

The lure of over six hundred quintillion dollars in precious metals breeds betrayal and murder when sordid space entrepreneurs secretly harvest the asteroid belt. Can a savvy meteorite hunter and his quirky gal friend prevent a near earth asteroid impact?

Near Earth

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NEAR EARTH

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Chapter 1 - Kazakhstan

The tall man greeted Pavel and Dimitri as they exited the train. The two had just finished some tedious extra-curricular duties. Why they had been chosen for this stealthy work, they did not know – but there were ten thousand Euros in it for each of them. More money than a railroad maintenance man in Russia would see in several years, and more than enough to deflect all possible questions about what and why. They were told only that some important cargo had been mishandled, and a substitution had to be made in transit, along the railway lines from the Baikonur airport to the Tyuratam Cosmodrome – the oldest space launch facility in the world, and the site that launched Sputnik in 1957. If the substitution was not made, a scheduled launch could go wrong – very wrong. And it was better if their railroad line superiors knew nothing about it. A common notion of bravery in the new Russia, where saving face and avoiding blame were virtues well understood by all.

“Any problems?” asked the tall man.

“No, sir,” offered Pavel.

“You are certain you were not seen?”

“Quite certain. It was completely dark. Without the night scopes, we would not have seen anything ourselves.”

“You had enough time?”

“Almost thirty seconds to spare.”

“And the original cargo?”

“In the extra box.”

“You remembered to mark that box with the ultraviolet marker I gave you?”

“Of course.”

“Very well. If you will follow me please.” Pavel followed, but Dimitri hesitated.

“Will you be paying us now?” he asked.

The tall man turned and put a rigid gloved finger to his mouth. “Do not discuss that here,” he replied in a loud but stifled whisper. “Just follow me.”

“All right. I just want to get it as soon as possible.”

“You will. This way, please.”

They were led to a delivery truck at the back of the train station, with Pavel chiding Dimitri all the way. Distrust of other Russians was a way of life left over from the Cold War. One never knew who was a countryman

and who was KGB. The slightest anti-party comment, or even a sympathetic look, was enough to get one imprisoned for life, or worse. Even though it was more than fifteen years since the breakup of the USSR, old memories died hard. Fortunately, the tall man was clearly not Russian, which made him eminently more trustworthy than most of the men Pavel and Dimitri knew.

The tall man faced them as they stood in the back of the truck. He had closed the door behind them. Dimitri noticed how eerily quiet it was inside the truck – no train or crowd noise at all. So unusual for such a busy train station. At its height, the Tyuratam Cosmodrome had employed thousands. The city of Leninsk was built nearby just to house the scientists and maintenance people, over ten thousand persons. But nowadays, it was not so busy. Since the fall of communism in Russia, Kazakhstan had claimed the launch facility, so it was not technically the property of Russia proper anymore. The tall man spoke again, more pleasantly this time.

“Just a moment. I need to verify that we got the item off the train.”

“And then we will be paid?” asked Dimitri.

The tall man didn’t answer. He turned away from them, pulled out his cell phone and made a call. No wonder he wanted quiet, thought Pavel. Dimitri had no reason to be so suspicious. The plan was a genius of misdirection and timing. The substitute cargo had been smuggled aboard the train a day earlier. After all, it was easy to hide – less than one meter long, maybe half a meter high, roughly the shape of a large sombrero. Plenty of room to store it in an extraneous cargo box.

A three kilometer railway tunnel snaked about ten kilometers from the Cosmodrome. It was dark and steeply curved, requiring the train slow to less than thirty kilometers per hour to pass through it. That gave Pavel and Dimitri just under six minutes. From their position as maintenance men in the trailing car, they carried out the steps they had rehearsed in private for several weeks. They opened the extra cargo box the moment the train slowed to enter the tunnel. They donned the night scopes so they could see in the dark. No additional lighting could be used for fear of being discovered. With their special tools and the substitute cargo in hand, they entered the fortified train car, which naturally was locked, but of course they had an extra key.

Pavel repeatedly checked his watch, as every step was timed, every move made with the precision borne of endless practice. Opening the cargo box was easy and went just as planned. First, they had to separate the straps, being careful not to disturb the Royal British seal that had been welded onto

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them. Then they had removed all the delicate padding and redundant moorings, which were attached just as expected. Their practice version of the box and its contents had indeed been accurate. They pulled out the item and put the substitute in its place a full twenty seconds before the half-way mark. Then they carefully replaced every pad and tie-down exactly as they found them, and rewelded the metal straps. They returned to the trailing car and put the item and their equipment in the extra box. They were still in the tunnel when they latched the box closed and resumed their positions.

The tall man snapped his phone shut. He turned back to the pair and smiled.

“We have the item. You have done your job well.”

“Thank you.” Pavel smiled and jokingly pushed Dimitri on the shoulder.

“We just have one final problem,” said the tall man. “You know that you cannot speak of this to anyone.”

“Of course. That was what we agreed to,” said Dimitri. Pavel nodded, glad to let Dimitri handle the communications. “As long as we keep quiet, no one will ever know.”

“Yes. That’s particularly what I’m worried about.” He pulled a long-barreled revolver out from under his coat. The silencer was apparent.

“What are you doing!?”

“Like you said. As long as you two keep quiet.” He fired twice at Pavel - the two dull thuds from the silenced nozzle were barely audible. He fell almost instantly. Dimitri gasped and turned to run. He hadn’t quite reached the door handle when two more shots, and two more dull thuds, echoed softly within the truck’s walls. Dimitri fell backward and lay with blood oozing from his neck.

The tall man briefly checked the pulse of each man. When he was satisfied that they were both dead, he exited the back of the truck, sealed the cargo door behind him, entered the cab and drove away.

Several days later, the bodies of the two men were discovered by a passerby. The truck had been abandoned in a remote forested area about eighty kilometers from the launch zone. No murder weapon was found and no fingerprints were present other than those of the two dead men. They were identified as railroad workers from Russia, and it was not known what they were doing in Kazakhstan. No other clues were found at the scene, and police were completely baffled by the incident. No progress was made in the case for the next four years. No progress, that is, until an American called the local police and suggested a logical suspect.

Chapter 2 - Mexico

Dan re-checked the tension on the cable. It was field-tested for five hundred pounds, and he expected it would require all of that strength to pull this meteorite up off the bluff where it sat. How it came to rest on a small ledge, just fifty feet below the rolling mesa where the remainder of the strewn field lay, and hundreds of feet above the valley below, Dan was not exactly sure. But when hunting for meteorites in the field, his experience was that anything was possible.

Including, in this case, the unseen guest who watched him through binoculars from across the bluff.

All Dan could think of now was, this had better work. After five days in this forsaken stretch of desert near Zacatecas, Mexico, all he had to show for his search efforts were a mild sunburn, a sore back and a broken winch on his jeep. (He didn't really count those three small stony chondrites he found on day one, as those were common meteorites, worth only a few dollars per gram.) The winch had broken earlier that morning in his third attempt to raise this much larger rock.

Meanwhile, Amy Dubek, his colleague and part-time meteorite hunter, on temporary loan from NASA's LINEAR program (despite her boss's protests, she just up and left whenever she learned of a freshly fallen meteorite), sat in the jeep, idly passing the time with her latest hobby – bow-tying. She peeked up from underneath her pink sun visor, her amber sunglasses reflecting the odd assortment of wires and pulleys Dan had fashioned. Then she turned her attention back to the partially tied red bow in her left hand.

“Think you got it figured out this time, Hazy?”

“I hope so. Fourth time's the charm.”

“I thought the third time was supposed to be the charm.”

“Well, the third time didn't work. So that must be wrong.”

“I hope you're right. If you break one more thing on this old tin can that you call a jeep, we're in for a long Mexican vacation. Not that there's anything wrong with this pretty little stretch of desert, but I'd prefer a beach and a bottomless margarita.”

“Have a little faith, Ames. This time Mr. Newton is helping us in a big way. His second law, and of course, his universal law of gravitation.”

“Yeah, well I'd feel better if Mr. Newton were here to help pull on that wire. Are you sure this, uh, vehicle has enough power for this?”

“It lifted that hundred kilogram rock in Argentina, didn't it?”

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“That was two years ago. Your jeep was younger then. And that rock was puny compared to this one.”

“Always with the negative ions, Ames. It would help if you tried some positrons for once. Visualize the jeep moving smoothly down the hill, the meteorite rising above the rim, our triumphant return to the Lunar and Planetary Lab in Tucson...”

“All I can visualize right now is you sitting on a couch next to a shrink. This is by far the nuttiest contraption you’ve ever come up with.”

Using a knotted rope, Dan had rappelled down to the bluff and wrapped the meteorite in a loose chain netting, linked atop it by a carabiner. To that he attached the wire cable from the jeep’s winch, stringing it back up the slope, over a Y-branch in a low mesquite tree, then up to the top of the bluff, through some bushes to a pulley attached to a taller tree and finally to the winch on the front of his jeep. Except the winch motor was broken, so he’d have to use the engine. He had hoped that the combination of the jeep’s horsepower, while backing downhill, would raise this rock to the top of the bluff. From there, he had another scheme to drop it gently into the back of his jeep, so that he and Amy could then drive it back to Tucson. At least, that trick had worked in Texas. And that wasn’t all that far away from where they were now. Geography had to mean something.

The uninvited guest put down his binoculars. He’d have to move fast to get as close as possible to Dan’s jury-rigged excuse for a meteorite collection device. It looked so primitive, it would be easy to upend. Then, with any luck, the meteorite would be his for the taking. Still out of sight of both Dan and Amy, he crouched down. The low desert scrub and tall grass were perfect cover for him. He peeked up above the vegetation one more time, and then crept forward.

Meanwhile, Dan made one final inspection of the wire and all the connections. He stood at the very top of the bluff and stretched to grab the wire. His athletic six foot two-inch frame was just long enough to reach it. He wiped the beading sweat from his forehead and pushed his long golden brown hair out of his eyes. After a few hard tugs on the wire, he concluded that everything was secure.

“Okay, Ames. Are you ready?”

“Sure, I’m ready. Ready to get out of this steamy oven and back to New Mexico. The LINEAR team does miss me after awhile, you know.”

“I mean, are you ready to drive?”

“You mean, you want me to drive this thing?”

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“I need to keep an eye on the rock and the cabling. If anything goes wrong, well...”

“Yeah, I know. Another expensive meteorite hunt with no meteorites. I know you don’t count those little chondrites we found.”

“Of course not. We both knew there had to be a bigger rock here and we were right.”

“You mean, I knew there had to be a bigger rock here, and I was right.”

“Well, I had a hunch.”

“Yeah, well, hunches don’t mean squat when compared to trajectory calculations and strewn field analysis.”

“Focus, please, Ames. You’ll have plenty of time for I-told-you-sos on the drive back.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She turned her head and peeked down at the path behind the jeep. Except there was no path – just a long, gently rolling downhill with no well-defined roadway, steepening towards the bottom, peppered with desert scrub, cactus, a few old wooden crates, an abandoned mine entrance and a few rattlesnakes. They had to meander their way along some old switchbacks just to coax the jeep up the mesa in the first place. But she really didn’t want to admit any fear to Dan.

“You know how I hate backing downhill.”

“Don’t worry. It’s my jeep. I give you permission to abuse it as much as necessary. Just take it slow, I’ll watch your progress and tell you when to stop. I figure you should have raised the meteorite over the top of the ridge by the time you reach those rocks, which is long before the steeper part of the downhill.” He pointed to a low pile of stones about fifty feet behind her. “Then lean on the parking brake as hard as you can. Remember how it slips.”

“I thought you fixed that.”

“I thought I did, too. But it’s acting up again. Just stand on it if you have to, that should do it.”

“I hope so. The regular brakes aren’t that great to begin with.” Amy looked back down the slope, which steepened at the point where she was supposed to stop. “I won’t be able to see you from down there.”

“Don’t worry. If you don’t see or hear me, just stop when the front end of the jeep passes those rocks.”

“Okay. You’re the boss, I’m just the hired help. And may I point out once again how cheaply I am working?”

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“Please, not again.” Dan walked up to her and gently kissed her hair above her visor. “You know your help is invaluable, Ames. That’s why mere money would never suffice...”

The interloper peered over the top of the cliff just in time to see Dan kiss Amy on the top of her head. How touching. All he had to do now was hide behind that mesquite bush about halfway between the cliff summit and the meteorite, then wait for his chance.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” continued Amy. “Just get up there and watch the meteorite. See if we can make it fly again.” She put down the red bow she was working on and grabbed the wheel.

Dan ambled back uphill and peered down at the meteorite. He gave one more pull on the wire. Everything looked ready. He had no idea his every movement was being scrutinized from across the bluff.

“Okay, Ames. Let her rip.”

Amy gunned the jeep’s engine, then stepped on the clutch and engaged reverse, craning her neck behind her to see where she was going. Except that the vehicle didn’t move. She applied increasing pressure to the gas, and felt the jeep’s body vibrate and rumble under the stress. It still didn’t budge. Dan saw that the jeep was straining, so why wasn’t she moving?

“More power!” he hollered. “Give it some more gas!” But with the engine revving, Amy couldn’t hear him. She eased off the gas and looked up at Dan, shrugging her shoulders in bewilderment as to what to do next. Dan rolled his right index finger and nodded his head - the universal sign to keep trying. She nodded. She put it back into gear and gave it some more gas.

“*Omigosh!*” Dan saw why the jeep wasn’t moving. He shouted back at Amy, waving his arms wildly, but she had turned her head to back up, and couldn’t see or hear him.

The jeep strained again, then jerked backward down the hill, throwing Amy forward and almost into the steering wheel. She braked hard and fell back in the seat, the back of her neck slamming into the headrest. Dan ran down the hill, finding Amy stunned, but uninjured.

“Sorry, Ames. I forgot to remove the rocks I used to chock the back wheels.”

“I’m sorry, too. *Sorry that I’m doing this!* By the way, I’m fine, thank you.”

“I know. You would have chewed me out if you weren’t. Try it again. It should go easily now.”

“Wait a second. I have to screw my head back on first.” She swiveled her neck a few times and pretended to turn it back into place. “Okay. Anything

else you forgot to tell me?” But Dan had already spun around and climbed half way back up the hill, and didn’t hear her. Amy sighed deeply. “Hazy, you really stress me out sometimes. Why do I get involved in these things?” She put the jeep back into gear and looked behind her again. “Oh, yeah, rocks from outer space. Pieces of asteroids and planets. Signs of alien life and all that jazz...”

The jeep started to roll smoothly down the hill. Amy was surprised – the motor wasn’t straining at all. But after about two meters, it stopped hard. She looked ahead at the wire, which was now pulling taut against the pulley on the tree. All she had done was take out the slack in the wire. She was just now feeling the weight of the meteorite pulling against the jeep. She looked up at Dan, who was nodding his head. Keep going, he meant.

She gave it some more gas, and the jeep stubbornly pulled at the wire, which tightened even further against the pulley. Dan could now see the top of the carabiner. This was the moment of truth. If the jeep had enough horsepower, and if it could get a little additional gravity assist by driving downhill, it would lift the rock. And if the wire were strong enough, and if the links of that old chain were sturdy, and if all his connections were true, and if the jeep could gather enough momentum...but those were a lot of ifs. First things first.

With the full weight of the rock now tugging on the jeep, Amy applied more gas. The jeep shifted, almost imperceptibly. First an inch, then a foot, then several feet. Dan looked back down the ridge. The rock had slid off the embankment where it had sat for who knows how many years, and now swayed gently as it began its shaky journey back up the hill. It was working!

He stared fearfully at the carabiner as it fought the pull of his impromptu chain netting. The eight metal links strained and squeaked like a hungry brood competing for mother’s milk. Just hang on kids, he thought, it’s not much further. Then the rock slipped a bit. As though the wire was being let out. Or, maybe the jeep was buckling?

He returned to the summit and peered down at Amy. She had backed nearly halfway down the hill, but her progress was anything but smooth. Contrary to the way any sane person would drive a stick shift, Amy used her left foot for both the clutch and the brake, and kept her right foot poised above the gas pedal. She always drove that way, even on the freeway. Better reaction time for the brake, she always said. It drove Dan crazy.

He now saw why the rock was swaying back and forth. Amy would feather the gas gently with her right foot, then hit the brake with her left foot as she picked up any speed. For a moment, she applied gas and brake at the

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same time, causing the jeep to lurch its way down the hill. At first, this merely imparted a slight swaying motion to the rock. But as it lifted further off the ground, the rock slipped with each stop and start. Every little slip was like placing the rock in free fall for an instant. Dan realized that Sir Isaac Newton would work against them in that situation. The extra strain on the wire, the carabiner, and the chain was not exactly what he had planned.

He wanted to keep an eye on the wire and all his connections in case he had to make adjustments, but if Amy didn't drive more smoothly, and any one of the connections failed, the meteorite would fall back down the ravine, and probably not land on that nice little bluff where they found it. It had to be at least five hundred feet to the valley below. They would likely lose out on this rock for good.

He surveyed the landscape behind Amy. It was all sand and desert scrub plants, with no clearly defined road. The jeep had no easy way of negotiating a straight path down the hill, but Amy had to drive straight to maximize the gravity assist from driving downhill in the first place. As much as he hated leaving sight of the rock, he'd have to risk it. He raced down the hill towards her, trying in vain to get her attention. She still faced the rear, and couldn't see or hear him.

He stepped and slid awkwardly down the sandy hillside. He couldn't build up any speed for fear of falling flat on his face. But he was gaining on her. He aimed for the driver's side – he'd just have to grab her about the shoulders to get her attention and make her stop, then he'd take over at the wheel. Now that he knew the meteorite was safely working its way up the bluff, maybe it would make it. No need to baby-sit it.

Amy gave the jeep another burst of gas, and picked up speed as she rolled down the hill, outpacing Dan again. He broke into a dead run, then promptly slipped and fell on his back. *Ouch*, that hurt more than his fall yesterday. He strained to roll over onto his stomach, facing down the hill. The fall had knocked the wind out of him.

He looked up at Amy, who appeared to be close to the rock pile, her stopping point. But he couldn't really tell from his perspective. He glanced back up the hill.

There, he saw the prettiest sight he had seen since the last Mexican sunset. Atop the summit, just as he had hoped, the meteorite swayed gently like a slender tree in an autumn breeze. Maybe it was a brief rush of endorphins, or maybe it was a sudden magical healing, but the pain in his back subsided.

Then he heard a sound, like grinding metal. His smile quickly turned into a gasp. The meteorite had jerked and dropped a full meter. He looked back down the hill – Amy was in trouble.

She had reached the rock pile and slammed on the brakes, bringing the jeep to a jolting stop. The meteorite tugged back against the pull, while the rock and its precarious netting waved wildly in mid-air. The jeep lurched forward several feet. She immediately jammed on the parking brake, which slowed the jeep's forward progress, but not completely. It continued to roll back uphill toward Dan. He peered overhead and saw the wire, pulled taught, inching its way back up the hill. The brake wasn't holding. But without the engine noise, maybe now Amy could hear him.

Dan tried to scream. He hadn't gotten his wind back yet, and he couldn't suck in enough air to talk, let alone scream. He made a feeble attempt anyway.

"The parking brake, Ames. Stand on it!" He could barely hear himself. No way that Amy could have heard that. He tried to sit up, but his lower back burned again, like he had been stabbed by a hot poker. All he could see from his prone position was the front bumper of the jeep, creeping toward him. He'd have to try something else. And fast.

Amy pushed her entire body weight on the brake. The jeep continued to fight her, straining back up the hill, squealing and grinding as it went.

"Dammit, Hazy! What's wrong with this thing?" She tried to stand up like Dan had suggested earlier, but her angle was bad. She fell right back in her seat, the jeep continuing to slide uphill. She leaned forward, stood up and put her left foot on the emergency brake. The jeep slowed but did not stop.

"Okay, this is it!" She leaned forward again, stood up and put both feet on the tiny brake pad. The jeep groaned, whined and then finally stopped cold.

"Whew!" She sat back and assessed the scene. She was just a few feet beyond the pile of stones where Dan had told her to stop. Not bad. She looked around but couldn't see Dan, so she stood up for a better view forward.

"Hazy? Where the hell..."

"Right here, Ames."

Dan was on his hands and knees, directly in front of the jeep. He pulled his hand out from in front of front left tire, having just crammed a triangular shaped rock against it, chocking the wheel once more, except now the rock

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was keeping the jeep from rolling uphill. With a groan, he rolled over on his back and out of the vehicle's path, then struggled to speak.

"A few feet further and you'd have squashed me."

"Dan! What happened to you? Why didn't you say something!"

Dan was now able to breathe more deeply. He still couldn't talk normally, but at least Amy could hear him.

"If I could have, I would." With both hands, he raised his body to a kneeling position, resting on one knee. The pain in his back was unpleasant, but tolerable.

"Well, next time, throw something, or make a cloud of dust, or..."

"With any luck, there won't be a next time. Remind me never to try a crazy set-up like this again." He looked around on the ground. "Here, we'll need another rock to chock the other wheel. Then we can go on to Phase Two." Amy shut the engine off and made a move to step out of the jeep.

The interloper peeked over the top of the bluff down at Dan and Amy. He was sure he hadn't been seen. It was now or never. He brandished his cutting tool and...

....*Snap!*

Dan had just gotten to his feet and watched the surreal events that followed in slow motion. The wire that had been connected to the meteorite flew past him and down the hill, the carabiner whizzing by his head. His brilliant improvisation had just failed. The chain had snapped and the meteorite had fallen.

Amy fell backwards and banged her head on the top of the driver's seatback. Without the tension from the weight of the rock, and with the jeep still in neutral, and not chocked from behind, the jeep jerked and started back down the hill. It picked up speed quickly.

Dan fought the stiff and stabbing pain in his lower back and took the first arduous step to run after the jeep. Ouch, now it hurt. *It really hurt.* He looked up at the jeep and saw Amy's body, almost limp in the front seat, drifting out of sight down the hill. He had no choice. It was nearly half a mile to the base and the slope didn't level out until close to the bottom. Pain or no, he'd have to catch up to her, and fast, or he'd have to pick up Amy in a heap at the bottom of the mesa.

He completely forgot about the meteorite, which by now had to be rolling its way to the bottom of the ravine, an area completely inaccessible by jeep. He focused on Amy. His second step was not as bad as the first, the third not as bad as the second. *I can do this*, he said to himself. Now it was Dan who was gaining speed.

Then he saw the jeep change direction. Apparently Amy was out of control, or worse, maybe she was unconscious. Still rolling backwards, the jeep made a sharp turn as it hit some low brush and deflected to the right. But that might help. If the jeep traveled sideways at more of an angle to the hill, it would slow down and he could catch up to it sooner. Then he thought of the downside to this development. If it turned too steeply against the hillside, the jeep might roll over.

At the wheel, Amy was dazed but awake. She felt the jeep accelerate as it continued to roll down the hill, then bounce wildly as it hit a bump. It jerked to her left and turned sideways to the hill. She held on to the driver side door as the force pulled her to the right. If she hadn't held on, she would have been thrown out.

The sideways direction had slowed her descent, but not by much. She tried the brakes, but they were almost useless. They barely worked on level ground, no way would they stop the jeep now. She had just enough control to steer the jeep back downhill. She wanted to do a one-eighty and shift into first gear, so that she could face forward and see where she was going, but she was still going too fast to try that. Maybe the engine could help slow her down. Could she get it started at this speed? She had never tried that. As long as it was in neutral, it ought to work. Then she could turn sideways to the hill and maybe slow down just enough to put it in reverse. With power, maybe she could gain control.

She tried the key. The engine groaned but wouldn't start. She tried it again. The engine coughed and choked. She repeatedly turned the key and pumped the gas. Nothing. *Great*, it must be flooded by now.

Despite her normal cool under pressure, Amy started to panic. Her mind raced as she wondered desperately what to try next. The steepest part of the hill was coming up and she wasn't sure she could survive a breakneck gravity-driven ride all the way to the bottom. She stole a glimpse back up the hill and saw Dan running toward her, but he would never get there in time. She looked behind her and spotted a small bulge in the sand looming to her right amidst the otherwise scrubby landscape. It was the abandoned mine entrance they had seen on the way up the mesa and it was coming up fast. She had an idea.

Chapter 3 – Dawson

It was early evening in the low Arctic. As the jaws of winter loosened, the precious golden sun, the source of all life that survived near the Arctic Circle, rose earlier and set later each day, inviting more living creatures back. Including the springtime game fish that swelled the Yukon River.

Nu-Teela, an elder member of the dwindling Han-Kutchin tribe, was elbow deep in a sink full of fish entrails, blood, rancid water and a thick Yukon River weed that smelled of skunk. The foul concoction was the inevitable result of cleaning his daily catch. Some game fish were more desirable than others, and only several varieties available at this time of year were considered good for eating. He would have to wait until fall to collect the Yukon's true prize – the Chinook salmon – as they migrated back up to their spawning grounds, high in the river's glacier-fed alpine lakes.

But this was early springtime and Nu-Teela had to catch what he could. He would feed his extended family first and, with any luck, sell the rest of his catch in town. The local fish markets and marine processors in the city of Dawson waited eagerly for the daily fish harvest brought in by the native fishermen. The tribesmen knew exactly where to lay their nets, which fish to keep and throw back and which ones brought the best prices – and Nu-Teela, from his years of fishing these waters, was the wisest of the wise. He knew which variety the merchants wanted most, and hence the ones that would bring his family top dollar. Today, he would bring in Arctic grayling and northern pike only.

He had been later than usual in cleaning the fish. One of his sled dogs had been injured and had to be sledded back to his son's hut, a round trip of two hours he had not built into his schedule. Now dusk was settling outside the town of Dawson and soon it would just be too cold and too dark to work any more. He stopped to survey his work thus far – two barrels full of perfectly filleted carcasses. Grayling in one barrel, pike in the other. He would have to stop now. Barely time to store the barrels and deliver some fish for his son's wife to prepare dinner.

As he grabbed the pike barrel about the top with both hands, preparing to spin it onto his dog sled, an eerie yellow light washed across his face from above. He looked up.

It was low in the sky to the northwest of the tribe's settlement on the outskirts of town. A strange ball of light and a thin smoke trail appeared below the thick layer of clouds and roared just over the tree tops. It made an

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awful screeching sound as it soared out of view. Nu-Teela stood straight up and cocked his head slightly, to follow the dying sound as best he could. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the echo of a distant thud. The ball of fire had landed – perhaps not far to the north.

Distant memories of stories told by his grandfather bubbled through his mind. Stories handed down from generation to generation in the Han-Kutchin tribe. About other great lights seen in the sky, about the great fortunes they would bring the tribe. Tools made from a hard black stone, that were stronger and more durable than any made from flint. A magic material delivered directly from the gods themselves. The abundant hunting and fishing seasons that would follow. He felt for the small leather necklace he wore – and the shiny, chipped black stone that hung from it. A present from his grandfather, a piece of one such magic rock itself. His spine tingled with an excitement he had not felt in years.

Nu-Teela's grandfather was one of the few elders left who could still remember the way things were. Before the white men invaded the north country, bringing their traps, their guns and their smoke-belching trains. Before the elk and beaver were hunted and trapped nearly to extinction. Before alcohol became the drug of choice for his people. Once, his family ruled the land from Alaska to the "great river", which is what the word "Yukon" meant in his native language. Now, his tribe was forced to live on a small settlement outside of Dawson. They caught fish for outsiders and posed for pictures with tourists.

He left the barrels of fish and the sink full of fish parts, hopped on his sled, turned it in the direction of the distant sound and cued his dogs. In unison they lunged forward, then broke into a full sprint. In the direction of the strange sound, and he hoped, to its resting site.

Chapter 4 – Lunar and Planetary Laboratory

Three strangely uniformed figures watched from behind a neatly trimmed row of hedges just outside the science building at the University of Arizona. Although the cover of darkness was more than sufficient to hide their presence, they always took the extra precaution of hiding anyway. Their existence was not well-known to the public and they were under strict orders to keep it that way. Anzio, the oldest and most experienced of the three, placed his night scope just above the hedge line and watched silently as two men stood in the faintly lit covered entryway to the science building.

To Russ and Toola, who flanked him behind the hedges, Anzio Tomasi was always an odd sight. Shorter than the average man, but more muscular and tougher than most, he had been bald since his early thirties. Even though his glistening head looked natural, if not premature, for a man of his otherwise youthful appearance, it was still the object of many jokes at the group's desert training grounds. Not that his two young colleagues would ever remark on it, as they had nothing but respect for their commander and role model. Now in his early forties, Anzio had remembered as a matter of routine to smear the blackout camouflage on the top of his head as well as on his face. Otherwise his golden dome advertised his presence, especially on these night surveillance missions.

Russ Tidewater was the youngest of the three and by far the most eager. This was his first field assignment since joining the elite group of agents and he followed Anzio's every word with "Yes, sir" or "Roger that, sir." All the while keeping one unoccupied eye on the third member of their specially trained unit, the exotic Toola Winapooli.

Toola was of mixed African-Filipino ancestry and possessed a face and a body that reflected the most delightful features of both cultures. Her skin was a light golden brown, the kind frequently mistaken for a nicely-tanned white. Her long dark honey brown hair, longer than regulation, was allowed only because she kept it neatly tied up in a natural braid that required no hairpins or clips. With a figure sculpted by the four-times weekly fitness regimen and diet required of all field operatives, she fit neatly into her new deep blue form-fitting uniform, which on her resembled an additional layer of skin. Although the outfits were just plain unnatural looking for the two men, it was perfect for her shapely figure. Together, the trio resembled three-quarters of the Fantastic Four. More or less.

After chasing fruitless leads around the world for the past six months, Anzio and his team had traced the missing item to a man in Argentina, who tried to sell it for half a million dollars (ten cents on the dollar to its market value) to a neophyte collector, who had refused to buy it because the seller couldn't prove it was genuine. And now that same man, named Pedro Allende, had made several cell phone calls to another man in the US and had arranged this meeting. It was no surprise to Anzio that the suspected buyer selected this spot, just outside the University of Arizona in Tucson, for the transaction. This was the break his team had been waiting for.

Anzio adjusted his earpiece. Then he whispered to his trainees.

"Keep that big ear focused, Russ. I can't make out what he's saying."

"I can," said Toola, as she adjusted her earpiece as well. "It's in Spanish."

"Good ears, girl. Okay, now tell me everything they're saying."

"I'm not getting all of it. 'Do you have it with you?' 'Of course I do.' 'Not on me' '...stupid to carry it on me.' '...have the money?' 'In my car.'" Then Toola fell silent.

"Well?" asked Anzio.

"It's muffled, I can barely hear anything. He must have turned his head away from us."

Anzio looked again through his scope and confirmed that was true. The buyer faced the building and gestured about something. Anzio looked away from his scope and back at Russ and the electronic listening ear.

"Russ, is that thing boosted to the max?"

"Roger that, sir."

"Okay. Then we'll have to hope he turns back toward us before he says the magic words. But if I see a trade take place, we go in. Russ, you'll go left, Toola go right, I'll go down the middle. Non-lethal weapons only. Unless someone points a gun at you."

"Roger, sir."

"Russ, for the last time, my name is not Roger."

"Oh, yes sir. I know we've talked about that. I won't do it again, sir."

Anzio peered through the scope again. Both men were still facing the building. Allende turned to the side and threw his arms up in the air.

"He's mad about something," said Toola.

"I could have guessed that," said Anzio. "What's he saying now?"

"Something about...oh he's cussing...shit...fuck you...oh, I'm sorry sir."

Near Earth

“Don’t be bashful,” chimed in Russ. “It sounds downright sexy coming from you.”

“Let’s cut the comedy, guys. I think our seller may have just blown a gasket. Allende is gesturing strongly with his right hand. Now he’s facing us again.” Allende screamed so loud that all three agents grabbed their ears to turn down the volume on their earpieces.

“Did you get that, Toola?”

“Something like ‘No way, Jose.’ Or the Spanish equivalent.”

Allende gestured again and then pushed the other man, who was shorter, in the chest. But not hard enough to budge him. Toola heard just enough to translate.

“He said no deal, sir. Not until he sees the...bleeping money.”

“Get ready. This could be it,” said Anzio. Russ dropped the big listening ear and checked his equipment belt. Toola removed her earpiece, reached behind her back and smartly replaced it in her small backpack. Both well-trained agents spoke as one.

“Ready, sir.”

“All right. Allende is pushing the buyer again, harder this time.”

Russ was ready to spring forward. “Sir, I think we should go in now, before...” Anzio ignored him and continued the play-by-play.

“Buyer is moving back. They’re almost facing us now. Maybe we can hear. Russ, pull up the big ear again.” Russ complied, had it nearly plugged into the power pack, when Anzio grabbed his arm.

“Oh, shit, buyer has a knife.”

Russ dropped the big ear and froze. No one spoke for several long seconds while Russ and Toola looked at each other. Then Russ looked back to Anzio, who whispered a shriek.

“*Oh, Christ!*”

“Now sir?” asked Russ.

“Yes...NOW!”

Russ flew over the hedge like a pilot from an ejector seat and was on Allende in seconds. He lay prone on the ground, bleeding profusely from the neck and abdomen.

Russ hastily looked around, then back at Anzio, who was trailing.

“Where’d the other guy go?”

“Into the building. Go after him!”

Toola got there a moment later and attended to Allende. She quickly assessed. Blood ran in a swift current down his neck. A second wound on his chest made a sucking sound as he took labored breaths. A punctured

lung for sure and maybe a severed jugular. Not good. She tried her best to stem the bleeding from his neck, but Anzio interceded.

“Toola – search him. See if by some miracle he still has the item.”

“But sir, he’s going to die if we don’t…”

“He’s going to die anyway.”

Russ pulled on the door, which didn’t budge. “He couldn’t have gone in here. It’s locked tight!”

“He used a security card. Here’s the reader.” Anzio indicated a spot about waist high to the right of the door handle. “Break the glass.”

Russ pulled a small box off his belt, whipped it open revealing an axe-like tool. He smashed it hard against the door, to no avail. He struck it twice more, harder each time, with no effect.

“Remember your training, Russ,” reminded Anzio. “Use the cutter first.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Russ flipped over the tool, which had a diamond cutter raised on a sharp reverse edge. It made a horrible chalk-board squeaking sound as he scratched a big X on the door. Then he flipped the tool back over to the axe side and swung hard. The door smashed on contact, erupting into thousands of tiny shards.

He reached through the hole and pushed on the handle. The door swung open.

“The lab is on the third floor,” said Anzio.

“Is that where you think he’s going?”

“If he got the item from Allende, that’s where he’s bound to go.”

“But not if he thought he was being followed.”

“He doesn’t. That’s why I made you wait before we went in.”

“Roger that, sir. Oh, sorry.” Russ turned and ran into the building.

Anzio looked back at Toola, who was still kneeling over Allende. Her sleeves were deep purple, wet with blood, almost up to the elbows.

“Stop what you’re doing, Toola.”

“If we could just stop the bleeding, he might have a chance!”

“Give it up. That’s an order, agent.”

Allende took short, slow, difficult breaths. The chest wound had punctured his lung and it was filling up with blood fast. Despite his morbid and painful condition, he moved his lips.

“Muham…”

“Sir, he’s trying to speak!”

Anzio fumbled into his backpack and pulled out a small hand-held voice recorder. He flicked it on and handed it to Toola.

Near Earth

“Hold it close to his lips. We need every word.” With each short gulp of air, Allende whispered a syllable or two.

“Muhammad...”

She put pressure on the neck wound with one hand and took his pulse with the other. It was barely readable. Toola realized that he had maybe a few more seconds of life. He tried to speak again.

“What about Muhammad?” she asked.

“...must be...”

Anzio knelt down next to him, across from Toola.

“Must be...what?”

Each breath Allende took was slower and shorter. He opened his mouth slightly and struggled to form a word, his lips quivering.

“Must be what!?” shouted Anzio.

Allende tried to lift his head. He coughed. A small jet of blood hit Anzio in the face. He ignored it.

“Must be what?”

“Sir, his esophagus must be full of blood by now. He can’t get any air to speak.”

Allende’s head fell back and turned to the side. Toola reluctantly took her hand off his wrist. His pulse was gone. He was dead.

Anzio stood up. “Great. Something about Muhammad. That’s all we need – terrorists.” He took the recorder from Toola and clicked it off. “Maybe we can get something more from this when we play it back with our sound equipment. I’m not sure I heard everything he tried to say.”

“Good idea, sir.” Toola looked away from the grisly sight. She hadn’t learned to be as battle-hardened as Anzio and she wasn’t sure that she wanted to be.

“A few moments ago, I believe I gave you an order to search this suspect, Agent Winapooli.”

She stood up. “Sir.” She didn’t need to ask him, because she knew the answer. She just wanted to hear him say it. “Did you actually see him stab Allende twice, steal the item from his body, pull out an entry card, open the door and run into the building, before you sent us in?”

“That’s affirmative, agent.” Anzio spoke without any feeling whatsoever. “Except I’m not positive I saw him take the item. After all, it is very small. I saw him search Allende, briefly. But then, I don’t think he would have fled into this building if he hadn’t gotten it from him.”

“Sir, it is possible we could have saved him if we had acted sooner.”

“Are you questioning my orders, agent?”

“No, sir. I just...”

“Just what?”

“Just...” She looked down and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“If you’re saying you might have acted differently under the same circumstances, your comment is noted. I did what I thought was right. Once I saw the knife, I knew it was over for Allende. No way we could cover the distance from the hedge to him and stop him from being stabbed. The buyer immediately put the knife to his chest and throat. Once I saw the intense spurting of blood, I knew he must have hit him in the jugular. He fell instantly. If I hadn’t waited for the killer to search his body, we couldn’t know whether he had the item. If he got it, the only logical place for him to go with it was into this building. That’s why they met here in the first place.”

“But sir, if we had called out and announced our presence before he stabbed him...”

“Then they both flee in different directions and we’d have to engage two suspects in a foot chase around a school of over thirty thousand students, many of whom live on or near campus, in the heart of Tucson – a city of over four hundred thousand.”

Toola contemplated these facts, not all of which she had considered. She was frequently amazed by Anzio’s quick read of a situation, his ability to evaluate alternate outcomes and act instinctively when the unexpected occurred.

“But, sir...”

“That’s enough, agent.”

“But sir...”

“You’re welcome to read my report. We’re here to recover the stolen item, not intervene in personal disputes, even violent ones. Remember our first principle, agent?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please repeat it for me.”

Toola loathed this. She had memorized the group’s operational principles before attending the first training session. She knew them perfectly and Anzio knew that she knew. But she obliged him.

“Keep the lowest possible profile. Keep interference with local affairs to a minimum. The secrecy of our group is second in importance only to the mission goals.”

Anzio stepped closer to her and stared her directly in the eyes. “Very good. I thought that for a moment, you may have forgotten that.”

Near Earth

Toola was accustomed to her commander's behavior. He usually indulged her questioning as a matter of training, or maybe sometimes he was just showing off his command abilities. But he tolerated her questions only to a certain point. When he told her that was enough, he meant it. If she asked him about it again, a disciplinary action would follow. The steps Anzio took on this mission seemed callous to her. But she realized that he was right. Stepping in sooner would have caused both suspects to run, and the three agents had no guarantee of catching either one, with a high probability of exposing their operation. The cost of maintaining secrecy was a man's life.

So she fell silent and bent down to search Allende's body. She turned out his pockets and found a few dollars and change. She patted him down completely and found only a used Kleenex, an empty cigarette pack and a lighter.

"I don't find it on him, sir."

"Try again. It may be loose, not inside any type of container. Remember, it's small. Here, give me the cigs and the lighter." Anzio tore apart the cigarette pack. He balled it tightly in his hands, feeling for anything that didn't belong. But it was just an empty heap of plastic. He tossed it aside and then tried the lighter. It was the cheap plastic kind. He broke it open in his bare hands, poured out the remaining fluid and examined the inside. It too was empty. Toola continued to pat down Allende, all pockets and cavities.

"Nothing, sir. Not even any ID."

"We know it's Allende, we can verify that by his DNA. So we have to assume the killer got what he was looking for."

"On a different matter, sir, you mentioned this building."

"Yes?"

"This is the science center at the University of Arizona. Why would he take the item inside this building?"

"Because, this is not just the science center for the U of A. On the third floor is the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory. Are you familiar with it?"

Toola thought for a moment. She had wondered about this location even before the stakeout planning. But she couldn't remember anything remarkable about it.

"No, sir. I assumed it was just another university doing some research or processing work for NASA?" She was guessing. This place had been mentioned in her required reading, but NASA passed out grants to many

Bruce Marotta

universities and graduate students. She couldn't remember the details of exactly what research was being done where.

"You should make a note of it. This is the southernmost point in the US where the stolen item could be verified as genuine."

"You mean...they can test a rock sample and tell if it's..."

"Yes. From the moon."

The lure of over six hundred quintillion dollars in precious metals breeds betrayal and murder when sordid space entrepreneurs secretly harvest the asteroid belt. Can a savvy meteorite hunter and his quirky gal friend prevent a near earth asteroid impact?

Near Earth

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