos that was going on here," I said, "that may be a little iffy."

"Let's see." Jake bounced over to the wall of the command center and pulled a blue print out of its wall compartment. I moved alongside him to study the diagram.

He continued, "Unlike our base, this one was--I think--to serve as a warehouse for the others... See. Here's where the storage complex was to be built. According to this, most of it isn't there yet. See the dotted lines? That's the underground storage area. The entrance is... There," he pointed to a small circle that led to the massive storage area. "I think I noticed a small dome outside; didn't recognize what it was."

"Makes sense since they'd be loading things up outside. And they wouldn't want to waste air on it either."

Nikki's voice sputtered over our headphones, "Hey!"

Both Jake and I spun around with our weapons ready.

"Hold your fire," Nikki said. She pointed to the computer that she had turned on. "Just found the last entry in the log. Apparently the going-home party got a little out of hand with some syntha-drugs that the crew had made--or brought with them. The crew got pretty frantic... 'K' 'F' (the letters inscribed in the dome roof) probably belong to one Kerry Franklin who was taken out in chains... Uh... The last entry is, 'Base abandoned, Tuesday, March--'"

"All right!" Jake said. "Officially abandoned. No one will be coming back."

"What about the bots? Anything about them?"

"Uh... No. Nothing."

Jake was again looking at the blue print of the base, "The entrance to the storage area would have to be that little dome we saw off to the side of us when we dropped in."

"Bet so, let's check it out. Nikki, want to come along."

"You better believe it. This place gives me compression blood."

Chapter 13

From the ground, it was pretty obvious that a lot of equipment must have been transferred from cargo rockets to the underground storage area. The dust showed the trampling of hundreds of feet and claws where men and bots had carried heavy burdens into the warehouse. A few vehicle tracks crisscrossed the trail which stretched from the large landing port over to the small dome that marked the entrance to the underground storage area. The tracks looked like they'd just been made; the lack of atmosphere meant they would remain as they were for centuries unless someone disturbed them.

The white plastic dome over the storage entrance was mostly door. When we released it, it parted along three seams and spread open so that it looked like some type of mechanical bird getting ready to take off.

"Why didn't they just store everything on the surface?" I asked.

"Earther mentality maybe," Jake said. "You see it all the time in space. We've all grown up with the ravages of the atmosphere. There're some other reasons, too, though. The temperature's more constant a few feet into the surface and there's less damage to equipment during a solar flare."

"Solar flare!" I said. "I'd forgotten about that. How do we know we're not being fried right now?"

"See the little button on the wrist of your suit," Jake pointed to his wrist then switched on his suit lights and bounded down the ramp leading into the cavernous storage chamber with one leap. "If it turns red, you head for shelter."

I reminded myself to check my wrist indicator every five minutes from now on. "What shelter," I asked as Nikki and I followed him into the cavern.

"Underground," Jake said. "The lunar rock gives shielding from radiation. Same reason the crew quarters and mess hall are underground."

As we reached the bottom of the ramp, we had to turn our heads about to bathe the area with our suit lights. Straight ahead from the base of the ramp were a number of lunar "rovers," large, tracked vehicles that were useful only for traveling about on the surface of the crater since they couldn't climb the steep incline of the crater walls.

Next to the rovers were three platforms with a rail around two seats. "What are those?" I asked.

Jake turned to see where I was pointing. "Those are two-man flitters. They use them for short trips around the cavern. They have a very limited carry capacity." He laughed. "When we get

other vehicles built with gravity rods in them, they'll really simplify moving things on the Moon."

"And Earth," Nikki added.

"Revolutionary."

We journeyed down the right ramp to six empty rooms. Beyond that was a large storeroom piled high with plastic crates.

"What are in those boxes?" Nikki asked and sprang toward them. She looked at those in her light then hopped over to some more. "Rats, they're only bar coded... It's impossible to tell what's in them. We'll have to look for the computer manifest. There could be enough stuff to outfit a whole colony." She leaned back so her helmet light revealed the rows of crates that extended upward.

"Let's go back the other way," I said. "The bots would be in larger containers. These are all too small."

We located the bots in a huge chamber that, like the others, had been carved out of the solid rock. Inside it were at least several hundred bots of various types along with an equal number of spare parts kits and support tools for the different models. Each of the bots was wrapped in a tough, clear plastic container.

"How about that?" Jake said as we stood there bathing the bots in the light from our suits. "A whole army of them. If we can get some of these back to our base..."

"The 'if' again," I said.

"Yeah," Nikki agreed. "That's not going to be easy given the limited space of the van."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Jake, could we use the cable you brought along? Would that hold?"

Jake laughed, patting the carbonylon cable he'd wrapped around his shoulder and under one arm, "If the van can lift them, the cable will hold anything up to 14 tons. String them up under the van and away we go."

"Sounds logical," I said, "only I'm afraid it won't work. The downward wash from the anti-grav rods would cause anything below the van to either be knocked off or ripped apart. We'll have to fill the van then fasten them to the top and sides."

"We'd better fasten them carefully so the load won't shift around," Nikki cautioned. "I can imagine what might happen if one swung loose and flopped around changing the balance of the van at a critical moment."

Hurtling toward the face of the Moon because of a poorly tied square knot. Not a pretty picture.

"Are the bots operational?" Nikki asked.

"We'll see," Jake said. He stepped forward and pressed the release seam down the plastic cover. The cover opened; Jake reached in and flipped the control switch on. Nothing happened. "Looks like we may have some work to do. I wonder whether they lack batteries or just need to be charged. Anyone know how to open a bot up?"

"Just a minute," I said. "I had some bots like these over here in my lab." I bounced over to the mechanicals. "Yeah, these are standard lab bots in space man's clothing. Let me pop one open and check its energy pack." I pulled off the plastic sheeting that surrounded it and tried the activation switch on the off chance that Jake had picked a malfunctioning bot. But like the other, this bot failed to come on line.

I spent the next few seconds trying to remove the battery cover so I could see inside the

power compartment. Suit lights are sure awkward; I had to do a contortionist imitation before I could see. "It has batteries but they aren't charged."

"How are we going to--"

"Shouldn't be too hard," I said. "We can run a cable off the van's generating system. It'll take a while but it should work. Let's start moving the bots to the front door."

"I'll go get the van," Nikki said and bounded out of the room and down the dark hallway behind us.

"Let's try to use this model," I told Jake. "It will be easiest to charge since I know how it operates. Unfortunately, the van's too big to back down here where the bots are."

"Nothing's easy." Jake came over and grabbed one side of the bot and I took the other. Through a series of spastic hops, we finally got it coordinated in our movements and rapidly brought it to the entrance to the storage area as Nikki brought the van down as far as it would fit in the narrow passageway.

"You know," Nikki said as she stepped out of the van, "if you could recharge a couple of these units, we could program them to drag the other bots to the entrance. It'd save a lot of work in the long run."

"Good idea," I said. I hated taking the time to program a bot, but the task was fairly simple and I hated carrying bots even more than programming them.

I pulled up the hood of the van and removed the coiled electrical cable that I had stored there. Setting the voltage regulator (that had come to us thanks to Jake's surplus gear) to the correct setting, I plugged one end of the cable into the bot's recharge panel and the other to the regulator. In five minutes, the bot was functional.

"Either of you know how to program one of these?" I asked.

"No."

"Fraid not."

So while Nikki and Jake played explorer, I got to play nursemaid to some very dimwitted machines. About a half hour later, the bot was finally dragging another bot out of the storage area and setting it by the van. I was relieved to see that it hadn't smashed its brother in the process.

By transferring the program from the first bot to the second, I was able to have two bots bringing out the others. I could have programmed several more, but found that with just the two working, I was able to charge a bot by the time they dragged out a new bot. I decided having a bot recharge the others was a little more risk than I wanted to take since the voltage regulator seemed to vary a lot and had to be constantly watched.

Eventually I choose three models of bots to take with us after double checking to be sure I could recharge all of them as needed. One type was the cylinder-looking lab bot that I was familiar with. The two other models looked like they'd probably both been designed for the low gravity of the Moon since they had spidery legs. One was about the size of a small dog and had "Go-4" ("Gopher," get it?) stenciled on the side of it while the other had a body the size of a man's with eight meter-long appendages which it could use as feet or hands or which could have power tools mounted on it. The crazy things could move on two appendages like a man or--if they had a heavy load--on four or more legs which gave them a real bug look. In my mind at least, it looked like a spider.

After two hours of charging bots, I was finally finished. The bots stood beside the van waiting

for more instructions. During that time I had been listening to Jake and Nikki on the radio. They'd managed to get the computer running in the control room and pulled out a list of what was in the storage area. Now they were making sounds that you'd expect from two kids in a candy store as they inspected the manifest of the storage area.

"I'm finished up out here if you two want to help load up," I said.

Moments later, Nikki bounced up to me, "Look at this." She handed me a computer print out.

I read some of the list. "Food, tools, medicine... Looks like we could be set up for quite some time. My only question is, will we be endangering some upcoming expedition if we use any of this?"

"Yeah, that's an angle we haven't really considered," Jake said. "I'd hate to move this out and cause some group to starve to death. I really think it's only an outside chance that anyone's planning on ever coming back, though. They've dismantled the space development and exploration."

"Even if a group came up from Earth that wouldn't be a problem," Nikki said. "If we can start up the mining operation, and make some rods, we'll be able to transport food and equipment up from Earth like there's no tomorrow. The need of a storage dump like this will be a thing of the past."

"Catering service. There's an angle." I handed the list to Nikki. "At any rate, we won't be needing these supplies for a while given what's in the other site. But it'll be good to know that they're here if we should need them."

"It's hard to believe that they abandoned all this."

"That's the problem with chemical rockets," Jake said. "They're too expensive. It was cheaper to leave all this stuff here than take it back. Just think of how things are going to change when the rods become available. A jump to the Moon will be as easy as a rocket flight to another part of the Earth."

"It is hard to imagine the effect the rods would have if we ever get enough made to make them available," I agreed.

"And once the public knows about them, we'll be out of danger," Nikki said.

"I don't know. If someone wanted to kill me--us--before, they'll be interested in silencing us rather than letting the public find that they tried to keep the rods under raps. I suspect we'll steal be on someone's hit parade."

"Phil, you always manage to look on the dark side, don't you?"

"A pessimist is never disappointed."

Chapter 14

Though the sun had hardly changed position, the Earth above us had rotated almost a half turn and our muscles were starting to complain even with the reduced gravity of the Moon. My stomach rumbled from time to time since I'd avoided trying to use the liquid garbage from the eating tubes in my space suit.

Eventually the van was crammed full of bots. The little gophers filled in the spaces between the larger bots and the "spiders" were stored end wise with all their legs folded. Added to this were the four cylindrical lab bots lashed to each side of the van with four more strapped to the top, along with a case of "brains" for the units back at what had become our home base.

It'll never fly, I thought, though I knew better. Lifting off was not going to be a problem. Taking the full crew of humans was. And I knew that no one would take seriously my suggestion of strapping Jake to the hood of the van.

We finally all got scrunched into our seats. Little gophers were fitted in all around each of us. I felt like a mother Saint Bernard. "You know, this is pretty dangerous," I warned. "One impact and they'll never sort the meat from the metal."

"Don't worry," Nikki said. "The computers will handle the whole thing."

As I tried my best to forget how often my lab computers froze during calculations, we lifted off on yet another terror express journey. Once I got the van over the rim of the crater, the computer locked onto our home beacon and we whisked over the jagged mountain range at almost as great a speed as we'd traveled with before.

"You know, we could program a bot to fly this route and free us up to work at the base," Nikki said.

"I don't know... What if something broke down. There we'd be without a way to travel to repair it. It's a long walk back to the Earth."

"Yeah, you're probably right. But once we get to manufacturing the rods, we'd be able to do something like that. Use some of the gear back in the warehouse."

"We could even build a bot/computer vehicle that could be used just for such tasks."

"Like the rocket expresses on Earth," Jake said from behind a pile of bots in the back.

"Don't remind me of the automated rockets on Earth," Nikki said, "I'm still bitter."

"Getting fired was the best thing that ever happened to you," I said. "Just think, you wouldn't be with us if you hadn't gotten canned. Instead, of riding in a flying junk yard, you'd be sitting at home enjoying yourself."

"Not being in an itchy, sweat-filled suit wouldn't be without its finer points," Nikki said. "But I'm glad I'm here with--"

At that point, the computer failed and we dropped like a rock.

It was only a few moments before the second computer kicked in but I think we all thought we'd had it. Our downward drop was checked with what felt like a quick kick in the seat of the pants. Bots jostled and pushed against us and felt as if they were just this side of crushing us.

I fought to control my bladder, quit screaming in terror, and calmly yelled, "What the hell happened?"

"Computer failed." Nikki fiddled a moment with the computer that was now off-line. "Luckily the backup worked. Program's gone. Must have got hit by a gamma ray."

I checked my wrist radiation display to be sure I wasn't being fried like the computer program had been. Still a healthy green. "Jake, you OK?" I asked.

"Banged my nose. Otherwise all right."

"I'm going to transfer the program back from computer two to one so we'll have a backup in case that happens again," Nikki said.

"Is that safe to do?" I asked. "What if--"

"Hold on," Nikki said.

I gritted my teeth and got ready to take over.

"There," she said.

"That was kind of a letdown, no sparks, explosions, or falling from the sky," I said.

"Keep up the letdowns," Jake said.

"What caused the computer failure? Gamma ray?" I asked.

"Probably. It doesn't happen often with the new memories but can--rarely--take place. Or the computer might have a more serious problem. I'm having it check itself out now... And... No problems. Must have been a stray gamma ray."

I eyed a sharp, jagged peak below us and had no trouble imagining my frail body impaled on it.

We reached our base without further mishap. We were all worn out so we called it a day and left the van to be unloaded the next day.

* * *

The next month proved very eventful in that we got the bots organized and succeeded in getting both the mine and hydroponics dome operational. We even managed to assemble the base's solar furnace without crisping any of us.

After Jake had created wire-drawing dies, we soon had bots making wire and armature-wrapping programs for the gophers. Shortly after that, we had several large generators ready and waiting to give us all the power we could possibly need--once we got the new rods manufactured to power the generators.

The tough part was making those first rods since we were short of power. We spent a lot of time during the long lunar nights using minimal power, trying to conserve. But once we'd gotten those first rods made and mounted to the generators, things got pretty easy. Soon the bots were programmed to continue mining, smelting, and making rods. Ah, the joys of automation.

Three months after we'd reached the Moon, we had a huge stockpile of rods and were ready

to return to Earth with the second step of our plan: To let people know that energy could now be virtually free, and also to convince the Earth government to abandon old forms of power generation. The first would be easy. Everyone likes the word "Free." The second part was going to be tricky since someone--maybe even everyone in power--was already out to keep my discovery a secret. But perhaps naively, we figured that we would offer an ultimatum: Integrate the rods into society or we would release the technology covertly in such a way as to topple the corporations controlling the government.

Though things went well on a mechanical level during those three months, the same couldn't be said about things on a personal level. Though none of us admitted it aloud, I think we were all anxious to get back to Earth. An automated plant isn't too exciting once it starts going and the Moon, while it has the desolate beauty of a desert, doesn't have the color, warmth, or safety of Earth.

And I was depressed. Nikki was not unfriendly to me; just not overly friendly. Two men with one well-built woman in a small confined area just doesn't work out to a balanced equation. Another month and I suspect Jake and I would have been at each other's throats. Or maybe Nikki would simply have shot us both to put us out of her misery.

It was time to return to Earth.

Chapter 15

It was a little disconcerting to depart what had become *our* Copernicus Base with only the bots left in charge; more and more I was beginning to identify with the sorcerer's apprentice. I could imagine coming back to discover that the whole moon had been converted into gravity rods. But there was no other way; the bots had to be left to their own devices since a huge inventory of rods would be needed for projects we'd been planning for the near future. Nevertheless, it seemed that more and more my future seemed to hang in the balance of how well these simple machines performed.

We took a few precautions to make sure that we weren't discovered: We disabled the homing beacon for our base and Jake painted some very realistic looking biological hazard signs which he mounted all over the outside of the base's domes. It would take a very brave group of people to enter the base if an expedition should arrive from Earth.

We had "air lifted" all of the rovers from the Eratosthenes Base by welding gravity rods to them, converting them so they supplied their own power much as my van did. We converted one of the wheeled versions of the rovers further so that we could load it up with odds and ends and take it back to Earth with us. Strangely enough, the hard part wasn't getting the rover into flying form but rather getting it set up to travel on Earth roads once we got back to *terra firma*; since the rover had wheels, we hoped to tow it behind the van without raising too much interest. The rover was a lot of work but enabled us to carry a huge number of extra rods back to Earth as well as the stuff we'd be needing for the next steps to get the anti-grav technology released to Earth.

Our "Plan A" was a little simplistic and would require us to improvise a lot along the way. We hoped to confront whoever was trying to kill us and bargain to release the secret of the rods in exchange for our secrecy about their trying to silence us. In the shuffle, we hoped to bargain for the possession of our Moon base (though we were going to keep it a secret unless we really thought things were going our way).

Obviously, this would take some fast talking and maybe even the threat of releasing the secret of anti-gravity covertly which would--with any luck at all--wreck the world economy in the process.

Which was Plan B: Release the secret of the rods covertly and probably wreck the order of things. Your basic anarchist, teenager style rebellion against authority.

(While the secret of the anti-grav technology could have made us rich, we figured that if we could continue with our automated mining/rod manufacturing operation on the Moon for a while, money wouldn't be a problem for us anyway.)

While Plan A was a little optimistic perhaps, it would be simpler to do than to try to release the technology as in Plan B. And we knew that Plan B could and most likely would create a major social upheaval that might cause a lot of harm as well as good. And at best it would take forever and a day to carry out successfully without getting us all killed. But if plan A failed, plan B seemed our only alternative.

Either way, we knew it was going to be tough. You don't just walk up to someone that's trying to fill you full of holes and say, "Before you pull the trigger, I'd like to have a few words with your boss."

At least you don't try that twice.

So we were going to have to find a way to talk to the "boss man" without getting killed in the process. And we didn't even know for sure who was out to get us. The world government? The energy cartel? Both? Neither?

We had our work cut out for us as we lifted off from the Moon.

"It's strange," Nikki said, "I'm going to be glad to get back to Earth. But I feel a little sad about leaving."

"Yeah," I said, "I feel that way, too. Guess it's nice and safe here. Seeing the huge stack of anti-gravity rods the bots are churning up day in and day out is kind of exciting, too."

"We're getting enough rods to carry out some fantastic work if we ever get the time and manpower to do it," Jake said. "Before long, we're going to have to consider heading out to the asteroids. One chunk of an icy asteroid would take care of all our water needs on the Moon for some time if we attached rods to it and hauled it back."

"Spoken like a true Spacer," I said with a chuckle.

"The possibilities really are endless," Nikki said.

"*If* we can get Earth off our backs," Jake said.

"The big 'if' again."

The rover floated behind our van, working in tandem to our controls. We'd rigged up a tow bar between the vehicles which carried messages from our van's computer to the one working computer looted from the Eratosthenes Base and now mounted in the rover. This enabled it to follow our maneuvers--we hoped. If it came loose or the packaging came apart, there were enough rods aboard it to take off to the next galaxy. We were towing a lot of potential mayhem and destruction. I tried to think about other things.

We raced around the Moon twice and then started the jump through space. Many hours later, the beautiful blue and white of Earth swelled below our feet. We waited for the scheduled rocket flight that would be dropping into Houston. Our good luck continued as it was close enough to schedule for us to match its downward arch to Texas. After a few teeth wrenching changes of velocity, we were back off Galveston Island, hugging the waves as we skimmed toward land. By driving all night, we reached Jake's surplus shop as the sun was rising. The worst thing that happened to us was that our vehicles picked up a few bullet holes when we had to drive between some feuding motorists. Fortunately no serious damage was done to us or our equipment.

Jake's shop was intact and his nephew, Mark, in one piece. That was a relief. While Jake and Nikki hadn't apparently been worried about anything happening to Mark, after the way the bag lady had found me, I had started to feel like we were facing supernatural foes.

Mark had done a good job. He'd sold off all of Nikki's jewelry and the industrial laser and

gotten some good prices for them. Even so, it hadn't been quite enough to get him by so he'd also sold Jake's antique sports car rather than any of the space gear. Though Jake had specifically ordered him to not sell any of the surplus gear (since we might be wanting it), I could see that Jake didn't aim to have his car get less than priority treatment. I thought maybe I could sell tickets to the neighbors to see Jake turn Mark into a human pretzel, but to my disappointment, there was no such show.

After living in low gravity of the Moon for three months, just sitting on Earth was work. Even getting my eyelids back up when blinking took an effort. While we'd exercised in the tiny gym at our base, it didn't take up all the slack for muscles gone soft. We felt like birds with their wings clipped; where before we'd been able to nearly fly over the landscape, now we walked with plodding steps or--in Jake's case--dragged about on crutches.

In addition to physical problems, our mental problem was nearly as overwhelming as the heavy gravity. We had to figure out how to contact whoever was in charge of rubbing us out.

Of course we could have ignored them and lain low.

That had worked for the last three months. But if those who were concerned about the rods found that we were actually manufacturing them again, the search for us would probably be larger and less subtle than before. I didn't care to spend every day of my existence wondering if the trash bots were about to cram me into the garbage truck or if the mail bot was really a hit man in disguise. Life in such a condition would slowly drive me mad.

Without the "slowly."

And if they did locate us... Imagining a screaming fighter plane dropping a few barrels of napalm onto Jake's happy store didn't do much for me either. I had no desire to become a crispy critter.

"So how can we get to them before they get to us?" Nikki asked as we sat around the table munching on a small salad that Mark had prepared for us--apparently with an ax judging from the state of the vegetables in it.

"Perhaps we can turn the tables on them," I said. "It'd be hard, but if we planned it carefully, maybe we could trap whoever comes to get us."

"That might work but it sounds pretty dangerous," Nikki said.

"Yes, it will be that. The last person they sent after us was pretty effective." I shuddered at the thought of the headless bag lady. The Russian salad dressing looked nauseatingly like blood; I decided to use the creamy. "We do have some tricks up our sleeves this time," I finally said. "While they think we're on our own and probably all but out of money, we actually have Jake and quite a few resources thanks to the gear we brought back from the Moon."

"Why don't we get a decoy van set up?" Jake said. "We could buy another old shell like your van and--"

"Put the old numbers on it," Nikki finished. "We could even convert it to anti-grav travel."

"Yeah," I said and munched for a moment on a piece of celery. "If we had two vans instead of one, that would really throw them off." The possibilities were looking like they could be shifted a bit more in our favor.

"Well, anyway, if we can get someone to come after us and then..."

One salad and several hours later, our plan had been pretty well formed. Our first step in this plan was to get a decoy van set up. We had too much equipment wired into the original van to

sacrifice it, so we decided to barter for an old van to use as decoy. After trading an industrial laser we'd brought back in the rover, we were able to obtain a van to convert to a nearly identical copy of our old van. After that, Jake--who had a lot of skill at doing body work on cars--cut off the storage area he'd added to the top of our old van and filled in the bullet holes it had picked up on the road. Then we repainted them both so that the new van looked like the old one while my old, original one looked completely different.

In order to avoid attracting attention to Jake's business, we decided to make contact with our enemies far away from Galveston. Since Denver had been the last place we'd been seen by them (we hoped), that seemed like a logical place to begin. We loaded up the two vans with special goodies and we followed a rocket from Houston back into Denver (this time we mimicked its whole ballistic arc by wearing space suits for the short trip into space).

Nikki chose to ride with me. Jake looked pretty disappointed but I didn't feel bad enough to suggest that Nikki ride with him.

From the Denver rocket port, we headed back to Nikki and Craig's condo since that seemed like the most likely spot to strike pay dirt in our search for our enemies.

I knew it was risky since it was entirely possible that the apartment had been booby trapped. We gambled on the fact that the people we were facing seemed to be interested in doing things so that they appeared to be accidental or so that the person would vanish without a trace. That took the personal touch of someone like the "bag lady" pro we'd faced last time I'd been in the apartment. Too, since I'd been free so long, we figured that they would be concerned about interrogating me to be sure their weren't other new loose ends they needed to cut off.

Nikki and I left the decoy van on the street where I'd parked before and went up to her place. Jake--who was our ace in the hole--waited on the street in my original van that we hoped would now go unnoticed by our enemies.

After taking the elevator up, we stood in the doorway of her condo a moment then I gritted my teeth and had Nikki use her thumb print to dilate the door open. I tossed in my suitcase and stepped back. Nothing exploded so I stepped in and waited a moment, half expecting something or someone to cut me to ribbons. Still nothing; it looked like it was safe.

Nikki entered behind me and closed the door. We cautiously advanced through the living room into the hall and entered the kitchen to be sure it was safe. Satisfied that there were no hidden assailants, we put our bags down on the kitchen.

"Nice to see that someone cleaned up the decapitated bag lady we left behind," Nikki said.

"Yes, she'd be pretty ripe by now. Looks like everything else is as we left it. Now all we need to do is--"

Jake's voice crackled over the ear radio I was wearing, "Got a bag lady nosing around your van."

"Rats," I said into my throat microphone. "I'd hoped for a bit more time. OK, we'll get ready here."

Nikki and I hurried with our jobs. I popped open the suitcase I'd brought in and removed the industrial spray coater we'd brought back from the Moon. I started spraying a plastic cover over all the air vents in the apartment then shut off the climate computer so that it wouldn't burn itself out trying to adjust the temperature in the rooms. That done, I sealed off the doors to the other rooms except for the kitchen and the hallway connecting the living room and kitchen area.

Nikki pushed the couch and chair back into the floor so that the living room was all carpet,

then started getting the suitcases in the kitchen ready for our upcoming confrontation.

Jake's voice came on again, "The bag lady's either talking to herself or over a radio mike. I'm still not sure this is one of the ones we're wanting. She really looks like a bag lady--I mean a real one."

"Just keep an eye on her," I said. "Let us know if she heads for the building."

"Sorry but she's headed your way now," Jake said. "She took something out of her bag as she entered the front. Good luck you two. Holler if you need help."

We'll be needing the luck for sure, I thought, as I made a hole from the living room wall into the kitchen with a screwdriver blade. I hoped we wouldn't be needing more help than Jake could give us since we'd be in hot water long before he could get to us. The real kicker was that this new bag lady hadn't given us enough time to get everything done we'd hoped to do.

I inspected the tiny peep hole I'd made as Nikki got the 3V going. I turned to see a complex pattern of pulsating green circles which slowly turned blue as they rose out of the floor. The circles grew into spheres and blinked from one color to another. They grew into overlapping patterns filling every bit of space in a three dimensional polka dot pattern that continued to flash to different hues with the gonging music that throbbed with them. Up and down no longer seemed to be in the right places as the spheres started circling the room rapidly, then tilted off on a plain all their own.

"Good grief, Nikki, does anyone enjoy watching that kind of stuff? It makes me feel sick."

"That's my favorite 3V disc! You can apologize later." She leaned over and turned off the sound, then took me by the hand to keep me from walking in circles. I closed my eyes to the dizzying display and let her lead me.

She got me into the kitchen just as the front door gave us a warning beep and dilated open. I peeked through the hole in the wall that I'd made. A bag lady, identical to the one we'd fought before, stepped in. The thing Jake had seen her pull out of her bag was a bullpup combat shotgun.

Chapter 16

The bag lady shut the door behind her as transparent pink bubbles chased by blue cubes swirled around her. Nikki and I put oxygen our masks on as our opponent squinted at the visual clutter produced by the 3V machine. The safety on her shotgun clicked audibly in the quiet apartment; she proceeded to fire twenty quick shots all around her.

Swearing under my breath, I grabbed Nikki and we ducked down behind the counter in the kitchen. I wondered for a moment if the cabinet would absorb the impact of the shot.

The heavy thump answered my question. I was thankful we'd hidden in the kitchen rather than trying to remain concealed in the living room among the shifting 3V patterns.

After seventeen I'd lost track of how many shots the bag lady fired. Over the ringing in my ears I heard the empty magazine of her shotgun pop out of her weapon and knew that it was now-or-never time.

I picked up one of the bottles from the suitcase Nikki had opened. Walking like a duck along the kitchen floor to the doorway so I would remain--I hoped--unseen, I tossed the bottle into the living room.

The plan was that the bottle would break. It didn't.

Instead the heavy glass bounced on the thick carpeting and the bag lady got a good idea of exactly where we were. She slapped a fresh magazine into the shotgun.

"Take the lid off the bottles first," Nikki whispered and threw her bottle around the corner.

I followed her example and we both quickly chugged another pair of the glass bottles around the corner as shotgun blasts riddled the door frame. Some of the liquid spilled into the kitchen as we threw the bottles. The fumes were nearly overpowering even with our oxygen masks on. I held our breath, hoping Nikki would do the same.

There were three more blasts, then things became silent in the next room. Nikki started to get up. "Wait," I whispered. "She may be playing possum."

I opened four more bottles and threw them around the corner into the living room just to be safe.

Still quiet in the living room.

Had our plan worked? I wondered.

We waited a few more minutes.

All remained quiet.

And my bowels made me feel like the bathroom was more of a concern than the living room. Fear does not bring out the hero in my body, I decided, as I got up the nerve to peek into the living room through the peep hole.

The bag lady was crumpled on the carpet, looking like a pile of rags. Above her danced a group of red cubes that were slowly descending, looking as if they'd crush her.

"The old bat probably never quite realized what had happened." I told Nikki as well as Jake over the throat mike. "Looks like our plan worked and she just kept breathing until she passed out from the fumes. I hope. I'll check her out. Cross your fingers and come on up, Jake."

With my Beretta trained on her, I carefully walked up to her prone form (which wasn't easy with red and purple squares dancing through the room). I kicked the shotgun away from her then reached down and removed the flesh-colored ballistic mask from her face which surprised me since the woman was perhaps twenty-five and not unattractive.. Her eyes were closed and a soft snore greeted my ears.

Nikki turned off the 3V then brought out the plastic wrap machine and I covered the bag lady's body in a sheet of plastic so that only her head remained free. Once we were sure she wasn't going anywhere, we opened up the vents in the room to let air into it. After things had aired out, we removed our masks and let Jake in.

We tried to plan on what to do next. We knew that the assassin wouldn't be an easy person to break.

Fortunately, she helped us out.

"Look at this," Nikki said after she had dumped the contents of the bag lady's handbag onto the carpet. In addition to six magazines of spare ammunition, a small talkie, and two hand grenades, there was also a small medical kit of some type. Nikki carefully opened it. It contained a number of vials and a auto hypodermic gun.

"What do you suppose that's for?" I asked.

Jake laughed. "I think I know. Let me take a look." Nikki handed the pouch to him and he removed one of the vials and examined it. "Yep. I'm sure these are vials of truth serum."

"What?" Nikki and I said in unison.

"Yeah, they used to test us out with that stuff before they'd let us go into space. Tried to be sure we wouldn't steal them blind. Can't figure why she'd have that, though."

"Maybe this is the reason," I said holding up one of the rounds of spare ammunition she had in her bag. "These aren't ordinary loads she was shooting at us. Look at the marks on the walls. They hardly made a dent."

Jake pried one of the spent projectiles out of the wall. "Looks like a liquid-filled load. Poison?"

"I'll bet they're stun shells." I said.

"Maybe she was going to disable us and then..." Nikki started and stopped in mid-sentence.

"Then quiz us," I said. "That way she could find out if someone else knew about the rods."

Jake nodded. "Makes sense. There's one way to find out." He lifted the truth serum kit and his eyebrows.

"Can you get her to babble away?" I asked. "How will you know what dosage?"

"This stuff is pretty safe to use. The auto-hypo regulates the dose and you'd need a pretty high

dose to hurt someone. Least that's what they used to tell us. Besides, she wasn't exactly out to give you a good time. Let's give her the drug before she has a chance to come to. That way she'll be less apt to resist if she's been programmed to resist truth serum."

"If you think you know what you're doing," I said, a bit dubious of the plan.

After giving her a shot and a few whiffs from an oxygen mask, she was ready to talk. Our questions were very straight-forward:

"Who do you work for?"

"I-don't-know."

"How did they communicate with you?"

"Over-my-talkie."

"After catching the people in the condo, how will you tell your boss you've succeeded?"

"Over-my-talkie."

"What will you tell him?"

"Mission-successful. Will-bring-in."

"Write that down, Nikki, the order of the words might be part of a code or something so they know it's really the bag lady. Do you know where some paper is here?" I said.

Nikki scrambled into the kitchen and returned with a pad, "Ask her again so we get it right."

We did and Nikki quickly wrote it down and continued to take notes as we questioned the bag lady.

"Bring them in to where?"

"Will-get-coordinates-with-call."

"Why did she have the truth serum if she was to just bring us in?" Nikki asked.

The bag lady answered the question before we could put it to her, "Was-to-question-all-of-them. Ask-about-others-connected-to-group-and-eliminate-all-but-one-who-knows-of-others."

We continued to question the bag lady until we'd gotten pass words, methods of doing things, and so forth. We tried to get everything from her that might be of help.

As we were finishing up with our questions, her eyes fluttered a bit and her face turned bright red. "She's coming around," Jake said. "We could safely give her another dose."

"I don't have any more questions," I said. "Do either of you?"

They both shook their heads no.

"Then why don't we--"

"What's she doing?" Nikki asked.

Good question. The woman moved her mouth and made a horrible face. Too late I realized what was happening. "I bet she just poisoned herself," I said. I tried to pull her mouth open but she held it locked shut and made an evil looking face at me until I quit trying. Moments later as we helplessly watched, the woman gave a shudder, exhaled a long breath, and was dead.

Her jaw relaxed and I pulled it open and I saw the hollow tooth that was loose on her tongue. An old but effective trick. I felt for the pulse on her neck.

Dead.

It was then that we realized just how ruthless the people were that we were up against.

It was time for the next step of our plan. *Out of the frying pan and into the fire*, I thought.

Chapter 17

After a ghoulish exercise in undressing the dead bag lady, Nikki was outfitted in the bag lady's ballistic armor and clothes. That done, I showed Nikki how to operate the combat shotgun. We loaded it with the stun shells since we hoped to take a prisoner or two at our next stop.

While we all crossed our fingers, Nikki called over the bag lady's talkie. We received instructions to leave the van on the street and bring the prisoner--me--and information about how to receive the bag lady's pay for the job. We had a tense moment when the man on the other end of things asked what vehicle we'd be arriving in.

What had the bag lady been driving and would whoever we were meeting know what she should be driving?

Or was it a trick?

"I'll be driving my new blue van," Nikki said into the talkie then closed her eyes tightly as if expecting to be hit.

A pause while Jake and I held our breaths.

"OK," came the voice over the talkie. "Here's how you get to us..."

Before we left, we booby trapped our decoy van. Anyone that tried to operate it without the proper computer code would discover himself flying at maximum speed--straight up. Though it would mean sacrificing one of our vans, it would probably be worth it, I figured, since that would get at least one undesirable off the face of the Earth and perhaps make someone think our van had malfunctioned and jetted us straight into Valhalla.

Nikki drove and I sat in the passenger's seat. Jake sat out of sight in the office chair he'd welded into the back of the van just behind our seats. We had an improvised curtain--borrowed from Nikki's condo--that hid Jake from casual inspection. We all wore our throat mikes and earphones so we could communicate with Jake, who'd most likely have to be left behind in the van when we got to our destination since it was probable that surveillance cameras would detect more than two people leaving the van at our destination.

Our meeting was to take place in New Denver's Catacombs. If Jake and I had known about the Catacombs *before* we got into the van with Nikki, we would not have gotten into the van with Nikki.

"Where are the Catacombs?" I asked innocently. I had in mind some resort area in the mountains. Maybe some caves or something.

After Nikki filled us in, I had a little different idea. It was simple really: If you take the beauty

of the Col-Kan sky and the jeweled, needle skyscrapers of New Denver and then imagine just the opposite of all that and then multiply by two times worse yet, you have a pretty good idea of what the Catacombs are like.

They originally were huge parking areas for those living and working in the buildings of New Denver. They were also interconnected so that the residents could move around the small city, visit, or go shopping even during a heavy snow storm or chilly weather. But like a lot of other major projects, the system was poorly thought out and even when everything was new, the parking lots had seldom been used since most of those who lived in the buildings weren't home much; the condos were owned by those that would be traveling world-wide via the rocket port. Such people seldom fooled with owning a vehicle of their own. When they needed to travel in New Denver, they took taxi-bots or even choppers to get around.

So the underground network had been crime ridden almost from the beginning. As the system was used less and less, maintenance was discontinued. Finally, decades after they were built, the underground areas had turned into a veritable no-man's land where criminals, Night Creeps, and other low-lives roamed unchecked.

"And," Nikki told us as we ignored the warning signs and turned down the short street leading to one of the few unsealed Catacombs entrances, "rumor has it that the catacombs have even been expanded to accommodate those living in them."

"Rumor? Doesn't anyone know," Jake asked.

"Those who found out whether the rumors were true or not never lived long enough to tell about it," Nikki answered.

"Don't ever tell me any bed-time stories," I said.

"Don't worry."

Shot down in flames.

Nikki turned on the van's headlights as we left the sunlit street and started down the dark ramp that led to the Catacombs. It suddenly felt colder in the van and a chill climbed my spine. "Jake, have your needle rifle ready. Looks like we could be needing it on the way in."

"Already have it out."

I picked up the Colt assault rifle I'd picked up from the Pukers and draped it across my lap, being careful to keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction. If Nikki had been trying to scare us, she'd succeeded.

The headlights of our van showed various junked vehicles which were covered with dust. Most of the glass had been broken from them leaving jagged teeth in all their openings. Empty cans and trash littered the area as far as the headlights poked light into the darkness before us. We passed through a screen of dense, black smoke which seeped into the van; someone was burning rubber tires. Fortunately we soon escaped from the thick swirling screen and broke into relatively clear--if dusty--air.

As we journeyed down the cave-like corridor of gray concrete, more and more rusted-out vehicles littered either side of the narrow ramp. Nikki made a turn and we passed a large area where great chunks of concrete had been blasted from the walls and lay along the road. Another turn led us out of the rubble and down an undamaged section.

Now we occasionally saw vehicles with their windows intact; the glass was painted or stained so that whatever was inside them was obscured.

"There're lights inside some of those cars," Nikki said.

"You suppose people live in those?" Jake asked, peeking through the curtain.

"Maybe." I wondered what kind of person would give up the light of day to live in the trash and darkness.

"We turn left here," Nikki said. We slowed and started down another passageway that looked identical to the others. Nikki had memorized the route as it had been given to her. I was totally lost already.

We went nearly a mile without turning and then made several more quick turns and journeyed downward on a narrow, dirty ramp. Human shapes often danced in the shadows on either side of us as we passed. Other, non-human forms jumped away from the beam of our headlights while large rodents darted across our path from time to time with their red eyes gleaming.

Farther from the entrance of the Catacombs, cars and other obstacles became rarer. Nikki speeded up.

We made another turn and again the headlights revealed a mosaic of trash and junk along our path. Papers and old newsfax blew in the van's wake as we hurtled past. Piles of rags that looked terrifyingly like bodies appeared alongside the road; these piles of rags were interspersed with the glistening white bones of large animals--or men--that had been picked clean by the rats that scurried out of sight as we passed, occasionally with bones crunching under our wheels.

After seeing no cars for some time, we rounded a curve to see, in the gloom ahead of us, a group of crouching, stripped vehicles. As we hurtled toward them, an old truck slowly rolled from its parking berth beside the bodies of the cars around it. The truck picked up speed as we neared it.

"Hang on, Jake, looks like someone's trying to block our path," I said.

I clicked the safety off my rifle, opened the vent window, and jammed the barrel out it.

"Hang onto your ears," I said and let loose a three-round burst of bullets at the truck. My ears ached at the sound. The truck continued to roll as we came upon it.

I fired another burst as Nikki floored the accelerator on the van and, with a screech of tires, we skidded around it. A group of men or women--it was impossible to tell which with the dirt and the rags they wore--sprang in front of us. They threw rocks at the van.

"Don't slow down," I told Nikki.

All but one got out of the way. The van made a sickening lurch as it crushed our would-be assailant.

"Oh, no," Nikki cried.

"You can't help that," Jake said. "They're trying to kill us. Don't worry about hurting them."

A crash and the sound of metal being strained came from behind us. Something large had hit the back of the van. Jake's curses echoed through the van.

"Everything OK back there?" I asked.

"Yeah. We're going to have some more body work to do when we get back though."

"Just so our hides remain intact," I said pulling my rifle back into the van and closing the vent window. I thumbed the rifle's selector back to its "safe" position.

We flew through the darkness. The area was again free of vehicles and Nikki was taking advantage of the fact to speed ahead.

"This area looks... clear. There isn't so much junk," Nikki said.

"Not only that," I said. "Look at the walls. Plastic. We've left the original Catacombs area. This must have been added to the underground network fairly recently."

"Who would want to add to this mess?"

"Or build here?"

A bright light shown ahead of us, its beam cutting a tunnel in the dust that hung in the air and glistened off the blue plastic walls.

"We turn here--I think," Nikki said as we approached a fork in the plastic tubing. I hoped she wasn't lost. Spending days to find our way back out didn't exactly sound like a fun-filled outing.

As we rounded the smooth plastic corner, the walls expanded into a huge chamber bathed in a purple light. A bag lady--identical to the other two who'd attacked us--stood inside a sandbag bunker directly in front of us. She trained an ancient M60 machine gun onto us.

I swore under my breath, "Careful. That thing could riddle our van full of holes." I hoped the bag lady was in a better mood than those of her sisters we'd encountered in the recent past. They all looked exactly alike. I realized that the bag ladies actually wore a uniform of sorts with identical patches and bullet-proof face masks. Identical down to the tilt of the battered cloth hat.

Nikki slowed almost to a stop.

I held my breath.

The bag lady looked into the van then motioned us on when she saw that Nikki--in bag lady's clothing--was driving.

We drove across the chamber and entered another long plastic tube. A string of cerulean lights dotted the walls and pointed the way to us. Ten minutes later, the tube expanded and the lights became brighter and brighter as we drove on. After perhaps a mile we entered a large cavern, so huge that it was impossible to see the far side of it. The field ahead of us was encircled by yellow flood lights.

"Can you believe this?" Nikki said as she slowed the van to a stop.

I couldn't.

A two-story, white Colonial-style house stood in front of us. Large trees and shrubs had been carefully planted around it and a well-manicured lawn covered the floor of the chamber. A small bird flew by the van and a deer bounded across the lawn as we watched.

"Well, I'll be a..." Jake said as he closed the curtains so he'd remain unseen in the back of the van.

As I looked at the scenic area ahead of us, I decided we were dealing with someone who had taken a serious overdose of weird.

Chapter 18

Nikki picked up the shotgun as I put down the assault rifle and wrapped myself in the remains of the clear plastic shell we'd used to wrap the bag lady in, in Nikki's apartment. I draped it around myself hoping to make whoever was in the house think that I was bound.

"OK, Nikki. Tape me in," I said.

She reached over and fastened it with some short strips of tape.

Though it looked like I had been gift wrapped in industrial plastic, I could--I hoped--push out my arms and free myself since only the small plastic strips of tape held the shell in place. My trusty Beretta was stuck in my pants under my shirt tails.

"Ready," I asked Nikki and Jake.

"As ready as I'm going to get," Nikki said. She jumped out of the van and walked around and opened my door. She waited for me to get out.

"Nikki, you're going to have to act more menacing than that. Remember that you're a tough old bat," I said.

With that bit of prompting, she pulled me out and I gracefully fell on my side. I stood up and the plastic shell fell off me.

I swore under my breath and picked it up quickly, "Hopefully no one is watching," I said. "Can you fasten that back on?"

"Yeah. I hope the sticky isn't too full of dirt... There. I think that'll hold."

"You think!"

"Shut up, prisoner." The muzzle of the gun forced me forward.

"Hey! Remember the plastic is just taped on. But keep up the tough gal act."

I immediately regretted telling her that since she gave me another sharp poke with the shotgun so I'd continue toward the house.

"I hope the safety on that blunderbuss is engaged," I said. "I'd hate to have to get a dose of stun shell."

"Shut up, pig."

"I've created a Frankenstein," I whispered to myself, forgetting about the throat mike. Jake's laughter sounded in my earphone.

We walked across the thick grass and stepped onto the porch. The white wooden door opened on its own.

I hesitated at the door. "Get on in there," Nikki loudly growled. I hoped someone was in there to hear her. I know it impressed me; I jumped right in.

And stumbled into the darkness of the room. My eyes quickly adjusted and I saw yet another bag lady sitting behind an antique oak desk in front of me.

"I've brought the prisoner," Nikki said.

The bag lady behind the desk pushed a button and a large panel of the wall opened up to reveal a dark passageway. "Take him on in."

With a shove from behind to remind me who was boss, I stepped forward and moved down the red brick hallway which had apparently been designed by Edgar Allen Poe on one of his worst days. The heavy wooden door at the end of it swung open as we reached it.

Behind the door was a room with three-meter high ceilings and Early-American furniture. A clutter of knickknacks covered the tables in the room and cheap-looking pictures hung on the walls. The carpeting was blue with stars while the walls had red and white stripes. A fireplace between the windows crackled cheerily with a fake-looking electric flame. The room was a monument to poor taste in kitsch.

"Well," a huge black man, dressed like Abe Lincoln, stood up from one of the chairs as we entered. "Finally, we meet," he said in a syrupy, bass voice. His eyes twinkled with an evil gleam. "Won't you have a seat Mr. Hunter." He motioned to one of the stuffed chairs.

Turning toward Nikki, he said, "I'd like for you to stay a moment to, uh, tidy up the loose ends to our business when Mr. Hunter and I are finished talking."

I sat down. He eased his tall frame into a chair and gave me a mirthless grin that exposed a row of sharpened white teeth.

He smoothed the sleeve on his black jacket for a moment before speaking. "We lost a good man when we tried to bring in your van. They lost track of the van when it left Earth's atmosphere. "

"Good men are hard to find, no doubt."

"I'd heard you had a smart mouth, Mr. Hunter."

"Phil, please. We should be on a first name basis."

"You can call me 'Elijah Lincoln,'" he said. He flashed another of his heart-freezing smiles. "Perhaps we should loosen your tongue and waste less time. Let's use the truth drugs," he said, again looking at Nikki.

"OK, Nikki, it looks like he's not going to tell us anything without help," I said.

Elijah Lincoln seemed to realize that something was not right. He sprang toward a small two-barreled flint-lock pistol which was concealed among the clutter of the table next to him.

Nikki followed the motion with her shotgun and fired two quick shots as he grasped the pistol.

I knew stun shells don't work instantly. It takes a couple of seconds for the drug to be carried through the blood stream to the brain. So I didn't just sit in the chair to see what happened. I jumped toward Lincoln as he reached for the pistol.

Nikki's first shot nearly hit me.

The second hit Lincoln in the neck. He held the stock of the pistol and I grasped the barrel. He wrenched it from my fingers and shoved me away. He ignored Nikki and aimed the pistol at

me. Nikki fired another shot which impacted with his hand as he pulled the trigger. He fired--but the shot went wide.

He aimed again. Just as a stun shell hit him right between the eyes.

He fell right on top of me. It felt as if a giant redwood had toppled over.

"What's going on in there?" Jake hollered in my earphone after hearing my groan.

"Phil's goofing off again," Nikki laughed nervously.

"Don't listen to her," I said after I'd finally regained my breath.

"Is everything OK?" Jake sounded a little exasperated.

"Yeah. How's it out there," I said as I pushed Elijah Lincoln--or whoever he was--off me.

"Still clear."

"Good. We're going to quiz Mr. Nice in here and see if we can get a ticket to the next stop. This may be it, but I doubt it. I suspect he's just another hired hand," I said.

One vial of serum later, Elijah Lincoln's tongue became quite loose.

We discovered that he was working for World Energy. That made sense; they stood to suffer the most if the anti-grav technology become generally used; at the same time it was all but crazy since the rods could be harnessed into large generators as easily as small. Knowing how the average guy on the street hates to fuss around with mechanical things, I could imagine that most people would continue to buy power regardless of how it was generated. Only now, the power rates could actually be reduced.

That was academic at this point, though. Our first task was to get to the chairman of the board, Sammy Dobrynin. The man who ran and all but owned World Energy thanks to a Russian ancestor who'd been a general and had the good fortune to have become a capitalist twenty years after the Soviet Empire had collapsed. By quickly taking over the Near-East oil fields which the Russians had stolen from the Arabs after the US had withdrawn from the area, he had created an instant empire which had been jealously guarded by General Gorshov Dobrynin's heirs.

We fed Lincoln questions:

"Do you ever see Mr. Dobrynin?"

"Yes. When-I-have-important-business."

"Would you see him after the Hunter interview?"

"Yes."

"Were you to meet today?"

"Yes."

And so forth... Little by little we played Twenty Questions, pulling the information from him. We also extracted his hollow tooth full of poison and cleaned out his mouth so he couldn't pull a disappearing act.

In the end we had one Elijah Lincoln, the information about where and how he'd be meeting Dobrynin, and no good way to get into the Dobrynin quarters which were in the middle of Miami.

"Any ideas, Jake?" I asked into my throat mike.

"Well... Not really. We can follow the shuttle that Elijah was to have taken. That would get us to Miami. But from there, you've got me."

We were all quiet for a moment while we thought.

"Hey, Phil," Jake said. "I have an idea."

"Yeah."

"Look in that truth serum kit. Seems to me I saw an auto-suggest vial. I don't know much about that but I think maybe we could get Lincoln to do a little work for us."

"What does 'auto-suggest' do?"

"You can feed them ideas to act on. You plant the idea and then let him think he's in charge. That kind of thing."

"So Lincoln could take Phil and me with him to Dobrynin?" Nikki said. "We could even make up some sort of excuse to get you in, Jake."

"Funny," I said, "Lincoln doesn't look like a Trojan Horse."

Nikki had the kit open and we read the different vials.

"Are there any instructions?" I asked her. Then I noticed the small speaker on the case. "Just a minute. It looks like it has a built-in guide. There. Try that 'Help' button."

Nikki pressed it.

"Can I help you," the case said in a tiny mechanical voice.

"Yeah. We were wondering just what how the, uh, 'Auto Suggestion Hypno' serum works."

The little kit told us all we needed to know. Shortly we had Elijah Lincoln all primed to do an act for us.

Lincoln, Nikki, and I went back to the van after a quick call to set things up with the head man. Then we raced out of the Catacombs.

We had a rocket to catch.

Chapter 19

Apparently, the staff of the rocket port was used to having Elijah Lincoln and his bag ladies carry arms through the check points. A uniformed security guard didn't even blink while Nikki, Lincoln, and I walked through the detectors and set off alarm bells in our wake. The guard shifted his weight from one foot to the other and gave a salute, in the form of a yawn, as we passed.

Lincoln put his Mastivisa into a machine and paid for tickets for all three of us. "Thank you," the machine told us. "Enjoy your trip."

We sauntered up the plastic ramp into the passenger compartment of the rocket, crouching as we stepped from the loading ramp into the narrow confines of the first class section of the rocket.

With some trepidation, we'd decided to leave Jake behind in New Denver. Since the rocket was taking off in the middle of the day, there was no good way for the van to follow it and we hated to leave it behind unattended. Too, we figured it would most likely be hard enough to get Nikki and me into Sammy Dobrynin's hide-a-way, let alone a third member.

So our plan was for Jake to follow the first rocket for Miami after darkness fell and--if all went well--pick us up in Miami that night. The way Jake flew, I privately felt we'd be lucky if he landed somewhere within two hundred kilometers of Miami somewhere in the Atlantic forcing us to swim to get to the van. Making things doubly hard was the fact that none of us had ever actually been in Miami. Therefore, to simplify things, we would be forced to meet at the rocket port parking area in Miami.

I sat in my chair, reflecting that after flying in the van, rocket flight seemed crude. We were strapped into heavily padded seats inside a cabin that was the size of a large drain pipe and which imparted the same cheery interior that one would expect in a drain pipe. The first leg of the journey we spent crunched back into the seats with our belly buttons leaning against our spines. Then we fell weightlessly for long enough to make breakfast stumble half way into our throats, and finally enjoyed some high-G slowing down that threatened to turn our tortured navels wrong-side out. At the end of our flight, we floated into the Miami port without power—the rocket becoming just a fancy glider on the way to the landing strip. This later point making it impossible to try for a new landing approach if the computer messes up on the first pass. Not reassuring.

As the ship shivered toward the landing strip, I closed my eyes and tried not to think about the fact that all that was in the cockpit was a bot or maybe just a hunk of metal and plastic screwed into the wall somewhere.

With a bounce that I felt for sure spelled the end, we skidded to a stop. A bot built like a stewardess with a smile painted permanently to its face helped me get to my shaky feet. The bot

had what might have been mistaken for a dress into which she'd been poured--and forgotten to say when. She/it guided me to the disembarking ramp and gently shoved me out the cabin.

Since the gradual warm-up of the atmosphere over the first half of the twenty-first century had melted a lot of the polar caps, Miami was another of the many cities along the coast that was ringed by a protective dike. The rocket port was an octopus-like affair to the north of the walled city with landing strips extending out from its hub over the water. With Lincoln leading us, we journeyed to the tram which sped us over the ocean into the city.

As we crossed the waves below us, I inspected the approaching city which was a sunken little island in the middle of the ocean, a strange hodgepodge of ancient high-rise buildings made of concrete and glass, new crystalline needle buildings, and--as I discovered when we stepped off the tram car into the parking lot--wall to wall humanity. When you walked anywhere in Miami, you had to be careful not to step on those sleeping--or recovering--on the plastic or concrete walkways. Doorways were beds; real beds were occupied in shifts; whole families lived on stairways. In part this was because when the poor lost their homes under water, they hadn't left Miami, they'd just changed their addresses. Now, each person in the city had a square meter of space all his own at any given moment.

"Here it is," Lincoln said as a large pink limousine pulled to the curb, nearly running over a puker who was lying there. The car was embellished in chrome, a vehicle that would have seemed gaudy to a pimp.

I held the door so Lincoln could climb in. Although he was acting according to our programming, he still thought he was in control and neither Nikki nor I risked crossing him for fear we might undo his performance. We weren't sure just how far the drugs could be trusted to force him to do what we wanted.

"Take us to Dobrynin," Lincoln said over the intercom.

"The villa?"

"Is Dobrynin there?"

"He will be after the game."

"No. Take us to wherever he is right now," Lincoln said. "We have important information and can't afford to wait in his villa."

The driver pulled away and threw us all back into the plush pink snake-skin upholstery of the car. Lincoln opened up the small bar in front of us and poured himself a drink, "You two want anything? I always take advantage of Dobrynin's free goodies," he confided to me with a wink as he stuffed four cigars into the breast pocket of his suit; a small vial of some type of drug followed the cigars into the hiding place.

I was thirsty. "I'd like a Pepsicoke."

"Nothing, thanks," Nikki said.

I nearly spilled the drink when our limo rammed a small modif-horse and rider. I had noticed the plow-like attachment on the car's bumper; now I knew what it was for. Lincoln didn't blink. Apparently this was the practice followed by all polite drivers in Miami.

Most of those in front of us got out of our way. As we neared the pink and purple plastic stadium that had been erected in the center of the city, we hit more and more pedestrians with stomach-wrenching regularity. While most of them were pukers or druggies, it still made me ill. Nikki scrunched down into her seat and tried not to look.

The limo pulled around the side entrance of the eighteen story stadium, avoiding the long line of people waiting to purchase tickets. Lincoln gave me his evil grin, "There's your energy dollars at work. Biggest stadium in the world."

I could believe it. "Also the most hideous."

As we stepped from the car, a group of bag ladies formed up around us; I lost Nikki among the look-a-likes. Sweat popped out all over me and it wasn't because of the hot, humid climate. *This is it, I thought, time for the show down.*

We marched into a small elevator which only could accommodate Lincoln, me, and two bag ladies. *Had Nikki made it in?* There was no way of telling since all of those who'd met us carried shotguns just like Nikki had. I toyed with the idea of heading back down the elevator and just sending our message from some safe place--like Antarctica.

We reached the top and headed down a long, rose walkway. Pink had never been my favorite color; now it was losing more ground, quickly falling into last place behind the color of vomit.

Our military parade advanced through the pink and violet archway and paraded through a large room where four bag ladies sat playing an electronic game built into the table between them. The surface whirred and flashed as they quickly hit colored squares in its top.

Lincoln ignored them and walked to the compu-door and whispered a few words into the small speaker at its side. Apparently he said the right thing; the door whipped open so quickly that it seemed to simply disappear.

Lincoln, the two bag ladies, and I stepped in and the door zipped shut behind us. I decided to be sure I wasn't standing too close to it next time it closed; it looked like it would be easy to discover bits of yourself standing on either side of it.

The interior of the chamber was giant, hideous, nearly continuous wall, floor, and ceiling salmon-colored mirror with tiny veins running through it. It was like standing inside a gargantuan stomach. The pinkish nightmare was broken only by three doorways and the back of the room which was all glass. Beyond the glass was a panoramic view of the sports field and the mammoth screen on the opposite side of the stadium which allowed those in the stands to see close ups of the field.

Upholstered swivel chairs were arranged in front of the glass with small tables between them. Each table was piled high with trays of fruit. All the chairs were empty except for the largest in which, looking down on the playing field far below us, was the mass of fat and flesh that comprised Sammy Dobrynin. I knew from the news-Ds he was overweight, but his pictures did him a disservice. His whalish figure was at least twice as great as he appeared to in his pictures. He was dressed in a rose-colored toga with a garland of leaves encircling his greasy hair. Just your typical, everyday Nero get-up.

He turned a blubbery face toward us, "Just in time for the game, Mr. Lincoln," his high feminine-sounding voice purred. The flesh under his chin bounced about long after he'd quit talking. He rotated his chair around to face us. "Nothing like a good game of football to get the blood boiling." He looked at me, "And how about you? Did you come to see the game?"

"I lost interest in it when they substituted clone giants for the robots," I said.

"Oh, come on!" he said, rolling his eyes with a hog-like grunt. "When the defenders use their bats... All that blood is *so* exciting." He held up a hand that looked like a chunk of meat with sausages attached to it, and an androgynous youngster came running forward from a corner of the room with a large platter of food. The child had his skin dyed--you guessed it--pink and was

dressed only in a loin cloth; rose sequins were glued over each of his nipples and around his eyes.

Dobrynin's oily fingers grubbed through the food on the tray and extracted half a chicken from the pile. "Excuse me, but we boys have to keep up our youthful figures," he droned around a mouthful of food.

In an age of no-cal foods and anti-fat pills, Dobrynin could give obesity a bad name, I thought. He patted his servant on the behind as the servant cautiously moved to take up his station at the wall. After slurping down a chunk of greasy chicken and spitting a bone on the floor, Dobrynin spoke, his high voice now having a sing-song rhythm, "Mr. Lincolnnnnn-- You haven't introduuuuuuced us." He batted his eyes at me.

"Excuse me," Lincoln half bowed. "This is Phil Hunter, the man that invented the anti-gravity rods."

"Ohhhh. So you're the naughty boy that's been giving us so much trouble."

Before I could speak or throw up, the buzzer on the field blared and Dobrynin's attention turned toward the field. "Ohhhh. Here come the teams. Sit down, you two," he motioned us to the seats beside him. Lincoln sat down, I remained up so I could beat a hasty retreat if I needed to. The last thing I wanted was to be within Dobrynin's greasy reach.

Miami's ball games are just as sadistic as you hear. The giant screen across from us allowed the fans--who had packed the stadium--to see close-ups taken from cameras located all around the stadium, the game starting out with the usual animal sacrifices to the players and ending with the immolation of the head cheer leader. She might have been an android, and certainly seemed to have approached the long-blades of the killer bot without coercion, but the blood and writhing looked pretty real on the screen from which I turned in revulsion. Even though I averted my eyes, it was impossible not to listen to her amplified screams and the revolting roar of the fans. Finally, the preliminary sacrifices and fanfare were over and the ten-foot-tall players in their chrome armor came tromping onto the field. After the playing of the World Anthem, the game began. And I'd already seen more of the game than I cared to.

I "casually" strolled about the room and get some idea what we were up against before I made my move. Assuming that Nikki had made it in and was the one of the two bag ladies (*was that a safe assumption*), we only had one guard to contend with in the room. And the three servant boys stood about waiting for signals from Dobrynin; *were they dangerous?* Could be, even though they look harmless, I decided. There didn't seem to be any sort of monitoring equipment. And the room seemed to be thoroughly sound proofed; the four bag ladies' noisy game in the front room couldn't be heard in Dobrynin's room and the sounds of the sports going on outside seemed to be piped in through a speaker.

In addition to the entrance which had a bag lady on either side of it (one of which I prayed was Nikki), there were doors on either side of the room. One was open and I could see the wall-to-wall pink fur bed that filled the room. *No way I would go in there.* The other door was closed. I fooled with a piece of pear that I picked off a platter of food for a moment, then casually sneaked toward the door as I munched on the juicy morsel. Dobrynin did have good food, if you could keep the surroundings from turning your stomach.

As I neared the door, one of the boys quickly skipped over to block my way. "Sorry," his almost masculine voice said.

"Uh... I'm looking for a rest room," I whispered to him.

"That's the communications room in there," he whispered back and put a too-friendly hand on

my shoulder. "Dobrynin has us use that urn in the corner. He thinks it's a good joke. I'm sure you'd really make a hit if you just went over there and--"

"That's OK. I can wait." Disgusting bunch of maggots, I thought. Time to get the ball rolling.

If Nikki had made it into the room with us. If she hadn't, I was hoping to quietly leave.

Time to test out the bag ladies. I whistled the opening bars of Beethoven's fifth.

One of the bag ladies scratched her head and adjusted her mask. Provided I hadn't just managed the world's worst coincidence, the scratching in response to our pre-agreed upon signal told me Nikki had managed to make it into the room with me.

Now it was time for signal two: I whistled a few bars of the *2112 Overture*. The music triggered a response from Lincoln, "Time for a little chat Mr. Dobrynin," he said as he flipped off a switch in front of Dobrynin. The din of the game being piped into the room was suddenly cut off.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dobrynin said flipping the switch back on and the sounds of the fans again gushed in. "Am I going to have to spank you?"

Lincoln reached over and switched off the speaker off again. He paused a moment in the abrupt silence, then ripped the control pedestal off the floor and hurled it across the room where it shattered the mirrored wall. *That takes care of that*, I thought.

The bag lady next to Nikki raised her gun; Nikki raised hers a little faster. The barrel of Nikki's shotgun lined up with the unarmored area of the bag lady's neck. The report rattled the room's windows.

The bag lady turned slightly, stumbled, then fell, asleep before she hit the floor as the stun chemical coursed through her veins.

One of the boys pulled a knife--how he'd hidden it on his person is beyond me--and advanced toward Nikki.

"You don't want to do that," I suggested, Beretta leveled strategically at his groin.

I guess he did since he threw the knife at me. Fortunately, his athletic skills were about as skimpy as his attire. The blade went careening past me and shattered the mirror behind me.

"Dobrynin," I said, "you're going to have some major redecorating to do when we leave."

Nikki fired again, putting the knife thrower down for his nap and quickly aced the other two boys as well just to be safe. I reminded myself to ask her where she'd learned to shoot so well if and when we got out of our present predicament.

At this moment, taking his part as a leader of the world to heart, Sammy Dobrynin fell on the floor and threw a tantrum.

I don't exaggerate.

It was a real chew-the-rug, scream-and-holler, curse-and-threaten, hold-your-breath-and-turn-purple tantrum. If we could have sold tickets, we might have retired right there.

Lincoln and I started laughing and the show came to an abrupt halt.

"You... You dirty boys," he sputtered as he got up onto his chubby knees.

"Why don't you just shut up, you tub of lard, and listen to what Mr. Hunter has to say," Lincoln said.

Another tantrum. But this one didn't last as long.

"Are you ready to listen, fatso," Lincoln asked, demonstrating that he had missed his calling

as a diplomat. I also figured he'd hate himself when he realized that we'd filled him full of chemicals in order to get him to bring us in and insult his boss. No doubt he'd be on the run after this. Sammy didn't look too forgiving.

"What do you want?" Dobrynin growled, easing his frame into his chair, his face glowing a furious red.

"Well," I said, "I need to talk to you. We need to have an understanding."

"Tell me what you want so I can get back to my game."

"Yeah, we don't want to let the state of the world interfere with our ball game," I said. "We want you to agree to quit hounding us and to release the anti-gravity technology to the public."

"You don't beat around the bush, Mr., uh...whatever your name is. Just what do you stand to gain from that?"

"My life. I want to be left alone."

"Just what would I gain?"

"Dobrynin, you get all the wealth created by cheap energy."

He laughed. "What makes you think I need more wealth?"

"You must. Otherwise you'd quit trying to get rid of me and my new invention. But I don't aim to compete with your monopoly. I figure that once you start turning out the rods, all of us will benefit. And you'll get even richer. Just leave me alone and my secret is yours."

Again Dobrynin laughed. And laughed. He all but fell out of his chair. Finally, he wiped the tears out of his eyes and spoke, "You fool. I already have the formula. You don't understand how things work. Did you ever wonder why we haven't circled the Earth with solar cells and beamed microwave energy down to Earth? Or how about fusion power? If we took advantage of what we know, of our technology, your anti-gravity wouldn't make a dent in things. Why are there steel shortages when we could mine the Moon? Did you know we've closed our operations down there?"

I said nothing.

"Want to know why?"

"I'll bite."

"Because the operations would be successful. Our goal isn't to help the unwashed masses. Our goal is to keep the peons poor. And it isn't easy to keep them poor so we can retain control of all the naughty girls and boys on this planet."

"He's crazy," I said to Lincoln.

"No," Lincoln said. "And he isn't alone in his thinking. The industrial cartel agrees with him. More or less. Listen to what he's saying. It makes sense."

"Yes," Dobrynin continued. "Think about history. When do you have revolts and uprisings?"

"Whenever the people don't have enough. When they're oppressed."

"Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong," Dobrynin whined, shaking his finger at me. "If you'd study history--really study history, not this tripe we have them telling the school brats--you'll discover that revolts and turmoil occur when people start to get a higher standard of living. Or when they see their neighbors getting it and they aren't. During real times of hardship--the dark ages, the depressions, hyper-inflation--people knuckle under. They look to their government to help them. They become beggars--not fighters."

"And that's what you want?"

"You bet. By slowly lowering the standard of living, by letting them the peasants expect a price rise on their utilities, we gradually gain control of everything. As long as they sit at home and watch the 3V or come to my games... People like me retain our power and we all live in peace. Since we started manipulating the government, there hasn't been anything other than border squabbles and on occasional terrorist act."

"But..." It was so crazy, I didn't know what to say. Because in addition to being crazy it had a terrifying ring of truth to it.

"You," Dobrynin continued, "would throw in a monkey wrench into things if you had your way with releasing the technology of anti-gravity. Right away everyone is going to *want* a flying vehicle; but not everyone can have one. The skies can't hold them all. And if even a few have them, my rocket system will go broke. Next everyone is going to expect cheap energy; what happens to the people who work in the power plants? Are they going to want to be on the public fares while their neighbors continue to work? No. We'll just have more friction. Those who've lost their jobs to your new technology won't be able to keep up with the others. We'll have protests and--finally--riots. And who finally loses? The government. And who runs the government?"

"The people," I said. And felt instantly foolish as both Lincoln and Dobrynin laughed.

Dobrynin sneered. "You must think you're in the good-old-days. No wonder you want to give power away. No, we can't let that happen. Now why don't you leave and let me watch my games?"

He turned back and watched the games. Lincoln sat still, having come to the end of his program. I stood and fumed for what seemed like ten minutes, wondering if I might still be able to do something else. I hadn't expected to be able to reason with Dobrynin; Yet I had hoped that perhaps we could get everyone off our backs so that we could go about our work. And I had hoped against hope that we'd be able to get my anti-gravity technology released to those on Earth who really needed it to raise their standard of living.

But I did have a plan.

It was time to use our drug kit to program Dobrynin.

Chapter 20

"Nikki," I said, "get out your drug kit. Nikki?" She was nowhere around. I gave the room another look. "Nikki!"

"Don't panic, Phil," she said from the room I'd tried to get into earlier. "Just a minute."

A few moments later she entered from the doorway leading to the communications room. She'd taken off her bag lady mask and helmet/wig since it was so warm where we were. "I've been playing with Dobrynin's computers. I could see you weren't going to reach a gentleman's agreement. I sent out the press releases and public announcements we recorded earlier." She held up the mini-D we'd recorded them on. "Before too long, the whole world will know about your anti-grav rods."

"That can be undone," Dobrynin said. "A few news broadcasts about the 'hoax' and everyone will be laughing about the impossibility of any such thing. We have already got them conditioned to scoff at the idea that there could be anti-gravity anyway. It will be a big joke." He dismissed us with a wave of his hand and went back to watching the ball game.

I looked at him a moment. As the game became more violent, he started drooling. I turned back to Nikki, "I think we're going to have to help him see things our way. Let's do for him what we did for Lincoln. That drug worked pretty well."

Nikki handed me her shotgun and took the drug kit out of the large pocket in her bag-lady uniform.

Dobrynin was--I thought--engrossed in it as it seemed. But when the kit came out, he screamed, "No!" and rose to his feet.

I glanced over as he rose, his face red with rage. Dobrynin was the first obese man I'd really ever seen. Yes, they do have them in the 3V's but we all know those are just actors in fat suits. Maybe even a little synthaskin. But not real flesh-and-blood, honest-to-goodness blubber.

So I didn't realize how fast a fat guy can move when he needs to. I just assumed he was sort of like a whale on land. Not so. While Nikki was looking into the kit, Dobrynin's obese fingers grabbed a tray of fruit as his body lurched forward and he threw it.

The edge of the tray collided with Nikki's temple and she fell, dropping the black medical case. I watched as Nikki, the tray, a rainbow of fruit, and the kit did a complicated ballet with gravity and dropped in a tangle. The case and fruit hit first, then Nikki landed on them. The tray continued past her and shattered another section of the mirrored room.

I was furious and afraid Nikki might be seriously injured.

"Good night," I said grimly, pumping a stun slug into Dobrynin. He blinked in surprise. I suppose he didn't realize that they were only stun shells. I pumped three more into him figuring anyone with that much mass to him might need an extra-large dose. He just stood there. I got ready to fire again and he toppled face down into a bowl of fruit on the table next to his chair. The table wobbled a moment and then collapsed under the enormous weight.

Lincoln looked at me. Our programming of him had made it impossible for him to do anything once the action started but I decided not to take any chances. I fired at him, missed, and fired again twice, hitting his body.

His eyebrows shot up as he looked at me with disbelief. "But--"

"Sorry, but you're not *really* on our team. You're only as good as the chemicals we trained you with."

He toppled over without protest further protest. I laid the shotgun down and knelt beside Nikki who was struggling to get up.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah. I've got a whale of a headache." She laughed. "That's probably fitting, isn't it, considering who threw the tray." She turned the medical kit over. It was a mess of liquid, fruit, and splinters of glass. We checked the other bag lady, but she had no kit with her.

"Now what?" Nikki asked.

"Now, we get out of here the best way we can and get to Jake. We'll figure out another plan later. If we were smart, we'd kill Dobrynin and end one of the major contributors to Earth's economic woes. But I know that neither of us can do that."

"And someone else would just take his place."

"Right."

"Wrong," Nikki said.

"You're not going to kill--"

"No. I did better than that. I was able to get into the computer system while ago and mess things up royally. It'd been left on so I didn't need any access codes. I just created a major sellout of World Power stocks. Also, I created a few press releases. The company is going to make an announcement of your discovery and how you made it. The population is going to be primed for cheap energy, space exploration, and you-name-it in a few minutes."

I swallowed and tried to let it sink in. "Are you sure that...will it...what?"

"Never at a loss for words, Phil." She grabbed me and gave me a quick kiss. "Now let's get out of here."

"Right. Now let's see. We can't drug them. You can get out as a bag lady. Maybe I could be the prisoner and you could..."

"I have a better idea. See that bag lady sleeping on the floor? If I can dress up like one of them, then so can--"

"Now wait a minute. You will never, ever get me to dress up in women's clothing. Never."

I soon had her clothes on; it was either that or one of the cute pink G-strings the boys were wearing. I figured the bag lady outfit was more masculine.

We calmly slipped out the door and let it close behind us and marched down the hall to caught the elevator without being stopped. We knew we had to get away quickly because all hell

was going to break out in the stadium in five minutes. Nikki had explained that while she had been in the communications room, she had taken the liberty of ordering the game to end, its broadcast to be replaced by a continuous loop of our canned release stating that anti-gravity technology was available and would change the world with new modes of travel and energy production.

Now an angry roar was rumbling from the stadium. "Let the games end," was not going over well.

Over the next few hours, Nikki realized that she had underestimated the love of a fans for their sports. Once the unrest started, it spread like wildfire through the city. And yes, in case you haven't guessed it, *that* was the game that the fans tore down the Miami stadium. The destruction of the structure was added to the many other losses World Power totaled up that day.

Chapter 21

We had just managed to flag down a taxi outside of the stadium elevator when inside the high walls of the stadium, the din of thousands of voices cursing and hollering grew to a roar. The dozens of bag ladies outside Dobrynin's elevator went scurrying and four headed up the elevator as we opened the taxi doors and climbed in, knowing we didn't want to be around when word came back that their fearless leader was down for the count.

"Where to, ladies?" the tiny little man behind the wheel asked unaware of the impending riot.

I slid into the seat behind him, "The rocket port," I said. Then cleared my throat and tried it again in my best falsetto, "The rocket port."

"No," Nikki said from her side of the seat as she slammed the door.

The driver turned around. It was only then that I saw that he was standing on the seat, "Come on ladies, I don't have all day."

Nikki was studying a computer printout she'd produced from her pocket and spoke without looking up, "Take us to the prison. And don't get smart or we'll cut a couple more inches off you."

"OK. OK. No need to get upset," He said. He turned around and grabbed a control stick to shift the vehicle into gear and spun away from the curb.

As we accelerated away from the stadium, I turned to see if anyone was following us. Amid the flurry of bag ladies, no one seemed to be even looking our way. As I watched, a large section of the stadium's plastic siding was hurled to the ground from above by a group of fans. One seemed to have forgotten to let go of it and fell to his death and managed to crush a number of those who were still waiting to buy tickets to a game that wasn't going to be finished due to a lack of power.

I turned around and settled into the seat and--as we jumped up onto the curb to miss a large police riot truck barreling toward the stadium--decided to fasten my seat belt.

Like the driver of the limo, our taxi driver didn't seem concerned about pedestrians. Though he did slow down to let an old man get out of the way, he was quick to explain, "Those old codgers put big dents in my car. Got to be careful."

As if to make up for it, he clipped a monopod, spilling the rider onto the pavement as we passed.

I leaned over and whispered to Nikki, "Why are we going to the prison? That should be where we're trying *not* to go."

She handed me the sheet.

"Terminate" it read across the top in large letters. The date was...Tomorrow, I decided after a little thought (so much had been going on, it was hard to keep track of the days). I read the list of names that didn't mean much to me. Then the names started to ring bells. Scientists. A whole list that was a who's who of the scientific community. And then one name stuck out: A member of my anti-gravity research team.

"Where'd you get this?"

"From Dobrynin's computer while our press releases were uploading into the broadcast system."

I studied the list. *If one team member has survived the attempts to hide our secret, have others?* I wondered. The names were in alphabetical order. I started checking up and down the list. All but one of the team and myself were listed.

Then they were still alive.

But not for long if something wasn't done.

"Couldn't you have released them through the computer?"

Nikki shook her head, "I tried. But such an order needs to have personal authorization."

"Dobrynin's personal authorization?"

"None other. If we'd had the suggestion drug to use on him. But when he caused me to fall and break the vial... Let's just say I didn't think he looked like he'd be interested in doing that voluntarily last time I saw him."

"OK. But... Do you have a plan?"

"No. I figured you could come up with something."

"Yeah, right. We'll just wing it. Our best laid plans don't seem to be having such a great track record these days anyway."

"I'd say you're doing pretty well so far. You took us into the jaws of death and we got back out again. Look here," Nikki pointed at a name on the list. "Recognize her name?"

I shook my head.

"That just happens to be one of the top bot designers in this hemisphere. Her name is what caught my eye when I happened to see the list by the computer."

"Executing these people must be Dobrynin's way of helping to keep things stagnant." I shook my head.

"Here it is," the driver said as he screeched to a halt and threw us up against the back of his seat.

"What do you think?" Nikki asked. "It doesn't look too formidable."

I looked at the small concrete archway of the prison. The entrance looked like it was all door and no building. It didn't look big. "We're here. Let's see if we can do something."

We got out.

"Hey. How about my pay?"

Nikki clicked off the safety of her shotgun and pointed it in the driver's direction. "Wait here."

"Yes, ma'am," the short driver said with a gulp.

"And don't try any tricks. We have your license number and will track you down if you leave."

The tiny man tried to speak but only managed another gulp.

"Just a minute," I said. "We'll be needing, uh," I looked at the list and did some quick figuring, "some more transportation if we succeed." I turned toward the driver, "Get ten more taxis here. Get them here in a hurry."

"Uh. Well--"

"Dobrynin will pay ten times the normal fares," I lied.

"OK, they'll be here in a couple of minutes," he said grabbing his talkie.

Nothing like greed, I thought. At the same time I felt guilty. I decided that *if* I got out of the prison after entering it during this time of insanity, I'd get him some sort of extra pay after this was all over. In his own way, this little person was as much a victim of Dobrynin's crimes as we were.

Nikki and I ran across the long gray plastic walk leading to the prison entrance which was built into the concrete dike that ringed Miami.

"Replace the stun shells with standard flechettes," I told Nikki. "The delay it takes before the stun shells take effect could get us killed."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I'm about out of the special shells, anyway."

I checked my shotgun as she slipped a new magazine into hers. As we stepped on the mantle plate, the huge door opened for us, closing after we enter the glass room inside. A camera swiveled toward us and trained its lasers on us.

"Business?" a voice said.

"We've come to pick up the prisoners for Dobrynin," Nikki said as I stood tongue-tied.

I hoped she knew what she was doing and quietly snapped the safety off my shotgun in case we needed to try to take out the laser.

The door ahead of us opened and we walked forward and stepped into the waiting elevator. As it sank down, I saw why there'd been no prison building to see from the front. The prison was under water.

The clear plastic elevator slowly dropped us one story below the surface of the ocean. We watched as fish performed their acrobatics outside the elevator. Around us, the bottom of the ocean showed a wealth of green life amid the ruins of Old Miami. Though the battering of the waves and the caustic action of the salt water and sea life had taken their toll, it was still possible to make out the streets and blocks that extended out from the prison. Several rusty hulks of cars still stood in the murky streets, as if waiting to again be driven toward the abandoned homes.

Far in the distance, a large sea farm was crawling through the violent, oxygen-rich waves which rolled over the ruins of the city. The farm's surface extended as far as we could see toward the northeast of the prison.

The prison itself extended from the central transparent bubble that the elevator opened into. There were few cells; there were many capital offenses, and punishment was often carried out without a court hearing.

Each cell along the prison hallway was a small dome on the ocean floor, among the decaying ruins, each cell interconnected by clear walk ways laid on the floor of the ocean. As the waves rolled above us, the prison swayed slightly. There seemed to be no artificial lights; light filtered

into the area in bright patterns of yellow, green, and blue from the bright shimmering mirrored surface above us where the ocean and air met.

We exited the elevator, our nostrils assaulted by the damp stench of sweat and urine. I looked around, my eyes adjusting to the light and spotted the large desk in the center of the dome. An old man sat behind a small, white plastic desk, his large, sunken eyes inspecting us closely.

"What prisoners are you talking about?" he said, breaking the quiet of the room.

"We've come to pick up these prisoners," Nikki said, sliding the paper we'd brought with us.

He looked at the paper without picking it up then frowned making more wrinkles on his leathery face. He punched a button on the desk top and inspected the display of names that sprang onto the monitor in front of him.

He shook his head, snapped the display off, and then rubbed a hand over his bald head. "Why can't you people get things straight. I got the order to release these people just a while ago and--as are my orders--requested the written authorization. And never got it. You'll have to wait until I get it."

"It was sent over ten minutes ago," Nikki lied.

"Let me call," he removed a talkie from the surface of the desk where it had appeared to be part of the flat surface. He spoke his number then listened a moment. "Nothing," he said. "What in the world's going on at central? Have the riots spread that far?"

I didn't wait around any more. I slapped him up the side of the head with the barrel of my shotgun and he fell over his desk top in a really fine Rip van Winkle imitation.

"A little hasty" Nikki suggested. "You do have a plan, right?"

I shrugged.

"I was hoping you had an idea when you tucked him in."

"It seemed like the thing to do. Let's see if we can get into the cells."

We ran toward the metal door leading to the prison cells. I dilated it open and came face to face with a bag lady.

She looked at me a moment, then stared past me at the comatose warden. I knew she saw the warden's body and she knew I knew. We both pulled up our weapons at the same instant and fired. I missed and hers connected.

Her gun was of a type I'd never seen before: a short-barreled hand gun with a heavy, lead-pellet-filled projectile about ten centimeters across. The huge slug caught me in the chest and knocked the wind out of me, causing me to keel over as I tried to breathe. Only the ballistic armor incorporated into the bag lady outfit kept me from greater harm.

The bag lady quickly tried to reload her weapon as Nikki jumped past me and fired; Nikki's shot missed. Rising to my knees, I fired again.

This time I connected with the lethal flechette load of the shotgun. The bag lady fell with a large, fist-sized hole in her chest.

I gasped for air a moment and stood up. The first thing that captured my attention was the sound of water.

"What?" I said.

"That's why she had such an ineffective weapon," Nikki said, pointing to the streams of water gushing through the plastic of the hallway. "Anything else is too dangerous. Your first

flechette load as well as mine punctured the plastic walls."

"Damn. I wonder if it will hold up?"

As if to answer my question, a large chunk of plastic broke off from one of the tiny streams of water and a torrent of water gushed in. Moments later, the other hole widened to admit more water.

"Come on," I said, "We don't have much time. We've got to get the prisoners out of here or they'll all drown."

We splashed down the passage to the fork in the hallway, "I'll take the left," Nikki said.

I dashed down the right. I was glad to see that most of the cells were empty. I stopped at the first occupied cell I came to. I tried to open it. It appeared to have an electric lock of some type. I heard a shot down the hall. Trouble?

"You OK Nikki?" I yelled over the racket the water was making.

"Blasted the lock," Nikki yelled.

Might as well try it, I thought. I motioned the young man inside the cell to stand back and placed the muzzle of the shotgun on the plastic lock while trying to aim downward so any flechettes that went through the lock wouldn't harm the prisoner or puncture the plastic bubble of his cell.

I pulled the trigger and the lock exploded apart. My ears rang.

"Get going," I told him as I pushed the heavy plastic door back, "the prison is flooding."

He didn't need any prompting. He scooped up a small bag of belongings now floating on the rising water and jumped out of the cell and sloshed toward the elevator.

The water was now ankle deep. I ran to the next cells and had soon blasted eight more open freeing three men and two women (none of whom I knew) and also freeing three of my team members who--to my surprise--didn't recognize me. Then I remembered my bag lady get up. I didn't take time for reunions but just ordered them to the door and hoped they didn't try to attack me since I looked like one of the old hags they had undoubtedly learned to hate.

That completed the release of everyone on the wing. The water was now knee deep and rising rapidly.

I half waded, half swam toward the fork. "Nikki, you almost finished?"

She came splashing up with two bedraggled women, "Yeah. That's it. Let's get out of here."

We made our way to the main chamber. I looked through the clear dome and water at the load of prisoners getting out of the elevator above us. I scooped up the little warden who was still draped across his desk, the water lapping at its top. The elevator was coming back down for the five of us when the power went off.

The water was chest high and the elevator was frozen half way down.

"We'll never get out," one of the women said.

And it looked like she was right.

Chapter 22

"Listen," I said over the gushing roar of the water, "We could last a long time if we had to by getting up to the top of this chamber. It's air tight and the dome top would create an air pocket. Someone would eventually come and rescue us."

Maybe, I added to myself. The idea wasn't all that reassuring.

"It'd be better to get out," Nikki said.

Especially since no one will probably be coming to help, I thought. I didn't say that since I didn't want to panic everyone. "Yeah. It would be better if we could get out on our own. The only way up is the elevator. So let's see if we can get up the elevator shaft."

It sounded easy; it wouldn't be, I thought.

The plastic was as slick as only the new plastics can be. Like trying to get a hold of a greased stick of frozen lube. The first order of business was to cut some hand holds into the plastic.

"Stand back," I said, throwing off my bag woman mask and hat so I could see better.

Some great sage in the dark and distant past said that guns were only tools. So far that theory had held up; the shotgun had worked well in opening the prison locks. Now I was going to test it out as a chisel. I fired three times at the tube of the elevator. The projectiles chewed three jagged holes, fortunately without punching more holes in the dome beyond the elevator shaft. Each hole was about a third of a meter higher than the next. They were the perfect size for climbing, I discovered as I pulled myself up on them and was nearly against the base of the elevator.

I placed the muzzle of my gun against the clear elevator floor above me and fired, creating another hole. I quickly fired another six shots around it, trying to ignore the splinters of plastic that threatened to put out my eyes as they splattered from the impact of the flechettes.

The holes made, I used the gun for a lever and broke out the area around the shots until a man-sized hole was created over my head.

I tossed the shotgun into the elevator, held the jagged edge of the hole, and scrambled through it. I turned and reached down toward the two women and Nikki who held up the floating warden, below me. "Who's next?"

One of the women climbed up and I grabbed her hand and pulled her through. She sat on the floor as I pulled up the second woman. The warden was the tough one. The water had risen nearly to Nikki's neck but she had a foot on the lower hole I'd punched in the plastic and now half lifted the floating warden out of the water as I grabbed the fabric of his jacket.

"He looked little, must have gold bars in his pockets," I gasped. One of the women in the

elevator grabbed his arm and together we hauled him up through the hole. Nikki scrambled up behind him and brushed her wet hair back out of her face.

"Now what," one of the women asked.

"Just blast some more holes," the other said.

"Not that easy," Nikki spoke. "The shaft is next to the water now. Any shots at the wall of the tube will bring in water. It only worked below because we were in the bubble of the chamber."

I thought a moment, then blasted another large hole in the roof of the elevator. "At least we can climb a little closer to the surface," I yelled. Nikki fired several shots in the same area and we soon had carved out a large hole above us. I pushed my shotgun up into it and broke out the few sharp points left in the crude circular opening.

The ceiling of the elevator was too high to reach and the water that was now bubbling up around my knees made it impossible to jump.

"Let me boost you," I said to the smaller of the two women.

The water was up to our hips by the time she and the other women had scrambled up. Nikki and I lifted the warden up to them, nearly dropping his limp body before it was pulled through.

"OK, Nikki, you're next."

"But..."

"Come on."

She put her foot into my hands and was pulled up by the outstretched arms of the women above her.

I handed my gun up to them then tried to jump up to their arms and succeeded only in falling down into the water. I came sputtering back up and took a deep breath of air, lost my footing, and dropped back into the water. I came up again spitting out salt water. My eyes burned and my wet clothes seemed to weigh a ton. I tore at the release on my ballistic vest so I wouldn't be dragged under so easily again.

When I finally got the water out of my eyes, I could see the warden's belt they'd lowered to me. I got a tight hold on it and the three above me pulled my heavy carcass up until I was even with the hole. Holding myself with one hand on the belt, I pulled my body up in a way I've never been able to do since then and got my elbow over the jagged edge of the plastic hole. The three women pulled on my hands and arms until I popped onto the top of the elevator with them.

We weren't to the surface yet. We were in a fix. I studied the smooth sides of the tube and the three meters or so above us before we would be at the ground level of the shaft.

"Could we get on your shoulders?" one of the women asked me.

I thought a moment as the water lapped at my ankles. "We'd better try something." I leaned against the side of the shaft, "Go on. Climb up if you can."

She scrambled up my back, managing to nearly claw my bag lady skirt off and threatening to flatten my skull as she booted herself up the final few inches. "Can't reach it!" she called down.

"Help!" she hollered. I realized that she was trying to contact someone outside the elevator shaft rather than calling to us. She called three more times, then lost her balance and slide off my shoulders and clawed her way down into the knee-deep water.

Things looked bad.

"Shall we try blasting holes in the sides of the shaft?" Nikki asked.

"Guess so, better than drowning like a bunch of rats without even--"

"Hello down there?" a voice came from above us.

"Help!" the woman next to me screamed again, nearly putting out my ear drum.

"Hang on."

I expected them to toss down a rope or something. Instead, a moment later the whole elevator started to rise. It jerked and stopped, then slowly inched its way up. The water was now at our necks and slowly gained on us even as we went up. Nikki held the warden's face above water and I held the short woman up as the water started to get up to our mouths.

"Hurry up!" I blubbered.

A face looked down at us from above. It disappeared a moment, then returned. "Hold on, we're having to raise the elevator by hand."

The water was too high for us.

We started coughing as it overtook us, rising up over our noses. Then the elevator jerked up. The water dropped and we struggled for air, only to have the water suddenly bubble up over our heads again.

I pushed the short woman struggling beside me up. *Even if I can't breath*, I thought, *at least I can buy her a few more minutes*. As soon as I had pushed her up, her weight was lifted from me and I felt her thrashing feet graze my scalp. I floated over to Nikki and boosted her up also.

Again, she was suddenly gone.

My lungs felt as if they were bursting. I exhaled under water then bobbed up and grabbed a breath of air then searched about for the other woman but couldn't find her. I opened my eyes under the water and looked about. Then I squinted downward and saw her below me. Somehow, she had fallen through the hole in the top of the elevator and trapped under it, with her eyes closed tightly so she couldn't see to find her way through the hole I'd broken in it. She had panicked--as anyone probably would--and was now clawing at the surface directly below me, unable to locate the opening next to her.

I floundered about trying to dive down and finally succeeded in reaching the hole with my fingers. Grasping its edge, I pulled myself down; my ears popping as water filled them.

I reached through the hole and got a good handful of the woman's hair and pulled her toward the opening. She was thrashing about as I lifted her up through the hole and managed to hit me in the nose. Then she relaxed, passed out from lack of oxygen.

I grabbed her limp body around the waist, my lungs feeling as if they'd ruptured as I kicked off the top of the elevator toward the sparkling surface of the water.

We broke the surface and I passed out.

Chapter 23

By the time Nikki had emptied the brine from my lungs and managed to pump in enough air to revive me, we were halfway to the rocket port in the fleet of taxis our little driver had rounded up for us.

Unfortunately, his good work was rewarded with only a "thank you." Our driver was on the war path when we couldn't pay him; I thought maybe he would chew off my knee cap before we got him settled down.

When I told him who I was and wrote him an I.O.U.

He finally looked me right in the face and said, "Hey. Wait a minute. You really are that Hunter guy. I saw the newscast while you were at the prison. It's a shame it interrupted the game--but it was interesting all the same."

"Yeah. Well, what we'd like to--"

"I think I like your hair better the way it was in the broadcast about your new anti-gravity invention."

"Yeah. Well... I'll make good on what we owe you if you give me your address and--"

"No need," he said tearing up the I.O.U. "Just give me a ride in the first spaceship you build with your rods. I've always wanted to get into space but been too short."

"That probably won't be right away because--"

"And buddy," he continued, not listening to a word I had said, "if I were you, I'd quit wearing that dress in public. You've got to think of the image you're projecting."

I stood speechless as he drove off. Then the ribbing from the lab team and Nikki began about my soggy dress. I felt like I might have been better off leaving them all in the prison.

We finally located a vending machine at the port and Nikki and I both dialed up some plastic unisex coveralls. The prisoners did likewise and in a few moments, we were outfitted in regular attire and our prison uniforms and dresses were discarded down a garbage chute. By the time we'd purchased new outfits for everyone, Nikki and I had run through all the credits in the pockets of our bag lady outfits. *I need to write a note to Dobrynin to pay his bag ladies better so there's more money to spend next time we roll one.*

At any rate, we now looked like paupers rather than prisoners or wayward bag ladies and I was no longer self-conscious about my outfit.

"Phil," Tom Berrel, one of my old lab group, said as he gripped my arm in his muscled hand, "we gave you quite a ribbing... But I'd like to say thanks for getting us out of there. There were

ready to--"

"No thanks is necessary guys," I said. " I know that you'd have done the same for me. And Nikki did most of the work anyway. And if I hadn't dragged you all into this in the first place... Tell you what, just quit talking about that crazy outfit and we'll call it even."

Everyone laughed. The looks of gratitude on the faces of those Nikki and I had rescued was all the thanks we needed.

With the problems at the stadium, no one in charge seemed to be too concerned about the escape of sixteen political prisoners even *if* they knew that everyone hadn't remained in their cells when the prison flooded. The Warden--whom we'd left sleeping soundly on the floor of one of the cabs--probably wouldn't be saying anything for another two or three hours, either.

Nevertheless, things were tense since we had several major problems.

The worst was what we were going to do for transportation.

There were sixteen people we'd released from the prison and Nikki and myself. Even when Jake arrived, we would only have rides for three people. Though we could stack everyone into the van like a load of bots, the gravity rods would put too much stress on them if we flew the van and if we didn't, getting from Miami to Jake's place in Texas would take forever.

Since none of us had money or cards, there was no way to purchase a ride on a rocket. And we wouldn't dare to try to commandeer a ride; it was too easy for the ground control to change the destination or even blow up a rocket. Hijacking rides was a thing they did only back in the good old days of the early 21st Century. Even though Jake usually carried some money, it was doubtful that'd he'd have enough to pay for more than two or three passengers' fare.

So that was one big problem. Another of more general interest was that it looked like we might have been too successful in dismantling Dobrynin's empire. In fact, as I watched the small 3V in the waiting room at the port, I thought we might have succeeded in putting the whole planet into a neo-dark age. The announcement of the discovery of anti-gravity and the dissolution of the World Energy Corporation (an addition that Nikki had added herself while in the communications room--save us from vengeful females) created quite an impact. The world stock market fell to record lows before being prematurely closed for the week. Adding to the confusion was the spontaneous walk-off of from jobs worldwide as people headed toward the nearest 3V. (The French were the worst; they threw what looked like a nation-wide celebration boasting that "Hunter" was actually a corruption of an old French name--a contention that undoubtedly made my ancestors somewhere rotate in their abodes).

Soon rioting broke out in Britain, Japan, and most of Africa while an interview with the president of the Flat Earth Society revealed that they thought I should be drawn and quartered. I made a note to put the Flat Earth Society at the bottom of my speaking engagement list.

Then the corporations brought out their own media guns. Slowly the 3V news specials started wheeling out the usual tired experts who explained why anti-gravity wasn't possible and/or what impact the technology could have on our society and economy with the usual (ho-hum) graphs and file footage.

But it was too late. The cat was out of the bag, even if the public only had an inkling of what might be achieved with my research team's new invention.

In fact I suspect that many people would have gone into shock if they'd realized that almost all types of travel and energy production would shortly become obsolete and that the whole solar system could now be used for raw materials.

Fortunately, in all the confusion, the police and bag ladies at the rocket port were all busy leaving to attempt to sort things out at the stadium and other areas that were now in full riot. All of our group just stuck close to the crowd milling about the 3V and Nikki and I kept our shotguns hidden but ready in case we got into a real confrontation.

We took up our guard duty in a spot that allowed us to watch both the 3V and the parking lot where--we hoped--Jake would be showing up shortly. Night fell as a formation of fighter planes went screaming overhead. Apparently authorities had decided to stop the rioting around the stadium in a hurry; a brilliant column of fire soon rose over the stadium area after the planes dropped their loads of napalm. After that, things calmed down since there probably weren't many rioters left following a few more napalm runs.

Nothing like a little urban renewal to solve clashes, I thought.

"There's the van," Nikki leaned over and whispered to me and nodded toward the parking lot.

I stood up and addressed our small group around me, "OK. Everyone stay here while we go and talk to Jake and try to sort everything out."

By the time we reached the auto doors leading to the parking lot, Jake stepped through, a big grin on his face. "Boy, you guys really split it wide open."

"Yeah. I just hope we didn't do too good a job," I said.

"No, looks like it's going over pretty well," he said giving Nikki a big hug. "It's nice that you got the credit for your work, too, Phil. You need to get a newer picture of yourself. For the news people. That skin cut hair-do looks wild."

"Yeah, that's my college graduation photo. That was the only shot Nikki was able to dig up. Look, we have a problem." We briefly explained to him about our extra sixteen passengers.

Jake chuckled. "Money is no problem. My nephew's proving to be quite a trader. Should've turned the business over to him sooner, I guess. Had a customer lined up for some of the industrial stuff we brought back from the Moon. Here," he took a large wad of bills from his jacket pocket and peeled off two large bills, "this ought to cover it."

"Wow, I guess so," I said. "We'll have them take a rocket to Houston then we'll ferry them over to your place if that's OK."

"Sure," Jake said. "We could use the extra help to get the anti-gravity rods and stuff we brought back sorted out and into the machinery we've been planning on building. With the publicity you got today, we'd better get some demo vehicles for the press to see or we'll go down as the greatest hoaxes in history."

Nikki and I got the money to the group, said our good-byes, and then headed out to the parking lot with Jake.

"Guess we'll head out after their rocket takes off," I said, knowing a flight to Houston would be the perfect cover.

"You guys better let me fly the van, you look pretty worn out," Jake said as we neared the van.

"We only look that way because we are," I said as we climbed in.

The rocket going back to Houston left only a half hour after Jake had arrived. Soon those we'd rescued were getting safely snuggled down in their rocket and we were waiting in the parking lot to follow them up.

We were slipping into our space suits (since the top of the arch of the flight after the rocket

would take us into pretty thin air) when Jake said, "You know, I think I'd better use the rest room in the station. Just a minute, I'll be right back."

I figured he must have gotten nervous kidneys thinking about how well he flew the van. He left and Nikki and I got our suits on and waited patiently.

Then we heard shooting.

We turned in our seats and saw a group of bag ladies run into the front of the rocket port building.

"Now what?" I asked, wondering if they'd somehow discovered Jake or my team. It could be trouble.

We watched a moment and then saw the bag ladies marching Jake out in a small parade. There were nine of the look-alike bag ladies in front and two on either side dragged Jake--who appeared unconscious. Four more of the ladies brought up the rear.

"Oh no," Nikki said. "What shall we..."

"There are too many to try to fight," I said. We only had our two shotguns--which were about out of ammunition--and I'd lost my Beretta somewhere during the day's activities.

"Have you seen the rail gun?" I asked. "I did have it stowed in the van."

"No. But I haven't been in the back."

"Keep track of where they're headed." I got up and went back to retrieve the rail gun which was still fastened to the inside of the van. I removed it from its straps and brought it forward.

"Well, we have a lot of over-kill at least. This thing could take on a fighter plane. Where's Jake now?"

"They put him in that green car over there," Nikki pointed. "The ladies seem to be getting into the two cars ahead and the one behind the car they have him in."

"OK. We've got to stop them before they get too far. If they're in cars, they must be leaving the rocket port area. We don't want to lose them in the city traffic as crazy as it is right now."

"There's only the one road off the rocket port into Miami--"

"Right. If we hurry, we can head them off."

"But what will we do if we catch up with them?"

"This rail gun can take out a car no problem. If I hit it right. We'll have to try to get the escort cars and cut the odds down to what we can handle with just the two of us."

Nikki raised her eyebrows but was too polite to point out just how harebrained my scheme was. Instead she jumped into the driver's seat, "Let me drive and you fire the rail gun, I don't know the slightest thing about it."

I decided not to tell her I didn't know anything about the rail gun either, other than what I'd seen in the 3Vs. Why do women always assume that men know all about weapons?

She put the van into gear and we raced toward the road. The bag ladies' caravan started at the same moment. We were all racing toward the road with a column of parked vehicles between the cars and our van.

As we moved down the poorly-lit parking lot and then were in the congested traffic, moving at a crawl. As we inched ahead, the bag lady caravan started to outdistance us. A car pulled out of its parking space ahead of us, blocking our way and we came to a complete stop as Nikki slammed on her brakes.

We bashed into the car with a resounding crumpling of metal. An angry giant jumped from the car.

"Sorry," I yelled to him as we backed away, "we've got a friend to rescue."

He hurled his hat at us and coated the warm Miami air with curses as Nikki reached the end of the long line of parked cars and turned the van around. Again we came to a stop.

I turned and watched the bag ladies' cars which were now at the end of the parking lot, turning onto the road that ran out over the dark ocean that was lit only by car lights of travelers over the bridge, the whole downtown Miami area being powerless and illuminated only by the burning stadium that lit the nighttime sky.

"There's no way we're going to be able to catch them in this traffic," I said.

"There's a way," Nikki said. "I'm going to get up some height so we don't crush anyone with our downward grav wash."

We rose into the air. Then I fell back into the seat under the enormous acceleration Nikki was pushing the car into. We quickly pulled up alongside the cars as we flew over the ocean alongside the bridge-like roadway Jake and the bag ladies were on. Nikki had the van's lights off and no one in the cars seemed to be aware of us.

"Let's try moving over and dropping downward over the lead car," I said. "The wash from our rods might be harsh enough to force them to stop."

That was an understatement.

As we dropped down, the car faltered a moment, bouncing up and down on its shocks and broke through the steel rail and went careening into the ocean with a tremendous splash. The car behind it either felt the effects of our passage or the driver panicked. In any event, it went crashing through the rail on the opposite side of the road and went splashing into the black water as well.

Nikki pulled up and put the van into a steep curve. I was slammed into the door which popped open and I nearly fell out before I grabbed the seat and held on for dear life.

"Let's try that on the rear car," Nikki yelled, ignoring the fact that I was about to fall out of the van.

"Yahhhhhhggggggg," I answered, heroically.

She ignored me and finished the turn as we wheeled behind the rear car and dropped down toward it as it sped along the road just as I pulled myself back into my seat and slammed the door shut.

By the time I was buckled in, we went bouncing down over the rear car. Again, the force of the van's anti-gravity rods caused the car to screech about and go out of control. This time, rather than going off the road, the car bounced end over end and rolled about umpteen times. The bag ladies in that car must feel like they've been in a centrifuge at the high setting after that, I thought.

No one in the car moved when it finally landed on its top.

The final car Jake was in had come to a quick stop as we passed by it. A spotlight on the car sprang to life as someone tried to track us. We climbed over the ocean and Nikki executed a steep turn and headed back toward the remaining car.

"Any ideas?" Nikki asked as the bullets from the guns below us started dinging off the outside of the van and the windshield.

"Don't drop as low this time; we can't risk hurting Jake. But come in close. It looks most of

the bag ladies have left Jake in the car. Maybe our grav wash will knock them down."

Nikki went over them and the bag ladies standing on the road were flattened like rag dolls as we flashed over them. Nikki did a quick stop that felt like it exceeded the limits on my seat belt if not my body and performed another tight turn that again took us toward the car. This time we went over it slowly; a bag lady that had been struggling to her feet was instantly thrown flat onto the plastic roadway and knocked senseless. We circled it twice. No one moved below us.

Nikki moved out over the ocean and held the van at the same level as the car on the bridge. She turned the van's lights on so that they bathed the car on the road. One last bag lady sat next to Jake who still appeared to be unconscious.

"Oh, no. I hope they haven't hurt him," Nikki said.

"Probably just stunned," I said, hoping it was the truth.

Without warning the bag lady jumped out of the car and went running down the road toward the city.

"Shall we chase her down?" Nikki said.

"No, let's just get Jake and get out of here. The rocket takes off in just minutes and we should get out of here as soon as possible anyway. "

Nikki eased the van forward; the guard rail crumpled under us as we went over it. Nikki settled the van down on the highway. I jumped out and ran to the car.

"Jake! Jake, are you all right?"

Only snoring answered my question. I pulled him from the van, knowing better that to try to lift his heavy frame; wearing a truss the rest of my life didn't appeal to me. "Nikki, can you give me a hand?"

She got out and ran alongside me. Together we wrestled Jake into the van and got him buckled into the rear seat. We screwed his helmet onto his suit and I put a quick patch, from his suit's emergency kit, over the spot where the bag ladies' stun shell had hit him.

"Do we have to listen to his snoring," Nikki asked over her suit's radio.

"We ought to keep track of him to be sure he's breathing OK," I lied. I figured there was nothing like hearing someone snore for a while to kill any romantic interest Nikki might ever have for him.

Behind us, the sky lit up around the rocket port.

"There goes our rocket," Nikki said and pulled off the bridge.

Just as we crossed over the water, fire covered the roadway, lighting the area as if it were daylight. As the fireball from the road climbed into the air, a fighter screamed over the road, causing the flames to roll as the air was torn aside by its passage.

Radar had picked up our battle with the bag ladies. Now someone was aiming to even up the score and had just missed turning us into baked beings.

Chapter 24

"Oh, ----," I said. "Let's get out of here."

The fighter wheeled about to make another pass at us.

Nikki didn't need any encouragement. I fell back into the seat as we flew forward at maximum speed.

"Get the radar on them," Nikki said.

"Good idea." I struggled to overcome our acceleration and get my hand to the switch to turn the machine on. Then I had to turn the antenna to pick up what was behind us.

"Let me know if they fire any missiles."

"They have those?"

"You better believe it," Nikki said. " I suspect he's holding off because he doesn't know what he's dealing with."

"A sitting duck."

"But when he sees that we can keep up with the rocket, I'm sure he'll try to get us before we get away from him--"

"Here come two missiles," I said as I saw two small blips break off of the larger one behind us.

"Two! Can't out maneuver two," Nikki said. " I've heard pilots talk... The new programs take alternate routes. One will always get you. How much time?"

"Coming fast. About... Oh... ten seconds away at a guess."

I counted mentally as we accelerated and I watched the blip come racing at us, Three, two--

The van shuddered as Nikki flipped a switch on the control computer then jammed the van's controls to cause it to go straight up (though our momentum kept us going forward as well). The metal skin of the van groaned; it was designed for low air resistance when it traveled forward, but not if it went straight up.

The two blips caught up with us and started to circle upward but as they went below us, they hit our anti-gravity field. I saw what Nikki was trying to do; deflect them with our repelling power. The missiles followed us but at ever slower speeds. Finally, they started to lose the race, fell back, then suddenly veered downward, tumbling out of control as we traveled upward. The missiles fell toward the ocean and auto-destructed, exploding far below us.

"All right," I said, "Good job, Nikki. Oh, blank it. Another blip."

"How long until impact?"

"About eight seconds this time, seven, six, wait, now six... It's dropping off. We're outrunning it."

We left the missile behind and it finally ran out of fuel and dropped into the Florida swamp with a brilliant flash.

Nikki pushed the van through a series of twists and finally we were following the rocket toward Houston, hoping anyone watching us on radar would lose us when we left the atmosphere and would fail to realize we were following the Houston rocket to its destination.

We soon found ourselves dropping toward Houston to the tune of Jake's snoring. We were afraid we weren't close enough to the rocket to stay within its radar blip and we fully expected another fighter to be waiting for us when we reached the Houston field.

But there wasn't one.

Nikki dropped us down on a road near the rocket port and we drove around to the huge parking lot and made our way on wheels toward the entrance rocket port buildings.

As we slowed down, we met the sixteen people we had freed. We parked the van nearby and everyone gathered around us as we stepped out. They cheered and clapped.

I smiled a moment. "Thanks. Well, I guess you're free men and women tonight. We can give each of you some cash, uh... We can borrow a little from Jake, he's the third member of our group and--"

"He caught a stun shell and is sleeping it off in the van," Nikki explained.

"Yeah," I added needlessly. "Anyway, you're free to go if you want. But we're in the process of starting up a, uh, factory, to make the anti-gravity rods. We have a lot of plans, a trip to the asteroids to get water, a couple of Moon bases, maybe even a starship down the way. We could use some people like you guys. So if any of you wants a job, whether you used to be on my team or were on the government's black list, I can give you one. The pay isn't much; in fact it's nothing right now--"

Everyone chuckled politely.

"...but you'll be as safe or safer than you'll be on your own. And you can keep anything you steal and get away with."

They were silent a moment as my words sunk in.

"I have a husband," one of the women that had been trapped in the elevator shaft with me said. "I couldn't leave--"

"You're free to return to him," I said. "Just get some cash from us and head home. Later, if you *and* your husband would like to join up--"

"I'd like that," she said.

"Yeah, well, any of you that have a family might want to head home, collect everyone, and then join us later."

"What about kids?"

"Well, if we set up a real colony on the Moon or Mars, I suppose we'll want some kids to keep it going," I said, even though the thought of mouthy little children getting into things made me have second thoughts about what I was saying.

"Where do we meet you after we collect our families?"

Where? Good question. "Well. I guess you folks can keep a secret as well as anyone. Don't suppose there are many traitors among those that Dobrynin was about to cancel."

A nervous laugh this time.

"Our meeting place is a military surplus store near Galveston." I gave them the directions to it. "Be there as soon as you can. After a week or two, I can't guarantee that we'll be there anymore. I suspect that there'll be quite a few unsavory folks trying to find us after today. We probably won't be staying there for long."

A short time later, six of the group left after I insisted that they take some of the cash we fished out of Jake's pocket to help them get to where they were going. I figured I could afford to be generous with Jake's money.

All of my old team stayed with me. They waited while Nikki and I purchased an old junker from a near by used car lot and then we returned with it and everyone piled into it and the van (which meant we couldn't fly without endangering them).

Jake was still snoring when we pulled into the parking lot of his surplus store. And with saliva snaking down his chin, he didn't look a bit better after his long beauty rest. Nikki glanced at him and then quickly looked away.

We finally draped Jake across the table as we throw the best coming-home party I'd ever seen.

When things were winding down, Nikki took my hand and led outdoors, away from the dining room turned party center.

Chapter 25

Things flew along quickly. Within a week, we had all the rods cut up and incorporated into a fleet of junk vehicles that were to fly our huge party to the Moon. (After looking over some of the cars and vans we'd be taking, I figured we would be making Earth about three percent more beautiful simply by our leaving in the junkers.)

Other groups of people worked equally hard. Our space-suit repair team had all the suits that could be made workable in Jake's surplus business patched up and ready to go; air tanks were filled to full capacity to support our band during our jump across the black airless space between Earth and our lunar base. Those with electrical skills repaired old radios or rewired vehicle radios to power small speakers sewn into suits so we could all communicate while in space.

All in all, we would be traveling on a wing and a prayer with epoxy, chewing gum, and paper clips holding everything together.

We'd be taking quite a party of people and equipment since more and more people had been coming in to join us. Not only did the original sixteen that we'd freed from the prison show up, but their families, pets, children, and colleagues as well. As might be expected with all the people involved, word leaked out and we soon had old spacers wandering in with their own worn suits and needed skills asking if it was true that we were mounting a space expedition. We converted their vehicles they came in, slowly assembling more and more "space craft" for our expedition to the Moon; we aimed to take everyone who really wanted to go.

In the evenings after we'd finished work for the day, old spacers told their tales while the newer members talked of harvesting the asteroids, colonizing the moons of Saturn and Jupiter, or even creating a starship with the rods. The possibilities seemed limitless as dreams were spun into the small hours of the day before we started work again after a few hours of sleep laced with dreams of space.

There was a rush to get things done. We all knew it would only be a matter of time until word got out about the group we were collecting to take to the Moon. And soon after that, basic rebels that we were, we had little doubt that some zealous bureaucrat might well order a fleet of fighters to do a napalm number on Jake's store. So everyone was pushing toward getting everything wrapped up so we could escape to the Moon. Once there, we would have an edge since Earth had dismantled its space program. Once in space, and with a little luck, our expedition could drop out of sight of the World Government.

* * *

After what seemed like an eternity of the hard work, we were nearly ready to leave.

"How's it going, Jake," I said as I made the rounds with a cup of caffinex to keep me awake.

A shower of sparks marked another weld on the car Jake was working on then he flipped up the protective mask. "Real well. This is the last of the fleet and its nearly ready. It's lucky that a lot of the folks coming to us are bringing in their own computers."

"Yeah. We wouldn't have been able to fly all the vehicles if that hadn't happened," I agreed. We had run out of money the first day we'd started this latest project and would have had no money to buy computers. "Even so, I wish we could have back-up computers in each of the cars."

"Would be nice. But I don't think it's too risky. According to Danny Hill, the sun isn't spitting out much radiation right now so the computers should be pretty reliable. If things really got bad, folks could probably tag along with the group and fly by the seat of their pants. We'll just cross our fingers for the flight."

"That's how I fly anyway," I said. "Know where Nikki is?"

"She was around here a minute ago," Jake said. "I bet she went up to our 'command center,'" he smiled and winked at me, then dropped his welding mask over his face and went back to work on the car.

I walked off to our so-called command center; it consisted of three phones and an inventory computer that was our connection to the Net, all spread across Jake's kitchen table. On the wall was a huge bulletin board and under it the ever-being-used caffinex machine. The room had become the heart of our planning sessions and Nikki, Jake, and I spent most of our free time there trying to coordinate our group's efforts.

Nikki hung up the phone and brushed her dark hair from her eyes, "Well, that's the last of them. I've contacted every major reporter we could think of. Our take-off tomorrow should have a lot of coverage."

"I just hope it doesn't have a fireworks display as well."

"I don't think anyone would be dumb enough to attack with the news people there. I think the general public is so fed up with high utility bills that they'll riot if it looks like someone's throwing a monkey wrench into things. Anyway, we've told everyone that we'll be in downtown Houston. We'll give a last minute call and Net announcement tomorrow morning to reroute the news crews here in time for the take off. It'd be hard for the Government to get rounded up in time to do much damage."

"Provided they don't get wind of what's going on. I hope that Frank really knew how to rig the phones and Net connections to make impossible to trace our calls."

"I'm sure he does. He's the communications whiz, you know."

I looked at Nikki's beautiful dark eyes a moment. "It all just bothers me. More and more, it seems like things are out of our hands and in the hands of the experts we seem to be attracting."

"That's the price you pay for launching the project that got all this going. It takes on a life of its own."

"I just wish I'd had a choice. Everything snowballed. I certainly don't mind loosing a lot of my responsibilities... It's just that..."

"Security is gone when you start depending on so many other people."

"Right."

Nikki reached over the table and held my hand, "Phil Hunter, you are one big worry wart."

"Compliments will get you nowhere." I gave her hand a squeeze and then looked at my

thumb-nail watch. "Oops. Late again. If anyone needs me, I'll be with my team up in the loft. We have something we're cooking up."

"Sounds mysterious," Nikki said.

"Unbelievably. It looks like we've made a mistake in our calculations. I think. But I can't figure out where. And if we haven't..."

"Something wrong with the rods?"

"No. Nothing to worry about. Just a side effect that occurs when you get a bunch of the rods together. We think."

"OK. Be mysterious."

"See you in a bit."

She rolled her eyes, shook her head, then blew me a kiss as I left.

The air conditioner was pushing out waves of cold air as I climbed the ladder into the loft of the old barn. My five team members were arguing heatedly about something. They all stopped when my head got even with the loft.

"No need to stop for me. I like a good argument as long as it doesn't end in fisticuffs." I climbed over the top of the ladder onto the old wooden floor.

Fran Wescott adjusted the antique glasses that she insisted on wearing, and flipped back a lock of blond hair. "We went over it all again," she said pointing to the projection screen tacked to the barn wall, "but it still comes out wrong."

I looked at the screen. "We've all assumed that we made a mistake. Maybe we should look at it as if the measurements are correct."

"But quantum mechanics..."

I raised a hand and everyone was quiet for a moment.

"Let's just assume that it's correct for now. We'll be able to test out our theory or formula or--whatever this mess is--shortly. The bots we left working on the Moon--if they haven't screwed up... We should have enough rods to actually see the effect. If it's not there, then our measurements are out of whack. If it is there then..."

"But it doesn't seem possible that such a small gravity field could warp space that much!" Fran protested. Everyone nodded.

"I agree. Yet, it doesn't seem like the rods should work at all. Remember when we started out? The thing that held us back for weeks was that we didn't think they could possibly work. When we finally settled down and tried making some rods, they worked. And here we are today. I'd suggest that there is a hole in physics and the rods are pointing this out to us, operating in the cracks as it were."

"So what now?" Tom Barrel, a tall, thin black in his twenties asked.

"I want you guys to generate all the information we'll need to...uh..."

"Warp space," Steve finished.

"Yeah," I said looking perplexed. "It still sounds impossible doesn't it?"

They all laughed. Sometimes, that's the job of a good team leader; make the individuals relax so that they don't cut each other's throats.

"Well, to heck with the impossibility. Give me the calculations I'll need to set up...oh...let's call them gates. Give me the calculations to set up space-warping gates to get to each of the

planets in our solar system. And maybe even a few of the close stars."

I looked at each of the young faces in front of me. It was beginning to sink in, I thought. We might be working out a way other than sub-light speed travel to quickly hop to the stars!

"What are we going to call this formula and theory?" Tom asked.

"That's simple," Fran said. "Hunter's Principle."

There was a murmur of agreement among the team.

"Let's don't worry about naming it right now," I said. I liked the sound of it but wanted to at least appear to be humble. "Just get the information generated so we can test this all out when we get to the Moon." I left them, knowing that they'd probably give me much more than I was asking for.

Hunter's Principle. I liked the sound of that. And if the calculations proved correct, rather than being an intellectual dead end, our little Moon base was apt to change the course of human history even more than I cared to imagine. We might soon be opening up gateways that lead to the stars.

Chapter 26

The news conference was a let down. It was as good as we'd hoped for. Better. Jake's lot was packed with news cars and vans. But I was tired of being in such a constant state of flux and was ready to return to being inconspicuously ordinary.

There were hundreds of reporters, each holding a mini-cam and asking a barrage of either intelligent or idiotic questions but never anything in between. After Nikki put the van through its paces for them, I could almost see the electricity flowing through each brain as they realized the possibilities of the rods. Nothing like an old van, pocked with bullet holes and dented from crashes, to blow minds as it does acrobatics in the air overhead.

"Here's something else of interest," I said after the van landed. "Monny Prell, a design engineer we've picked up, has rigged this little generator from the rods. Now... we'll hook up a couple strings of electric lights and some power equipment..." A bunch of us quickly had a string of appliances and lights running off the generator. "That's about what a small apartment uses. The cost of the generator, if they were produced on a large scale, would be about one week's salary. As you can see, for a small price, every home in the world can afford to make their own power for household appliances."

The questions stopped after that for a minute while everyone mulled it over.

"I'm having Tom hand out some little sections of rods we've cut out of the last of the rods we've made. I figured that having a little bit of a rod in your hand, trying to keep it from floating away, would give you something to remember us by."

There was a mad scramble by reporter to get one of the rod sections. Tom had trouble keeping his footing in the jostle but finally got the sections more or less distributed to the press.

I lectured a bit more then finished up my sales pitch, "The time of massive generators, pollution, and terrorist acts that leave us... in the dark... are soon to be things of the past," I said. "Now, I'd like--"

The reporters had recovered. Not willing to let me finish where I wanted to, they started calling out questions.

"Will you ever make flying belts for individuals?" a dark-haired woman toward the back of the group asked.

"We thought about that," I said. "But it's too dangerous. If you get your legs in the way, it can cause severe injury when the rods try to push your feet away from your body. Too, if you miscalculate just a little, it would be easy to drop like a rock. Some day, we might be able to make an array of pin-sized rods and have them controlled by miniature servo motors and a

computer... Until then, though, a flying belt would be a terribly dangerous way of traveling."

I fielded a few more trivial questions then Jake stepped up to the car that was serving as my stage and pointed to his fingernail watch. *Time to go.*

"One final thing," I said. "If each of you will focus your cameras on this sheet of paper..." Everyone did. "This won't make much sense to most viewers. It's the formula for making the rods. The process isn't quite as simple as the formula, but anyone with a little metallurgical know-how can pull it off with the data on this sheet. Anyone watching out there has my official authorization to use my formula to create as many rods as they wish. There will be no patent rights to this technology. It's public domain. You can use the technique privately or sell rods for a profit. It's up to you. This is our--the research team that helped me produce this as well as myself--this is our gift to the world."

That will also take the heat off us, I added to myself; the genie was now out of the bottle as the formula was beamed at the speed of light around the global communications satellites to homes and offices around the world. The Net and 3Vs would make sure it could never be suppressed or hidden.

Jake stepped up beside me, "Sorry folks but that's all the time we have."

Amid some clapping and shouted questions that I did my best to ignore, Jake and I pushed our way through the crowd as each of our little band got into their assigned vehicles and our caravan of thirty-six cars and vans lifted off together.

We nearly squashed one gung-ho reporter who decided to try to get a shot from below the vehicles and instead got flattened by the gravity wash in the process. He struggled back to his feet with a broken camera and a bloody nose, making a good object lesson for the folks back home as to how dangerous the rods could be.

I knew things were going too well.

Sure enough, no sooner were we in the air than a fighter dropped down from the clouds, screeching over us with a sonic boom that visibly rocked the cars and vans floating in the hot Texas air. There was no way of knowing if the plane was really out to get us or to impress the news people; one canister of napalm then and there would have done it, so I figured he must be aiming to spare the reporters and take out our space caravan. At any rate, the plane just went overhead on the first pass.

"Get going," I said into my radio to the other vehicles. "Get into your orbit as soon as possible. We'll try to hold this guy off here if we can and catch up to you as soon as possible. If we don't make it, the sealed envelopes we gave you will show how to program your computers to get to the base on the moon that we're headed for."

The vehicles flashed skyward in the hot Texas air. Meanwhile the fighter was just slowing down enough to make a low-altitude turn and was headed back, the hot air distorting its distant image so it wavered and flickered like a ghost on the horizon.

As the fighter approached, a missile dropped off its wing and came flashing toward us.

"Can you outmaneuver that?" I ask Nikki. "If we could divert it from going for any of the other vehicles--they won't know how to avoid it."

My head suddenly was flung back into the seat as our van leaped into the path of the missile which Nikki was trying to get it locked onto us rather than another of our group. Once it was on our tail, she executed a series of heart-stopping turns that took us up and finally over the missile so that it was repelled downward to expend its energy and explode harmlessly in the earth below.

"I'm tired of being the victim," I said as we hovered in place, waiting for the plane to turn and head for us again. "Nikki, Take us down a bit--keep enough altitude so you can maneuver if you have to--then hold us real still. I need a shooting platform." I'd half been expecting trouble and had made it a point to learn how to use a rail gun. Now I was getting *real* sick of seeing lousy fighter planes in action. I pulled the rifle from its straps next to me, and opened the side door of the van. "Turn the van so my side's toward the plane."

I kicked the van door fully open, loosened my seat belt, and slid around in the seat so my feet dangled out the side as Nikki brought the van around. I pointed the gun out the open door and focused the scope on the oncoming plane.

The fighter was gaining altitude in the distance, preparing to send a missile over us so we couldn't deflect it downward. Below us, the crowd of reporters scattered all directions while a few brave souls stood their ground and took pictures of the battle unfolding above them.

A rail gun sends out a small projectile of depleted uranium wrapped in a steel shell. It travels so fast that even a plane is standing still for all practical purposes; in theory the fighter was a relatively easy target. All I needed to do was center the plane in the cross hairs of the scope and fire. The speed of the shell gave it the kinetic energy of a much larger projectile. Provided the plane and shell connected, the fighter wouldn't bother us again.

In theory. The problem was that rail guns were notoriously inaccurate, which is why the plane wasn't armed with them. If its inaccuracy weren't bad enough, the wind was causing the van to sway ever so slightly. And my hands were shaking as well.

Like all hand-held rail guns, it had only three barrels. I had to strike the plane with one of three tries or we were out of luck. So I lined the fighter up in the cross hairs the best I could and fired. The rail gun recoiled as the shell accelerated down its magnetic track.

One miss.

I aimed and fired again. Another miss.

One shot left.

As I watched, a small missile dropped from the plane and started toward us. Now or never because Nikki would have to maneuver to get out of the way. I aimed and fired.

And missed.

I hit the missile that was still close to the plane. The rocket exploded below the jet, shrapnel from its premature explosion riddled the fast-approaching plane. Apparently the fighter's on-board computer was damaged; the plane suddenly tumbled end over end out of control without the micro-second adjustments needed to keep it stable.

Nikki forced the van into a short dive and we flew under the tumbling inferno as it was carried through the air by the momentum of its flight. The fiery wreckage arched overhead and smashed into the dry earth with bits of molten plastic and burning fuel spewing across the ground.

"The news people got a nice show," I said as we stopped and hovered about ten meters off the ground. "OK. Let's catch up with our group before we have another showdown."

I tossed the now useless rail gun out of the door and closed it. A small boy below ran over and picked it up as we pulled away; a souvenir he'd probably hang on his bedroom wall, I thought as he waved at us.

Chapter 27

When we reached the moon, we discovered that the bots had made a pile of anti-grav rods like I couldn't believe. Part of it was because of a little trick Nikki had pulled.

"I made a little change," she explained as I tried not to roll my eyes. She'd been messing with the computers and a small experimental manufacturing assembly she'd brought back from the Erathosthenes base when we'd gone parts raiding. Basically, it was a meter-sized automated factory which had been part of an experiment to see if producing computer memory modules using the near vacuum the Moon offers was practical. "Coupled with the power the rod generators we'd set up to produce almost limitless electricity," she continued, "I figured the little factory might just as well be producing memory chips while we were at it."

"So it's been up here chugging out computer memories on the side like there was no tomorrow," I said.

"Looks like it. I programmed the bot overseeing the factory to plug them into the computer running the bots and the mining/rod making operation. The computer quickly became a super computer as more memory was plugged into it. It isn't fast by modern computer standards; that's impossible to achieve with modular units. But it's smart. And I fed an Oracle program into it."

"Oracle program?"

"It continuously analyzed what the bots were doing and made alterations in their programs to speed things up. The bots have been turning out rods at maximum production rates."

"Faster than I'd ever thought possible," I agreed, looking at the massive stack they'd created. "Wait a minute. There are more bots, too."

She chuckled. "Yeah, I was wondering when you'd notice. I'm guessing the Oracle computer took information from the mass information storage computer on the base and started a side assembly line which making new bots to add to the work force. That surprised me but probably made perfect sense to the computer. More bots would, after all, make the process of creating rods faster."

"I think you created a Frankenstein."

While the rest of our convoy was getting settled into their small rooms in the base, Nikki and I stood outside in the slow lunar sunset and watched the activity of the bots as they dragged rods out on sleds. The rods were piled in a huge arch-like arrangement that Oracle had come up with.

"You know, there aren't many of the original bots working," I said after we watched the process for a while.

"There aren't any at all, near as I can tell," Nikki said.

"Hey, Jake, you listening in?" I asked.

"I shouldn't be, but I am. Sorry."

"No problem. You inside the mining area?"

"Yeah," he said. "I know what you're going to ask. The answer is that there is one of the original bots in here. What happened to the others? Worn out?"

"Maybe," Nikki said. "But I doubt it. It would always be easier to use the repair program rather than completely replace the bot. Especially since the mini-factory I set up is making the same standard memory units that Oracle and all the bots use."

"Can you check Oracle for what happened, Nikki?" I asked.

"Sure. I'm curious, too. I'll be back in a minute."

I watched her bound away then turned my attention to a pair of bots that pulled a load of rods from the plant toward the stack. Then I realized something rather strange was going on. Rather than pile the rods along the outside, the bots had been walking down the aisle formed by two stacks of the rods.

I followed the bots, curious as to where they were headed. They made their way down the aisle, then made a left turn, right into what should have been a wall. "What the...?"

They were gone for about five minutes while I tried to figure out what the bots were up to.

"What's going on?" Nikki asked bouncing up to where I stood.

"I don't know. See those bots coming out with the empty cart?"

"Yeah."

"They just walked through a solid steel wall of those rods or--"

"Or what?"

"Or Hunter's Principle."

"That theory your team has?"

"Yeah. That the rods are warping space... Hey, Jake, shut down the bots in there for a minute. I don't want any more rods brought out here to throw off the force field we've created."

"Will do," Jake's voice crackled over the radio. "What's up?"

"I'm not sure. I think Oracle may have managed to create a gravitational gate."

"A what?"

"Remember, we were talking about the possibility of warping space. Looks like maybe it IS possible to do. I'm going to check it out."

"OK. I'll be out in a minute."

"Just be sure no one moves the rod arrangement around. That could change the setting... No telling where we'd end up."

"I'll come out and guard the rods so nothing's disturbed."

"Great. I'm going to take a look now," I said.

"Me, too," Nikki said.

I started to say no, then looked at her through her bubble helmet. With that look on her face, I thought, it would be crazy to try to talk her out of exploring with me.

We bounced toward the rods; we cast long shadows along the crater floor. "Did you find out what happened to the bots?" I asked.

"Each one was lost."

"Lost? How would--"

"Every time they added rods to the outside while bots were between the piles of rods--here in this valley or aisle," she said as we walked in the area between rods, "they would disappear. Finally, Oracle quit adding rods to the outside and started storing them inside. Even though there shouldn't have been room."

"Computer logic." I chuckled. "As long as they could get the rods back and quit losing bots, there was no reason for the program to question *how* it worked."

"Exactly. And they quit losing bots after that."

"The rods added on the outside must have changed the coordinates."

"The coordinates of what?" Nikki asked.

"Of the gate," I said. "The bots that were lost must have gone... but that would mean that somewhere... there are other gates."

"Which means?"

"Which means that someone--or something--is already building the gates. Sure you want to come? We might be meeting a bot-eating monster." I said as we neared the blurred area ahead of us.

"You can't scare me, Phil."

"Jake," I said. "We're entering the field now. You might want to call my team so they can know what's going on."

"Will do."

Nikki and I remained speechless as we stepped into the blurred area and headed down what should have been a wall of rods but looked like a long black tunnel ahead of us. The darkness seemed to shimmer and made my eyes hurt whenever I glanced at it. "Jake, can you read us?"

Nothing. I stopped for a moment. "What do you think?" I said to Nikki. "If we were smart, we'd probably go back."

"If we were smart is a little iffy, right."

"Yeah. Let's go on and see what's making that rainbow ball of light ahead of us."

The sphere of light was beautiful. The calculations said the rods warped space. Period. But they did more than that. They created one of the most beautiful displays of changing patterns of light ever seen by human eyes. The ball of light danced ahead of us as and then, as we neared it, it proved to be a hole which we stepped. Our bodies seemed to become part of the interplay of shapes and colors. Almost with regret, we stepped out of the gate and felt a heavy, Earth-weight gravity.

"Look at that!" I said as we both stumbled to regain our footing under the heavier pull of the gravity. We certainly were no longer on the moon. Wooded areas were broken by long expanses of grass. The plants were growing wild and looked like an ancient, pristine Earth. Butterflies the size of footballs fluttered about while a strange whirring insect or small animal occasionally zipped by on an unknown task.

At first I thought we really were back on Earth. But the small animals and greenish sky told

me we weren't. And everything had two shadows; I sneaked a peek at the sun, "Binary sun?" I said. "Where do you suppose we are?"

"There're the rods, anyway," Nikki said and pointed to a huge stack of rods several meters away resting in a clump of trees. "And what do you suppose that is?"

I looked where she pointed. In the distance, a blue, lacy crystal mountain which appeared to be floating in the air. Large bud-like areas seemed to grow out of the narrow tubes connecting everything. The size was deceptive; it had to be huge, judging from the hazy look it had which could only be caused by the distance it was from it.

"That," I finally said, "Is what a city looks like when the culture building it has anti-grav rods."

"Do you suppose it's inhabited?" Nikki asked.

"If it is, they must be the most uncurious living beings in the universe. I can't imagine having this gate with bots coming through it all the time. And not checking up on them."

"Abandoned?"

"Maybe. We'll have to see later on. For now, we'd better get back," I said.

"Yeah."

We turned toward our entrance. Unlike its counterpart on the Moon, this one was created by two monoliths of blue stone, apparently designed just to be a gate. A "stargate," since we were somewhere far, far from Earth. An alien control panel or--perhaps just an elaborate work of art--stood in front of it, glowing with a changing pattern of small lights.

We walked toward the gate and stepped into the blurred area that marked the entrance and moved back into the shimmering darkness. We walked without talking.

But we didn't step out on our Moon. It was an airless, barren world. But not the Moon.

"What's going on?" Nikki ask.

"I don't know. But I think I know how the bots got lost. Let's backtrack real quickly."

We started at a walk and ended in a run. We stepped back out on the planet with the blue crystal city in the distance.

"We'd better sit tight for a while," I said. "They'll surely start sending bots through the stargate we created on the Moon. Then, we can follow one of the bots back."

We waited.

Hours passed while we explored the area around us.

We slowly ran out of air in the suits' tanks.

"Do you think it's safe to breathe the atmosphere?" Nikki said.

"There isn't much alternative. I did notice that some of the plants... Look there, if that isn't a dandelion... So maybe."

We cracked our helmets open and tried a quick breath. We didn't die right away, so we removed our helmets to conserve the last of our oxygen in case we ever did find a way back to the Moon.

Hours later, it still appeared that the air was safe. I hoped we hadn't picked up some weird virus or fungus that would kill us later on. I decided to keep that worry to myself.

"They'll get to us before long," I said, hoping my voice sounded more sure than I was. I put my arm around Nikki and we sat, watching first one sunset and then the other as the second sun

sunk below the horizon and foreign stars dotted the purplish sky. We put our gloves back on as the air turned cool.

When we awoke the next day. There still wasn't a bot to be seen.

At noon, alien planet time, a bot finally wandered through the gate with a load of rods as if it were business as usual. We put on our helmets and followed it back through the alien gate after it had deposited the rods in the pile and started back--we hoped--for the Moon.

We stepped out to look down the rows of rods to the barren surface of the Moon.

"We're back!" Nikki said as we bounced out onto the lunar surface.

Cheering rang out over our radio, then Jake's voice crackled through the din of voices. "Get back into the dome you two. You've got some explaining to do."

I took Nikki's gloved hand in mine and we headed toward the base.