

Volume 2, Winter 2009

MOONBEAMS



Tales from the High Frontier

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Editors Note: This edition of Moonbeams has two stories that are not strictly moon related, but they are so good that I wanted to share them with our readers. Other genre will be given consideration when there are no other submissions.

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APOCALYPSE DAWN

AARON SEVEN



A SHORT STORY BY
DENNIS CHAMBERLAND



Apocalypse Dawn

By Dennis Chamberland

The plague was not just uncontained – it was *uncontainable*. It had originated from a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency laboratory as a genetically modified organism and was euphemistically tagged as a virus that was ‘inimical to higher life forms’. The Defense Department’s own under-speak was partially responsible for the lack of judgment when it came time to keep the insidious little strand of RNA safely locked inside its glass tubes and dishes. But after three very wrong moves in what the investigation described as “a serial failure of containment”, the little bastard ended up on the bottom of Staff Sergeant Polly Markus’ high heel, and eventually in a downtown Manhattan bar on Ladies’ Night Out. In a mere 72 hours, more than 25,000 people were dead in the Naked City. By the seventh day – and a fierce debate over whether or not to nuke the city (as they should have done no-later-than the 96th hour) – it was far too late for the planet. The nervous-Nelly politicians and all the hand wringing in the world could no longer reverse what had become history’s ultimate *fait accompli*.



Aaron Seven stood in the study of his mentor, Dr. Raylond Desmond, deep in the Tennessee forest. Two hours before, Seven had been plucked out of an horrific jam in Atlanta traffic by a military helicopter. It was a total mystery to Seven how they had found him at all. Even he had not had a good idea of where he was when the long wire sling was lowered to him from the hovering chopper. Had he not already been stuck in the endless grid lock for more than four hours, he would never have accepted the ride on the end of the long rope for reasons he still did not at all appreciate.

The military men were steely and efficient but altogether uncommunicative. No matter how many times Seven asked the 'why' question, they did not answer. They simply flew him fifteen short minutes northeast of Chattanooga and left him standing alone on an uninhabited bluff overlooking the Sequatchie Valley. Less than ten minutes later, a yellow and black civilian Hummer driven by a large, enigmatic man in gargoyles sunglasses, picked him up, navigated back roads through the deep woods and delivered him to Dr. Desmond's study at his estate called Stonebrooke. The man briefly identified himself as Joseph Blake - aka 'the

Commander'- and then abruptly left the room where Seven was left alone, once again.

"Ah, Aaron, so good to see you," Desmond announced sincerely, entering into the large, well apportioned room whose glass wall overlooked a frothing, white stream just a few feet outside the crystal, clean windows.

Seven nodded with as much decorum as he could muster but could not shake his flat, tense smile. "And you, Professor," he responded with a nervousness he could not hide.

"Sit, please!" Desmond said, as he settled himself opposite Seven.

Seven took a seat across from his mentor, a Nobel Laurite and one of the most famous physicists in the world. He had not seen or spoken to Desmond in nearly three years but time had been kind to the older man. His beard was slightly greyer, but the professor wore the same confident and winning smile he always had.

Desmond stared back at Seven, a 30ish man of lean build, well apportioned and athletic in appearance. Inquisitive brown eyes peered intensely at Desmond from beneath the brown hair falling lightly across Seven's intelligent brow. His

countenance bore a natural smile and exuded a confidence he could not hide. Seven was dressed in what those who knew him considered his 'uniform of the day' - blue jeans, a long sleeved cotton T-shirt and a pair of New Balance sneakers.

"Aaron," Desmond began earnestly, "please forgive the drama of the military evacuation, but time is of the essence."

Seven nodded his pardon, adding, "I should thank you, Professor. I was definitely looking for a way out of that traffic jam. A helo with a sling was somewhat more dramatic than I had considered, but a very effective way out nonetheless. However, there are two considerations..."

Desmond had anticipated the first issue and handed him an envelope. "Inside are enough funds in the form of a cashier's check to purchase a replacement for your automobile. I am sorry if this has seriously inconvenienced you."

Seven looked inside the envelope and whistled. "Wow! You must not have done a Bluebook lookup on my car!"

"We wanted to be fair, Aaron," Desmond replied with a smile that strongly hinted he never expected Seven to actually cash the check. "And what was your other consideration?"

"The doughnuts," Seven stated flatly. "The dozen freshly baked Krispy Kreme glazed doughnuts."

Desmond shook his head, a puzzled expression begging the question.

"That was why I left my apartment in the first place," Seven continued. "I was out after a dozen doughnuts. I had slept in, then woke up and was planning to take Interstate 85 as a shortcut to the closest Krispy Kreme. I had no idea I would end up in terminal gridlock. I figure if you knew where I was in traffic and knew how much my car was worth that you could at least take care of the doughnuts," he quipped, smiling back at the professor with his infamously wicked sense of humor.

"We estimated your car's value and located you by cell phone triangulation. We had no idea where you were actually heading or why," Desmond retorted with what could have been slight irritation. He looked behind Seven and spoke to an unseen figure, "Serea, can we possibly locate some doughnuts for our guest?" Looking back to Seven, now having lost all sense of gentleness, Desmond stated flatly, "May we get down to business?"

Seven nodded sheepishly with a nervous smile.

"I take it by your comments that you have no idea of the mounting crisis?" Desmond asked.

Seven shook his head. "Sorry, Professor. I returned from a week on the Appalachian Trail late last night. I slept in then woke up and drove out on I85 immediately. I forgot my SIRIUS-XM radio and the car's radio died years ago so I haven't heard any news in about a week. Does the crisis have anything to do with the traffic jam?"

Desmond sighed and smiled a patient smile. "Then you really

have no idea?" he asked Seven.

Seven shook his head again.

"A cover story has been released by the government - against my most adamant advice - to the effect that New York City has been attacked by a terrorist biological weapon. Unfortunately, rumor has spread faster than the government can control it and it is also now widely circulating that other cities have been attacked - such as Atlanta. That was the reason for the traffic situation. Unfortunately, the simple truth would have prevented much of this unbridled chaos, which is probably only going to get worse. And now, as I warned them would happen if they followed this course, the government has absolutely no credibility at all."

"Do you know the truth?" Seven asked inoffensively.

"Yes, unfortunately I do," Desmond responded. "New York City was not attacked with a foreign biological weapon. As far as we can tell, the biological agent was unintentionally spread to the city by a DARPA laboratory technician."

"So the crisis is biological and the organism is one of ours?" Seven pressed.

"Yes," Desmond admitted.

"And the antidote?" Seven followed up as a simple, logical, matter-of-fact detail.

"There is none," Desmond responded with a full scowl. "They were working on that."

Seven smiled and nodded his head slowly, more out of irony than humor. "They were working on that..." he whispered loudly

enough for Desmond to hear. Seven looked up at Desmond and leaned toward him. "What is the plan to stop it, Dr. Desmond?"

Desmond sighed deeply and looked down at his desk. He shook his head slowly and then returned Seven's stare. "There is none. This is an honest-to-God E.L.E. - in the parlance of Homeland Security - an 'extinction level event'. It is far too contagious and moving far too fast to ever contain. I'm afraid we've screwed the proverbial pooch this time, Aaron."

Seven looked back to his mentor, but his eyes were focused elsewhere. "Is it infective to humans only?"

Desmond nodded. "As it was designed, yes."

"And what are the numbers on natural resistance?"

Desmond looked pale. "There isn't any natural resistance. It is 100% fatal to 100% of those who are infected. It is specifically targeted to the genius Homo sapiens. It was intentionally designed for absolute lethality."

Seven nodded slowly, then looked back to Desmond. "So exactly why did you pluck me out of permanent gridlock and bring me here? I'm a bioengineer of macro systems, not a bioengineer of microorganisms. And you are a physicist. I don't get any of these connections."

"Your doughnuts, Dr. Seven," interrupted a seductive voice from behind him. Seven turned to see a tray of doughnuts held by the most astonishingly beautiful woman he had ever seen. He opened his mouth to speak but a

large part of his cerebral cortex had just been roasted by a massive surge of testosterone. The fact that the world was melting down outside the windows suddenly lost any consequence. He just sat there staring at the tray held by the angelic vision and it was all he could do to keep from actually drooling.

"Ah, Aaron, I would like to introduce you to my daughter, Serea. And Serea, this is Dr. Aaron Seven of whom I have been telling you."

Serea nodded and smiled at Seven, looking him directly in the eye.

Seven's rational mind refused to cooperate. He stared back at this woman of approximately his own age, with crisp grey eyes and long, flowing dark hair. Her face was perfectly formed, her nose slightly upturned and her body and breasts appeared to have been symphonically arranged by a supernatural presence just to force the male organism into permanent excitation. Her sheer image demanded fecundity and demanded it now.

"I'll just set them over here," she said to him with a sparkle in her eye, ignoring his temporary paralysis, obviously recognizing the intensity and depth of his anguish.

Desmond stood to his feet and announced urgently, "Dr. Aaron Seven, I have called you here to join me in saving a remnant of humanity until this plague runs its course. The disease cannot be contained. But we can engineer an isolated community of survivors and you have the unique talent to help us build a bioregenerative life support

system that is completely self-contained."

"It won't work, Professor," Seven responded flatly, returning his eyes to Desmond with much effort.

"And why not?" Desmond snapped.

"Because you cannot seal any facility, however well conceived, against a weaponized airborne viral attack, no matter where you attempt to conceal this hideout. This agent of death is less than microscopic - no filters are truly effective. And all you need is for one of those microscopic bastards to get inside - just one. The odds will catch up, and no matter where on earth you position it, the virus will get inside. It's the perfect nightmare and certainly no rational human or government would ever permit any work on such a doomsday weapon," Seven added sarcastically.

Desmond relaxed and sat down. He smiled and looked back at Seven for several uncomfortable, irrational seconds. Then he said bluntly, "Ah, I forgot to mention - our facility isn't on earth!"

Seven blinked twice, his mind not fully comprehending this newest assault on rationality.

Desmond stood and held up his hand, circumventing Seven's inevitable onslaught of questions and abruptly ended the interview with the statement, "Aaron, meet here in the morning at 0600 when we will depart. Joseph, please show Dr. Seven to his quarters."

The Commander was now standing in the place where Serea had stood. The angel with the Krispy Kremes had simply disappeared.

Seven turned around to speak

just as Desmond left the room.

The next morning, Desmond, Seven, the Commander and Serea departed Stonebrooke aboard Desmond's private executive helicopter on a northerly route with no announced destination. Seven sat beside Serea and directly across from and facing Desmond and the Commander. Serea was reading some papers but occasionally stole a glance at Seven, which made him more than just a little nervous.

"Aaron, let us discuss the details of your assignment. I am certain you wish to know the answer to the 'where' question. After detailed consideration of the many possibilities, we have decided our colony will be located on the surface of the moon." At that point, Desmond stopped speaking to allow his words to sink in.

"The moon..." Seven responded mockingly. "You're just gonna load up your ark and fly away to the moon - just like that? With no notice and no warning and the most infectious agent ever unleashed on planet earth right on your heels?"

"Yes; that's partially correct," Desmond replied confidently.

"And what is your crew size?"

"127, counting yourself and one relative or friend of your choosing."

"What am I missing?" Seven asked, still stunned. "The Apollo lunar lander weighed in at 15 tons. It was all the Saturn V could handle and only allowed two men to live on the lunar surface for three days max before they had to return to earth or die.

The upgrade unit is the Altair Lander which is three times the mass and handles a crew of four astronauts. But its lunar surface stay time is still only up to 210 days - and that's only if the site is pre-loaded with supplies.

"So if the Saturn V is a museum piece and the Altair Lander is the penultimate technology, then how are you planning to transport 127 humans to the lunar surface and keep them alive indefinitely?"

"I always appreciated your frankness, Aaron," Desmond responded, settling back in his cushioned chair and smiling like a man ensconced permanently in the catbird seat. "But you have set up a scenario of suggested truth that is, in reality, not at all the whole case."

"Go on," Seven said, now settling himself back for what was turning out to be the most amazing ride of his life.

"First, Altair is most certainly not the penultimate technology in lunar systems."

"You have something better?" Seven quipped sarcastically.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we do. Further, the Saturn V is not a museum piece. And the idea of stacking a landing site with consumable supplies for a long term mission is primitive and stupid, as you should be lecturing me by now."

Seven simply stared back at his old professor with a blank look on his face.

"Aaron, my group has preserved the old Saturn V plans and has rebuilt them by the dozens. We launch two of them each year from secret platforms in the South

Pacific and we have been for over a decade now. We have also integrated them with newer technologies to greatly enhance their power. And we have designed lunar landing systems that form a large human colony upon arrival on the lunar surface. In fact, Aaron, we have pre-staged our site with enough equipment and supplies to provide for all of us for at least four years - but our stay will certainly be considerably longer than that."

"Wait...wait..." Seven said shaking his head. "You're way ahead of me. I don't know which question to ask first."

"Pick one," Desmond responded in a near chuckle.

"Who is "we"? What group?"

"It is called the League of the New Worlds. I formed it myself more than a quarter century ago. We have designed a failsafe system to protect the human race from the seeds of its own insanity. Our group has prepared for this event that is now upon us. We never knew exactly when something like this would happen, but we did know it was only a matter of time."

"And for over half a generation and through multiple government administrations, who had the foresight to pay out all these billions and then manage to keep everything secret?"

"Let's save that for later. What is your next question, Aaron?"

"I may believe your story on rockets and hardware - regardless of its improbability - but I'm still waiting for the answer to your question on life support. No one has ever developed a

workable advanced life support system with anything resembling actual effective recycling. In other words, since this is my expertise, what's going to keep your system from crashing in a year or two, or even six years down the road...or when the first consumables run out, as they will?"

Desmond smiled confidently, nodded his head just once and then responded, "You are."

Seven leaned forward and blinked several times trying to understand the logic of Desmond's two word response which was received more like a kick alongside his head by a 500 pound mule.

"Me?" he stuttered. "Me?"

"Yes, Aaron; you. That is precisely why you are sitting here in this aircraft right now"

Seven smiled and laughed loudly, sitting back in his seat. "You know, Professor, you really had me going there! I thought for a minute that this whole story was real." As he said this, Seven glanced at Serea who smiled sweetly in return. He then looked back to Desmond who was no longer smiling. It was the perfect response. His powerful, expressive face said it all.

"You mean... you mean... this isn't a joke?"

Desmond shook his head slowly. "I wish to God it were..."

"Professor, I know you're a Nobel Laureate Physicist, but let me explain a few elements of bioengineering of macro systems..."

"Aaron..." Desmond interrupted, laying his hand on Seven's knee, "I know. I understand. You

don't have a system designed that will take care of these issues. I already know that. No one ever has."

"Then...then what?" Seven asked in frustration with upturned palms.

"You are going to design and direct the construction of this system for us."

Seven laughed loudly once again. "Is the ventilation system in this chopper circulating Thorazine or something? Professor, this would require a national effort involving billions of dollars over many decades with teams of engineers and scientists working together nonstop 24/7, night and day. When do you plan to launch your mission, for heaven's sake?"

"A single fortnight: 14 days hence, and not a day later."

"Professor, even if I had a genie in a bottle - which I do not - I couldn't pull this off in 14 days. Hell, I couldn't pull this off in 14 years!"

"Aaron," Desmond calmly said leaning toward him, "you have 14 days to develop a list of required supplies and equipment. I never expected you to build this here! You are going to build it when we get there!"

Seven leaned his head back, perspiring heavily and out of breath. "This is just getting better and better. Why didn't you call me last year - four years ago? Why now? Isn't this just a little late?"

"I had planned to call you in at the end of the year. None of us had seen this coming so quickly and now we are out of time. The fact is, Aaron, we no longer have a choice. We have to

launch with what we have. We cannot wait a day longer than the 14 days which our statistical models predict is when the virus will breach the defenses of our compound. We launch with what we have. Humanity's only ace in the hole right now is your particular genius. If you can't make it work, then we will all die on the moon and humanity's last chance will have run out. It's all very simple: we launch with what we have. We are out of time. And when we land there, you become our star or all of humanity will be lost forever."

Seven sighed deeply as the first trickle of sweat ran down between his eyes. In frustration he looked to Serea who whispered, "No pressure, ace."

Seven sat in his seat in silence. Although it was early in the morning, he was exhausted. He looked out the window and watched the tiny automobiles jam the roads below. Like ants whose hill was disturbed, they swarmed about in anger, fear and uncertainty, apparently without direction or reason.

As if to awaken him out of a deep slumber, he felt Serea's fingers slip slowly around his left hand and grip his fingers. She did not look at him or even remove her stare from the papers she held in her other hand. Seven did not miss his opportunity and clung to her hand for the remainder of the flight, which mercifully gave him more to think about than his new assignment as humanity's most unlikely messiah.

Seven watched out his window as the chopper sat down in a

grassy field high upon the vast Cumberland Plateau. His eyes strained to make out any details, but it appeared as though they had landed in a brown prairie so wide he could not see its limits or any man-made structure.

As the blades of the chopper wound down, suddenly the entire craft lurched. To his astonishment, Seven realized that the grassy land on which the chopper sat was lowering. Within just half a minute, he could see that the aircraft was descending into a massive underground structure of enormous size. Almost immediately, the sky above them disappeared as the opening was covered over by another door and the aircraft platform settled some two stories down.

"Welcome to Nirvana!" Desmond announced, unlatching his lap belt and standing.

Seven smiled, recognizing that the name fit the actual mission of this place perfectly. But he was not prepared for what he would see as the black blades of the chopper wound to a stop and he stepped out from the aircraft. The metal platform was suspended near the top of an enormous underground city that stretched for what appeared to be miles in every direction and descended below him hundreds of feet. He could not see the full range of its length because it extended so far that its span was hidden in the natural fog of distance.

The huge, cavernous space was brilliantly illuminated from powerful ceiling mounted backlit sources and down the length of the long structural columns that rose to Nirvana's upper limit. It was filled with countless

structures arranged in perfectly symmetrical rows and radiated circles in at least seven levels rising off the floor of the immense cavern.

But the most astonishing sight was the line upon line of massive rockets aligned in rows at both peripheries. They were obviously resurrected Saturn V missiles with cylinders strapped on each side that Seven immediately recognized as solid rocket boosters. It was such a powerful image that Seven looked back at Desmond with wide eyes. His mentor was staring at him, smiling like a new father holding his first child.

Then Seven looked at Serea who was gently smiling at him with an unmistakable look that had nothing whatsoever to do with rocket ships and huge, high tech buried cities deep in the Cumberland plateau.

A well dressed man in a black suit accompanied by a boy of around 8 or 9 years of age approached Desmond and shook his hand with a beaming smile.

"Ah, Senator Harrington! I would like to introduce you to the scientist I was telling you about - Dr. Aaron Seven," Desmond offered, as the Senator turned toward Seven and extended his hand to him.

Seven accepted the hand of the smiling, perfectly groomed Senator with little enthusiasm. "Pleased to meet you," he said guardedly and with a stern expression.

"And this is my son, David," the Senator replied, placing his hand on the child's head.

Seven glanced down momentarily to the boy and nodded curtly.

"Professor, you said that 127 people were going to accompany you to the lunar base. You didn't say anything about politicians and their families," he added tensely.

"I see he is not just a scientific genius, but he is also a quick study of human affairs, as well," Harrington said to Desmond with raised eyebrows.

"Don't you guys have a ritzy hideout at Mount Weather, paid for by all those people who are going to die unprotected out in the open?" Seven retorted with unchecked anger rising in his voice. "I thought we were about the business of saving the best and the brightest. So what the hell are you doing here?"

Seven turned to Desmond with a red face. "Let me guess. No one is actually at Mount Weather; they're all here. Am I right? Because if I am, I'm out of here right now. I'd rather take my chances with a weaponized virus than the likes of him and his elitist buddies!" Seven spat angrily, pointing his finger at the Senator. "How dare he and his ilk take the place of the finest minds and humans on this planet just because they can pull political strings! I've lost close colleagues - truly worthy, brilliant, self-sacrificing researchers willing to give up everything for the betterment of mankind - when politicians decided to conveniently ignore their existence and left them in the unmerciful hands of some temporary terrorist government in a hellish third world country because their coup was determined to be 'advantageous for national purposes' at the time!"

"Aaron, that is enough!" Desmond barked angrily. "Just who I invite is my business and mine alone. I have long held that exclusive authority, granted to me by Executive Order signed by the President of the United States. No one decides but me. It is not your call and will never be! How dare you repay me with this insult of my judgment!"

Seven turned to open the door of the helicopter and get back in, but it was locked. He banged his fist on the fuselage in anger. "Where's the stairwell?" he demanded, turning back to them with a red face and a full scowl. "How do I get out of this most expensive boondoggle in all of history?" Looking at Desmond, he then pointed his finger at the Senator. "Professor, you said that saving all of humanity was now up to me. So here's how it all comes down. Either he goes - or I go!"

At that moment, Serea stepped up to Seven, gripped the front of his t-shirt in her balled fists, pushing him back against the helicopter, and pulled his face to hers, kissing him firmly on the lips. It was astonishing and unexpected. She pulled her lips away from his and whispered so that only he could hear, "How about we go back to my room, slip into something more comfortable and have a drink?"

Seven looked down at her and blinked. Her unexpected actions were far more effective than had she bludgeoned him on the back of his head with a five pound maul. He was breathing hard but he could not take his eyes off her beautiful face. Serea was Desmond's strong-arm and he knew

it. And she was vastly more effective than a 350 pound, angry Samoan bouncer. Her eyes had already arrested and cuffed him and now she was about to haul him away to confinement. The only problem was, he desperately wanted to go with her regardless of the affront he had just clearly laid out along with his bitter ultimatum.

Seven walked out of his steamy shower in Serea's apartment. He was dressed in a soft, white terry robe. With bare feet he crossed the carpeted floor of her bedroom, ignoring his clothing which lay on the bed, and walked into the outer room.

Serea was waiting for him in a chair that sat overlooking a large glass wall facing the panorama of the huge underground city. The view was breathtaking. She patted the chair beside hers and Seven sat down. Again, he was wholly arrested by her devastating smile and beautiful face. He knew he was supposed to remember his anger, but sitting so close to her, he could not.

She handed him a small glass of what was obviously a dark liquor.

"What is it?" he asked.

"My favorite," she replied. "Drambuie."

"Hmmm," he responded sincerely. "I approve of your tastes." Seven downed the contents of the glass in one quick shot, squinting as it burned its way down his throat. "Nice," he rasped.

"So, Dr. Seven," Serea began, nursing her own glass, "where will you go?"

Seven thought a moment and

sighed. "I don't really know. I don't have any family. It's just me and ...well, it's just me, actually. I had a dog named Marbles once...but he died of stupidity."

"Aaron, it's all I can do to keep from dropping to my knees here before you and begging you to stay," Serea suddenly said almost wistfully. "Father never even mentioned you before two days ago, so I don't know anything about you. But I do know about people in general. Your display of anger out there was totally out of place, out of control, ill-mannered and quite far off the mark. You insulted my father and the Senator in front of his very impressionable young son. And yet, after having thought about what you said, you are, as a matter of fact, mostly correct. The Senator and the rest of the government officials all bought their way on this trip with taxpayer money. They have bumped the best and the brightest off the flight, and it isn't fair at all."

"Then why do you go along with it?" Seven asked sincerely, without anger.

"Because without the people that my father selected, including Senator Harrington, we would not be here at all. In fact, Senator Harrington alone has saved this project half a dozen times in recent years. If it were not for his truly heroic, behind-the-scenes efforts, this place would have been abandoned long ago. So, in a real sense, he and his family deserve their ride - humanity would have no hope right now if it weren't for him. I can assure you, there was

and is much pressure to include high, powerful government officials here; but father has allocated every space - all 127 seats - with pure integrity."

Seven scowled. "Why should the rich and powerful have any better reason to live than any other citizen? It wasn't their money that paid for this great, secret city! Those who actually made it happen worked hard and did without because so much of their salary went to pay for this place. So now they die while their money paid for some politician's life."

Serea looked him in the eye and replied, "Father has agonized over that question for years. And the answer is not simple. He will die wondering whether he made the right decisions - selected the right people for the right reasons. I might add that he agonized over you, as well. And right now he is grieving over that choice."

"But may I also point out that he was entirely correct in his decision to ask you along and completely accurate when he says that if you don't know how to build our life support system, then we will all die on the moon anyway. He doesn't want you to leave... and for many different reasons, Aaron, neither do I." Sitting her glass down, Serea then took his hands in hers and lowered herself to one knee before him. She kissed his fingers tenderly then looked beseechingly up into his eyes. "So I beg you, my prince, please stay. We need you. We all need you. I need you."

Seven gazed back at her, stunned and mesmerized, just as

her doorbell rang. Serea closed her eyes for a moment, then stood, gently squeezing his fingers before releasing them as she turned and walked to the door.

Seven sat staring out the wide windows at what must have been humanity's greatest human achievement. It was more magnificent than he had ever dreamed possible. And, ironically, it would soon be abandoned.

In a minute Serea gently laid her hand on his shoulder and said softly, "You have a visitor, Aaron."

Seven looked behind him and there stood the Senator's son, David, with a trembling lip and a very frightened expression on his face.

"Dr. Seven, may I say something?" he asked in his small boy's voice.

Seven nodded, feeling suddenly ashamed to the core of his being.

"I want to trade my place here for my dad's," David blurted in a broken voice. "I'll leave so he can stay. My father told me before you arrived that you were the most important person on this mission, so I know that you have the power to send him away. If you say he has to go or you'll go, then they'll send him away and he'll die. I want to take his place. I can go stay with my aunt in Atlanta. But please, don't send him away. He's very important. Please, sir, please send me away instead. My daddy has to live," he sobbed.

Seven looked up at Serea as she brushed a tear away from her cheek. He lowered himself to one knee, facing David as the boy

fought to regain his composure, gulping back the sobs that racked his frame. The child blinked two wide blue eyes as he waited for Seven's sentence to be pronounced on him.

"Nobody's leaving here, David. Not you and not your father. I'm sorry and I'd like to ask your forgiveness," Seven said feeling the tears well in his own eyes.

David's eyes widened in surprise, then he suddenly leaned forward and embraced Seven tightly. "Thank-you, sir! You'll like my dad. He's really a nice guy," he said in a small voice in Seven's ear.

Seven pulled the boy away and tenderly wiped the child's tears from his face with his fingers.

"Do you know what a jackass is, David?" Seven asked.

David knit his eyebrows as he pondered the question, then replied, "I don't know for sure."

Seven breathed deeply. "Well, lad, you're looking at one right now - a certified jackass."

The boy smiled brightly and blinked away his tears.

"Really?" he asked.

"Really!" Seven said nodding. "And I want you to know that if we're going to pick just 127 people of the human race - the very best and the very finest among us - I am most honest in

saying that I would pick you first. As far as I'm concerned, David, you have just proven to be the most important person on this mission - certainly not me."

The boy smiled innocently. "Thank-you."

"Can you take me to your father?" Seven asked. "I want to introduce him to the biggest jackass on the planet in the company of the most important person on the mission - and I'm going to tell him just that way."

David nodded and turned to leave. As he did, Serea embraced Seven and kissed him deeply. "I'm glad you decided to stay," she said passionately, brushing away her own tears.

Exactly 14 days later, the bottom fell out of the Cumberland Plateau as the fires of hell roared in towering flames from the pit. Twenty four missiles streaked skyward carrying the hope of humanity outward on a nearly impossible mission - to preserve and protect the dreams and destiny of humankind. The odds were clearly against them - and they all knew it. But on the slimmest of hopes they had pinned their future and the expectations of everyone to follow on uncommon genius and extraordinary courage.

Apocalypse Dawn

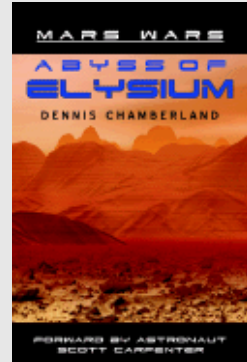
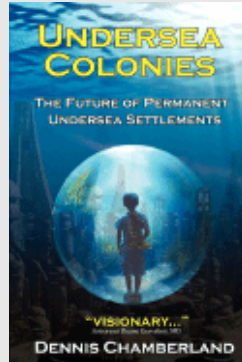
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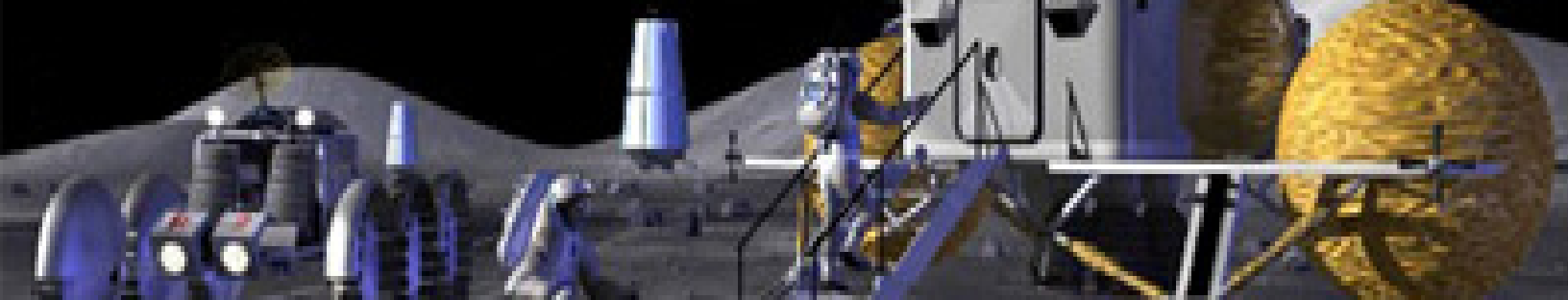
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Author's Note: Apocalypse Dawn is a short story that introduces the Aaron Seven adventure novel, Apocalypse Morning. The plot line here is the same as in Apocalypse Morning but the story is condensed and leads the reader through the first one third of the novel. My risk in introducing an entire book in this way is, obviously, rushing the story because the novels are considerably more detailed than in this brief story. Here the first 200 or so pages are condensed in just a few pages, but I feel it gives you, the reader, a good idea of how the Aaron Seven stories are developed and a look at the personality and dynamics of the major players that are featured in every book. It also gives you a good feel of how each Aaron Seven story is developed and how they unfold. Other Aaron Seven stories are available right now from Quantum Editions at:

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Comments

The Cheshire Smile - Moonbeams v1

The last great bombardment of the Moon by "planetesimals" and larger Earth-crossing asteroids was pretty much over some three and a half billion years ago, a billion years after the Earth's and the Moon's formation. The result of this bombardment had created a magma ocean beneath a consolidated crust. Here and there, especially in the fractured great impact basins, upwelling of runny fast-flowing lava flooded across the basin floors.

Some maria, such as Smythii, seem to have only a shallow lava ponding, as pre-existing crater rims protrude in many locations, forming "ghost craters." In other maria, such as Mare Crisium, there are only a few protruding older craters such as Yerkes, along the basin rim. In general, the flooding of this basin seems to be relatively deep.

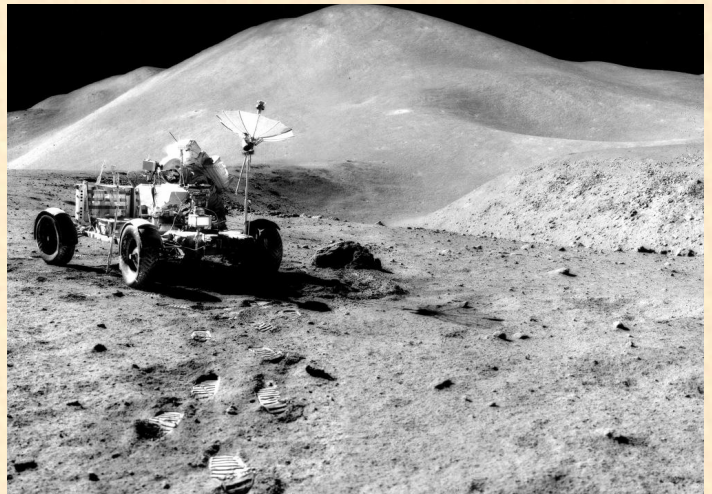
In yet other maria, we see frozen lava flow fronts that formed on top of prior flooding.

These facts indicate that there may be lava tubes not just in the surface lava sheet, but in deeper sheets below.

Those lava tubes on the Moon that are still intact, have been so for 3 and a half or more billion years and are the most stable and long-lived shelters in the solar system. Those in layers below must be even more resistant to surface impact triggered

spallation off tube ceilings forming rubble piles on tube floors.


What better place for a space faring civilization, coming on a world with potential to give rise to an intelligent species, to leave a calling card that would last the geological ravages of time?



In comparison, it is difficult to think of an environment on Earth that could remain intact for even a small fraction of such time periods, before falling victim to active geological processes and erosive weather events.

The story, in this light, is anything but farfetched.

Peter Kokh



No Guts; No Glory

By Robert Wilson

He longed for rest, but there was none;
He longed for praise, but was ridiculed;
He longed for companionship, but was abandoned;

Well within the jungle at the edge of the airfield, Jim sat motionless as the rainwater ran off the brim of his camo hat. He was tucked into the dense vegetation and once in a while, a drop would run down his neck. Strangely, the warm water made him shiver but he didn't let it break his concentration. He was one with the world around him, the rural environment of southern Mexico and the crude airfield in front of him.

Not so long ago, Jim had been a white man in a Mexican neighborhood, a loner in a world where everyone else was in a gang. How the hell did he come to be in this off-the-wall place, caught up in impossible circumstances, and about to bring somebody a taste of war?

It had started simply. He'd just spent four months in the rat hole they called a jail. The usual bullshit, fighting. Jim had a bad temper and a poor game of pool. Alcohol didn't help and

he hated losing, so... he'd lost the game, got mad, talked shit and started a fight. Worse, he'd won. When the cops got there, he was the last man standing. They hauled him away to the county lockup. When they released him, it would have started all over again except for Enrique.

Enrique didn't like him, something about Enrique's sister. Anyway, when he walked out the front gate, Enrique was waiting for him. Not a good sign. Jim looked around for a setup but didn't see one. Enrique said he wanted to get Jim into a deal that would be good for both of them, but he didn't want to stand in the parking lot, in front of a half dozen remembering guards, and talk about it. Jim decided that if Enrique was really pissed at him, he'd have stuck him a long time ago and not come up with this cockamamie story.

On the way out of town, the Mexican explained that he was recruiting for people without names. Enrique did his best to make it sound like a legitimate



head hunter job, and that he wasn't allowed to say more. Actually, Enrique didn't know much more and, as he brightly explained to Jim, "This is what you gringos call a win-win situation. I get two grand and you disappear. Very good for me. After a while, Maria forgets you, I forget you and life is good."

The place Enrique took him was an abandoned cotton gin with twenty foot ceilings and windows missing most of their glass. Long dead vines and a breeze sent shadows dancing across the floor of the old building. It had the smell of something about to happen.

Two men waited inside. They sat Jim on an OD green war surplus canvas chair and took his prints. Once the guys with no names were assured that Jim was who they were looking for, the tall one paid Enrique his two grand and told him to take a hike. The Mexican grinned and was gone. Jim felt like a horse between horse traders. If it wasn't for his curiosity, not to mention a long walk back to town, he'd have split. But he was

almighty broke and his gut said stay.

The short one tossed a manila folder in Jim's lap.

It took a minute for Jim to realize it was a dossier on him. A certified copy of his high school transcript shows he was bright but undisciplined and had dropped out before graduation. It also said Jim came from a broken home and was the only one who supported his grandmother who had cancer. The file even had pictures of his grandmother's funeral almost a year ago. Jim hadn't been the same since.

The file also contained a prison report that said, among other things, that he spoke Spanish like a homegrown barrio hood. The page after page of employment history showed the high number and low quality of jobs he had done over the years, cab driver, fry cook, and day laborer were among the best.

Jim shakes his head. Lately he hadn't been able to find anything. Decent jobs were increasingly hard to come by for a man with a bad rep and a record. Besides, in this neck of the woods you had to know somebody, or at least somebody

who knew somebody, and Jim didn't and didn't care. Jim was a loner, a troublemaker that even the criminal element avoided. He just never quite fit in, a square peg in a round hole.

With his family scattered or dead, Jim had no place to call home. He was at loose ends and this little tribute to Jim's life showed just how loose.

Jim handed the file back to the man.

"So?" he said, studying the pair.

The two men were medium, medium build, medium hair color, and medium attitude. Dressed in Levi's and short sleeved shirts, they were typical blue collar working men. Their faces were hard to remember even after you had just looked at them. One was older than the other but both had the same '*been there and done that*' look in their eyes of military men. Even the shabby white Ford pickup truck parked in front of the decrepit building blended in with just the right combination of faded paint and dents.

It was kind of spooky when you took the time to look at it and Jim took the time.

The tall one spoke first, "Jim Parker, we are looking for someone without family connections - just like you. We want someone with nothing to lose - just like you. We know you're a no account hard case but we think you can mature into what we need, a man who values loyalty and honor, a man devoted to his comrades and the mission. The job comes with personal danger, physical exhaustion, and yes, someone might get killed - maybe even you. But I guarantee you

will never have another opportunity to do something that will give you such a high sense of accomplishment."

Really. It was inspiring to listen to, like one of those old war movies. But Jim was not one to be persuaded by just talk.

"What's the pay?" Jim asked.

"You are guaranteed \$500,000 for your first six months."

A half mill for six months? Holy shit! Made a guy want to stand up and cheer - but it didn't quite hold together. First off, Jim wasn't a flag-waver and nobody gives \$500 grand for six months honest work. Since no one had showed him a flag, he must assume the other.

Jim squinted at the short one, "So, what do I have to do?"

The man leans down, "Join us and we will challenge you like you have never challenged yourself. You will be asked to make some hard decisions and people might get hurt but that's the job."

"What if I want out?" Jim asked.

The tall one replied, "As long as you never divulge what you do - ever - you are free to go where you like and do what you like. But if you release classified company information, rest assured, you will be treated as a traitor."

The tone and look in his eyes carried far more meaning than just the words. Both men have sidearms and Jim sensed they knew how to use them.

Jim wasn't so sure they would let him just walk out of here at this point. He decided it was in his best interests to just go along. And he kept going along, and going along, and going along

until now, he finds himself at the edge of a Mexican jungle waiting for his prey like the predator that he was.

Jim studied the distant buildings for movement and debated if he could risk scratching the bug bite he'd just gotten. He decided he could, shifting his weight just enough to get at it without making a sound. It worked. He scratched, felt immense satisfaction and focused on the air field. Sooner or later his targets would show up - then it was just a matter of which plane they would take.

The training they put him through was physically and mentally harder than anything Jim had ever experienced. But what bothered him most was that he couldn't figure out their angle. At first he thought they were US government, but it didn't add up. These men were tough, talented and honed to a hard edge; but they didn't wave the red, white and blue. Didn't even talk about it. Strange.

Jim considered himself an experienced street fighter - then he started hand-to-hand combat training. He learned in a classroom the various techniques of the US Marine Corp and the "50 blocks" found on American prison yards. He then learned the hard way how to apply them.

In the beginning, somebody beat the hell out of Jim every day. But he learned fast and it wasn't long before the beatings turned into hard contact sparing. Finally, he held his own or gave better than he got.

Soon, he was spending time

each day on weapons training. Who knew a paper clip could be so dangerous? Or that a pencil was absolutely deadly when used with precision and determination.

Next came conventional weapons, mostly eastern block or European, some U.S. - easily obtained all over the world. From the ubiquitous AK-47 to the exotic Barrett .50 cal sniper rifle, Jim excelled with weapons, but where he really shined was camouflage. He had been born in hunting country, raised in the NRA and liked to play Indian as a kid. The patience of a born stalker came naturally and with Rembrandt's eye for color, Jim could blend in with practically anything given time to prepare.

Some weeks into the training, they teamed Jim with four others. From that day on, the five did everything together. Day after day of arduous physical training hardened both mind and body. Jim found himself drawn to those who went through the ordeal with him.

As one, they would run from learning station to learning station, stop, complete a task, then double time to the next. At one station they did setups with a telephone pole in their laps. At another, they had to fight their way past a gang of toughs. At yet another, each member had to disassemble and reassemble an AK-47 blindfolded. Once, they had to turn out in the middle of the night to swim in the dark and sneak ashore before daylight. Fun for a masochist, but hard on a pool player from Texas. Through it all, Jim learned to depend on his teammates and they, him.

For most of his adult life, Jim had felt like an outsider, a loner. But now he began to feel

part of something bigger than himself for the first time in his life. It felt good!

Then came reading.

Historically, reading was a form of torture for Jim. He knew how, but it was slow work. Suddenly, he was required to read two newspapers a day and write a report on what was going on in the world. This was graded, corrected, and shoved back in his face to fix. At the same time he was taught a form of speed reading.

To everyone's surprise, he took to it like it was second nature. Slow reading was still difficult, but taking in a page at a time came natural. Soon, he was able to read, remember and cough up everything from newspapers to combat manuals. He didn't always understand what he had read, but he could repeat it back weeks later.

Then the training moved from the backcountry to the city streets. Jim and the others learned how to blend in by changing accent, haircut, clothes, and body postures. He put them on and took them off like a second skin. Jim again found unknown talent. He could go from a slouched Mexican to an uptight New York business man with the fluidity of a shape changer. When they were tested, this ability gained him the right to pick what they had for dinner that night. Jim chose pizza and ice cream.

The choice seemed to provoke the instructors. They set the men to memorizing lists of food and matching the list to the appropriate picture of the food.

The next step was to learn to mix and match the food against

the region it came from and what wine, soft drink or water was an appropriate companion. They didn't get to eat it, just study it.

Jim's newfound skill at speed reading and memorization allowed him to help the other guys with their lessons. He liked the feeling it gave, to be part of a group of equals.

Electronic eavesdropping, explosives, surveillance and tailing came next. They used all five within the team to identify, follow, and report on the movements of a "target". They learned the specialized techniques of vehicle vs. foot surveillance, and most importantly, how to work together on busy streets. A good exercise was one where the target never even suspected they were being watched.

Just as in the woods, they learned to use what was around them to their advantage, taking advantage of department store windows and other reflective surfaces as mirrors, stooping to tie a shoe in order to look behind them, handing off items to each other while walking, moving through a store to throw off a tail, and a thousand others. In short, they learned how to spy.

The day was wearing on. It had become hot and muggy. The clouds were almost gone but even transient shade was welcome when it came. The Mexican sky was a brilliant blue untainted with exhaust gas or smoke stacks. There had been some movement around the hanger, but no one messed with the planes.



The road to the airfield emerged from the dense jungle several hundred yards to Jim's left. He could hear it before seeing the truck, an older model GM in need of a muffler. Jim brought the binoculars into focus and looked long and hard at its occupants. Satisfied, he got out his cell phone and texted a simple message. Moments later he received the order to proceed.

The pickup truck stopped just short of the Cessna 182. Two guys in sports coats and sunglasses got out, heaved suit cases into the back of the plane, got in and started the engine. Without bothering with any pre-flight check, the plane taxied to the end of the runway and aligned with the wind sock. With a roar, the little plane barreled down the runway and surged upward.

Jim watched them go. While the plane was still visible in the sky, he hit a speed-dial on the phone. Even at that distance, he flinched at the flash and waited for the sound. It rolled over him seconds later.

He then looked at the hanger and the sudden burst of activity as those outside realized what

had happened. Jim triggered a second speed-dial. The Aero Commander parked on the hanger curtain exploded followed closely by the Cessna 401 sitting right beside it.

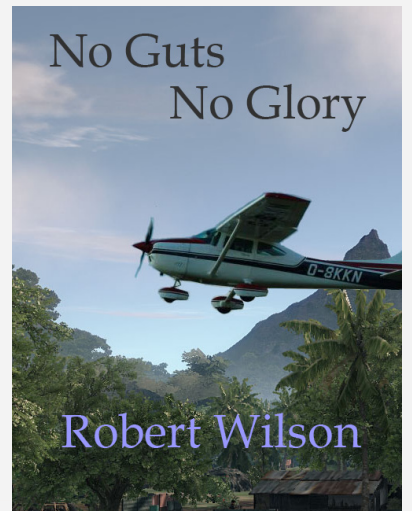
Job done, it was time to get out.

He eased back into the brush, making his way to the horse he had ridden in the night before. After making sure no one had stumbled upon it, Jim striped. The worn Levis, faded shirt, and an old hat let him pass for a farmer. He stashed the discarded cloths, cinched up the mare, and started for the hut where he had cached the rest of his gear. The next morning, Jim would join the locals on their way to market. Another change of clothes and he would become just another tourist on his way home. He expected to be back in the States in time for dinner.

Jim Parker still wasn't sure who he worked for.

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Robert Wilson is a Vietnam veteran who came home and joined the Arizona Department of Corrections where he achieved the rank of Lieutenant. Lieutenant Wilson is working on expanding the story of Jim Parker into a novel. Look for future releases through [Writers Cramp Publishing](#).



Letters Home

Moonbeams invites you to contribute a micro story. See the [Submissions](#) page for details.

Dear Diary...

6/2/28 Today is my birthday and Jim, Susan, Lea, Craig and Sammy surprised me with a cake. Not like mom's but good. They had to use potato flour and soy milk. Susan says that next year she will put chocolate icing on it! Imagine that! Chocolate on the moon! She works on the farm and brought a handful of ground coffee beans to the party! We all sat around after eating the cake and drank coffee just like back on Earth. It sure was nice! Captain Jacobs showed up and told us we should be proud, we are opening a new frontier. I guess I'm proud when I have time to think about it.

Secure Email...

2/3 Shift Report, Sept 10, 2028

Space Mining Inc, Central Highlands

To: Shift Commander Jensen
First shift cleaned out the last of the ilmenite in Section 901. Mission Control has assigned your team to Adams and wants to concentrate on Section 245. Adams has fallen behind by almost 700 tons in the last week and wants you to help him catch up.

We are still having problems with the ROV links. The geeks keep saying they don't know why but I'm losing tonnage and sooner or later, someone is going to get hurt. Keep your team close and don't take anything for granted.

DH

Help wanted:

Fiction Authors w/ Imaginative Short Stories

Nonfiction Authors w/ Referenced Articles

Creative Artists, Illustrators, and Cartoonists

Willing and Able Assistant Editors

If you have something that you think we might be interested in, drop us an email. See details in [Submissions](#).



Aldrin Station

By Charles Leshner

December 2026: Alphonsus Crater, Luna

"Slow down!" Colonel Nesbit says, but it's too late.

The rover loses traction as it crests the summit, fails to make the turn, and skids off the beaten track. Its young driver does not panic, managing to regain control and guide the vehicle back onto the crude path.

They were lucky. Had they gone off the other side, they would still be bouncing their way to the bottom of a very long steep slope.

His heart pounding, Colonel Nesbit shakes his head, "Private, you ever do that again, you'll be on the next freighter Earthside!"

Marine Private First Class Leo Sanders suppresses a nervous grin, "Yes Sir!" The rover reminds him of his high school dune buggy but squirrely, like it can't get a grip.

Calling this a road is

generous. It's two parallel ruts compacted in the regolith by the passage of rovers much like theirs. However, it's the only overland route between Aldrin Station and New London.

Keeping eyes front, the young man notices a puff of dust rise just off the left track twenty meters ahead, then a larger one a few meters closer, then another.

He points, "What's that, sir?"

Colonel Nesbit frowns and leans forward looking intently through the front view port.

"Meteors!"

Something strikes the rover with a dull thump. In the next instant, the right front tire is ripped off at the axel. The rover careens sideways and slides over the edge, tumbling violently down the steep slope before coming to rest almost a kilometer below. Lunar dust slowly settles as the alarm goes out.

Adding up the fatalities, thirty-two people have lost their lives to meteor impacts in the decade since humanity returned to the moon. Dragon defensive lasers help but they cannot get everything. Early in the game, it became obvious they needed to limit surface time and live deep underground. In one incident alone, nineteen died when a rock the size of a walnut slammed into Kyoto's cafeteria during a party, plowing through the few meters of regolith piled upon it, ripping a hole the size of a docking port in its side.

Instant decompression.

On an airless world, space rocks are a major problem. It is simply prudent to keep as much mass overhead as possible.

The rims of craters have proven to be ideal for carving out living and working space. In 2026, there are four major complexes under construction. Kyoto in Copernicus, Shennong in Tycho, and two in Alphonsus, Aldrin Station and New London in the crater's central peak, are all taking shape.

Even though Aldrin Station gains volume every day, after two years of digging, there is still a long way to go. Eventually it will consist of three main levels, the lowest will be roughly even with the crater's floor, the middle with the highlands outside Alphonsus, and the upper a few hundred meters above that. Ultimately, Aldrin Station will have tunnels going all the way through the rim, connecting the highlands with the crater's floor and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of habitats

carved from the rock in between. But that is years away. Excavating with conventional explosives takes time..

"Colonel, can you hear me?" the voice is persistent and annoying. "Colonel Nesbit?" He wishes it would go away and leave him alone. Reluctantly, he opens his eyes.

"It's about time," her voice pounds his temples like a drum.

"Dr. O'Neil, you needn't shout," Colonel Nesbit says softly.

Abby grins, "Already giving orders. That's a good sign."

Colonel Nesbit turns his head ever so slightly to see to whom she is talking. The movement sends pain throbbing through his head. Dr. Phuong Lu moves into his vision. "What's going on? Where am I?" he asks.

"Easy Colonel. You are in Lincoln County Hospital. You've had a nasty accident but will be just fine," Dr. Lu tells him. Specifically requested by Dr. O'Neil to lead the Neurological Department, Dr. Lu is the only Vietnamese in Aldrin Station. Fluent in five languages, the fact that she speaks, reads, and writes several Chinese dialects worries some people. Homeland Security has told the Colonel to keep an eye on her.

Deep under Rim Mountain, the hospital was one of the first habitats occupied in Aldrin Station. Since then, it has served as aid center and the local version of Ellis Island. Newly arriving colonists live in its rooms and eat in its cafeteria until their residential habitats are complete. The

moonbase is bursting at the seams and already contains a population of almost two thousand. New excavations cannot keep up.

Returning memory supplants the pain, the two-day trip to New London, the long ride back, then... nothing. "What about Private Sanders? Where's Sanders?" Colonel Nesbit asks.

"Phuong, please see to it that the tests we discussed are scheduled. Ask Bob to assist," Abby says.

"As you wish," Dr. Lu glances at the Colonel once more and leaves.

"Come on, spit it out," Colonel Nesbit looks intently at Abby until she finally speaks.

"Private Sanders didn't make it. He wasn't buckled in and was thrown about in the vehicle," Abby says.

Sanders didn't make it... wasn't buckled in... The words reverberate through his aching head. He has lost people under his command before but this is especially hard. Private Sanders had been on Luna for less than a month and volunteered to drive him just to clock some extra hours in the rover. The lad had depended upon him for guidance and he had failed miserably. Nothing anyone could say or do now will ever change that.

Seeing his obvious distress, Abby says, "You cannot control meteors, Colonel. Sit back and relax. We need to run a few more tests but you should be cleared for duty in a day or two." She can only imagine what he must be going through, but her specialty is biology, not psychology. She can mend his body. Someone else must deal with his mind.

Abby reaches up to adjust the monitor above the bed causing her loose-fitting shirt to rise up, exposing her belly, and giving Colonel Nesbit a good look at her profile.

Even in his state of mind, Colonel Nesbit recognizes what he is seeing. "Dr. O'Neil, you're pregnant."

Abby sucks in her breath and looks down at him... and smiles. "Yes, Colonel, I'm pregnant."

"McSwain will insist you immediately return to Earth." Colonel Nesbit is dismayed at the prospect of losing such a fine doctor.

Abby slowly shakes her head, "With all due respect, Colonel, I'm not going. This is my home and this is where I'll raise my family."

Colonel Nesbit frowns, "You know that's not possible. This is a military base on the moon, for Christ sake. We can't have children running around. It's too dangerous."

"Come on Colonel, that's a load of BS and you know it. Aldrin Station is not a military base. Besides, even military bases have had kids running around and as far as being dangerous, it's a lot less dangerous here than being stationed in Iraq or Iran." Abby's sure that reason will hold the day.

Colonel Nesbit however, is unconvinced. "How far along are you?"

"Why don't you rest? We can talk about this later. You need to regain your strength," Abby says.

"Answer me, Dr. O'Neil, how far along are you?" Colonel

Nesbit repeats.

Abby hesitates, "Third trimester," she responds.

"Humph," Colonel Michael Nesbit lays back and closes his eyes. He sees trouble on the horizon and here he is, laid up in this dingy hospital room, head pounding like a big bass drum.

Word spreads quickly throughout Aldrin Station that Abby's going to have a baby boy. Personally well known and universally well liked, Doctor Abigail O'Neil's refusal to leave after becoming pregnant is turning up the heat on an already simmering pot. Most are happy and cheer on her defiance. Many long for families and a life beyond that of work. After all, if this is the new frontier, then there should be kids around.

Nevertheless, some are angry that she had used her position to hide the pregnancy. They felt she exploited being Chief Medical Director to gain something they were being denied. They did not yet understand that someone must bear the responsibility of being first.

The Remote Operations Center is never a big room. As excavations penetrate deeper under Rim Mountain, a new one will eventually take its place, so there is no need to waste energy beautifying any of them. Even the door will be removed and taken to the next ROC when the time comes.

Four such doorless rooms are strung out behind them marking their progress extending the tunnel. Only a short section of

the tunnel containing the excavation itself remains in vacuum. Everything else is sealed and pressurized into a shirtsleeve environment.

Workstations crowd the ROC's cramped interior. From a few hundred meters away, Patrick feels the blast reverberate through his feet and buttocks, and waits for the last vibration to settle out. Per regulations, he sends the small robominer in to poke and prod and x-ray the walls for the slightest crack. Heavily plated, it could survive all but the most catastrophic cave-in. Besides, robots are replaceable. He's not.

"Jonas, you man the loader for awhile. The rest of us will shuttle the tailings out," Patrick rumbles in his deep voice. In a not-so-rare combination of European and African blood, Patrick was born and raised in Ireland and speaks with a distinctive Irish brogue.

As Director of Mining Operations, Patrick has his pick of jobs and personnel, but the four people in this room are not only the most accomplished of the twenty-seven ROV teams, they're his very close friends. All five were part of the first permanent crew almost two and a half years ago that took possession of what was then called Farcain Station, named after the assassinated American president. At the time, they were the only Europeans on the mission. That is no longer the case.

When no one moves, he looks around. "Come on lads, let's muck this out," Patrick says.

Seated next to him, Kimberly pulls her workstation's power

cord then takes her cell phone from its holster and removes it's tiny power-pack. The others follow suit as she stands and pulls the plug from the camera above the door, letting it dangle. "Patrick, we need to talk, privately." She says shutting the door and slipping a screwdriver into a hole in the floor, effectively locking it.

"Lass, whatever it is can wait 'till after the shift. Now let's get back to work," Patrick says gently, determined to keep his team focused on the task at hand.

Kim leans past and pulls the cord to his workstation. His phone is next. "No Patrick, we need to talk, now. Are we going to let McSwain deport Abby?" Kim places his dead phone next to the dark computer. Kim and her husband Kipper are British and refuse to conform to the American accent.

Patrick sighs and slides his chair around to face his team, the metal legs screeching against the stone floor. They have been through much together and he recognizes determination when he sees it. "You know I don't fancy her leaving but this's my problem. I'm waitin' to hear from Chief Aldridge but I'm sure she'll agree, tiz past time to have little ones underfoot."

"You're dreamin' Patrick," Inga says.

"You don't actually believe Mama Aldridge would risk her nice cushy job just to let you have kids? Bloody chance in hell!" Kim says with conviction.

Patrick shakes his head, "That may be so but if we're not careful, we'll piss off the Americans and they'll stop

flights from Earth. Kim, Aldrin Station needs those supplies."

"You are being way too reasonable Patrick. This is Abby and your baby we're talkin' 'bout. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Jonas asks. He is a Norwegian that stands almost a head taller than anyone else on the team.

"Of course it does!" Patrick flares, his voice taking on an edge seldom heard. "We must be bloody cautious, it's all I'm sayin'. If we don't, we may all be trippin' Earthside."

"That's just it, they can't send us all back. We must force their hand now before McSwain gains even more control. He has network cameras in every corridor, on every computer, and is monitoring our every word." Kipper holds up his dead phone. "They know everything and we know nothing," he says angrily.

"He's right. All information is going one way and it's not towards us," Jonas says.

"Don't you see Patrick? This isn't about Abby as much as it is about all of us. McSwain is challenging our freedoms and we either stand up or lie down. I, for one, will bloody stand up!" Kim says passionately.

Patrick frowns. Has he focused so much on designing Aldrin Station that he overlooked the damage McSwain and his four henchmen were doing? After all, they arrived six months ago and will leave in six more. As ranking Cis-Lunar Corporation representative, McSwain was at best, a transient member of the bases governing body, at worst, someone focused on grabbing what he could and leaving the first

chance he got.

"What's Abby and the baby to do with freedom and McSwain's cameras?" he asks.

"Everything!" Inga answers.

"Look, McSwain isn't our enemy. Cis-Lunar isn't our enemy. We wouldn't even be here if it weren't for the Americans," Patrick says.

Kipper nods, "True, I like most Americans but McSwain, not so much. If we stand by and do nothing, we're granting him complete authority. Then it's only a matter of time before one of us gets in his way."

"What would you have me do?" Patrick asks.

Kipper grins and leans forward, "Let the information flow both ways! Eliminate all the secrecy! Level out the playing field!"

Patrick admires his young friend's enthusiasm, "Exactly how do you propose to do that?"

"Put all the recorded data on public servers and give everyone access to them," Inga replies.

"Full disclosure," Kipper adds.

"No secrets!" Kim exclaims.

"We are not alone in this. Most of the Americans agree, as do our fellow Europeans, and the Japanese, Koreans, Indians, and Aussies. If we don't do something soon, McSwain'll continue to consolidate power. At some point, it'll not be a bloodless change. It'll require an armed revolt." Jonas says.

Patrick looks at him incredulously. "You seem to forget, I'm a Director and part of the administration."

"You're different, Patrick. You've never abused your

position," Jonas says.

"That cannot be said about McSwain and his cronies. They routinely collect information whose sole intent is to keep them in power," Inga says.

"And they are not shy about using it," Kipper adds. "The people here the longest are being forced Earthside. Those who refuse seem to have accidents at a much higher rate." When Patrick looks skeptical, Kipper continues, "You can claim this is a statistical anomaly, but doesn't it make you wonder?"

"It's been my bloody experience that numbers don't lie, Patrick," Kim says quietly.

Patrick frowns. How had this escaped his attention? Is it possible to be so self-absorbed in ones work as to lose track of such events whirling around him? Apparently so.

Someone tries to open the door but the screwdriver stops them. The thin sheet metal reverberates under heavy pounding.

"Open up!" a male voice calls from the other side.

Patrick looks around at his team.

"It's what we've been telling you. McSwain doesn't like not knowing what's going on," Jonas says.

Patrick gets up and pulls the screwdriver from the floor, stepping back as a baby-faced marine lieutenant pushes the door wide open. The young man is careful to stay out of the line of fire of those behind him. Patrick finds himself looking down the barrels of at least ten fully automatic assault rifles.

"I'm Director Dugan! What's the meaning of this intrusion?"

With less than two thousand settlers populating Aldrin Station, it's possible to get to know all of them to some extent, but marines are rotated every six months and this young officer is a recent arrival.

"Just following orders, Sir. The Administrator wants to see you immediately. I'm to escort you to his office." The young lieutenant is not impressed with Patrick or any of his team. His assessment of the situation is that he alone could take the lot of them without breaking a sweat.

"How nice of him. Did he tell you why he wants to see me?" Patrick asks.

"No Sir. He just said to get you. So if you would, Sir, come with me," the young officer motions for Patrick to exit the room.

The marines are fresh from Middle Eastern occupations and well trained in street fighting. The only possible advantage Patrick and the others have is these young men are not accustomed to Luna's gravity, but that fact seems woefully inadequate at the moment.

He picks up his phone before stepping out. Patrick looks into the small camera mounted above the lieutenant's helmet and says, "McSwain, we'll be discussing this later. Now, order these men out of here," Patrick rumbles in his best brogue.

Seconds tick by.

"Sir, you're directed to come with me," the lieutenant says.

"Will you shoot me if I refuse?" Patrick asks the young man, holding his anger firmly in check.

The lieutenant shrugs and

says, "You wouldn't be the first."

The cold tone sends a chill down Patrick's spine. He briefly wonders what the lieutenant has been through that left him this way.

"Simmer down, lieutenant. Let's not get carried away," Major Isaac Crenshaw says in his West Texas drawl. The Major is moving up the corridor past the marines, making sure their rifles did not end up pointing at him by mistake. As the marines' second in command, he is Nesbit's eyes and ears while the Colonel is recovering from the accident.

The lieutenant turns to face this new challenge, drawing himself to attention when he sees who it is. "Sir!"

"Stand down, gentlemen. No one's doin' any shootin' today." Major Crenshaw looks at the Director, "Patrick, what in blazes are ya up to now?"

"Seems McSwain thinks it's his right to interfere in a private conversation," Patrick says.

"Well, it is his responsibility to ensure the safety of everyone in this base. He can't do that if he don't know what's goin' on. Don't you agree?" Major Crenshaw asks.

"Since when am I, or my team, a threat to the safety of this base?" Patrick's anger is growing exponentially as the full realization of what his team has shown him sinks in, not directed at them but at himself. He had been completely oblivious to what was happening around him, his mind focused on designing and building Aldrin Station and nothing else, but he was beginning to understand.

"Izzy, we go back too far to let this ass turn me into a bad guy." Patrick says.

"Relax. No one said you're a bad guy. McSwain don't know y'all like I do, so when you turn off all the comm links, he wonders what you're up to," Major Crenshaw states agreeably.

Anger reaches a boiling point within Patrick. "Then I guess I need to set the Administrator straight. Let's go, lieutenant. Now I want to speak to McSwain as badly as he wants to speak to me,"

Patrick pushes past the young man who drops his hand to the butt of his pistol.

"At ease, lieutenant. There'll be no gunplay unless I order it. Is that clear?" Major Crenshaw locks eyes with the young officer.

"Yes Sir!"

"Good, now go with him, and take your squad," Major Crenshaw orders. "I'll see that these other law breakers are properly scolded." He shakes his head, watching the young men shuffle awkwardly away, wondering just how this was going to play out.

"Patrick," Abby intercepts him as he emerges from a spiral ramp close to Administration. He had long since left the marines behind. They had not yet mastered speed walking in Luna's weak gravity.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"A little bird whispered in my ear that you needed help," Abby replies falling into step alongside him. Her blond ponytail makes her look much younger than twenty-eight.

"I don't need help, but McSwain will when I'm done with him," Patrick rumbles ominously.

"Stop!" she reaches out and grabs Patrick by the arm forcing him to pull up and face her, not an easy task.

"If you go in there like this you will not only fail, you will probably get us both shot. Administrator McSwain is the reigning authority in this base and as such, has complete.. Listen to me!" Abby shakes his arm until he looks down at her, "complete control. Do you understand?"

Patrick stares at her for several long seconds then chuckles, breaking the tension between them. He takes her in his arms and says, "Oh, what would I do without you? Where you go, I go. You're my rudder."

"Your rudder? I'm not a rudder. I'm your mate," Abby says with relief. First, she had worried that she wouldn't catch him in time, then that he wouldn't listen when she did.

"I accept your proposal of marriage. Set a date and we'll get hitched." Patrick frowns when she laughs. "Isn't that what you call it in Kansas, getting hitched?"

"We don't need a piece of paper to say we're hitched. Our baby boy will do that just fine," Abby says.

The lieutenant and his men make a racket in the ramp like a bunch of drunken sailors as they catch up. He sees Patrick and Abby as soon as he emerges.

"Come on, you! The Administrator is waiting," the young lieutenant blusters.

"Well love, we mustn't keep him waiting," Patrick says

smiling down at Abby.

She looks dubious but allows him to turn her and start them moving again.

"The girl stays here," the lieutenant says.

Abby laughs and they keep going.

Plainly frustrated, the young officer glares at his men and silently follows.

Typical of lunar architecture, Julie Colbert's office is devoid of right angles and straight lines, a rounded bubble of air cut from the rock between the outer corridor and McSwain's inner sanctum. She detests the label of secretary, preferring to call herself an Executive Assistant. McSwain is her third Administrator.

She has decorated the rough rock walls of her tiny office with hand-painted murals done on her own time, and has wrapped colorful cotton ribbons around the electrical wires strung across the curved ceiling. A single florescent light shines down on her desk. Her chair and two others in the room are made of cold metal.

The desk is a slab sitting on two vertical stones reminiscent of Stonehenge. No drawers, no filing cabinet, no pencils, no pens, the moonbase is completely paperless. On the desk facing her is a flat-panel computer monitor with an attached keyboard which she almost never uses. Julie much prefers the voice recognition software to typing. Beside the computer sits a picture in a crude metal frame. No other clutter of any kind mars the surface of the desk. Everything

in the office, except the computer, was made on Luna.

Abby nods and Patrick winks at Julie as they pass, earning a grin in return. They enter the short tunnel leading to McSwain's office without knocking, letting the thin metal door clank shut behind them.

The lieutenant hesitates at the closed door and Julie says, "Sit down lieutenant. It may be a while." As more of the squad enter her domain, she adds, "Oh my, so many handsome men all in my little room. How did I get so lucky?"

The stone separating the small outer office and the inner sanctum is eight feet thick. The short corridor opens out on the larger space beyond.

Patrick and Abby emerge side by side and stop. The room stretches out before them long and narrow, its ceiling peaking far above their heads. Before them is a long conference table made of butting together multiple desks, each larger than Julie's. Administrator McSwain sits at the far end, close to his inner office. Behind him is his desk, massive in its own right, covered with computer monitors. Florescent lights inundate the conference table with brilliance, leaving his personal desk in shadow.

A rather short man, what's left of McSwain's hair is white and forms a fringe above his ears. At a trim sixty-two, he is the oldest Administrator ever sent to Aldrin Station and is rather touchy about the subject.

McSwain's inner-circle sits closest to him while Aldrin

Station's section leaders are farther away. The prevailing theory was, the closer one sat to the seat of power, the more pull one had with McSwain.

"Dr. O'Neil. Director Dugan. So glad you saw fit to join us," McSwain says in his gravelly voice. The old man squints down the length of the table and motions them to take the seats open at the other end. "Sit and we'll get started."

Abby and Patrick do a quick head count as they settle in. The supervisors and directors are all good employees and have been with Cis-Lunar Corporation for many years. They're well aware of the power McSwain holds over them. Lest they forget, he reminds them often.

Major Crenshaw enters the office using McSwain's private entrance. "I'll be attending for Colonel Nesbit," he says walking past the massive desk and down the length of the conference table.

McSwain motions impatiently. He would have preferred the Colonel. Major Crenshaw has been on Luna far too long. McSwain makes a mental note to remedy that as soon as this baby nonsense was taken care of.

Major Crenshaw takes a seat far from McSwain and close to Patrick.

Patrick nods at the Major, takes his comm unit from its holster and dials. "See to it that everyone has this conference number," he says then lays the phone on the stone in front of him with its camera facing McSwain.

"What are you doing? Put that away. This is a private meeting,"

Tom Hoeffler says. Tom's job was to make sure Cis-Lunar made a profit, but he was never shy about sharing his opinion regardless of the situation or his lack of knowledge in it. He likes throwing his weight around.

Abby's phone starts to vibrate. She smiles at Patrick, flipping it open and setting it beside his but facing them.

"I beg to differ. This is a public meeting and everyone is entitled to observe if they wish," Abby says.

McSwain's face screws tight and he slaps his hand down on the tabletop. "I've had just about enough of this nonsense! Put those away or I'll have them taken from you!"

Patrick shakes his head then tries to move on, "What is it you wanted to see me about? Have you decided to let Abby stay?"

"Davison, confiscate those phones," McSwain says waving his hand at Patrick.

Rick Davison stands and starts to walk down the length of the table.

Patrick locks eyes with him as he approaches. "I'll break your bloody hand if you touch either of them." Patrick's voice is a dark and ominous promise.

Davison stops a few feet away and tension compresses the room.

Many of the supervisors look uncomfortable with the situation. They don't like McSwain's policies but feel compelled to back him nonetheless. After all, he is the Administrator and their careers depend upon him.

"Why not let them keep their phones? What harm will it do?" Charles says shocking himself and those around him. Charles White

III has been the Director of Personnel almost from the beginning. While he doesn't personally care for McSwain, Charles is a good company man and would normally remain quiet, but this is getting serious. His job is not worth people getting hurt.

"Shut up, White! This doesn't concern you!" Bill Bailey spits out. He is an overweight venomous slug that McSwain brought with him six months ago. He thinks of himself as the enforcer, everyone else thinks he's a just a big jerk that eats more than his share.

"Y'all calm down. Using phones ain't against the law, even in this room," Major Crenshaw says in his slow Texas drawl.

Bailey leans forward and looks down the table sneering at Izzy. "The law is what the Administrator says it is and he ordered them put away. If they don't, they will suffer the full weight of Cis-Lunar Corporation."

Major Crenshaw pulls his military issue comm unit from its holster and punches a few buttons, locking it into Patrick's phone. "No one's word is law, not even the Administrator's."

The room sucks in its breath.

Using his own phone, McSwain orders, "Lieutenant, bring your marines in here."

From behind him, Patrick hears the door open at the far end of the tunnel and the shuffling of feet. The lieutenant stops next to McSwain with his men arrayed around the table behind its occupants, rifles at the ready. Two are breathing down the neck of Patrick and Abby. The young lieutenant is surprised to see

Major Crenshaw at the table.

"Now Patrick, you should listen to your rudder, I'm the reigning authority for this base." Administrator McSwain spreads his hands agreeably and looks at Abby. "You don't want to see this go any further, do you?" he asks.

Patrick sits motionless for a moment asking himself if the threat behind the words was real or imagined, then picks up Abby's phone and snaps it shut. "Put this away, love', this is my fight."

Immediately the room goes black.

"What's this!" McSwain roars. "Get those lights back on!" He can't see his hand in front of his face. Even the ventilator fans fall silent. Out of the darkness, someone whimpers.

Around them, the soldiers switch over to infrared and several around the table turn on the little pocket lamps some carry. About the size of your finger, the high efficiency penlights can provide a candela for several weeks before dimming, comfort equipment for anyone living inside a mountain. Because red LEDs are more efficient than their cousins, their pale light gives the assembly a hellish cast.

McSwain looks down the table at Patrick and roars, "What do you know about this?"

Patrick shakes his head and says, "Not a thing."

Abby takes her phone from Patrick and begins dialing.

McSwain's eyes look ready to burst out of their sockets, a fiendish image in the monochromatic light.

Miraculously, the lights come back on and the reassuring purr of the fans returns.

Abby smiles and lays the phone back down beside Patrick's.

"Lucky guess," she says.

"Enough of these games, Dugan. I want you on the next shuttle out of here. I don't care where it's going, I want you and this woman on it. Do I make myself clear?" Mad as hell, McSwain has a crazed look on his beet-red face and sweat glistens across his baldness.

Patrick laughs at McSwain, "Aye! That's a marvelous idea Administrator, but you have it backwards. You'll be on that shuttle when it leaves in less than an hour. Oh, and don't forget your lackeys. We wouldn't want anything to happen to these fine lads, would we?" He slides his gaze from Hoeffler to Nelson, on to Bailey, and finally Davison, who has long since retreated back to his seat.

Only Bailey speaks out, "How dare you! The Administrator is in charge of this base, not you. He will decide YOUR fate!"

Furious at being laughed at, McSwain jumps to his feet and shakes his finger at Patrick, his face getting even redder if that were possible. The most powerful man in Aldrin Station rolls his lips back in a snarl, "Arrest him!" he sputters through clinched teeth, his jaw throbbing in anger.

The young lieutenant frowns with trepidation, glances at Major Crenshaw who shakes his head ever so slightly, then backs away from McSwain.

Turning his demoniac gaze on the young man, "What are you

doing? I gave you an order, arrest him!" his hand visibly shaking as he points at Patrick, rage and age combining to render it unsteady.

Major Crenshaw stands and starts moving towards McSwain. All around the table, section leaders begin pulling their phones out and locking them to Patrick's. The only one without a phone before them is Charles. Izzy stops behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Charles looks up, "My phone's being repaired," he says nervously.

Major Crenshaw squeezes his shoulder affectionately, "That's fine, Charley. We know where your heart is." He goes on, stopping in front of McSwain. The stricken look on the Administrator's face would be comical if this were not so serious.

"What're you doing? This is mutiny. I'll have you shot," he says weakly, feeling the situation slipping away. Looking at Major Crenshaw, McSwain realizes that all is lost and deflates like an old balloon. Only a miracle can change things at this point and he had long since given up on those.

Izzy shakes his head, "Partner, you truly stepped in it. Can't run roughshod over these eggheads, they'll bite you in the ass every time." Drawing himself up, Major Crenshaw says in his best Texas drawl, "Administrator McSwain, I hereby relieve you of duty and place you under protective custody awaiting transportation Earthside. Lieutenant, take him and these people to Hanger One. I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Sir, yes sir!" the lieutenant has no problem taking orders from the Major.

Patrick looks at Izzy, "What say you, do we request another Administrator?"

Major Crenshaw nods, "Reckon that ball's already rollin'."

"Can you wait for just a day or two?" Abby asks.

Izzy shrugs, "Why sure darlin', if I've a good reason. Can ya give me one?"

"To make sure this never happens again," Abby says.

"How do we do that?" Charles asks. The other supervisors and directors watch intently along with most of Aldrin Station.

Abby is as excited as they have ever seen her. She begins nervously pacing the floor around the table. "The first thing to do is route all cameras in Aldrin Station to one server. We need to design a network that will store every public utterance and make it available to any citizen at any time. Information must flow freely in a free society. We need to make it unlawful for any decision or agreement to be made privately or in secret. Everything must be out in the open, full disclosure. In fact, let's call it that, the Law of Full Disclosure." Abby says enthusiastically. She and many others have been hoping for this moment for what seems like forever and now when it's finally here, she wants to do everything at once.

"No love, I disagree," Patrick says, smiling when Abby turns to look at him in surprise. "The first thing we need to do is make our baby legal."

Abby grins from across the table, "No, I disagree. The first thing we need to do is make ALL babies legal."

"I concede the point," Patrick says bowing his head to her. "By all means, let's make all babies legal. But for now, let's make sure McSwain is on that shuttle, then you can convene a meeting of all citizens and discuss your ideas." He snaps his phone shut bringing Luna's first General Council meeting to a close.

Epilog

Something strange is happening on the moon. Hundreds of amateur and professional astronomers have documented phenomena that are lumped together under the generic name of Transient Lunar Phenomenon or TLP. In short, TLPs are patchy, short-lived changes in brightness on the moon's surface. They can last a few seconds or go on for hours, they can grow from a few kilometers to a hundred kilometers in size, and they can change color while they fluctuate in brightness.

No one knows for sure what causes a TLP. Speculation has ranged from volcanoes to little green men. The most likely reason is the simplest, lunar outgassing.

From what source is still a mystery but it is possible that primordial ice from the earliest days of the moons formation is trapped deep underground and periodically releases a bubble of gas or vapor.

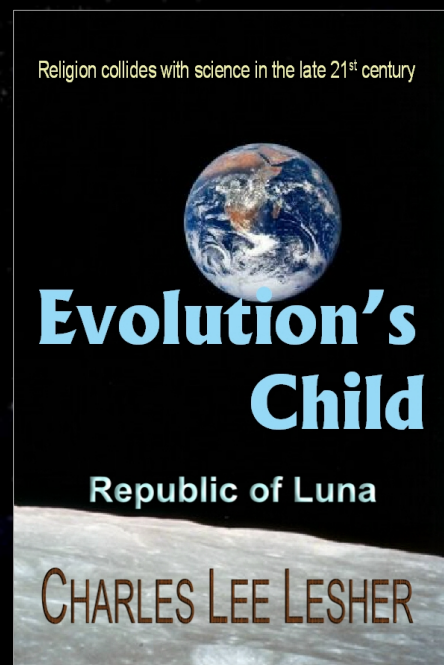
What a treasure it would be to find water ice veined like gold under the surface of the moon.

Evolution's Child is Chuck's debut novel. It is set in 2092 and explores the high tech society that will develop when separated not only by great distances, but the harsh unforgiving vacuum of space. It is available at all major bookstores through:

Writers Cramp Publishing
ISBN-10: 097772350X

The second novel in the series is due out late first quarter 2009.

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Submissions Guidelines

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Moonbeams genre is primarily **Speculative Science Fiction** as it relates to colonizing the moon but we will accept other genre including nonfiction. You do not have to be a Moon Society member to submit.

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Exchanging links is ok if your link is clearly space related. Moonbeams reserve the right to say no to any submission.

These guidelines are subject to review and will be adjusted as we go along. Moonbeams is *YOUR* magazine. Let's have some fun with it, shall we?

The Editor