

ANDROMEDA'S MOON

SEARCH FOR THE
LAVALIGHT CRYSTAL



BEN AND ANNIE GRIMLEY

All characters in this book are purely fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental (except for our silly orange and white cat, Pickle, who really does get himself into many pickles).

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1. Andromeda's Perfect Plan



The Moon is a funny thing. Sometimes it seems larger, sometimes smaller. It can look snow white, pale yellow, shiny silver, or even pumpkin orange. And sometimes you can see a face—the “man on the Moon” of which there are so many legends.

The Moon has many powers, too: It commands the ocean tides, navigates the seasons, steers sunrise to the East, and steadies our Earth as it wobbles. When full, it guides travelers through the dark. When full of mischief, it turns the unwary into werewolves.

Well, okay, there are no werewolves in this story. There's no “dark side” of the Moon either. Nope, there's no half that's dark year-round (except down in a nice deep crater) or always bright (except high on the Mountains of Everlight at the north pole). But when the night sky down here on Earth is clear and

the air is crisp, you might just make out the faint shimmery outline of nighttime on the Moon.

It's hard for most of us to imagine that people actually live up there, but they do! Fearless explorers mapping new frontiers, clever scientists unlocking the secrets of space-time, lonely settlers building their futures on a barren rock that alternates between extreme heat and freezing cold. Yep, there's not too many willing to go where there's no air, precious little water, and more things that can kill you than a crocodile-infested lagoon. But there are those brave few...

As the full moon rose high above Ta'u Island, a silvery moonbeam lit up the steep slopes of Lata Mountain like a spotlight. Giant ferns waved their pointy fronds. Thin wisps of sea mist drifted by. The keen eyes of a "flying fox" megabat flickered in the passing light. The moonbeam continued its upward march until it shone on a small, dark figure dressed all in black.

"Okay, almost there! Almost..." the climber gasped, gulping down deep breaths of moist island air. It was a girl's voice. And it belonged to Andromeda Starwell, one very determined twelve-year-old (almost thirteen!) who had an extremely dangerous and daring plan that she'd told absolutely no one about—unless you counted Pickle, her

orange and white American Shorthair cat. It was always safe to tell Pickle her most exotic plans, since he was a most reliable keeper of secrets.

Powerful tropical winds blew Andromeda's long auburn hair around like an insane chef violently tossing a bowl of spaghetti. The fresh salty air made her feel wild, like staying out all night. It gave her the energy she needed to scale the rest of the way to the top of the narrow ridge.

At last, Andromeda reached her goal. With one hand, she chucked something big and heavy up over the edge of the precipice—and heard the satisfying crunch of ferns as it landed—while the other hand patted around blindly in search of a handhold.

“Whoa!”

Her right foot slipped on some loose pebbles and she slid down several feet, clutching desperately at ferns and stunted trees. Luckily, the other foot snagged on a root, and that flipped her upside down—totally freaked out, but at least alive. Then she made the mistake of looking down at the two-hundred-foot drop beneath her and howled in fright. If anyone had heard her, they might have shivered and wondered if there really WERE werewolves. But, no, she was alone on the mountain.

Well, not quite exactly alone...

As she raised her head, Andromeda noticed two glassy eyes watching her. The creature—also upside-down—had a long black snout, gray and orange-brown fur, and black leathery wings. It popped one eye open to stare briefly at Andromeda before deciding she wasn't a threat.

Holy ginormous sleeping fruit bat! GAAAH!

Andromeda crunched her abdomen and stretched out her arms to grab hold of the tree root that had saved her life.

Thanks, root. Roots are awesome.

She hoisted herself up and climbed back to the top.

Ah, finally! Now we can get back to that extremely dangerous and daring plan... You see, Andromeda knew she'd thought of EVERYTHING—how to slip into the spaceport undetected, how to throw Dad off her scent, and how to sneak on board. She was getting on that ship and no one was going to stop her!

She pulled out her notes and reviewed them for the umpteenth time:

Andromeda's Absolutely Amazingly Awesome Arrangements

T-30M: Climb ridge and zip down to water tower. Weeee!

T-20M: Wait until ground crew leaves, then go up tower #1.

T-15M: Enter ship side hatch. Take pics for proof.

T-9M: Get out during countdown hold. Run for tunnel.

She made a few scratches with her glow-in-the-dark skeleton pen by the moonlight—this was a purely lights-out mission—and added one more line:

T-0: Share pics with whole world. I'm famous!

Satisfied, Andromeda folded up her secret plans and slid them back into her pocket. She bent over and brushed off the various thorny brambles and fuzzy seedpods that had stuck to her jeggings during the climb up. Ta'u Spaceport sprawled out far below in the darkness. The U.S.S. Explorer, lit up by a distant halo of launch pad lights, looked like a model spaceship from this height.

Moonbeams glinted off the last lengths of the thousand-foot spool of aircraft cable Andromeda had strung all the way to the spaceport. Oh, what a joy it had been (not!) to roll it up and down the mountain until every muscle in her body felt like it was on fire. The toughest part had been hopping the barbed wire fence and anchoring the line to the water tower. Then all that tightening and adjusting the cable tension until her hands bled.

Ouch! Well, it had to be done. All for the good of tomorrow's mission.

She just hoped no one would look up. People so rarely do...

2. Andromeda's Secret Mission



If the night before had been quiet and empty, the morning was all hustle and bustle. Crowds milled about aimlessly. People jostled each other. Kids somersaulted on the small bits of open green.

“T minus thirty minutes,” blared ginormous loudspeakers, strung high up on posts the size of telephone poles.

Andromeda Starwell and her dad gingerly climbed the swaying bleachers and found their seats. Sunlight glinted off the chrome metal benches. A large burly man with a wide-brim hat and an equally wide bottom deposited himself just in front.

“Dad, I can't see!”

“Look, kid, I'm not a magician. For crying out loud, I had to get down on my knees, beg, and clap like a demented seal just to get you a badge. This IS a top-secret spaceport, you know.”

“Yeah, but we’re not close enough. I want to get CLOSER.”

“No, you don’t,” replied Mr. Starwell, indicating the yawning crevice between the large man’s untucked shirt and slipping pants.

Ugh! Andromeda and her dad looked at each other with squeamish expressions, crinkling noses and biting lips. A brief smile flickered on their faces.

“You know, when I was your age we had to sit MILES away. Now the only reason we’re even this close is thanks to Lata Mountain. That ridge over there is the only thing between us and a noise so loud it would turn our brains into grape jelly. I’m sorry, but this is as good as it gets unless you’re the crew.”

Pickle meowed as he squirmed around in his kitty carrier. He didn’t seem to relish the idea of being turned into jelly. His furry whiskers poked through the wire mesh side of the bright pink bag.

“Last chance for a snack, Kiddo,” Mr. Starwell yelled in Andromeda’s ear.

Ow! Oh, how she hated when Dad called her “Kiddo.” She was NOT a “Kiddo.” She was twelve – practically thirteen! – a young lady. *Get it straight, Daddo!*

“Uh, could I get some pop – ahh! – corn?” Andromeda asked, suppressing a sneeze.

“Why the heck would you want an ACORN at a time like this?” her dad wondered.

“I said popcorn!” but a horrible screeching sound erupted from the loudspeaker system and blotted out the middle part of her sentence.

“Corn? I thought you hated how it got stuck in your teeth.”

“NO! POPCORN!”

“Why not? I’m sure they have popcorn.”

Okay, now Andromeda knew she needed to speak in a language Dad’s wee little brain could understand: the international language of dumb-idiot grownups. She pointed at a nearby pair of Space Patrol officers who were chowing on a bag of delicious, salty, buttery popcorn.

“Read... my... lips...” she mimed, “Mongoo... want... foood...” Then she gave Mr. Starwell a gentle but firm shove toward the popcorn vendor. It seemed like he got the message because he started heading in the right direction.

“Just be a good girl and wait,” Adam Starwell called, after descending halfway down the bleachers. He turned his face into the warm tropical breeze. The wind didn’t even twitch a hair on his head. It was too short!

Andromeda’s wavy auburn hair with sun-golden highlights streamed across her light turquoise eyes. Her flower-

imprinted, red summer dress flowed like the churning sea. She tuned out Dad's now-distant voice. *Okay, Andromeda. It's now or never.*

"C'mon, Pickle," she muttered, hoisting the pink cat carrier over her shoulder. She bounded down the steps and made a beeline for the spaceport gate.

If I can just get to that moving walkway on the other side of the fence... Oh, drat!

Two military police officers blocked the way. They were armed.

As Andromeda edged her way closer, one of the MPs started to notice the suspicious-looking bulge in her bag. Pickle was scratching at the faux lambskin lining. "Stop that, Pickle!" she whispered.

She fingered her special V.I.P. badge. That was one advantage of having a dad who designs space rockets! (Did he design this one? Why did she know so little about Dad's work?)

Aww, this isn't gonna work, badge or no badge.

All of a sudden, a man stood up on the top row of the bleachers behind her and started yelling. Andromeda couldn't make out what he was saying, but she craned her neck around and saw that he held up a cardboard sign with both hands.

“Return our sacred land,” he’d scrawled with a thick, black marker. Then smaller: “Ta’u belongs to the Samoan people.”

“Hey, come down from there!” hollered one of the officers.

“He doesn’t have a badge!” shouted a bystander dressed in Space Patrol blue.

The two MPs muscled their way through the crowd, causing eruptions of popcorn, peanuts and soda as they rushed up the steps.

No one’s watching! It’s now or never, Andromeda Starwell.

The gate was chained and locked, but the metal posts were just far enough apart for a slim twelve-year-old (and an even slimmer cat) to squeeze through. Amid all the confusion and the gusty wind blowing stuff around, no one seemed to notice as she hopped onto the moving walkway heading for the spaceport. Andromeda immediately crouched down between the walkway handrails to avoid being spotted.

The moving walkway sloped down to the low, mostly underground Space Traffic Control bunker. She knew that once she reached the tunnel, there’d be another checkpoint, security cameras and about zero chance of sneaking through to the other side where the launch pad was.

This is where I get off. Thanks for the ride!

She vaulted over the walkway guardrail and prepared herself mentally for the long climb ahead.

Go, go, go!

Andromeda sprinted up the side of the mountain. If she hadn't been training for weeks, there's no way she could've made it. Even so, her legs felt like lead and her head pounded. Pickle was a fat boy riding on her back.

"How loooooow can you go?" Her ringtone started playing the first few bars of "Lo-Grav," Andromeda's favorite song for all time (until she found another).

Oh, no, it's Dad! He can't be back already!

She picked up, trying not to sound winded.

"Uh, hey, like where ARE you, Dad?"

"I'm sorry, Kiddo, the refreshments line is crazy long. I guess with this being the hundred-fiftieth Moon landing anniversary, you know—last solid fuel spacecraft ever and all."

Phew! He's not back yet... that was close!

"Well, just as long as you're back in time for liftoff. Bye, Dad!" She hung up quickly.

Um, Andrie? Should you really have done that? Oh well, too late to turn back now!

At last Andromeda reached the ridge top.

Good. All my gear's still here.

She braced herself against the strong air current while she put on her safety harness. Then she clipped the harness to the stainless steel zip-line trolley on the aircraft cable, and secured the kitty carrier straps. Pickle clawed desperately at the walls of his bag.

“Relax Pickle, it’ll be fine,” she said. “I’ve done extreme zip-lining a zillion times at camp.” Then she looked down and had a total panic attack.

No, it won't be fine. It's too steep. I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't – SHUT UP! Focus on the mission, you pathetic wimp. You might never get another shot. DO IT!

Andromeda took a deep breath, closed her eyes and plunged down the zip-line. The speed was incredible! For the first few frightening seconds, she squeezed the straps so tight that her knuckles turned white. Her cheeks and eyelids flapped against the headwind. She held in her breath. Then she let it all out.

“Whooooooooooooaaaaaaah! This is totally freakin’ AWESOME!!!”

The fun only lasted until the cable started sagging dangerously in the middle.

It's from my weight on the line. Test, test, test. Why didn't I test it with a log or a backpack or something first?

She prayed hard that the line wouldn't snap and recoil. In fact, at that moment, she was willing to pray to whomever or whatever might be willing to save her. Before she could decide on likely candidates, however, she'd already whizzed right over the barbed wired fence.

Now Andromeda could see the launch tower and spaceship nosecone looming up ahead. Just in the nick of time she remembered to trip the magnetic brakes.

No use being a splat of goo on the side of that water tower!

"Preflight alignment complete. We're a go to resume countdown. T minus twenty minutes," announced the Flight Director. "Attention, Close Out Crew! Clear the launch pad. Clear the pad."

Okay, this is it.

The last truck had pulled away. Andromeda crept out from behind the water tower, looking both ways to be extra sure she was alone.

Little white bits—popcorn, maybe?—swirled around the ship. As she got closer, she realized with a shock that they were actually snowflakes. Massively huge puffy snowflakes on a hot sunny day! With a wide, almost barbaric grin Andromeda flicked out her tongue to catch one. Then another. And another.

Mmm, deeee-lish!

The ship's liquid oxygen and hydrogen tanks, which were cooled to minus 240°C (-400°F), were making a private snowstorm just for her! Andromeda twirled around laughing as snow glazed her elbow-length, reddish-brown hair until it looked like vanilla icing on a carrot cupcake.

There! Umbilical tower #1.

The door was cracked open. It had a big red sign on it that read "Launch Personnel Only."

Andromeda knew she shouldn't be here. There were about a zillion different ways things could go dreadfully wrong.

Half of her wanted to go through with the mission until the bitter end: *Stick to the plan!* The other half wanted to run off like a scared rabbit: *Get me outta here!*

It was pure curiosity that tipped the balance. (Hey, didn't curiosity kill the cat? Dad LOVED that stupid expression, another sign of his dumb-idiot grownup-ness.) Andromeda simply couldn't resist.

"Well, Pickle, what do you think? This should take us to the side hatch."

Pickle didn't protest, so Andromeda stepped inside.

The whole stairwell seemed to tremble with vibrations. It was from that blasted wind! It made her knees wobbly.

Pickle meowed. She grabbed his kitty carrier and ran up the steps.

After a challenging climb, the stairs led to a small chamber with gleaming white walls. Safety gear filled cubbyholes on either side, and a coil of thick yellow hose dangled from the ceiling, partly unwound. Andromeda stood facing a large, round hatch with a metal wheel in the center. Some Cyrillic letters were painted on it – Russian!

Andromeda hesitated for a heartbeat, and then turned the wheel.

3. A Terrible Accident



The room inside looked rather cramped and cluttered, with strange equipment and furniture all strapped or bolted in place. Nearly every inch of the curved walls contained a storage locker or shelf or sliding door to some other yet smaller compartment. Nearly every panel, switch, and knob had a tag or sticky note attached to it. And the weirdest thing of all: Everything in the room was sideways!

Andromeda knew right where she was... the exact spot she wanted to be... the mid-deck of the U.S.S. Explorer!

I did it! Swwwweeeet!!!

She started to rummage through her bag for her phone. No one was ever going to believe this. Time for some absolutely amazingly awesome pics! And only a few precious minutes to take them...

Up on the flight deck, a blue warning light flashed: “Door Unsecured.”

“Whaaa? Three minutes from launch status check and they can’t keep the friggin’ door shut? I thought everyone was supposed to be off the pad?”

“I’ll go see what it is, Cap’n. Can’t abort now!”

“Yeah, this is our last shot before they retire this old bird... You’d better go quick or they’ll restart the clock.”

Andromeda heard the voices, but she couldn’t tell where they were coming from. In a panic, she scouted for a hiding place and was able to pull herself and Pickle on top (or was it the side?) of what looked like a giant refrigerator secured to the wall with steel rivets.

Don’t meow, Pickle. Please don’t meow.

A slim, athletic woman clambered down the ladder from the flight deck and hopped off, landing with surprising poise. She wore a close-fitting uniform that resembled a wetsuit, except instead of being smooth and black like the suits scuba divers use, it was white, blue and shapely. The woman quickly slammed the hatch, gave the wheel a hard twist and reported in:

“Locked and sealed, Cap’n.”

“Okay, now get back here pronto and buckle up.”

As soon as the woman astronaut disappeared, Andromeda climbed down and gently placed Pickle's carrier on the floor. Then she started some serious, rapid-fire photography. That little episode with the hatch had cost her a full minute.

She was so obsessed with cramming in every picture she could possibly take during the countdown hold that she didn't notice her cat pawing at part of the carrier flap that had come unzipped. He squeezed his head through the widening opening. His fur was standing straight up.

"A little windy out there, eh? Thirty knots," muttered the Launch Director, looking at the huge TV screen inside Space Traffic Control.

"Weather checks—we're a go," the LWO assured her. (That's "Launch Weather Officer" in case you've never flown a spaceship before.)

"Right, all systems go then. Resume the count on my mark. T minus nine."

Adam Starwell swore up and down that these were their seats. There was the guy with his pants slipping down, the old lady with the pea-green hat... Of course with the cops arresting that local troublemaker with the cardboard sign,

there was bound to be some confusion. But still, where could Andromeda have gone?

Probably the bathroom. Girls are always running to the bathroom. She'll miss the launch of the century for a potty break! Then his brow creased in suspicion. *Or maybe she's off playing one of her little tricks...*

And there Adam Starwell danced dangerously close to the ragged edge of Truth.

The younger Starwell paused her picture-taking to peek at the "NASA Live" channel on her phone.

T minus nine? She was running out of minutes. Okay, that's my cue to get outta here!

And that was of course the flaw in Andromeda's perfect plan—you've probably been laughing at her the whole time, haven't you? How was she going to get out? Less than a minute and a half and they'd disconnect the umbilical tower. She'd be trapped inside!

Okay, okay, there must be a latch or a handle somewhere to open this thing. Here! A diagram! "How to disarm side hatch from mid-deck interior. Step One: Turn red lever to right..."

All day Pickle had felt a growing sense of foreboding and doom. Sometimes animals can sense that sort of thing better than us humans. Maybe it's a kind of survival instinct that we've lost.

Something just didn't smell right, a kind of warning that blipped on his cat radar.

He'd been scratching and chewing and gnawing at the kitty carrier for hours and now his big chance had arrived. While his Food Giver was busy trying to decipher the emergency exit instructions, he popped out of the carrier and scurried right between her legs.

Freedom... sweet freedom!

Andromeda felt a swishy tail brush against her leg.

Uh-oh. This was definitely NOT part of the plan.

"No, Pickle, we've got to get out of here!" Andromeda wailed, diving after him. The terrified cat bolted and quickly hid among the odd-looking astronaut furniture.

"Pickle, come back! We're almost out of time! PICKLE!!!"

"Andromeda! Andromeda!" Mr. Starwell hollered into the wind. He cupped his hands to project his voice better, but still no answer.

Wait, there she is!

From the bleachers he spotted a tall girl with auburn hair and a red dress. He scrambled down the steps, trying not to overturn the giant popcorn bags he carried in each hand.

“Hey, Andromeda! I’m over here!”

At last Andromeda spied an orange and white furry tail.

Aha! Gotcha!

She grabbed her cat, stuffed him in the carrier, and raced for the exit hatch.

“T minus seven-thirty,” crackled a voice over the ship’s radio. “Detach main umbilical tower.”

A horrible creaking sound erupted outside as the tower peeled off the side of the ship. Now the only thing outside the hatch was thin air.

Trapped!

It finally dawned on Andromeda that her life had just taken a most unexpected turn.

“Oh, you fluzzy dumb fur ball – now you've landed me in another pickle!”

Pickle just stared at her with his moist, sad little eyes. He'd never looked cuter.

“What do we do now?”

“Andromeda, STOP!”

Adam Starwell ran up from behind and grabbed her by the arm.

“Next time you run off by yourself, you’re going –”

“Get your hands off me, Mister!”

Technically, it was only one hand, but the college-age woman in the red dress had every right to be upset.

Someone tapped the surprised Mr. Starwell on the shoulder.

“Beat it, creep. You dig?” a deep voice boomed.

Mr. Starwell spun around to see the woman’s big, muscular boyfriend squinting at him. He backed away, not so much out of fear as pure shock. *Then where the heck was Andromeda?*

Joke or no joke, it wasn’t funny any more.

Andromeda wasn’t laughing either.

I’d better strap myself in, but how?

She couldn’t see any passenger seats, and everything was tilted sideways! She hunted for whatever handholds she could find and scrambled up the wall (or was it the floor?), searching for someplace safe to stay during liftoff. Finally, Andromeda was able to pry open a sliding panel labeled “Sleep Station.”

She climbed in, pulling Pickle up after her.

Adam Starwell was having trouble finding his phone. The crush of people left him with no place to put down the popcorn. But he couldn't very well do a proper search with a huge bag in each hand.

Oh, what I'd give for an extra couple of arms about now, thought Mr. Starwell.

He clumsily cradled both bags in the crook of one arm and used his chin to stop them from spilling while the other hand fumbled through his pockets.

There! Now let's see, Andrie's number must be on here...

"T minus thirty-five seconds," the announcer said. "The board is green. Switching to on-board computers for auto sequence."

Wait, my phone, Andromeda suddenly remembered. *Maybe they can still call off the launch!*

Mr. Starwell picked up almost instantly.

"Andrie, where ARE you?"

"Dad, I'm here. On the ship."

"On the ship..." he repeated weakly, mouth wide open in disbelief.

“Go for main engine start,” blared the loudspeakers. Power units on the spaceship started firing up, forcing Andromeda to plug her ears.

OMG, I'll be like deaf for WEEKS!

“Ten... nine... eight...”

“Andromeda!”

A deafening roar rocked both the ship and the ground as the massive main engines ignited. Andromeda hugged her cat. His eyes grew wide as saucers.

“Dad!”

“Five... Four...”

“Andromeda! Andrie!”

“Two... one... liftoff!”

The rocket blasted into the air. The crowd of people cheered. All eyes gazed upward toward the receding spaceship. Among all those eyes, only one pair was looking somewhere else—transfixed in horror on a blank screen that read “CALL ENDED”. It might as well have read “WORLD ENDED”.

Despite all the noise, Adam Starwell no longer heard anything. Just a strange buzzing in his head. A bag of fresh popcorn lay toppled at his feet, while short bursts of tropical wind scattered the puffy white kernels. They swirled and

eddied in the air, formed as if by unseen hands into small, butterfly tornadoes.

4. Found



The first thing that occurred to Andromeda was that the snowflakes on her head had melted into slush. She could feel the cool droplets tickling her scalp.

Second, the engines rumbled so loudly that even when she plugged her ears, it made no difference at all! Worse, the ship began to shudder and shake, making her spine rattle and head swim.

And third, Andromeda realized how fortunate she was to have chosen a bed with blankets and pillows as her hiding spot. Their softness cushioned her body against the sheer crushing 3g force of takeoff. Her left cheek pressed firmly against the base of the sleep station and the right cheek puckered, shaping her mouth into a fishy face.

Andromeda's stomach felt positively awful. Pickle looked even sicker. He was curled up in a tight little ball like a fuzzy caterpillar.

Gradually, the ringing in her ears faded and she began to hear voices coming from the flight deck...

“Roger that. We’ve achieved orbit. E.T.A. is forty-nine hours, fifteen minutes.”

“Alright, we made it up the hill, folks. Explorer mission number thirty-five is a go!”

Applause filled the Space Traffic Control room down on Earth.

After a brief check of the dashboard, Pilot Cassandra decided that the ship was safely away. She whipped off her launch helmet and matted down her thick, black hair, wrapping it into a ponytail. A few stubborn strands resisted, too frizzed up by static electricity to stay put.

“I’ll go below, Cap’n, and make sure everything’s secured.”

The man to her left nodded in silent approval. He unhurriedly slipped his helmet off to reveal first a slim chinstrap beard and then a pair of alert but bored-looking eyes furrowed beneath a close-cropped buzz cut.

Cassandra floated weightless to the middle of the room and squeezed through the hatch to mid deck. She quickly returned. Commander Richards glanced up at her with mild

interest. His thick, bushy eyebrows arched upwards in the form of two question marks.

“THAT was fast,” he quipped.

“There’s something down there.”

Mission Specialist Shaw, the always-witty third crew member, arched over backwards and grinned at Cassandra upside-down. He stretched his feet “up” to the ceiling.

“Ooooooh. There’s a boogeyman on board. Abandon ship!”

“Not funny,” the Pilot retorted. “There really is something down there.”

“Shaw, take the helm,” the Commander ordered in his deep, relaxed voice. He stood up ramrod-straight, then flipped his body over and gracefully drifted through the inter-deck hatch, head-first.

The Pilot followed.

“Where’d ya hear it, Cass?”

“Well, Cap’n, it was like a rustle coming from over there.”

“Ah – AH – AHHH-chooooo!” burst a sneeze from inside one of the sleep stations.

Andromeda looked up to see the sliding door cracked open and two startled astronauts peering in at her.

“Uh, hi?” she waved, sheepishly.

“What are YOU doing in there?!”

“Am I in space?” Andromeda asked, feeling light-headed. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t just her head that felt light.

“Weeeeeeeee! Look at me, I’m floating!!!”

Commander Richards and Pilot Cassandra stared blankly at Andromeda, then at one another... then at Andromeda again. The Commander’s jaws flexed opened and shut several times until at last he gave up even trying to speak.

“Uh, should I report this to Mission Control, Cap’n?” the Pilot asked.

Andromeda’s heart froze.

I’ll be grounded for life!

“First we need to figure out who she is... and what the heck she’s doing in my bed!”

He bent over and squinted to read her badge: “Ms. Andromeda Starwell, V.I.P.?” Strangely, there was a flake of buttered popcorn stuck to it.

Even more strangely, an orange and white furry cat floated by.

Now if you’d snuck aboard a spaceship and been caught as a stowaway, what would YOU tell the ship’s captain? Would you own up and be honest? Or would you fib and make up a

story like, “I wish I could reveal why I’ve been sent here, but it IS a secret mission, you know,” or “Actually I’m your fourth crew member; I just have young-looking skin from all those long-lasting moisturizer products,” or “Hey, it’s not my fault; the little green men locked me in here!”

Well, Andromeda didn’t come up with ANY of those reasons. In fact, she was too frightened to say anything at all.

After some debate, the Pilot and Commander agreed that they’d better all return to the flight deck. So they bent their knees and launched “up” from the floor, much like a swimmer doing a push-off. Their momentum carried them to the ceiling. Small handholds, like monkey bars, helped them make their way along to the hatchway. Andromeda scooped up Pickle and followed their lead.

Poking her head through the hatch, Andromeda was pleased to see the sight she’d always dreamed of: gobs of blinking lights, dashboards, readouts, switches, levers, and dials of every sort—everything you’d expect to find in a spaceship cockpit.

“That’s Mission Specialist Shaw,” said the Commander, nodding toward the tall back of a man standing by one of the larger consoles. “One of the best in the business, even if he WAS dropped on his head a few times as a baby.”

“Hi,” Andromeda said, shyly.

At the sound of her voice, the man spun violently around, twisting and stretching the bungee cords that kept him from floating around the cabin. Andromeda was disturbed to find herself gaping at a crooked, brutish face with a lopsided mouth and dangling left earring. Shaw looked rather like a space pirate from those bedtime stories Dad had made up. (Hadn't he? Of course he had!) Instinctively, Andromeda tried to take a step back and found her foot suspended in the zero gravity of the flight deck.

“Don't worry, kid, I'm not gonna hurt you – yet... But what the HELL are you doin' aboard our ship???”

Then, in a confidential almost-whisper to the Commander and Pilot he repeated: “What's she doin' aboard our ship?”

And that's when Andromeda decided it was time to cry. Not the real kind where you're sad and hurt, but the fake kind that makes grown-ups act nicer. Not that she wasn't concerned about her situation, but there was a ginormous viewscreen on the other side of the deck and she desperately wanted to see out of it.

Andromeda knew exactly what to do. First, you bury your head in your hands and moan. Next, you let out a high-pitched wailing noise like the whine of a siren. Then the sobbing should start. Last come the tears and the sniffles. Timing is everything. If you move too quickly, or skip a step,

they'll know you're faking it. Fortunately, none of the crew were parents. Childless grown-ups are the easiest kind of suckers.

Nobody knew just how to react. Pilot Cassandra recovered first, draping her arm around Andromeda's shoulders.

"Now, now, Andromeda," she soothed, "everything will work out just fine."

She gave Specialist Shaw an icy look of such intensity that it forced back his brawny, barrel-chested frame like it was a balloon being batted away by an invisible hand.

"Just fine, huh..." Shaw muttered under his breath, too cowed to challenge the Pilot aloud. "We've got a cry baby kid aboard in the middle of a dangerous mission, but everything's just fine."

Nobody was listening.

Within minutes, Andromeda found herself right where she wanted to be: wrapped up in a cozy blanket with her warm, furry cat purring in her arms, sipping hot chocolate (through a straw, so it wouldn't drift all over the flight deck), her nose pressed against a porthole with a planet-side view. And that view was AMAZING! She could see Earth floating like a jewel suspended in a cloud of stars.

So beautiful... she occasionally had to remind herself to breathe.

Was it her imagination or could she see Earth spinning? Puffy white clouds began to swirl and eddy, or they seemed to. Andromeda got the strange sensation that her body was moving one way, while another person inside of her was moving the other way. She swayed and her eyelids fluttered.

Shaw hunched over Andromeda, hands on his knees, and glared down at her crumpled form.

“Huh,” he grunted. “She’s goin’ *garny* on us.”

“Say it isn’t so,” sighed Commander Richards. Most astronauts get space-sick at one point or another. Not much you could do about it.

“Cass!” he called out. “Water!”

Pilot Cassandra glided up from mid deck bearing a sippy cup and plastic straw.

“Oh, oh, where’s my teddy bear?” Shaw sneered.

The Pilot swatted at Shaw’s big ugly head with her spare hand and barely missed as he clumsily ducked out of the way.

Just then Andromeda doubled over and groaned. Pickle slipped out of her grasp. Shaw snapped his head to face her just in time to see what looked like large coffee grains flying toward him.

“What the – ???”

The globules collided with his cheeks, staining them dark with brownish-yellow spots. He looked like a mutant alien freckle monster.

Andromeda's stomach felt much better. But where was her cat?

Now Shaw went completely ballistic.

"I TOLD ya she'd go *garny* on us, but did ya listen?"

"Shaw..." started the Commander.

"Why that miserable little cheese-brained dookeyhead!"

"SHAW!!!"

Shaw paused uncertainly. Cap'n just about never yelled.

"How about using your mushy mouth for something other than talking?" snarled the Commander in a quietly dangerous tone.

Shaw's face got red and kind of purply. It did not improve his looks. He gave Andromeda a mean stare and then stomped off to go clean himself up in the lavatory.

Cassandra's alert eyes followed him intently until he disappeared through the hatch to mid deck. Then her shoulders sagged slightly as the tension flowed out of the room. She knelt down (as best as one can in a place without a real "down"), and wiped the mess off Andromeda's face.

There wasn't much, since most of it was on Shaw's.

“Well, we can’t go back to Earth,” she said slowly, keeping her eyes fixed on Andromeda. “That would blow the mission.”

(Meanwhile, Andromeda dove under Shaw’s console calling “Pickle, Pickle!”)

“Mmm. We’ll have to divert to Apollo Base and drop her off there,” Commander Richards agreed wearily. “I’ll take her down in the lander myself.”

Fate was a roll of the dice. Why fight it? He had more important fights anyhow.

Richards felt only mild surprise as an orange and white floating fur ball bounced off his head.

5. Stranded!



When Andromeda stepped off the ice cream truck-sized landing vehicle and onto the Moon, the first thing she noticed was the polished moonstone floor—mainly because she'd fallen flat on her face. It reflected a harsh, icy-cold gleam that seemed to warn, "Don't tread on me, kid, or I'll freeze yer feet off."

Andromeda tilted her chin up to look around. The Apollo Base landing bay was vast and empty, with enough room for a whole fleet of spaceships. No lights, no parades, no cheering crowds. Not quite the reception that Andromeda had always dreamed about. The thin air made her short of breath, and the soft echoes from her gasps were swallowed up by eerie silence.

Commander Richards escorted her away from the lander and over to the moonbase airlock. He disarmed the door and they moved briskly through the round outer hatch, then down

a long tunnel, and at last through a second inner hatch. Andromeda found it difficult to walk after being used to zero gravity. She would've fallen flat on her face several more times if there hadn't been handrails all along the path.

When the ship had first landed, she'd felt strangely heavy. But now, even with the cat carrier looped over her shoulder, she began to feel bouncy and giddy as if she'd trimmed down to the weight of a baby. No, wait; she WAS the weight of a baby!

I remember now. The Moon is one-sixth the gravity of Earth. That puts me at about fifteen pounds. And Pickle doesn't even weigh one and a half!

Commander Richards turned to Andromeda and made to leave.

"You'll be safe here, kid."

Andromeda's face flushed.

I'm not a kid, she was about to say, I'm a young lady. But she couldn't strike up the courage.

"Just stick around a few minutes. The Base Commander will be here in a flash."

"The who—?"

"All's set, Cap'n." bellowed Shaw's voice over the radio. "We gotta roll!"

“Good luck, kid.”

Richards abruptly did a one-eighty, stepped through the inner hatch, and clanged it shut behind him.

It felt like the last sound Andromeda would ever hear.

What will they do with me? Or maybe the right question is ‘what will they do TO me?’ And how will I ever get home?

After what must’ve been minutes but felt like hours, Andromeda finally gave up her nervous pacing. She was bored. And Pickle was asleep in his bag. Then she noticed the sign: Viewing Room.

Well, that sounds promising!

The Viewing Room had a large window overlooking the landing bay. Andromeda could see the lander slowly rolling out toward the launch pad. From there it would rejoin the Explorer in lunar orbit.

The far wall held an absolutely ginormous glass porthole. This gave her a wide-angle view of the moonscape. Here’s what she saw: An endless expanse of gray desert, pockmarked with shadow-filled holes and countless craters, framed by an inky black sky. The world looked lonely and bare. Nothing moved. There was no sound. In the harsh white glare of the lunar sunrise, it seemed a horribly unfriendly place. Already,

Andromeda missed the green grass, the blue sky, white puffy clouds... her warm furry cat curled up on top of her blankets.

Then it hit home. She might be stuck here for a very long time. Alone. And without warning the floodgates opened; hot tears streamed down her cheeks.

Is this what Mom felt like when she got lost?

It'd been two years now and no news. Was it even possible for an astronaut to survive that long stranded on the Far Side? Dad seemed to be the only one who thought so.

Andromeda gazed up at the sky, if you even called it that on the Moon. The glimmering stars lit up her whole field of vision. They were incredibly bright. And there were more of them than she'd ever imagined possible.

"If you want to find the Andromeda Galaxy, just follow the sideways W-shape..." her mom's voice whispered in her head.

On Earth, the galaxy was blurry and faded. But here, from the Moon where there's virtually no atmosphere, the galaxy shone clear and strong. That was HER galaxy that she was named after. Andromeda's chest puffed out in pride. Gradually, she felt her courage returning. If she could realize her lifelong dream to reach the Moon, what would stop her from visiting even the Andromeda galaxy someday? There were no limits to what she could do if she tried!

Nothing in the whole universe can stop me. Nothing!

6. Welcome



A tall, wiry man in a neatly pressed uniform and neatly trimmed mustache approached Andromeda. She quickly wiped away her tears and put on her bravest face. It wouldn't do to have everyone think she was a crybaby.

"Welcome to Apollo Research Base! I'm Base Commander Decker. How do you do?"

"Hello."

"I've radioed Mission Control and they're contacting your dad. As soon as we've received a message, I'll be sure to bring it to you."

"Thanks," replied Andromeda, gratefully.

"Poor child," Decker murmured, shaking his head.

Poor child?! Grrr! She did NOT like that.

Decker turned and a large hulking robot lumbered over, taller than a person. It was bulky and kind of blocky as if

made out of giant toy bricks. The “face” had a ridiculous smiley permanently etched into it. Two “eyes” glowed softly –strangely out of place on that inhuman, metallic body. It had four arms. It was also wearing a cowboy hat.

Andromeda raised one eyebrow.

“Perhaps you’d like to introduce yourself, Andromeda?” Decker prompted.

“Well, uh, my name is Andrie, short for Andromeda.”

“And I am called R.A.D. That is short for Regolith Analysis Device,” the robot said.

“Ray-go-whaaa?”

“Regolith. Most humans call it moondust.”

“Ohhhh. Well, that’s a nice name,” Andromeda ended, kind of lamely. But, I ask you, what else could you say to a name like THAT?

“What is your origin?” asked the robot.

“You mean where am I from? From Earth! What about you?”

As soon as she said it, Andromeda realized it was a silly question. How could robots really be FROM anywhere? Still, it was comforting to have someone to talk to. Someone you couldn’t get embarrassed in front of, who couldn’t tell on you, and who might know something about the place. The robot’s

voice was very un-robot-like. It somehow reminded her of Dad.

Decker smiled kindly. "Rad here will give you a tour of the base, if you like, and then show you and your pet to your quarters. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask for me."

Decker left, and the two were alone with a snoring cat. Neither spoke for a while.

"Shall we begin the tour?" asked Rad.

"Yeah, sure," Andromeda replied, and the tall robot began shuffling down the corridor.

Andromeda found that she still had trouble walking. Every now and then she would feel herself start to tip forward and one of Rad's four mechanical arms would reach out and catch her fall.

They turned a corner and found themselves on a platform one story above the Apollo Command Center. Lunies called it "The Pit" because the huge round basement room was mostly underground. It was filled with people, computers, monitors and big screens.

"I've seen this kind of stuff back on Earth, Rad," said Andromeda. "Let's find something more exciting, okay?"

Rad nodded and silently led the way onward.

Soon they arrived at a large room filled with desks. Each had a shiny glass surface lit with glowing letters, exploding stars, sprouting flowers, or shifting patterns. As Andromeda poked her head through the doorway to see, she very nearly collided with a short, plump old lady with a sweet smile.

“Hello, hello! Why you must be Ms. Starwell!” she said warmly. “I’m Ms. Plum. I’m so glad you stopped by.”

“Hi,” Andromeda replied timidly. She flashed a dark look at Rad that, had he been human, he would have understood to mean “This is NOT what I had in mind.”

“Oh, how exciting to see a new face in class,” Ms. Plum crooned in a cheery, sing-songy tone. “We have so few young people – only the ones born here on base are allowed to stay – and then half the time the parents whisk them away and raise them down on Earth. Can you imagine that? Very silly if you ask me!”

She excitedly grabbed a homework tablet and loaded it with an e-book. And another. And another.

“Decker told me you might be joining us for a while. Sooooo, I have just a few teensy-weensy reading treasures for you.”

The e-book titles whizzed by like flashes of nightmares – “Adventures in Theoretical Chemistry,” “Quantum

Computing Made Easy,” “The Joy of Grammar,” and gobs more – until Ms. Plum finally appeared satisfied.

“Well, that ought to be just enough to get started.”

But then she scooped up a thick, heavy-looking packet.

“This is a 37-page math assignment, so I guess you can hand it in on the third, which is five of your Earth-days from now.”

“Um, thanks,” Andromeda said, feeling overwhelmed and not very thankful.

Ms. Plum smiled sweetly.

“You kids today don’t know what you’re missing. When I was young, we still had REAL books, not these new-fangled contraptions. Of course we’d have to lug ‘em all around in our backpacks... Can you imagine?”

Andromeda couldn’t. She didn’t like the sound of the word “book” without the “e” either. It sounded so MEDIEVAL.

“Let’s go somewhere else, Rad, before she can give me more homework,” Andromeda whispered. They slinked out of the Education Center, leaving Ms. Plum to reminisce about her days as a young student in times long ago.

Next stop was the Lab. The translucent steps on the escalator glowed a faint electric blue as they descended to the

first level. The sidewalls were completely transparent, allowing Andromeda tantalizing glimpses into all sorts of interesting-looking rooms on the way down.

She expected to meet a bunch of white-coated lab scientists and was pleasantly surprised to find a handsome, fashionably dressed man waiting for her. He even looked something like her image of what a space hero should look like, with chiseled chin, tough lean body, and flawless posture. The lab director eagerly shook her hand. She felt a plastic, filmy substance and realized that he was wearing see-through lab gloves.

“My name is Dr. Horace Xavier Villin, although some prefer to call me Dr. Vee. Pleased to meet you, Ms. Starwell.”

Andromeda liked how he spoke to her—as if she was a grown-up. Well she WAS, almost. “Thanks, same to you.”

“We have LOTS of exciting experiments going on here. Consider these plants, for instance,” he said, expansively waving his arms in front of a large greenhouse-like container. “Only here on the Moon can we watch them grow in a low-gravity environment.”

Andromeda nodded politely as they strolled down the corridor, with Rad trailing behind.

“Over there in the biomedical section, our team is working to find breakthrough treatments for fighting cancer and other diseases.”

“What’s in THAT room?” Andromeda asked, peeking into a small window set in the center of a steel door.

Unlike the other labs, this one’s walls were completely opaque. Inside she spied a woman with pale, white hair hunched over a workbench. A violet glow radiated from a part of the room that was hidden to her.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Starwell, I can’t take you into Dr. Jade’s rocket lab,” Dr. Vee shrugged apologetically. “She runs our top-secret Positron Reactor project. Very dangerous.”

He kept marching ahead, pausing a moment to let Andromeda and Rad catch up.

“Of course my own work in astrophysics is here on the Lavalight Crystal,” Dr. Vee continued, now entering a bright, spacious room filled with large panels of glass and mirrors all tilted at various angles. “It’s my prized work—the achievement of a lifetime!”

“Lavalight Crystal?” asked Andromeda curiously. “What does it do?”

“Ah, let me show you.”

Dr. Vee first dimmed the overhead lights, then gently tugged the hood off a diamond-like crystal, thin but as tall as a person. Even in the faint light, the gem was dazzling. Andromeda gasped with delight.

“Yes, it’s the cornerstone of our almost-completed solar array that will harness the sun’s light to power new lunar colonies. The reflector panels you see around you will concentrate intense light on the lens,” he motioned in the air with a gloved finger. “This, in turn, heats our solar converter, generating massive amounts of electricity.”

Dr. Vee placed the hood back over the Crystal and raised the lights.

“Imagine, if you will, brilliantly lit lunar cities, clean-energy factories, solar-powered high-speed trains—and enough spare power to convert into microwaves and beam down to Earth...” Dr. Vee droned on.

Andromeda quickly lost her initial enthusiasm and yawned.

“But I see you’re exhausted from your travels... Rad, perhaps you’d care to show Ms. Starwell the galley and allow her a bite to eat.”

“Actually, I’m starving!” Andromeda realized. “But thanks for the tour, Dr. Vee.”

The scientist gave a slight, formal bow and returned to his work.

“The galley is up one level.” Rad pointed a metal finger at the escalator. “THIS way, Ms. Starwell.”

“Oh, just call me Andrie, okay?”

“As you wish, Andrie. I believe you will find the galley to your liking.”

The retro orange and white, cafeteria-style tables and buffet bar were unimpressive. But the panel on the far wall looked interesting. Andromeda walked over, careful not to lose her balance, and tapped the screen:

CHOOSE ENTRÉE: She selected macaroni and cheese.

CHOOSE SIDE DISH: *Hmm, a side salad would be nice.* Andromeda pressed the blinking square.

CHOOSE DESSERT: *Chocolate mousse – definitely!*

Andromeda was about to ask Rad where to pick up her food when, suddenly, a small door opened in the wall. The buffet bar clicked and clacked as it transformed itself into a conveyor belt. A tray with her order slid down onto her table, right in front of her face.

“Amazing!”

“I have seen other humans react similarly the first time,” agreed Rad.

The food tasted fine. Better than fine. Andromeda wolfed it down—every speck. The scent woke Pickle up. He started to stretch and nose around the mesh wall of his cat carrier.

“Sorry, Pickle, no kitty chow on the menu!” Andromeda laughed.

She passed him a few scraps of the mac and cheese, which he promptly gobbled up. Rad placed the tray of dirty dishes back on the conveyor belt, pressed a button, and it all disappeared through the door in the wall.

Now Andromeda felt refreshed and wanted to check out the gym. So she and Rad walked through several hallways and hatches toward the locker rooms on the far side of the main dome. They stepped gingerly around a short man in grease-stained overalls who was stooped over an even shorter soda can-shaped robot. He was obviously trying to fix it.

“Darn *pyan-nee* cleaning bots. Got somethin’ jammed in here good...” the man grumbled as Andromeda and Rad strolled past.

“Got it!” There was the loud whirring sound of a high-powered vacuum sucking in air. Pickle cringed. His hair bristled like a porcupine’s quills and his tail swished madly.

Andromeda paused in mid-step. She noticed something strange out of the corner of her eye. The man’s bearded chin seemed to be stuck to the vacuum hose. He had both hands on the hose trying to pull it off his face.

“Is something wrong?” Andromeda asked, concerned.

“What, THIS?” the man replied, as if getting his goatee caught in a cleaning bot’s vacuum hose was a completely normal thing. “Oh, no, no, no... This, uh, it’s just part of the regular repair work. See, I’m just testing the suction power.”

Two women strolled by. They were dressed in the crisp, close-fitting nylon outfits that most of the Apollo Base grown-ups wore.

“Oh, hi, Nurse Sullivan,” the repairman nodded, the vacuum hose still attached to his face. “G’day, Mrs. Collins.”

“Hullo, Harry,” they replied, smiling. Harry kept one hand over the suction cup, trying not to let them see that his thin, scraggly chin beard was trapped inside. With his other hand he pretended to fiddle with some random knobs and dials on the robot.

“Yow!” Harry yelped after the two ladies rounded the corner.

Andromeda turned back toward him. “You SURE you’re okay, mister?”

“Fine, fine,” Harry said peevishly. “Just a minor malfunction.” He waved them on.

Andromeda and Rad resumed their trek toward the gym. If they’d stayed, they would have seen Harry desperately grasping at the hose with his right hand and yanking on his

goatee with the left. They surely would have heard him hollering and cussing at his misbehaving cleaning bot.

“Shut it off, you squishy-brained, double-crossing hunk of junk! I’LL TURN YOU INTO SPARE PARTS FOR THIS!!!”

But no one ever did see what happened next. Harry kicked and rolled around on the floor. His scraggly black goatee stretched out several feet, like a super-long gob of silly putty, as he painfully tugged it out of the vacuum hose.

Rrrrrrrrip! Harry’s chin beard tore clean off.

Sllllllurp! The furry clump was sucked down like a string of spaghetti and disappeared into the bowels of the cleaning bot. That gave the poor little machine a bad stomachache. It started to rattle and beep. Smoke poured out of its sides.

“I suggest we take your pet to a safe place,” said Rad. “The environment here is very dangerous for animals.”

Alone? Without my furry companion?

Just when Andromeda thought it couldn’t get worse... It was all she could do to stop herself from crying again.

“But why?” she asked. “I’ll be so lonely without him!”

“A small animal could easily get lost here on Apollo Research Base, Andrie. His long tail could get caught in some machinery. Or he might slip into an airlock.”

Hmm. Pickle's an outdoor cat...

Andromeda did not find it difficult to imagine him trying to sneak out the hatch. Curiosity WOULD kill THIS cat.

“Yeah, you’re right, Rad. We’d better lock him up. But where?”

“We have a small petting zoo where he can be cared for. In fact, it’s on our way to the gym, just past the New Columbia portal.”

They soon arrived at a small compartment crammed with glass cases. These housed a few bunnies and hamsters, some toads and a box turtle. Several cases were empty. Andromeda chose the largest of these and gently lowered Pickle inside. She shoveled a few scoops of sand inside, figuring it would make good kitty litter. Pickle rubbed his wet nose against the glass, leaving a smudge. His eyes looked sad.

“Don’t worry, Pickle,” said Andromeda. “I’ll come back as soon as I find you some nice kitty yum-yums.”

She decided to leave quickly—before she got too teary-eyed.

They entered the gym just in time to spot an older boy spinning crazily in the air. Andromeda felt exposed in her red

summer dress, which clashed dreadfully with the Lunies' athletic-style sportswear. But curiosity overcame her shyness.

"Hey, how'd you do that?" she asked the boy, whose broad shoulders made him look at least fourteen.

"You mean the triple back-flip? Or the leaping twenty feet in the air?"

"Both!"

"It's easy. C'mere. I'll show ya how to do it."

"But I can't do a SINGLE back-flip, much less a triple back-flip."

"Oh, you Earthies are all the same," the boy shook his big, roundish head. His deep-brown face was topped by a buzz cut.

"Look, it's easy once ya try. Start by jumping and just do one back flip. Pretend you're looking back to see what's behind you and kick your legs over your head."

"Okay, I'll try."

Andromeda stood still for a moment. Then she launched her body into the air, kicked her feet back over her head and smiled as she... wait a minute, she was plummeting to the floor!

SPLAT! Andromeda belly-flopped right on the air mat. All the other kids laughed, but the boy stayed serious.

“There, that wasn’t so hard,” he said, holding out his hand.
“Hey, I’m Buzz.”

Andromeda had to laugh, too.

“And I’m Andromeda,” she said reaching out and giving a firm handshake. “I must’ve made a first-class fool of myself. I guess I can’t do it.”

“But you DID do it! You did a back flip. Now, all you need to do is tuck in your knees, like this,” Buzz demonstrated.

Andromeda practiced again and again. She wasn’t able to do a triple back flip, but she did several nice-looking double back-flips without belly flopping.

Afterwards, Andromeda felt so dizzy that her legs seemed to have a mind of their own. They kept making her stumble around in circles like a clumsy clown. That drew more laughs and made Andromeda’s cheeks blush red as a ripe cherry.

Now the tour was officially over, and Rad guided her down the corridor marked “To Children’s Quarters.”

“Each cabin holds up to four children of one gender,” Rad explained evenly.

When Andromeda stepped into the empty hexagon-shaped room, she gasped. “Where are all the beds?!”

“You just press the green button like this, Andrie” – and a thin slab covered with a clean mattress and blankets popped instantly out of the wall and slid over her head.

Andromeda poked at the mattress like a participant in a magic show, as if unconvinced that it was real. Then she hopped up the ladder and spread out luxuriously on the blankets.

“The desk and wardrobe operate the same way,” Rad continued, pressing another button. A writing table rose up slowly out of the floor, causing Andromeda to prop her head up on her pillow to watch.

Clearly, four sides of the hexagon each hid beds, desks and closets. A fifth side led to a shared bathroom, while the sixth wall framed the door. Andromeda decided to inspect the bathroom and found it cleaner and more spacious than on the U.S.S. Explorer. There was a double-sink, two toilets and two needle showers, one at each end.

Andromeda, still in her red flower dress, had been studying herself thoughtfully in the mirror when she heard voices in the corridor. The door slid open and three girls walked in, all about twelve or thirteen. Each had a blue and yellow plaid skirt, quilted yellow pullovers, yellow sneakers and blue socks.

“Hello, who’s this?”

“An Earthie, maybe.”

“Hi, I’m Andrie,” Andromeda said, walking up to greet the girls.

“*Wah*, it talks!” exclaimed one to another.

“Look at her funny clothes.”

“Ew! She SMELLS.”

Andromeda recovered quickly from the insults. “You would, too, if you’d just stowed away on a spaceship.”

“You mean you’re a stowaway? That’s kind of freaky.”

“Here,” one of the girls said in a more kindly voice, “Let me show you how to use the shower.”

Andromeda was grateful. The shower controls were certainly not easy to figure out. Once her back was turned, however, she didn’t notice the slim, straw-haired girl trying to suppress a giggle. The other roommates exchanged knowing looks.

“So, you just adjust the pressure valve, like this, and flick the ON switch over here.” The straw-haired girl backed out of the bathroom and closed the door. The three accomplices all huddled together whispering.

“*Noo?* Is she gonna scream?”

“Ya THINK? I turned it up to full blast!”

Andromeda turned on the needle shower. A thin, incredibly powerful jet of hot water shot out of the high-pressure nozzle. The girls pressed their ears against the bathroom door, snickering.

“YEOWWWWWWWWWWW!!!”

7. Moonjump Day



With the frenzy of yells and screams and shouts you would have thought something horrible was happening. Like an invading horde of three-headed, googly-eyed Martians or Ms. Plum announcing there'd be a five-hour-long spelling quiz with no bathroom break.

But, really, it was just another Moonjump Day. And every child old enough to wear a spacesuit was there.

Some had spray-painted blue hair; others had smeared on gold war paint. Kids were leaping on each other's backs, doing pirouettes, slapping high-fives, whispering in ears—the sorts of things you'd do if you were standing in line way past the limit of your patience.

Harry the Mechanic wistfully stroked his raw chin—recently plucked hairless by his new archenemy, Vacuum Bot Number Twelve—as he cracked open the dressing room doors. A crowded ring of keys jingled on the belt of his baggy

trousers. He nodded to Ms. Plum, who unsnapped the rope line.

The crowd surged forward. The younger kids pushed and pleaded to be the first to squeeze through, but the older kids soon got them in order. One by one they stepped over the threshold, searching around for the spacesuit with their name tag on the collar.

What is Moonjump Day? you ask.

Well, it's sort of like Field Day, but even more fun. The so-called "Moon bounces" we have on Earth are a joke compared to the sorts of things you'd do at a REAL Moonjump Day. (Of course the only place you can find real ones is the Moon.) By tradition, the most popular event on the schedule is always the – oh, well, you'll find out soon enough.

Andromeda had already been body-scanned and fitted that morning. She was surprised at how light and flexible her space activity suit was. They HAVE to be easy to move around in – or else no one could do moonjumping, boarding, magball, or any of the other low-grav sports. Her suit stylist had explained how they use lasers to map the way you move so they can customize your spacesuit. It was amazing just how well it fit – and looked.

But now she was realizing that the same things that made the suit easy to wear made it super-hard to put on. It was like trying to get into one big elastic stocking from your toes up to your neck.

In fact, modern spacesuits ARE basically thick spandex leggings coated with a web of wires that compress the body into shape when outside in zero-pressure. They keep you cool in the hot lunar daytime and warm (mostly) in the freezing cold night. The helmet hooks into breathing gear and includes a headlamp and solar power cell for recharging.

Over their suits, Lunies always strap on their wristbands. About as wide as four wristwatches, the bands give you a readout of the time, temperature, air pressure, GPS, radiation, and vitals—not to mention a two-way viewscreen. They even hook into the headset in your helmet so you can use it like a walkie-talkie. You can get lost on the Moon, but as long as you have a working band, you're never far from help.

“Ugh. Why – won't – it – go – ON!” Andromeda complained, her empty sleeves flapping around like a windmill.

She'd pulled the suit up to her chest, but it just wouldn't go any further, like a ginormous German Shepherd who won't budge when you want him to stop sniffing a tree or fence post.

“It’s on backwards,” whispered Buzz out of the corner of his mouth as he zipped past her toward the airlock. Andromeda blushed.

It’s fair to say that she felt pretty stupid. Doubly so, since every kid on the whole base was waiting for her to finish before Harry would let them go outside.

“Hurry it up, Andrie!” somebody yelled.

A few minutes later, long after even the littlest kids were all suited up, Andromeda finally finished putting on her brand new spacesuit and attached the helmet. As she hobbled awkwardly over to the hatch, some of the older kids started to slow-clap.

But she never made it.

Andromeda felt strangely sluggish, like she was swimming in very heavy water and being pushed down, down, down.

I’m drowning, she thought in mute surprise. But how come no one else is swimming?

She swayed and stumbled, wondering idly which way the hatch was—and why she was even looking for it. Under the opaque lid of her space helmet, her lips were blue.

Suddenly, there was a burst of fresh air in her mask. She noticed Harry clutching her elbow. He was helping her stand up.

“Don’t forget to adjust your oxygen mix,” he warned, “or you’ll get into a whole lotta *da-byan* outside. It’s this dial here, see.”

Thankfully, all the other kids had already scampered into the airlock, saving further embarrassment. The inner hatch was open and Andromeda was alone with Harry.

“Thanks, Harry. I won’t forget,”

She darted into the airlock. As soon as Harry secured the inner hatch behind her, the room flooded with red light—a warning that the airlock was about to go to zero air pressure. Then the kids filed through the outer hatch, passing through a thick layer of regolith and a thin film of recycling water. These protected the base from solar flares, cosmic rays, meteorites, magnetic fields, and various other space hazards that Earthies like us never have to worry about.

Andromeda felt a slight chill down her spine as she left this protective shield behind.

When she stepped outside at last, Andromeda felt light-headed and had goose bumps from head to toe. But it wasn’t as bad as she’d feared. The sun’s glare wasn’t as harsh as when she’d arrived from Earth and the moonscape now took on a friendlier deep-brownish tone. Of course with no clouds in the sky—and barely any atmosphere at all—there was

nothing to stop the sunshine from baking the Moon rocks like hot coals on a barbecue. The intense rays would have blinded Andromeda in seconds if she hadn't been wearing her reflective visor.

Unlike the previous day's scene from the Viewing Room, today the Moon was full of life. There were kids in spacesuits bouncing everywhere. Some did mid-air somersaults; others jumped holding hands. Dazzling morning light glinted off their mirrored helmets. Ms. Plum and Nurse Sullivan were also nearby, along with several parents who'd volunteered to help with the event.

Outside the base the land was totally silent—sound can't travel very well in an airless vacuum. But inside Andromeda's helmet, she heard shouts and screams of delight blaring over her built-in headset. Everyone shared the same radio channel, so there was no such thing as a private conversation—unless you and a friend knew how to set up your own encrypted channel. It was also a rather uncanny experience because someone far away sounded just as loud as someone standing right next to you!

Looking up, Andromeda spotted a dash of blue hovering above. It was Earth! And it was upside down!

Everything I know – my friends, my family, my house – it's all on that fragile blue ball, Andromeda mused thoughtfully. She sighed.

For a few moments, she just stood there watching and listening to other kids enjoy the rare freedom of the outdoors. One other person was watching, too—well, not really a person. It didn't take long for Andromeda to spot the robot in the cowboy hat.

It was Rad, of course!

As she approached her robot-friend, she noticed he was holding a mug in one of his four three-fingered hands.

Bots aren't supposed to drink, are they?

She edged closer and raised her chin, looking into the cup. Foamy hot chocolate!

Rad put it to his “mouth” as if to take a sip. She reached out and grabbed his mechanical arm.

“Rad, wait!” she screamed into her helmet's microphone. “You can't drink hot chocolate. That'll fry all your circuits!”

“Hello, Andrie,” replied Rad calmly. “I am not drinking a heated cocoa product. Bots are unable to consume human beverages. This cup contains a lubricant for my servomotors.”

“A what?”

“Sorry, Andrie, I sometimes forget that your vocabulary is limited. I meant to say that the cup is full of oil for my gears.”

“Rad,” confided Andromeda quite sincerely, “I hope we never accidentally swap drinks.”

The whistle blew. It was time.

“Gotta go!” She dashed off to where Blue team was forming into a circle.

Like Andromeda, all the other kids on her color team sported a navy-blue armband on the outside of their suits.

Now a voice boomed in everyone’s headsets: “Event number one this Moonjump Day will be the Aerial Obstacle Course. Each contestant will be scored on time. Any drops will earn you a demerit.”

The kids all craned their necks up to see the ropes, nets, swings, and other parts of the course high above them. It all looked very intimidating.

Andromeda Starwell was lucky enough to have an “S” name, so she could watch lots of other kids go first. When her turn came, she had a pretty good idea of what to do.

The course started off fine. She gripped the guide lines and walked up a steep balance beam, kind of like crossing a log over a creek. Then came the swinging steps, which were like

mini circus trapezes. This part was trickier. Next were the monkey bars and rope swings—a lot easier than on Earth, actually, because of the one-sixth gravity.

It wasn't till the long jumps that Andromeda got the jitters. At first she had to jump only a few feet across from one platform to the next, but the gaps grew wider as she went on.

Finally, she reached a gap that must've been over fifteen feet. On the other side was the Crow's Nest, the tallest of the tall platforms. It towered above the rest of the course like the topmast of a great old sailing ship. Ladders went up from the platform to what looked like a ginormous hot air balloon basket filled with kids waving to friends down below or cheering on teammates racing the course.

In her mind, Andromeda knew that long-jumping fifteen feet on the Moon would be a cinch. But her mind was not in full control at that moment. Beads of sweat trickled down the back of her neck as she sized up the distance. Her eyes just could not believe she could jump that far.

Summoning all her courage, Andromeda crouched down and prepared to push off. She closed her eyes and then launched into the air.

When she opened them, she was flying over the course, already halfway to the Crow's Nest. It was working!

Yes, it was working, but too well. Andromeda sailed over and past the platform and slammed right into the safety net, sliding to the bottom and flopping around like a flounder until she got all wrapped up in the netting.

Some of the smaller kids leaned over the sides of the Crow's Nest and leered down at her.

"I don't think she knows HOW to do it."

"Maybe them Earthie legs don't work right."

"I think she's abominable."

"What's that mean?"

"Abominable? It means, uh, she's a snowman, I think."

"What's a snowman?"

Tears welled up in Andromeda's eyes.

It's not fair!

Just then, she was rescued by an unlikely hero. It was a scrawny little boy named David. He was hanging from the top of the obstacle course, tangled up in a bundle of crisscrossing ropes, with a steel trapeze bar sandwiched painfully between his legs.

David's cheeks puffed out and his eyes lolled way back into his head. He groaned.

"IT'S THE WORLD'S FIRST SPACE-WEDGIE!!!" yelled one kid.

And then everyone ran around howling and yammering trying to get the best view. Kids gawked in wonder and amazement.

“How’d he DO that?”

“I don’t believe it!”

“He’s like a human pretzel!”

For many years afterward, Moon scientists would try to solve the mystery of David’s incredible space wedgie. None would ever succeed...

Of course Andromeda was just relieved that no one was paying attention to her belly flop any longer. She struggled out of the netting, scrambled up onto the platform and then scaled the ladder to watch the last few kids finish the course. Her time: eight minutes, forty-two seconds, with one demerit for falling. Second-to-last, but at least not last place.

“There’s always somebody better than you, and always someone worse,” Dad was fond of saying. “Just make sure you’re doing YOUR best, and not someone else’s best.”

In light of the situation, Andromeda was grateful that she finished the course in better shape than poor David.

The next event was Moondiving.

“You’ll be scored for each flip and for style,” the announcer said. “Each contestant gets three tries.”

Andromeda was not great at gymnastics, but she wasn’t bad either. And she’d had some practice in the Apollo Base gym already, so she knew how different it was on the Moon.

She stepped out onto what was basically a diving board one hundred feet above a ginormous trampoline as big as a house. From her bird’s-eye view, Andromeda could see crystal-clear for many kilometers around: the ropes and rigging of the Aerial Obstacle Course, the low domes of Apollo Base huddled together like sheep trying to keep warm, the loaders shoveling whale-sized hunks of the Moon’s crust into treaded trucks...

Her gaze wandered past the trucks kicking up clouds of moondust as they hauled rocks and soil to the ore processing plant, its slender smokestacks and towers poking up behind the domes like the fanciful spires of a sultan’s palace—and beyond that to the long, snaking underground Tube that, if she’d known it, led all the way to New Columbia city.

“*Noo?* You gonna jump?” asked the next kid in line.

Now I’m sure you can understand how nervous Andromeda was. A hundred feet is a long way down for anyone, Earthie OR Lunie! She imbibed a deep gulp of air through her oxygen mask and tried to re-focus on the dive.

Sunbeams were roasting her back, while her front felt strangely chilled.

I'd better jump before half my body gets cooked and the other half freezes!

Andromeda bounced lightly a few times on the diving board to get a sense of how springy it was. Then she did a hop, skip and a jump. Boing! She shot up to a good height and then pressed her knees in close to her chest and hugged them with her arms. Chin tucked, she rotated head over heels three times before landing on the trampoline – a triple flip!

Growing up on Earth turned out to be a big advantage with this event, since the six-times-heavier Earth gravity had forced her to work extra hard to control her body in the air. Here on the Moon it was so easy to make her body do whatever she wanted. Easy peasy! (Except for the dizziness and stumbling around in circles afterward.)

All three dives scored points, much to the amazement of her Blue teammates. A few congratulated her with slaps on the back. But Jason Decker's eyes narrowed as he watched. He was leader of the opposing Gold Team and a notoriously bad sport. He was the only one unhappy with Andromeda's success.

The third event was the Lunar Slalom. Basically, you coast down the side of a hill in a two-person sled. All you have to do is avoid hitting the penalty flags. It certainly sounded easier than the other events.

Jason sidled up to Andromeda's sled partner, Sally, her straw-haired, prankster roommate. He signed a bunch of hand signals. (Sometimes Lunies used them to communicate when the radios didn't work right—or when they didn't want to be overheard by anyone else.) Sally at first shook her head, but quickly nodded after a few more gestured threats from Jason.

Sally and Andromeda sat in their sled waiting for the start flag, Andromeda in front. The flag was up! The sleds tipped over the edge and hurtled down the hill.

Easy at first, the track soon began to snake and weave. The girls leaned hard into the curve and stayed with the pack of other sleds. They found themselves sliding down an artificially smooth slope of powdery moondust pocked with a forest of flagpoles. The penalty flags! They had to dodge them!

One flag stood directly in their path. Andromeda leaned left, thinking Sally would follow and lean the same way. But Sally leaned right. They crashed straight into the pole. It was flimsy and bent over easily without causing any damage, but

a beeping sound made clear that they'd registered a demerit for hitting the pole.

Again and again Andromeda would lean one way only to find Sally leaning the other way. By the time they reached the bottom, they'd racked up five demerits.

Andromeda's teammates were furious. That put Blue team behind Gold again. Sally's head drooped in shame. She just couldn't bear to look at Andrie.

Jason smirked.

Now the moment all the kids were waiting for arrived at last. Moonjumping is always the favorite activity for Lunie kids of all ages, whether you live in Apollo Base, New Columbia, Hi-ten, Luna One, Shen-jo or some other settlement.

The ref would blow the whistle and everyone got thirty minutes to jump as high as they could. Only your very highest jump would be recorded, so you were free to try any jump style or test any new tricks your friends might have told you about. The only rule was no bonking into other jumpers or you'd be disqualified.

Andromeda pushed off into the lunar sky. She soared ten... fifteen... almost twenty feet into the air, the unfiltered sun sparkling on her space helmet. The blood all seemed to rush

to her head, but it felt good. She imagined she was a hawk or an eagle and that the other kids were a distant flock of birds. She felt completely free. And then she was falling...

Oof!

On the first jump Andromeda belly-flopped on the ginormous foam mats the grown-ups had rolled out for the jumpers. For a moment, her insides felt jammed up through her ribs straight into the back of her throat. She stood up and breathed in deeply. The pain vanished.

So up she went again. And again. And again...

The sun was unbearably bright and the lunar surface had already climbed to well over two hundred degrees. The thin pressure suits they wore couldn't handle the really high daytime temperatures and solar radiation for very much longer. (The radiation meter on Andromeda's band was already yellow, creeping toward orange.) So, the grown-ups began to collect the kids and haul them back to the portal and the safety of indoors.

Andromeda glided back inside, lost in a dream. Blue team had lost to Gold in the end—by over thirty points—but Andromeda's thoughts were not on the score. They were visions of wings—wings and sunlight soaring high in the airless sky.

8. Pixie



The next day, Base Commander Decker still hadn't received word from Andromeda's father.

What's a "day" on the Moon, anyway? Well, it sure isn't a day like on Earth! On the Moon it takes, oh, about two weeks for the sun to rise and set. And then "night" lasts another two weeks before the next lunar day starts.

I bet you're wondering how things would work if each night lasted for two weeks straight. It's simple: Lunies keep to the same 24-hour schedule as an Earth-day, only they call it a *waykup*—the time between when you wake up, go to sleep, and wake up again.

Andromeda didn't know any of this yet and was far more concerned with getting home from her unexpected journey. Decker had suggested that she attend class in the meantime so as not to fall behind on her school work.

“Besides,” he’d said. “You might find school here rather interesting.”

Fat chance of that, thought Andromeda. But she politely accepted anyway.

“Since we only have one teacher on base, kids of all ages are mixed together. Very much like the one-room schoolhouses of Nineteenth Century Earth.”

So there she was in the Education Center, sitting at a desk specially adjusted for her height: 1.65 meters. Pickle’s fluzzy little face stared up at her through the glass surface. (Bored out her mind while waiting for class to start, she’d designed her own screensaver.)

Danny, a lanky kid with long bangs, shuffled to the middle of the room, dragging along a spiky-haired, pimple-faced boy. There was something familiar about that boy...

“I’d like to introduce you to my anatomy specimen. His name is Dave.”

Oh, now she remembered – Space Wedgie Boy!

Danny shook the long bangs out of his eyes and continued, “I’d like to share a few things about the human body today... Well, if Dave’s actually human, that is.”

That got a few chuckles.

“The cranium,” explained Danny, putting his entire hand over David’s head as if about to crush it like a nut, “is a hard bone that contains the brain. In this case, it’s completely missing.”

More chuckles.

“Huh?” wondered David, scratching his head.

“The spine is a like a staircase of bones that stretches from the base of the brain down to the *peegoo*,” continued Danny, dragging his finger all the way down David’s back.

“And right here on the other side are the gizzards,” Danny added, poking David in the belly button. David burped.

“Right above that is the diaphragm. It’s the muscle that pushes the air out of your lungs when you breathe – hold still, Dave – and then you’ll find the solar plexus right smack in the middle between the ribs – will ya STOP wriggling around like a worm???”

He grabbed David’s shoulder firmly.

“But you’re TICKLING me,” protested the smaller boy.

“Oh, I’ll do better than that. I’ll NOOGIE you!”

And the two boys proceeded to noogie, slap and tug at one another. The other kids cheered them on. All the while, Ms. Plum just smiled sweetly.

“What a nice anatomy lesson, Daniel. Thank you, David,” she said in her slow, saintly tone. “Now it’s time for our geography pop quiz... Jason?”

The class calmed down as Jason Decker stood up, his muscles rippling in cut-off sleeves. Jason was a “popular” teenager who fancied himself leader of all the kids in Apollo Base. It was his birthright.

He tapped the wallboard. Instantly, a menu displayed all along the surface of one wall of the classroom. Then he tapped “Earth Side” and a ginormous, glowing map of the Moon filled the entire wall. All the kids swiveled their desks to get a better view.

“Okay,” Jason started, “like this spot down here in the *Tranq* is where WE are, right?”

He extended his hand and that cast a large red halo around the location of Apollo Base, nestled in the southwest corner of the Sea of Tranquility. Andromeda couldn’t see exactly how he did this.

“And then further southeast here’s New Columbia right near the edge of the Highlands... And, like, to our north that’s the Arena, home of the sweetest boarding this side of the Moon – YEAH!” Jason hooted.

Most of the other kids hooted, too.

“Now comes the quiz part. Who can point to Hi-ten?”

A dark-haired girl with overdone eye shadow hatchet-chopped her arm in the direction of the wallboard. That lit up a region far across the screen.

“Very good,” coached Jason. “Now how about Luna One?”

After a few more minutes of geography, Ms. Plum ended the lesson.

“The next hour will be study hall. I’ll be down in my office if any of you dears need anything.”

Ms. Plum left. Jason immediately walked over to the desk of a young brunette with a deep olive complexion. She was probably ten or a smallish eleven-year-old.

“*Noo?* Fork it over, shorty.”

“Not gonna,” the girl replied, proudly sticking out her delicate chin. Jason leaned over her, threateningly.

“Pixie, I NEED that paper you wrote so I can pass level ten in writing. You better not cross me,” Jason growled.

That made Andromeda’s ears perk up.

“*Fay-hwa!* Just cuz yer the Base Commander’s son...”

“Shut up, you brat. I’ll –”

“Why don’t you do your own homework, you big bully!” interrupted Andromeda, rising to her feet.

Jason's head snapped in her direction like a hungry shark locating a new food source. His clear blue eyes gleamed with malice.

"Oh, look at the Earthie—"

Just then Ms. Plum returned. Jason grew suddenly distracted and started biting his fingernails and cracking his knuckles.

"I seem to have forgotten my glasses," the teacher explained. She felt around on her desk and at last placed them over her long, thin nose.

"Ah, that's better!"

Everyone watched out of the corners of their eyes as Ms. Plum exited the room again. Then Jason strutted over and brushed against the back of Pixie's chair.

"You'd better get me that report tomorrow. Or you're space dust, *pally*."

Everyone looked up and then quickly went back to doing their homework, as if nothing interesting had happened.

After study hall, school let out. Andromeda found the young brunette waiting for her in the corridor, hugging her notebook against her chest. It was as if she was afraid Jason

might pop out of the floor and snatch her papers at any moment.

“Ta for sticking up for me, Andromeda,” the girl said. *“No one’s done that for a long time.”*

“Jason should do his OWN homework. Anyway, call me Andrie... Hey, um, what does ‘ta’ mean, anyway?”

“Oh, I think you Earthies would say ‘thanks’ or something like that. Lunie is lots of languages mixed together, ya know.”

The girls smiled at each other. They seemed to be on the same wave.

“Why don’tcha come out with me to board?” suggested Pixie.

“Board?”

“Da, it’s the funnest thing ever,” she gushed, excitedly. *“I’ve heard Earthies go gaga over it.”*

“But I don’t KNOW how to skateboard,” Andromeda protested.

Pixie cocked her head. *“Skateboard?”* she asked, creasing her forehead as if the word was totally alien. *“Look, just trust me. You’re gonna like it.”*

Andromeda noticed Pixie had just the trace of a smile in one corner of her mouth and a bright sparkle in her almond-shaped eyes.

9. Boarding



Andromeda stopped short. They HAD to be going the wrong way.

“Pixie, doesn’t this way lead up to the main portal?” she asked. Her newfound friend didn’t answer. “Pixie? Hey!”

“Huh?” Pixie finally realized she’d been asked a question. “Well, where do ya EXPECT to board, Andrie, inside?”

She pointed to a sign plastered to the wall: “Absolutely NO boarding on premises,” it read.

When they reached the dressing room on level three, the girls rummaged around in the lockers for their outdoor gear. Andromeda still couldn’t get over how sleek and light the space activity suits were—nothing like the clunky suits that astronauts used for spacewalks. With their reflective coating, Apollo decals, and custom-designer materials they looked totally, freakishly wicked.

Putting on the spacesuit was way easier this time. Still mindful of the disaster on Moonjump Day, Andromeda double-checked that her suit was working okay before they headed for the airlock.

She triple-checked the oxygen dial!

Pixie punched in the access code on her wristband's keypad. That beamed a wireless signal to the computer that controlled the portal.

"Access granted," a computer voice said. "Door disarmed."

They heard a click and Pixie turned the wheel counter-clockwise on the hatch until it swung open. She stepped through. Andromeda followed, taking care to close the door behind and to turn the wheel until the red door light changed to green. Ding!

Now inside the airlock, Pixie fished two boards out from a bin in the corner. They looked like snowboards but were a little wider.

Andromeda was getting used to things being feather-light on the Moon and was surprised at how heavy her board felt. She flipped it over and saw a bunch of tubes and metal boxes attached to the underside. Two chrome tailpipes stuck out the back.

She looked at her friend, puzzled.

“Uh, Pixie?”

Pixie nodded toward the outer hatch and spun the wheel. The girls waited until they were outside before they continued talking.

“Here’s how you ride it, Andrie: Ya jump as high as you can in the air, then press your foot against the board.”

Andrie frowned.

“I don’t see what that’s gonna do. There’s no wind on the Moon – and definitely no waves!”

“Sometimes you say the most *loco* things, Andrie,” Pixie giggled as she clipped her boots to her board. “Just TRY it.”

So Andrie did as she was told. She leapt up, and once in the air, pressed her foot firmly against the board. Zing! Her twin engines roared.

“Whooooooaaaaah!”

Andrie started zooming off across the sky.

“*Wah*, don’t press so hard, Andrie!” Pixie yelled. “Ease up a little!”

“This is AWESOME!”

“*Da*, Andrie, but if you go too fast, you’ll end up like Johnny Meteor and never come back down!”

“Like who? Hey, I think I’m getting the hang of this!”

“Okay, hotshot, watch this. I’m gonna show ya how to pop a *neily*.”

Pixie squeezed her foot down on the pressure plate and her rocketboard sped after Andromeda’s, soon passing her. Then Pixie leaned her body back and stiffened her legs. The board came up, and her head and shoulders dropped down backwards. This made her spin around like the hands on a haunted grandfather clock until she was at last back upright.

Andromeda was impressed.

“Come on,” said Pixie. “I’ll take you to my favorite spot for boarding.”

The girls zigged and zagged over the cloudless moonscape, whooping and shouting into their headsets. The landscape rolled by underneath, pure and brilliant as a crystal bowl that seemed to glimmer against the steeply curved horizon. Andromeda somehow felt she was looking out of a spotlessly clean window right after a heavy storm had swept through and left a trail of sparkling rainbows in its wake.

It didn’t take long for the two shooting stars to reach the Arena. That’s the name for the small, shallow crater where the Apollo Base kids liked to board; it was close enough to be convenient, but far enough to avoid bothersome grown-ups nagging them.

The crater was lined with hoops and half-pipes, making it perfect for tricks, flips, and spins – like popping *neilies*. In fact, Pixie did a couple more and was about to show Andromeda how when she spotted some other boarders.

The girls weren't alone.

Most of the time that wouldn't be a problem. But Pixie recognized Jason Decker's decal on one of the spacesuits. He'd sent more than one Lunie kid home crying and was the biggest bully in Apollo Base.

"Maybe we should go someplace else, Andrie."

"No, Pixie. If this is the best spot for boarding, I don't see why we should settle for anyplace else."

Pixie glanced over at her new friend as if sizing her up for the first time. She admired Andrie's courage, but that was going to make for a difficult afternoon.

Pixie shrugged.

"Okay, let's go."

It wasn't long before they attracted Jason's unwanted attention. He sidled up to them, doing flips against the rocks nearby for a while before coasting over. His two friends Buzz and Deke circled above like vultures about to swoop down on their prey.

“Well, ugly duckling, I’m waiting. Where’s that paper you owe me?”

Pixie glared back at him, almost melting a hole through her faceplate. “Since when do I owe YOU anything?”

“Since I’ll squeeze your brains out if ya don’t do what I say!”

“At least she HAS brains,” Andromeda chimed in.

“*Da*, I’ve been a bad boy. I should just leave you two alone and go away...”

Jason retreated a little as if he was about to leave.

“NOT!”

It was just a feint. Now he swerved around and flew back toward the two girls sporting an evil grin. The girls pushed their feet down on their boards and accelerated across the crater floor. Jason and the other boys streaked along behind them.

“Let’s split up,” Pixie breathed into her headset, sure that Jason would follow her.

He didn’t. Instead he closed in, hot on Andromeda’s tail. He chased her all the way to the shady side of the crater. Its dark moonstone cliffs were looming up high and blotting out the sky. Almost instantly, instead of the lava-hot sun

pounding on their spacesuits, the world transformed into a giant ice bath.

Andromeda decided she'd have to try something drastic. She headed straight for the crater wall. Pixie slowed to watch. So did Deke and Buzz, as if worried their game might be going too far.

"PULL UP!" shouted Pixie, but Andromeda didn't seem to listen.

Jason was still chasing and almost even with her tailpipes. His board was clearly faster. (In fact, he'd souped up the engine to give it extra thrust.)

Just as he was about to smash into her, Andromeda pulled up hard and let her momentum smack her board sideways flat onto the cliff. She bounced off and soared right over Jason while he plowed straight ahead into the rock.

As she ignited her engines, it let loose a burst of flame. The searing heat scorched his helmet so that it looked like somebody ran over his head with a motorcycle.

Jason got up painfully from the ground, brushing the moondust off his suit. He sniffed. There was something wrong. A smell like burnt plastic was seeping into his oxygen hose. And all the other kids were staring at him. He felt carefully along the singed top of his helmet.

“Aaah! My beautiful hair!” Jason shrieked, now realizing that part of the helmet lining had fused with his poofy hair.

It would have to be scraped off like a layer of bubble gum, leaving him completely bald. His normally clear blue eyes now burned blood red with fury.

“Uh-oh, now you done it,” breathed Pixie.

Jason was sizzling mad. He aimed his rocketboard full-speed right at Andromeda.

“Andrie! He’s gonna ram!”

Andromeda twisted her body out of the way as fast as she could, but it wasn’t fast enough. Jason leaned into her and forced her board against the crater wall. Sparks flew in every direction as board met rock. The twin engines sputtered.

“You’re gonna stall out!” Pixie shouted, her pulse quickening.

She slammed down her foot and raced to the rescue.

“Quick, grab my hand!”

Andromeda reached her arm up toward Pixie’s. They could feel each other’s fingers grasping for something to hold onto. Andromeda had the surreal feeling of seeing herself and Jason both reflected in Pixie’s mirrored helmet... She could almost feel the worried look in Pixie’s dark-brown eyes.

Then the worry turned to fright.

Andromeda lowered her gaze to look ahead and saw it: A large craggy rock jutted out from the cliff wall just ahead. Jason meant to smash her into it.

She tried wriggling her board free from his, but it was no use; their boards were locked together. A few more seconds and...

Finally, Pixie got a good grip on Andromeda's hand.

"UNCLIP YOUR FEET!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

You'd never guess such a small kid could have a voice that loud.

Pixie pulled. Andromeda undid her clips. Her board flew off and clattered down on the rocks. Just in time, Pixie whisked her up to safety.

Jason's grin turned into vast surprise, as his prey seemed to vanish out of sight.

"Here, we'll go in the tunnels," Pixie whispered.

Andromeda steadied herself on Pixie's board, grabbing hold of her slim waist.

Can two people share a board? Well, no time for questions now!

They rocketed to the bottom of the crater. It was pocked with cracks and crevices, as if the Moon really WERE made of Swiss cheese. Some were just dead-ends, but others opened

into a maze of tunnels that were once lava tubes, formed eons ago when a young Moon heaved and churned with fiery volcanoes. Some of the tunnels and crevices were too narrow for a large boy like Jason.

The girls burrowed their way into the underground maze and hid. Jason's engine flamed angrily overhead, as he hunted high and low.

The sky, too, was angry. It began to rain. No ordinary rain, of course. On the Moon there's no precipitation of any kind. This was a meteor shower. A big one, too.

"We gotta go home, Jay-dawg. No use getting' smashed up out here," said Buzz, pulling up alongside his friend.

"Yeah, they're toast anyway," added Deke.

Sweat fizzled against the inside glass of Jason's helmet. His mind strayed far away. Instead of answering, he began to giggle and sing: "My hair's not there... so what do I care... I'll just go hug... a teddy bear... Whoa, it's raining!" he laughed, pointing at a smoking hole where a meteorite had just crashed seconds ago.

"C'mon, Jay" Buzz said, firmly gripping Jason's arm. "That's enough for today."

He shoved his friend's wristband at his face. The gauge showed 8 PSI air pressure and dropping.

“You’ve got a serious pressure leak, *pally*. That’s why you’re acting all loopy.”

Buzz and Deke each grabbed an arm and towed Jason home – to the delightful sounds of him rhyming and giggling the whole way back.

The girls were unaware of the situation up above. It wasn’t until the storm was raging full blast that Pixie at last realized what was happening. And by that time it was too late.

Meteorites were pelting against the crater floor at alarming speeds. Every now and then a chip of rock or a smoking meteorite fragment would land nearby.

“We’ve got to find safer shelter,” Pixie insisted.

They scouted around and soon found a passage down to a small lava cave deeper underground. They crouched inside, waiting out the storm in the freezing pitch-dark.

Unpleasant thoughts surged through Andromeda’s head. She imagined being crushed by a ginormous meteor or starving in the lunar wilderness.

“Pix?” Andromeda called out, flipping on her headlamp.

Her friend was feeling along the bumpy cave walls with her fingers and humming softly to herself. She didn’t seem to hear.

“EARTH TO PIXIE. COME IN, PIXIE.”

“Uh?”

“Like how cold does it get at night on the Moon anyway?”

“Oh, maybe minus 180 degrees or so, I guess.”

“Um, do you think we’ll freeze to death if we have to stay out here all night?”

Andromeda’s neck and shoulders tensed up and she felt a lump growing in her throat. She was already shivering in the frigid shadows underneath the crater.

“Nah...” said Pixie calmly.

Andromeda let her shoulders relax.

“We’d run out of oxygen first,” Pixie finished.

Andromeda stiffened in horror. All the blood drained out of her face until it was pale white and her lips formed into a big “O.”

Pixie laughed.

“I’m just teasing, ya silly Earthie. Most meteor showers on the Moon don’t last long at all. What’s more, night won’t come for about twelve more *waykups*. Actually, I think it’s probably safe now. C’mon, we’d better get back to base.”

Andromeda and Pixie stood at attention in front of the large desk in the Base Commander's office. Decker faced the other away, holding his hands behind his back.

He looked out the window a few moments and then whirled around to face the two girls. He seemed tall – tall and forbidding. Andromeda almost imagined a great shadow hovering over her, like an angry spirit.

“Do you have ANY idea what your father would do to me if I'd lost you out there, Andromeda?” he spurted out in a volcano of words.

Yeah, she had a pretty good idea. And “pretty” would not be the word to describe it.

“I had two search and rescue teams out in the middle of a meteor storm,” Decker continued peevishly.

His mustache twitched in annoyance.

“Would you still find it amusing if one of my crew got injured looking for you?”

“No, sir,” the girls replied in unison.

“You should really thank Jason and Buzz. They alerted me and provided the GPS coordinates on their bands,” Decker continued, pacing.

“But –” Andromeda started.

“True, you made it back on your own, but things could have turned out otherwise,” Decker kept talking, his mustache twitching even more excitedly. “Now Pixie here’s a known trouble-maker.”

Pixie looked down at her feet.

“But I had higher hopes for you, Ms. Starwell. Being older – and the daughter of Adam Starwell – one might think you’d be more responsible than that...”

As he talked, Base Commander Decker’s mustache seemed to Andromeda to take on a life of its own. It looked like a hairy caterpillar inching along underneath his nostrils. It was fascinating to watch it ripple and squirm.

Does he comb his mustache? Andromeda wondered dreamily. Does he ever talk to it? Does it have a name?

Decker now seemed less angry, having said his piece. The light of the still-rising sun streamed in through his window and the shadows shrunk into corners.

“Well, that’s all for now... I trust this won’t happen again, girls.”

I am NOT a girl, thought Andromeda. I’m a YOUNG WOMAN.

But all she said was “No, sir. It won’t.”

The two girls (or young women, if you please) turned to leave.

“Oh, yes, and one more thing,” Decker said, searching a stack of papers on his desk. “A letter for you, Andromeda.”

He handed her a thin printout and then waved them away. Andromeda pocketed the letter until they were out in the hallway.

“Well, Andrie? What’s it say?”

Andromeda scanned the page, eyes flitting back and forth like an ancient twentieth-century typewriter.

Dear Andrie,

I’m so glad to hear that you made the journey in one piece and are now safe and sound on Apollo Base. You’re in good hands with Decker, although he can be gruff and melodramatic at times. You can’t miss him; just look for the guy who has a squirrel glued to his lip. (He calls it a mustache, but I swear it’s a squirrel.)

As worried as I am, it’s at least comforting to know that you’ll find your time on the Moon interesting. I just hope you’ll still want to come home with me when I arrive!

As you can imagine, it’s not easy hitching a ride to the Moon, but I think I may be able to hop on the next lunar shuttle scheduled for tomorrow night. Enjoy yourself and make lots of friends, but

*please do me one favor: DON'T STRAY OUTSIDE THE BASE.
You're in quite enough danger as it is, my dear.*

*Looking forward to seeing you again soon & much love,
Dad*

*p.s. Did you know I designed the U.S.S. Explorer? What did you
think of "my" ship?*

*p.p.s. Beware of Ms. Plum, a very nice lady who once taught at
the Academy... but man does she pile on the homework!!!*

*p.p.p.s. Do keep an eye on Harry the Mechanic for me. I'm sure
you'll run into him (literally!). He can get into quite a lot of trouble
sometimes.*

The girls giggled at the last bits. But Andromeda suddenly found herself missing Dad – and home. And the green grass, the blue sky, white puffy clouds, her warm furry cat... which reminded her that she'd better go feed Pickle soon.

*Uh-oh. He's probably licking his chops at all those cute little
bunnies and hamsters by now.*

She also found that her own stomach was growling.

When she complained, Pixie replied, "Well, what are we waiting for? The bell for *din-din* chimed fifteen minutes ago. Let's hurry!"

Even before the girls arrived at the galley, they could hear a ginormous commotion. Hungry people were yelling at poor Harry, stamping their feet and banging their forks and knives against the tables, chanting, "WE WANT FOOD. WE WANT FOOD."

As soon as Andromeda and Pixie entered, the reason for the commotion became obvious: The whole conveyor belt was busted. There were about fifty customers—a sizable fraction of Apollo Base—who'd put in orders and were waiting for their food.

Harry lay underneath the conveyor machine with tools and parts scattered everywhere. His face and hands were caked with grime as he worked.

"I'm starving," whined a young boy, who jumped up on his chair.

"Hurry it up, Harry," wheezed a sour-looking man with a face like a lemon, "I'm starting my late shift in twenty minutes."

"What kind of a mechanic ARE you, anyway?" challenged a stocky, middle-aged woman who looked like she could use a few less meals.

Harry was about to think up a really brilliant retort when a glob of grease squirted out of the conveyor's underbelly and

landed in his eye. Harry's head jerked up reflexively and bonked against a switch. Somehow the switch flipped on and the conveyor belt started churning. And that's when everything went completely haywire.

The kitchen bots—unseen on the other side of the wall—began to stack up the customers' orders all at once. The belt started moving faster. Trays of food came tumbling out of the little door in the wall, quickly piling up at the end of the belt.

Sensing danger, Harry stood up and picked up one tray, then another. The belt sped up even more, like someone had hit the fast-forward button. The conveyor was now going so quickly that the trays and cups and plates all combined into one big fuzzy blur. Harry had trays on his back, trays under the crook of his arms, one between his knees, and yet another balanced impossibly on his head.

At last, the belt ground to a stop. The crowd leaned forward to the edge of their seats as Harry swayed and teetered. He was going to pull through! He had to!

Danny, the kid with long bangs, stood up and pointed.

"Way, there's my super triple fudge sundae!" Yes, there it was on the lone tray perched on top of Harry's head.

Just then a long robot arm popped out of a wall recess and rotated directly over Harry. It released a tiny little red cherry, which landed—plop!—right in the middle of the sundae.

Harry's whole body was now trembling from his super-human balancing effort. First his back contorted. Then his neck tilted. Next, his elbow cracked. Finally, he started tipping over. His fall was slow but unstoppable.

WHAM!

Trays, cups, plates, bowls, and fifty dinners all crashed to the floor and scattered. Harry lay covered in whipped cream, pudding, tuna salad and baked beans, oozing over a layer of coal-black grease and soap suds.

And on top of that unappetizing mound... one tiny little red cherry.

"MY SUPER TRIPLE FUDGE SUNDAE... IT'S RUINED!!!" cried Danny.

He bent down and scooped up a glob of whipped cream.

Harry's eyes grew wide. "Now wait, young man, don't –"

THWACK!

The fistful of cream went smack on the side of... Pixie's head. Oops. Danny missed Harry and hit the wrong target!

Enraged, Pixie jumped up on a chair and poured a bowlful of piping hot baked beans over Danny's head. They dripped down his unhappy face.

"FOOD FIGHT!" someone yelled.

"Oh now you really done it, Pixie," breathed Andromeda.

Hunks of cabbage, imitation chicken bones, banana peels, puddles of gravy – pretty much everything people could find – started flying across the galley. With the low-gravity on the Moon, food certainly flew further!

Andromeda opened her mouth in shock as a plateful of noodles slapped against her cheek. She turned to see David standing there grinning. She walked over to him with a pie behind her back, smiled, and then stuffed it in his face. The grin turned into a whimper.

Within minutes, the whole galley and everyone in it was covered with slimy, goopy bits of food. It would take a good solid half-hour in the needle shower that night for Andromeda to get cleaned up.

10. The Boy in the Bubble



“*O-hayo*, boys and girls!” sang the cheery voice of Ms. Plum. “That’s Lunie for good morning, Ms. Starwell.”

Andromeda rubbed her eyes, still sleepy. She’d returned late last *waykup* from the disaster-filled *din-din* at the galley and had not slept well, thanks to her practical-joking roommates. This time it was a frog from the greenhouse pond that they’d hid under her blankets while she was hogging the bathroom.

“Thank you for turning in your reports on time.”

Whether Ms. Plum looked directly at Jason on purpose or by accident was not clear, but he looked guilty. He fumbled around in his backpack pretending to sort through his papers and, when Ms. Plum wasn’t looking, stole a glance at Pixie. She was busy staring at the ceiling. It was as if the rest of the class didn’t exist.

“Here are your math quizzes, everybody. Sally... David... Deke...” Ms. Plum called out each student’s name one at a time.

Andromeda cradled her tablet in her arms and angled the screen so Pixie could see it. Her friend seemed to snap out of her daydream and leaned over to see.

“A hundred!” Pixie exclaimed. “*Wah!*”

Andromeda was by no means a straight-A student. Not even close. But she did have a natural talent in math; it was her best subject.

“Congratulations to Andromeda Starwell for advancing to level twelve in mathematics, logic and reasoning,” cooed Ms. Plum. “Please stand up.”

She gently nudged Andromeda toward the center of the class. (All of the desks were arranged in a circle, the usual setup.)

Ms. Plum then moseyed over to her teacher tablet, tapped a few commands and the student progress grid glowed green on the far wall. Andromeda’s chart zoomed into view and her progress bar in the “Math” row stretched until it reached the “12” marker. Kids stood up and clapped and hooted.

“Oh my,” Ms. Plum mumbled to herself, “that’s the first student to reach level twelve at her age for many years – well, ever since Jade...”

Jason was furious at Pixie and jealous of Andromeda. He tried hard to suppress how mad he was, but he could barely contain himself. His hand jerked up and accidentally knocked the “New Columbia Wildcats” cap off his head. For a brief instant this revealed a wide bald streak right down the middle where Andromeda’s rocketboard had liquefied his helmet lining. A scraggly tuft of hair poofed up on either side like a circus clown. Jason rummaged around for his cap and quickly placed it back on his head. As far as he knew, no one saw. He asked Ms. Plum if he might be excused and stormed out of the classroom.

Ms. Plum directed Andromeda back to her seat.

“And now it’s time for our lab science presentation.”

She signaled to Danny, who started wheeling a lab bench across the floor together with David. Both were dressed in knee-length white lab coats and goggles. The goggles made their eyes look huge and buggy, like a couple of over-sized houseflies.

“Today I’d like to show you a DANGEROUS new experiment that I’m going to perform on Dave here,” said Danny menacingly. “Ahem, I mean WITH Dave.”

David looked over at him blankly.

“The purpose of this experiment is to simulate the activity of a volcano,” continued Danny, “but of course without the

smoke, ash or lava... well, okay, maybe just a little bit of smoke." He grinned. "Dave here has volunteered to drink the volcano when we're done."

David gulped. "I DID?"

Danny stepped on David's foot, squashing his toes.

"Don't interrupt, Dave. I'm gonna make you famous."

David's expression brightened a little.

All the kids stood in a wide semi-circle watching Danny and David mix and heat ingredients over the gas burner. Dr. Vee, the nice scientist Andromeda had met on her tour, leaned warily against a far wall by the door, as if wanting to be able to make a quick escape if necessary.

"All right, children," cooed Ms. Plum, "why don't we all keep back from the flame, just to be safe..."

It was wise advice.

Danny poured a bright yellow powder into the beaker and now its contents started boiling faster. David watched glassy-eyed as a limitless supply of bubbles formed out of the frothy chaos. They squeezed upwards through the gooey mass to the top and then burst.

"It's sorta like makin' soda," Danny said, wiping his hair out of his eyes. "Carbon dioxide is a gassy substance, just like Dave here, that gives soda its fizz."

David tried to keep still, but he couldn't help fidgeting around.

"Except you wouldn't wanna drink this. It's mostly soap!— hold it steady, Dave," said Danny.

David stood on his tiptoes trying to pour a flask of clear syrupy fluid into the mixture. His hands shook, spilling a few drops on himself.

"And now watch as Dave's right hand dissolves. That was pure acid!"

"What? No way!" protested David, nervously eyeing his hand.

"It's okay, he won't feel a thing because this kind of acid is completely painless until it eats through your bones."

Now kids started giggling, except for a few younger ones who thought Danny was serious. One of these cried, "No, I can't watch!" The little girl appealed to Ms. Plum, "Please don't make me watch Davey's hand disappear!"

The bubbling brew frothed and fizzed as it sloshed around in the beaker. Danny had the Bunsen Burner on too high and David knew it. He tugged on Danny's shirt.

"Uh, Danny?"

"Shut up, Dave. I'm trying to concentrate." Danny added one last ingredient.

“But Danny!” David’s eyes were bulging out.

“I said shut—WHOA!!!” The beaker exploded, and a volcano of bubbles overflowed onto the lab bench. Bubbles soared into the air, some as large as David’s head. All the kids watched in awe.

As bubbles started to fill the room, Ms. Plum grabbed her cane and propped herself up on top of a chair. She used the pointy end to pop a particularly large bubble.

“Oooh, how nice!”

All at once, that seemed to unfreeze the students, who leapt to their feet and started chasing, jumping and popping bubbles. Some stood on their chairs, others on their desks, reaching up to grab as many as they could. Andromeda launched herself off the ground and bonked one with her head, smiling to herself. She noticed Dr. Vee frown and slip out the door.

One especially large bubble headed straight for David, who backed away in fear. “No, no, NOOOOOOOOOOO!”

SLURP!

The bubble wrapped itself around him until he was trapped inside. He pressed his hands and nose against the gooey membrane, gazing out helplessly at his classmates.

From that day forward David was famous indeed. Before he was just your ordinary, average Dave the Wedgie Boy.

But now he had become the stuff of legend.

He was BUBBLE BOY.

The mayhem continued for several minutes until Harry the Mechanic showed up. He calmly strode into the classroom and whistled loudly through his fingers. Within seconds, several cleaning bots wheeled into the room. Kids scattered out of the way. The bots aimed their nozzles upward and started blowing hot air at the bubbles, which dodged and swirled into the corners of the ceiling.

Harry walked over to the lab bench to shut off the burner. But somehow the gas line got caught under his foot and flicked the burner off the bench. Still lit, it dangled and twisted around over the edge, spewing out a jet of blue flame.

Ms. Plum had climbed down from her chair and was standing nearby. She did not notice that the back of her dress was on fire.

Harry recognized the danger at once. He picked up a broom and gave Ms. Plum a hard whack in the rump to try and put out the flame. Then another. It worked! Harry was a true space hero!

But I'm sure you realize that Ms. Plum was thinking something else. She was thinking, *What in the Space Devil's name is that crazy man doing whacking my private parts with a dirty broom?!*

She spun around, faster than you'd expect a sweet old lady to spin, grabbed the broom out of Harry's hands, and proceeded to whack him right back – over the head!

The cleaning bots kept noisily blowing out air and popping bubbles. Some bots now turned their air blowers on the students and dried off the bubble juice that caked their messy faces.

Finally, the room calmed down and the kids stood there sadly. All of the bubbles were gone now – and so was Harry.

It was time for the next lesson.

11. Lockdown



“Oh my poor dear girl!” exclaimed Nurse Sullivan in her pleasant Jamaican accent. “How ever did this happen?”

Grr. NOT a girl.

“Your eyes look positively AWFUL.”

Um, thanks. Just what I wanted to hear.

“Now this is called an eye wash. You’ll need to keep your eye open in the water while you move it around and blink a few times.”

Nurse Sullivan placed an oddly-shaped cup of water on the table. Andromeda bent over and pressed her forehead against the cup.

“Hold it there for thirty seconds... That should clean out the detergent.”

You see, Andromeda had been minding her own business in class when one of the cleaning bots, filled with leftover bubble

soap, had rolled over to her desk and sprayed her right in the face!

She KNEW someone did it on purpose. Robots don't just roll up and squirt you in the eye with chemicals. Could some prankster have re-programmed the misbehaving bot? The prime suspects: Jason Decker, his friends Buzz and Deke, and her three mean-hearted roommates.

She squinted into the eye wash plotting how she'd take revenge. Shaving cream in the toothpaste tube? Bubblegum on the hairbrush?

Andromeda heard the alarm before she saw it. She was still blotting her eye with a washcloth when the siren blared.

"Nurse? What's that?"

Nurse Sullivan didn't answer immediately. She was struggling with how to explain without causing her young patient to panic.

"The base is on alert," she told Andromeda. "There could be any number of things wrong. But don't worry, they'd let us know if we need to evacuate."

Now Andromeda DID panic. What would an evacuation mean on the Moon? Would there be time to put on her spacesuit? Who could rescue them?

“You’d better stay here until they give the all-clear signal,” the nurse said.

Andromeda sat tensely on the infirmary bed swinging her feet back and forth for what seemed like forever and a half. She and the nurse exchanged several nervous glances.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the siren stopped. The worry lines on Nurse Sullivan’s forehead smoothed out and she exhaled.

Andromeda guessed that this meant they were in no immediate danger. So she hopped off the bed, hoisted her pack over her shoulder, and told the nurse she was going back to her bunk.

As she went down the passageway, Andromeda passed under a swirling light, which cast a deep red glow on the walls and floor. Every now and then she passed another red light and another. It gave Apollo Base an eerie, creepy feeling.

At last she arrived at the Children’s Quarters. A metal plaque to the right of the door displayed three dots in a row, with a second row of two dots underneath—the symbol for cabin number five.

Most of the kids who outgrew Early Care got to stay in a cabin. It was better that way. Some grown-ups had to work the late shift; others worked the mines; and still others were

often gone for long stretches on various scientific missions and expeditions. Kids could always go home with their families whenever they wished, but generally it was more fun sleeping over in your bunk with your roomies.

Except today.

When Andromeda entered the cabin, she heard sobbing. One of the bunks was occupied. It was Sally, the girl who had been tormenting her with pranks and who had sabotaged her Lunar Slalom sled run.

It must be another prank, Andromeda thought at first. I'm not gonna fall for it.

But either her roomie was an incredible faker or the crying was for real. The girl was practically choking on her sobs and sniffles.

Andromeda gently set down her pack. She stood for a moment, watching Sally. Then she went over to her bunk.

"Mind if I come up?"

Sally squinted at Andromeda as though she were on the other side of a rainy windshield. She nodded, a lump in her throat. Straw-colored hair draped over her pretty face, eyes and nose barely peeping out. Her lips were cherry-red, now slightly smeared, as a salty tear streaked down her cheek to lodge in the corner of her mouth.

Andromeda climbed up and sat next to Sally on her bed. Neither girl said a word.

Children's Quarters—maybe the whole base—was quiet and peaceful, the siren now a distant memory. The only sound was the hum of the ceiling lights, almost too low and soft to hear. Sally shuddered and sighed deeply.

"The others went home," she spoke without hardly moving, so you'd think it was a statue doing the talking.

Andromeda kept silent and listened.

"My parents are off-base, so I can't go home..." Then, as if realizing it for the first time, Sally said, "Wait, I don't suppose YOU can go home either, Andrie, can ya?"

"No, Sally, I can't."

Now Sally lifted her head and looked her roommate in the eye.

"I'm sorry for the way I treated you. Didn't mean any harm. It's just..." She seemed to run out of steam for a spell. "It's just you're an Earthie and—"

"Why does EVERYBODY call me that?" Andromeda demanded. "What's so bad about being from Earth? I mean, you're ALL from Earth in a way, aren't you?"

"Well, our parents are, of course. But we're not—and we'll never be."

“What do you mean never?”

“We can never go back, Andrie – back to Earth, I mean.” Sally explained, a little passion seeping into her voice. “Don’t you get it? We can NEVER go back. THAT’S why we tease you so much. We’re jealous!”

“I don’t understand, Sally. Why can’t you visit Earth?”

“Visit, *da*. Live there, no. You see we’ve all grown up in low gravity. Imagine how it would feel to live on a planet where you weighed six times as much. Even with all those exercises we do... it’s still not enough. Sure, our bones and muscles could survive okay, but that’s not the same as really living. I tried once, but everything felt so HEAVY... That and my ears got all floppy.” Sally squished down her earlobes to illustrate. “You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to keep your ears upright on your head with Lunie scalp muscles!”

It was starting to sink in.

How horrible! Andromeda thought. *Kids born on the Moon can’t ever have a normal life back on Earth. Could that happen to me?*

“But why were you crying just now?” she asked. “Is it so bad having your parents off-base?”

That made Sally laugh. “No, not normally. It’s just that they’re stuck outside and I’m stuck inside ‘cause of the lockdown. So I’m a little scared, I guess.”

“Lockdown? What’s that?”

“Oh, you DO need looking after, don’tcha?” Sally teased, now more animated and showing little trace of being sad or scared anymore. “It’s when they close off the whole base and don’t let anyone in or out. Haven’t done it for years—until today.”

“Why would they do THAT?”

“I dunno. Must be something pretty bad.”

“I’ll say. Well, I’d better go find out what!”

“But Andrie... where will ya go?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’ll tell you when I find out!”

Andromeda jumped off the bed and started for the door.

“Andrie?”

“Mmm?”

“*Ta*. You won’t be getting any more pranks from me, roomie.”

Andromeda winked at Sally, who smiled back from up on the bunk.

She decided to go see the Base Commander. But first she had an important errand to run.

By the time she arrived at the petting zoo, all the flashing red lights had stopped. The regular yellowish glow of the

hallways would've made things feel normal again if the base hadn't seemed totally empty.

Andromeda had just finished giving Pickle his yum-yums and was starting back to her cabin when she bumped right into... Rad!

The low-speed collision did not damage either of them, but it did knock the bot's cowboy hat off. Rad extended a robotic arm to retrieve it and gracefully placed the hat back onto his "head."

"Hello, Andrie. I was just looking for you."

"For me?"

"Correct. I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm okay, Rad, just a little shaken."

"Shaken? That does not compute. There has not been a moonquake of any significance since you arrived."

Rad's blocky mechanical features allowed little in the way of expression, but Andromeda imagined that he looked almost, well, puzzled.

"Shaken just means that the lockdown and all has got me worried... What happened?"

"I see," Rad paused as if thinking, although bots don't really think. (Do they?) "An item was reported stolen."

“That’s it? Something got stolen and they close off the whole base? That’s ludicrous!”

“No, Andrie. This was a most unusual item,” said Rad gravely, “perhaps unique.”

12. Investigation



The hatch wheel spun by itself and the latch clicked. There was a deep rumble as the New Columbia portal opened.

Two door-wardens in faded green Apollo Base uniforms stood at attention just inside the hatchway as Base Commander Decker stepped over the threshold. He surveyed the scene briefly and then walked briskly to the comm-link on the wall. He pushed a series of numbers on the keypad to dial the secure line to the Command Center.

“Are all the doors sealed?”

“Da, Commander.”

“And guards posted?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Any activity since the theft?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay, then you can cancel the red alert,” said Decker. “But keep those guards posted.”

He turned around to face the three people who filed in through the portal behind him: a woman in patterned blue-gray military fatigues and polished black boots, a young man in a similar uniform—obviously the junior of the two—and Jason Decker wearing a stocking cap, presumably to cover up his rocket-scorched hair.

The woman was sliding her fingertips along the rim of the circular hatch, studying it thoughtfully.

“Inspector Ride,” Decker said. “Shall I take you to the Command Center now?”

“Just a moment, Commander,” the Inspector replied. “How many other exits or entry ways are there?”

“Four. The main portal, the landing bay, the factory, and the greenhouse.”

The Inspector turned to her aide and ordered, “Take some readings here and at the other portals, Elan. I’d like to be completely sure that no one has been in or out.”

Turning back to Decker, she said, “Ready to proceed to the Command Center.”

“Very well,” agreed the Commander. “Please come with me.”

The two of them disappeared down the passageway, with Jason lagging behind in a vain effort to keep pace.

Rad and Andromeda arrived at the railing overlooking Apollo Command Center to find it bustling with activity. Controllers were moving from panel to panel, checking the camera feeds and sensors. Base Commander Decker stood on a raised platform in the middle, barking orders. Bots wheeled in and out of view, going on various errands. Indicator lights flashed and messages scrolled across screens.

Inspector Ride stalked about the Pit like a tiger on the prowl, ready to pounce on any bit of information the controllers might turn up. Her cat-like movements were as balanced and nimble as an acrobat. She seemed completely aware of everything in that vast room, though if she noticed Andromeda watching from the upper level she didn't show it. The Inspector was all business and, until she could prove otherwise, everyone on this base was a suspect.

"All spacesuits accounted for, Commander," said one of the controllers. "They were all located in their secure lockers."

The Inspector quit pacing and joined Decker on the platform.

“Elan confirmed it. No one in or out, except us.” Inspector Ride’s voice did not sound satisfied. “Are you certain we’re not overlooking something? An emergency exit perhaps?”

“No, Miss – uh, Inspector – Ride,” Decker corrected himself, sensing the dangerous flash in the Inspector’s eyes. “No, there are no other exits.”

“Ventilation shafts?”

“Well, yes, of course. But without a space suit, where would one go?” asked Decker incredulously. “And besides, none are large enough for a person to escape through.”

“And below? What about tunnels?”

“Again, no, Inspector. The tunnels are not accessible from inside the base – only from the outside.”

“Then we’re right back where we started, Commander,” concluded Ride, disappointed. “Which is exactly nowhere.”

“And whoever stole the Lavalight Crystal must have had inside help,” Decker said uneasily. He stroked his mustache, pondering the problem.

Dad’s right; it DOES look like he’s petting a squirrel glued to his lip!

“That’s a given, Decker,” said Ride, smugly. “Why don’t you leave the investigating to me, please, and focus on getting

those background reports. I want bios, profiles and activity reports on all personnel. ALL.”

The Commander’s face flushed and his mustache now twitched with outrage. “A FULL investigation?”

“That’s right. I’m sorry, Commander, but there’s no other choice.”

She did not look very sorry.

“I’m placing the base under lockdown and martial law until we’re able to complete this investigation.”

“But you CAN’T do that. It will interfere with our research. You don’t have the authority!”

“But I do.”

The Inspector calmly pulled out her badge and flipped it open.

CAPT Kalpan H. Ride
Special Agent
U.S. Space Patrol Investigative Service
Priority One Clearance

Priority One? The Base Commander’s mustache drooped sadly. Never in the history of the Apollo Base had there been martial law. But what could he do? A Priority One agent could do ANYTHING. She was even – Decker’s heart valve fluttered – she was even licensed to kill!

“But this is all so ridiculous. Why, it’s only a hunk of glass!”

“That hunk of glass, I might remind you, Commander, is an incredibly potent Crystal that can heat objects to a temperature of up to three thousand degrees.”

Decker blanched.

“Between you and me,” murmured Ride confidentially in a low voice, “we’re just lucky that whoever it was didn’t run off with Dr. Jade’s experimental Positron rocket, too... If the prototype fell into enemy hands, they could have an incredible speed advantage over our Space Patrol ships.”

High up on the second-level railing, Andromeda and Rad looked at each other in surprise.

Rad was eavesdropping. He dangled a robot sensor over the edge of the Pit to pick up the conversation below. Then he patched the audio feed through to Andromeda’s band, which pumped the sound into her headset. It could pick up even the rustle of Decker’s mustache.

“Enemies? What enemies?! We’re at peace!” he objected.

“In my line of work, we always have enemies. Don’t you know we’re in the middle of the world’s second Great Space Race?” Ride absentmindedly fingered the silver bald eagle pinned to her collar. “Except it’s not just us and the Soviets like it was back in the twentieth century... Listen, Decker, the

Romans carved out their empire by building roads. The Brits ruled by virtue of their sailing ships. American airpower once dominated the skies. The next frontier – the next great race – is right here in outer space. And whoever wins this time controls the –”

She paused as Elan approached and saluted.

“I’ve b-brought Dr. Villin, ma’am.”

“Ah, here he is,” said Decker, regaining his composure a little.

It was somewhat reassuring to have at least ONE sane person at hand. The good doctor, however, looked more serious even than he usually did. And his brow was creased with concern.

“Doctor, I’m so glad you could join us,” the Inspector greeted him politely, as if she hadn’t just been whittling the Commander’s ego down to the size of a pea.

She glanced a second time at Dr. Vee’s face. She would have to be careful not to let herself get distracted by this handsome thirty-something scientist.

Well, a little distraction now and then might not hurt...

“I’d like to ask you a few questions, if I may,” she continued.

“Ask away, Inspector. It will be my pleasure.” The lab director bowed courteously.

“Is there a private place, Decker?”

“My offices will do,” said Decker stiffly. “Please, follow me.”

As the group moved off, Andromeda leaned over the railing watching them. She turned hurriedly to Rad.

“Come on, we’ve GOT to follow them!”

“There is an elevator in close proximity.”

“Prox-a-wha?”

“That means it is nearby.”

“Then why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

Rad lumbered a short way down the hall and then hooked left around the corner, with Andromeda close behind him. The elevator was the see-through kind that has curved glass windows (usually reserved for fancy hotels). Rad rotated an “arm” into position and pushed the down button.

Ding!

The two of them piled in and the doors closed. As the elevator descended, wide open space surrounded them on all sides. The view gave Andromeda a greater appreciation for just how ginormous the Command Center really was. Why

there were probably enough computers, TV monitors and switchboards to start a whole electronics super-store!

Andromeda darted out as soon as the elevator “landed.” (It DID feel a bit like a helicopter landing.) Rad loped along after her. The Inspector and the others had already disappeared down a passageway, so they had to catch up.

“Hold that door, young lady!” called a familiar voice. “Hey, wait! This stuff’s heavy!”

But Andromeda and Rad were already racing by. The owner of that voice had to jerk his arm out to stop the elevator from closing. A loud crash could be heard as the man dropped a large fish tank on the floor. (Luckily, the fish hadn’t arrived yet...)

While the crash distracted his attention, the elevator doors squeezed shut on the man’s right arm. The elevator started to rise – with one very unhappy arm sandwiched in between the doors!

“Oh, no, not again!” moaned – you guessed it – Harry the Mechanic.

A woman nearby was slurping some soda and noticed Harry being reeled upward, his left hand flailing around. She was so surprised that she choked on her drink, and snorted the fizz right out of her nose. It splattered frothy bubbles all

over her clean uniform. (In case you've never had soda fizz up your nose, I assure you it's not pleasant.)

"Help! HELLLLP!" cried Harry, now high above the Pit.

"If he reaches the top," exclaimed one of the controllers on duty, "it'll snap his arm right off—and probably his head, too!"

Hearing this, Harry got even more frantic. You could practically see the tonsils in the back of his throat as he opened his mouth wide to yell, "Somebody please help!!!"

Fortunately for Harry, robots can react amazingly quickly. They don't freeze up or flinch or second-guess themselves. They just do the logical thing to the best of their ability.

In seconds, Rad whizzed over to the circuit board and flipped the breaker. That shut down power to all elevators. Just in time, too! Harry was inches away from getting his arm clipped off...

"Aww, Harry!" groaned Andromeda. "Now we'll NEVER find out what they're up to."

The Inspector and everyone else were probably already holed up in the Base Commander's office by now.

Minutes later, Harry was safely down and rubbing his sore arm.

“Maybe YOU can help, Harry.”

“Me? My dear girl...”

Not girl. Young lady! Andromeda thought, angrily.

“Tell us why the Lavalight Crystal is so dangerous,” she said out loud.

“Really, Andromeda, I have no idea. Well, except that it’s a project Dr. Vee’s been working on.”

Andromeda’s shoulders sagged with disappointment.

“I know why, Andrie,” said a voice that sounded like Dad’s.

She spun around to see it was Rad doing the talking.

“You do?”

13. Conspiracy



The Apollo Communications Center was simply a row of computer kiosks connected to an Earth-side radio transmitter.

In the moonbase's early days, settlers came here almost daily to write or video chat with friends and relatives down on the "big blue ball," as they called their home planet. There was always a line (and strict time limits) at the kiosks.

As the years passed, something changed. Young Lunies met their Earthie families rarely, if ever. Plus, all of their friends were up here. To the native-born Lunies, Earth became just a "thing" – a place to visit or to see in the movies.

The Moon was home now.

And so gradually the lines grew shorter, then stopped forming at all.

Currently, only one kiosk was in use: Andromeda was busy tapping away at a letter home.

Dear Dad,

Since I got to the Moon, everything's been really crazy. First, I met a talking robot who's got a voice just like yours. Then I met this girl Pixie who's totally spacey and only hears half of what I say. Then Ms. Plum's dress caught on fire yesterday. She burnt her beeeeeehind! And then poor Harry got his hand stuck in the elevator – or was it his beard stuck in the vacuum bot?

Oh yeah, and I almost forgot this kid Dave got a space wedgie. I don't actually know what a space wedgie is, but it was AWESOME!

I think these Lunies are totally loony, don't you?

Love,

Andrie

Andromeda rested her chin on her fist for a moment.

“Oh, I suppose I'd better tell Dad the rest...”

p.s. One more thing, kinda serious. Somebody stole this thing called the Lavalight Crystal from Dr. Vee's lab. It's supposed to get energy from the sun's rays and change it into electricity or beam it up to space stations in orbit. Sounds pretty harmless to me, but Rad seems to think it could be turned into some kind of giant death ray or something if it ended up in the wrong hands.

We have no idea who might have stolen it, but the Inspector seems to suspect everyone. (It wasn't me, I pinky-swear!) She has all the exits closed off and won't let anyone in or out. It's kinda scary, but kinda exciting, too.

Just then the lunch bell chimed. She moved her finger to tap the "send" button then jerked it away. One last line to type...

p.p.s. Don't worry. I'm sure those investigators will find the culprit by the time you get this letter!

Andromeda snickered. She wasn't lying. Not exactly. She just didn't need to tell Dad ALL her plans yet.

"Pixie! Pixie!"

"Ya, hi, Andrie," Pixie's voice floated across the galley. "What's up?"

"Pixie," Andromeda panted breathlessly, "We've got a mission!"

"Mission? What mission?"

"Tell her, Rad."

Rad swiveled his box-like head to face Pixie. "We are investigating the theft of Dr. Vee's Lavalight Crystal."

“We?”

“Yeah, Rad and I,” said Andromeda. “Wanna join up?”

“Well, um, lemme think about it for a while.” Pixie counted to about two. “Okay, count me in!”

“Good, now let me think...” Andromeda stroked her chin. “We’ll need a name for our incredible crime-solving team.”

She paced back and forth, deep in thought. “I got it—the Space Crime-Solvers!”

Her idea was greeted with complete silence—except for the sound of Pixie munching on her order of Ultimate Supreme Nacho Chips with triple extra-cheese.

“No? No, I guess you’re right. Something with more pizzazz... Mmm, how about The Terrific Trio?” she posed dramatically, spreading her arms wide.

“I cannot see how this is relevant to our mission—” began Rad.

“Pixie, what do you think? PIXIE!” Andromeda snapped, folding her arms over her chest.

Pixie seemed strangely interested in a spot on the ceiling of the galley.

“You weren’t listening at all, were you?”

“Uh, sure I was...” Pixie paused. “So, like, what exactly was I just listening to?”

“Maybe we should call ourselves the Space Cadets,” said Andromeda, more than slightly annoyed.

“EVIL CUPCAKES!” Pixie suddenly exclaimed, glaring wide-eyed at a tray of cupcakes that rolled by on the conveyor belt.

They were decorated with red jellybean eyes, candy corn noses, and chocolate icing mouths, making them look all creepish and evilish.

“That’s it! The Evil Cupcakes!” Andromeda raved excitedly.

“Huhhhhhh?”

“It’s our team name, ya noodle-brained –”

Luckily, Andromeda didn’t get a chance to finish her insult.

“Andrie,” interrupted Rad. “Perhaps a more practical approach would be to determine our suspects through the evidence at hand and a process of elimination.”

“HUHHHHH???” Both girls wheeled to face Rad.

“That is to say, let us figure out who might be guilty,” translated Rad into regular English.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” said Pixie, gobbling down another chip.

“Um, good idea, Rad,” agreed Andromeda. “Hey, save me some of those, you nacho-hog!” she yelled at Pixie.

“They’re MY nachos,” Pixie snarled, wrapping her arms protectively around her basket of chips.

She did not seem to be in a sharing mood.

“Gosh, they’re practically drowning in cheese dip anyway,” Andromeda countered.

“I estimate the ratio of cheese dip to tortilla chips is approximately three to—”

“Who asked you?” squawked Pixie, rudely cutting Rad off.

The slight distraction was all Andromeda needed. She slipped her hand under Pixie’s arm, snagged a soggy chip and slurped it down before her friend could block her.

Pixie looked furious for a second, her eyes on fire, and then meekly shrugged her shoulders.

“Nacho thief,” she muttered bitterly.

“Okay, so let’s talk suspects,” began Andromeda, pleased with her superior chip-snatching skill. “Ms. Plum?”

“You’re funny,” Pixie chortled. “She’s too old and slow.”

“Never underestimate your enemy, human-friends,” advised Rad in his comically serious Dad-like voice.

Andromeda’s eyes grew wide as she imagined a diabolical Ms. Plum cackling while filching the Lavalight Crystal. She could practically see the elderly teacher stuffing the giant gem beneath the folds of her baggy dress. That sweet smile behind the old-fashioned spectacles would be the perfect disguise!

“Nope. Couldn’t have been her,” Pixie shook her head. “She was just done teaching class when Andrie went to the infirmary. No way she could’ve moved THAT fast.”

Poof!

The vision of an evil Ms. Plum evaporated into little white puffs and vanished.

“Well, it couldn’t have been Nurse Sullivan, since I was with her,” added Andromeda.

“Very good,” said Rad, approvingly. “That makes two suspects ruled out. See? The process of elimination at work...”

“*Da*, great, Rad. But there’s over three hundred people on this base,” Pixie groaned. “It’d take days to eliminate all of them.”

“You are right, Pixie. Perhaps if we had access to the Inspector’s records...”

“YEAH! That’s the ticket!” Pixie was finally getting into the spirit. “Here, I’ll pull it up on my band.”

She started tapping wildly on her wristband, her fingers blurring to the point of seeming invisible.

Andromeda gawked. She’d never seen someone tap at light speed before.

“P-Pixie,” said Rad uncertainly. “You are n-not supposed to have access to those records. I see they are tagged as Top-Secret.”

“Ya think that’ll stop me? I can hack into just about ANYTHING they’ve got. Compute THAT, ya walking toaster!”

The glow in Rad’s eyes dimmed to a pale white light as Pixie kept tapping furiously on her band.

“Well, what is it?” Andromeda demanded impatiently. She leaned over to look.

“Hmm. The controllers were all working their scheduled shifts in the Pit. Dr. Vee and the other scientists were in the Lab section. Wait... Decker wasn’t there...”

“So where was he?” asked Andromeda.

Pixie looked up. Their eyes met.

“Off base,” said Pixie. “With our favorite *pally* Jason... and therefore no alibi for either of them!”

“Logically, the Base Commander could enter and exit the base without raising suspicion,” Rad said, “but it seems unlikely that a person with that level of responsibility would commit a crime.”

“Well someone did it, Rad,” argued Pixie. “And this is our best lead.”

“So if they were off-base, where’d they go?” wondered Andromeda.

“Dunno. Says it’s confid – confi –” Pixie couldn’t pronounce the word.

“Confidential, Pix,” finished Andromeda. “That means private information no one else should see.”

“How convenient,” scowled Pixie.

“When the Base Commander leaves the base, it is standard protocol for him to log his intended destination,” said Rad before remembering that he needed to talk more human-like. “I am sorry. I mean he is supposed to say where he is going.”

“Yes, yes, that’s it. Here! The log file –”

Base Commander’s exit log

Exit Reason: Doctor’s appointment.

Destination: New Columbia. Address confidential.

Exit Time: 06/03 09:12

Return Time: 06/03 11:58

“That means he got back just after the theft!” Pixie practically shouted.

“Ladies and gentlebot, the Evil Cupcakes are on the case. Let the REAL investigation begin!” Andromeda announced.

“Now I’ve got a plan...”

Rad's eyes gleamed brighter and sharper than usual. He was about to test the limits of his programming.

"I have tied into your bands. Now you will be able to reach me as long as you are within range."

His voice sounded almost worried. Of course a bot can't get worried. (Can it?)

"Pixie's access rating will get you through the portal," continued Rad, "but since we are in lockdown, the MPs will stop you at the hatch. As we discussed, I will create a distraction that will give you approximately two minutes and fifty-one seconds to—"

"We've been over that three times already, Rad. Have you blown a circuit?" interrupted Pixie.

"Well, it's now or never!" breathed Andromeda.

Rad left the girls behind in their hiding place, a small storage closet, and crept toward the portal. Not that a bulky two-meter-tall robot can creep very well. But he sure tried. He stopped just out of sight.

"Officer! Report to the landing bay portal on the double," he boomed.

The door-warden on duty jumped up, alert. That voice sounded exactly like the Base Commander's!

It was actually Rad, of course, using his robot skills to fake it. He was pretty sure the guy who programmed him would be proud... and a little freaked out, too.

“I’m sure glad Rad’s on our side,” Pixie whispered.

“Shhh!” Andromeda put her finger to her lips.

Obedying the Base Commander’s orders – or so he thought – the guard bounded down the corridor toward the landing bay double-time. Andromeda almost hoped the door-warden might be old, fat and slow so they’d have extra time...

No such luck. The guy booked outta there like an Olympic sprinter.

The sign over the portal read “To New Columbia.” Not that they took the time to read it. Pixie whipped out her wristband and swiped it against a small blinking light on the wall. The light stopped blinking and the hatch opened. They could see the outer hatch on the other side of the airlock...

Long ago, Lunies learned how vital it was to seal the Tubes with airlocks on both ends – and they’d learned the hard way. Even today, no Lunie makes it past level seven in History without writing an e-book report on the Hi-ten Breach.

One tragic day, according to local legend, a pressure leak started in the Cross-Highland Express Tube. Bad luck that the

Hi-ten settlement hatch was jammed. Every breath of air down to the last mouthful would've been sucked out into space in minutes if it weren't for brave little Tommy Lee. He'd plugged his finger right in the leak for hours and hours until help arrived. He saved the settlement, they say, but the rescuers were too late to save Tommy's poor frozen finger...

Now Andromeda closed the inner hatch behind her, quickly but softly – just in case the guard was already back in hearing range. The green light flashed and the outer hatch sprung open. There was a slight breeze for a few seconds as the richer air of Apollo Base mixed with the thinner air of the Tube.

No space suits were needed; Tubes nowadays have decent air pressure. But it was smart to take along a breathing mask just the same. Never knew on the Moon just when you might need one.

"We're in, Rad. We made it!" Andromeda smiled with relief into her band.

"You da bot!" Pixie added. "You legend!"

"I am honored, ladies," Rad answered gravely. "Good luck to you both. Over and out."

The two-radio on their bands went quiet.

"See, the Tubes connect most of our settlements," explained Pixie. "They're long, narrow and dark as a crater at night.

Don't like 'em much... This is how I get to school every *waykup* though."

Pixie lived with her family in New Columbia, unlike most of the other kids who stayed in cabins on Apollo Base like Andromeda.

"What are THESE?" Andromeda asked, pointing at a bunch of strange-looking metal boxes parked on their right.

It looked like there were a dozen or so, all lined up in a rack, each in its own slot.

"Oh, those are ponies."

"Ponies???" Andromeda choked in surprise and went into a fit of coughing.

Her friend must be either completely whacked or else pulling her leg. What an odd sense of humor she had.

"Your so-called ponies look like rectangles wrapped in aluminum foil shrunk to about the size of a rocking horse."

Andromeda supposed there were some decorations on the sides that made them resemble the bouncy horsies you might find on a preschool playground. But "pony" was still a ridiculous word to use.

"*Da*, Andrie. They're a special kind of bot you ride to get to the other end of the Tube."

Great. Boxes with wheels. "Can they go fast?"

“Weeeeell, not THAT fast,” Pixie said cautiously. “I guess I COULD show ya how to hot-wire ‘em and make em go faster.”

“Yeah! Now you’re talkin’!”

“Alright, *sec.*”

Pixie pulled a long, thin piece of black metal out of one of the many pockets in her cargo pants. She held it perpendicular to the front of the pony bot and rotated it—without touching anything. Andromeda watched, fascinated, as a panel slid open and out popped the pony’s “head” and “neck”.

Pixie squatted down and tore two wires out of the bot’s insides (after first removing the power cell of course!). She pinched off the plastic ends of the wiring with her fingernails and twisted the leads together. Then she did the same to another pony and powered up the two bots.

“There! That oughta override the speed limit.”

The ponies raised their mechanical heads and whinnied.

Well, not really. The whinnies were pitiful fakes.

“Okay, Andrie, hop on.”

“How do I make it go?”

“Just squeeze your legs together against the pony's flanks. Like a real horse, I think.”

“Sounds easy enough...” Andromeda fiddled with the snaps on her riding helmet.

“Andrie? Have you ever ridden a real horse? On Earth, I mean.”

“Sure, lots of times. You?” Andromeda immediately regretted her question.

She doubted there were horses or even pets on the Moon. She hadn’t seen any.

“Mmm, nope,” Pixie confirmed gloomily. “This is as close as it gets on the Moon, *pally*... Oh, hey, don't forget your seatbelt.”

Click.

“Ready!” Then Andromeda changed her mind. “No, wait.”

“What for?” asked Pixie.

“We can’t ride ponies without knowing their names.”

“They don’t HAVE names, silly. They’re bots.”

“Well, I’m gonna call mine Buttercup.”

“Butter – oh, *fay-hwa* – I guess mine’ll be Herman.”

“Herman!” Andromeda cried in outrage. “What kind of a name is THAT for a horse?”

“I think it’s a wonderful name. At least it’s not girly like Buttercup,” Pixie sneered. “And they’re ponies, not horses,” she finished.

“Race ya!” Andromeda grinned evilly, squeezing Buttercup’s sides.

“You’re on,” Pixie accepted, kick-starting her pony, too. “My Herman will grind your Buttercup into space dust!”

“When pigs fly!”

Andromeda was indeed already flying ahead. It took a few seconds to pick up speed, but soon they were both rolling right along faster than a bike down a cliff.

“Ride ‘em cowgirl!”

“Yeeeeha!”

Uh-oh. Someone was riding in from the other direction. A grown-up. Maybe a deliveryman who didn’t know about the lockdown yet? Whoever it was, they were on a collision course!

“Split!” yelled Pixie.

The two girls swerved in opposite directions.

“*Way,* you kids, slow down!” the rider shouted.

“Oops, sorry!” Pixie called back. Andromeda giggled.

As soon as the other pony had passed, they sped up again.

“FULL SPEED AHEAD!”

“WEEEEEEEE!”

Soon the tunnel ended in a “T.” Pixie took the left fork, heading east.

“How long will it take to get there, Pix?”

“Oh, just another half hour.”

“At this speed? But I thought we'd get there sooner... we're going so fast.”

“The Tube goes on for a couple dozen *clicks*, Andrie, along the path of the *rille*. That's a natural Moon channel – probably an old lava canal that the early pioneers cleared out with drill cars. *Da*, I read about it last year in 'The Lunie Chronicles.' They melted the tunnels insides with sun mirrors to seal 'em up airtight.”

Andromeda tried to imagine those brave settlers tirelessly slaving away in the Tube to fill it with air. (Actually, bots did most of the work.) The tunnel walls were smooth as glass.

“See, the Tubes are the safest, fastest way to travel on the Moon,” Pixie continued. “If they'd built roads above-ground where it's unprotected, you'd get radiation poisoning real quick.”

Instinctively, she glanced at her band and made sure the radiation meter showed green. (It did.)

They zoomed along for several more minutes. Every now and then they passed a side tunnel that led who knows where into deep caves of darkness.

There were no other travelers.

“Okay, we're coming up on the portal.”

“Wait, how do you pull the brakes?”

“Just squeeze the handle bars. Squeeeeeeze,” Pixie spurted out.

“Watch out, Andrie, you're gonna crash into the wall!”

SMASH!

“Ouch.”

“Uh, Andrie, I think your pony's head's on backwards.”

“Oops. Sorry, pony.”

“Giddy-up,” the pony said flatly. The girls chuckled as it powered down.

“Lock your pony in the rack,” instructed Pixie as she aimed her band at the portal.

“Access granted,” a computer voice echoed from the wall. They heard the snick of the hatch unlocking.

“Well, here we are,” said Pixie, stretching her stiff arms and legs. “New Columbia City!”

14. Flying Lesson



“It doesn’t look like any city we have on Earth,” said Andromeda, as she surveyed the scene.

The main access tunnel widened ahead into a broad open area rising to about three or four stories tall – and many more stories deep into darkness. A huge dome arched high overhead, allowing sunbeams to shine through UV-filtered, shatterproof windows onto the city below. In the middle, suspended in the air, was a dizzying web of walkways and bridges that crisscrossed the open space. These led to numerous other tunnels and hatches of various sizes all around the circular rim.

“Well, it’s what we got,” Pixie replied matter-of-factly, chin held high. “Building underground protects us from meteor storms, solar radiation, cosmic rays, and extreme temperatures,” she practically recited word-for-word from her “Intermediate Selenology” textbook.

Eons ago, a massive volcanic eruption had bored this natural lava tube through the flat base of the Sea of Tranquility. (It wasn't a sea, really – it's just that the ancient astronomers didn't know any better and thought the low, dark parts of the Moon might be oceans.) Then the Lunies had come along and carved the lava tube into a smooth cylinder shape and built their underground metropolis.

“It looks kinda like the inside of a ginormous soda can, except all green and moldy,” Andromeda teased.

Actually, she was quite impressed with the view.

Balconies wrapped all around the insides of the circular walls in front of her – and above and below her, too. Many were decked with potted plants, clotheslines, flags, lounge chairs and assorted decorations. Tropical vines, moss, and creepers covered the walls in between the balconies. Nooks in the walls housed hundreds of spider plants and peace lilies. The whole place looked more like a vast hanging garden than a city center.

What is it with all the plants and stuff? Andromeda wondered.

Of course she was not thinking. I'm sure you've already realized that all those plants were more than pretty decorations; they supplied New Columbia with the oxygen its citizens needed to breathe!

The broad mid-air walkway in front of them was clearly “Main Street” – or the closest thing to one on the Moon. It was cluttered with market stalls, people buying and selling, and “ponies” to carry home the things people bought.

Andromeda tottered across, trying not to look down over the edge. The bottom of the can-shaped city far below was shrouded in shadowy gloom; it housed all the power generators, water and air pumps, and other machinery that had no need for sunlight.

Honk-honk. Beep-beep.

“*Way, watch where ya goin’ pally,*” hollered a guy riding his pony.

He nearly ran over Andromeda’s foot.

“Uh, sorry,” she apologized as the man rode on.

The back of his orange uniform was emblazoned with a big “AgriGro” company logo.

“*Fay-hwa!* What a jerk!” Pixie grumbled sourly. “Those AgriGro guys are always banging into people without so much as an ‘excuse me’ or anything. They think just because they run all the N.C. greenhouses and canneries that they own this town.”

“Never mind. I’m okay. So where do you live?”

“On the far side. I don’t think we have time to stop there now. We’d better focus on our mission.”

“*Da*. So how do we figure out where Jason went?”

“Let’s start at the post office,” Pixie suggested, smiling inside at her friend’s first-ever use of a Lunie word.

“Post office. Here? On the Moon? Doesn’t everyone just use their bands?”

“Well, it’s not like the old letters we learned about in “Modern Earth History,” but we do send care packages and flowers once in a while. Plus, the post office is one of the few places in New Columbia with a transmitter that can beam messages across space. Most city workers still have family back on Earth, ya know.”

“Yeah, my WHOLE family is back on Earth.”

“Oh, right, sorry about that, Andrie.”

They hiked down the walkway until they spotted a thick pillar that stood in the middle of the city core. It doubled as structural support and elevator shaft.

“So, like, where are we going?” asked Andromeda.

“To rent ya some wings,” answered Pixie.

“Um, sure – wait – wings???”

“*Da*, Andrie, it’s the bomb. Totally sweet. You’re gonna love it!”

“Hold on. You’re not going to trick me into something *loco* like you did with the rocketboard again, are you?”

“Really, *pally*, I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” Pixie giggled.

“Oh, okay, Pixie – no! Do you hear me? NO!”

Pixie ignored her friend and continued walking briskly toward the Wings2Go booth. Andromeda struggled to keep pace.

“Hey, I told you –”

“Two pairs of wings, please,” Pixie said to the shaggy-haired booth attendant, still ignoring Andromeda. “I’m a size six and she’s probably an eight or nine.”

“*Sec*,” the attendant winked, chomping on a scraggly split end.

She kneeled down to peruse the shelves and fished out a couple pairs of what looked like halves of a kite or glider. Each half had elastic hoops to slip your arms through.

“Hmm, let’s try an eight out first...” She grabbed Andromeda’s arm and started fitting her with the size-eight wing.

“But I don’t want –”

“Bingo! Fits just right.”

“Here ya go,” said Pixie, as she pressed “approve payment” on her band.

“*Ta*. Enjoy your flight!”

“Pixie, where are we going with these stupid toy kite-thingies on our arms?” demanded Andromeda. “Mine has pink polka-dots. It makes me look like a—AAAH!!!” she squawked as Pixie shoved her off the edge of the suspended walkway into mid-air.

She was falling, falling, falling—her stomach popped up into her mouth as the whole world turned into one long scream.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“No, that’s not how ya do it,” Pixie hollered, diving after her. “Arms out, keep ‘em stable—like this,” she demonstrated with hawk-like precision.

But it was no use; Andromeda was dropping like a rock. And she was looking down, not up.

“Andrie, *way!* You’ve got to control your flying or you’ll smack into that... BRIDGE!”

The crowd of people below on Market Street scattered, some diving behind ponies, carts, bins—whatever cover they could find. Andromeda swooped right over their heads,

barely missing an old guy who ducked just in time to avoid having his head knocked off like a whiffle ball.

“Flap your wings, Andrie. It’ll help you steady your pitch angle... *Wah*, why are you having so much trouble???”

Maybe because you pushed me off and I don’t know how to fly?

Andromeda flapped desperately. It did help her regain a measure of balance – enough to yell aloud at Pixie.

“I’M GONNA KICK YOUR *PEEGOO* FOR THIS, YOU SCHEMING LITTLE TRICKSTER!”

“Honestly, *pally*, get a grip on yourself. This is supposed to be fun! Now follow me.”

Pixie glided over to her friend. Together they flapped up and up until they soared up to the city-top windows.

Then Pixie turned and said, “Now let’s try that dive again – all the way to the bottom.”

Andromeda looked green. “You’re kidding, right?”

“*Fay-hwa!* We’re doing it. Now down we go! *Noo?*”

After several more minutes of extreme torture, Andromeda finally felt her stomach returning to its rightful place. Moon gravity actually made flying pretty easy once she overcame her fear.

“*Way*, Pix. I think I’m finally getting the hang of this!”

“About time. I thought it was gonna take the whole *waykup!*”

“*Da-byan-hwa!* Let’s try an upside-down loop, this time, okay?”

“I’m so very proud of you, little grasshopper,” Pixie smirked. “Lucky are you to have such a great and wise master.”

“Weeeeeeeee-haaaaaah!” they both yelled, squealing and shrieking as they soared across the city, looped around its thick support pillars, and dodged bridges, suspension cables, and other winged flyers.

At last they alighted on a large, flat courtyard area—platform #8—three stories down from the Tube level and right in front of the post office.

15. Dead End



Pixie traced her index finger along the row of P.O. boxes in the wall.

“I KNOW it’s here somewhere. Number forty-two, I think.”

“Exactly WHAT are we looking for?”

“Here it is. I’ll just knock.” Pixie said. “*Way*, anyone home?”

“Knock? Are you *loco*? What, do you expect someone is living inside a one-foot long box in the wall?”

Pixie was peeking into the post office box as if expecting a little elf to pop his head out or something.

Andromeda planted her balled fists on her hips. She KNEW this was another one of Pixie’s stupid little jokes.

“Pixie!” Andromeda knocked on her friend’s head. “Hello, anyone home?”

“Uh, were you saying something Andrie?”

“I was saying your head’s full of rocks and your jelly-bean brain’s about as...” Andromeda suddenly trailed off. “... WHA???”

The lid on Box #42 had popped open. A voice hissed, “Pssstt!”

Andromeda and Pixie put their eyes up to the hole and saw the face of a little boy with pizza sauce splattered on his freckly nose and a disheveled head of hair. HE WAS INSIDE THE WALL!

Andromeda’s eyes bugged out. “How – how’d YOU get in there?”

The boy giggled. “People don’t live inside walls, ya nutcase. I’m on the other side.”

He took a bite out of a half-eaten slice of saucy pizza.

“But there’s no door!”

“Of course there is. How else ya think I got in here?”

The boy kept munching as he cheerfully insulted her. “You must’ve got shortchanged in the I.Q. department. Ask yo mama for a refund.”

“Learn some manners, pizza-nosed weirdo!” Andromeda shot back.

“You wanna do business or just keep sassing?”

“Business?!” Andromeda was genuinely astonished.

“I think I’d better handle this, friendido,” Pixie jumped in. Pizza boy agreed.

“I hope there’s at least ONE sharp tool in the shed. Ya girlfriend’s got ‘bout as much wits as a banana split!”

“And I’m gonna split YOU like a banana if ya don’t shut it!”

Andromeda certainly wished she had SOMETHING to whack him with.

The boy flinched. He was unnerved for just an instant, since girls generally didn’t threaten to violently assault him with peeled fruit. He quickly tried to cover up his fear by making his face look all fierce. Instead, he ended up looking like someone’s annoying kid brother.

“Put a sock in it, wise guy. We’re here to deal,” Pixie said, anxious to end the argument. “We’re looking for a guy named Decker.”

“Decker! Big cheese. Runs Apollo, don’t he?”

“That’s the one. Here’s his pic,” Pixie held her band up to the post office box.

Its screen flashed a photo of the Base Commander. “And the crummy boy next to him is cheese junior.”

“What’s the rap?”

“They were here earlier this *waykup*. Went to see a doc. Just wanna know which one.”

“Easy-peasy. Decker, huh? We’ll track it down... for thirty buckaroos.”

“No way. Twenty or I’ll tell your mum you like to cheat girls.”

“Pixie, why we would pay –”

“Fine, fine. Twenty-five. And don’t find us; we’ll find you.”

The boy quickly finger-scanned Pixie and slammed the lid shut.

Andromeda wobbled her head as if trying to shake out the confusion. *A talking post office box? How strange! Never seen THAT back on Earth.*

Next time she was DEFINITELY bringing a squirt gun. She’d get the little sucker right smack in the eye.

“What do ya think you were doing?” Pixie demanded angrily. “Ya know he could tell Biggs on us!”

“Biggs? Who’s that?”

“Holy moly! Ya don’t know?” now Pixie was really flustered. “Biggs is leader of the Outcasts. All the street kids work for him. He knows practically everything happening around the *Tranq* –”

“Relax, Pix, if boy wonder was any indication, this Biggs is probably just a noodle-brained, pizza-faced eight-year-old, too. No need to fuss.”

But Pixie’s mind had already wandered elsewhere. She was getting that spacey look again.

“Oooh, I see little pink fairies...” she commented randomly. Her head tilted upward, mouth open and jaw slack.

Andromeda saw nothing except a couple of bugs buzzing around a ceiling light. (It was the first wildlife she’d seen on the Moon, if you counted stink bugs as wildlife.)

“Pixie? PIXXXIEEEEE!”

Andromeda was getting annoyed at her friend’s bizarre antics. They happened at the most awkward times!

“What are we supposed to do now?”

“Um, standard mumbo-jumbo, Andrie. We just hang out, walk around. Like he said, they’ll find us,” mumbled Pixie, now recovered from her freakish fairy trance.

Andrie blinked hard and pinched herself.

Nope, not dreaming.

“The girl said LEFT on McAuliffe Port, Pixie.”

“Nah-ah. She said RIGHT. And it was McAuliffe Court.”

“Courts are dead-end traffic circles, dummy.”

“Whatever.”

They hadn't minded waiting a couple hours for Pizza Boy to do his spy work. Who knows how he did it? If you believed Pixie, the city was simply teeming with watchful kids pretending to play hopscotch, fake-senile grandmas on balconies hiding binoculars under their quilts, videocams on every street corner—all reporting back to Biggs in exchange for a few measly credits.

Andromeda had heard conspiracy theories before and found this one particularly ridiculous. She doubted they'd get any information on Decker's whereabouts and suspected that Pizza Boy had simply used the money to buy more pizza.

The novelty of the New Columbia street market had been interesting for Andromeda and her excitement even seemed to rub off on her tiny companion. There was the farm-fresh produce from the city greenhouses—odd-shaped bananas that seemed to curl into little O's, funny-looking peppers with bumps and knobs on them, and sour “lomatoes,” a crazy cross between a lemon and a tomato. (Everything seemed to grow a little differently on the Moon.) Then there was the street food: grilled potato pancakes, steamed dumplings, fire-roasted kabobs, toasted spinach pies, spicy samosas... but now the girls were full from a double lunch and their mouths felt greasy.

There was nothing left to explore in the city core and their stomachs were too full to fly again, so they'd trotted over to the rim and turned up one of the side tunnels. And that's when the little girl with the smudge on her cheek had run up to them.

"Message for you!" she'd chirped and then loudly whispered the address for the Deckers' doctor, along with some muddled directions that had led to their current predicament.

"I think we're lost, Andrie."

"Those directions were probably fake anyhow... no, wait, look! Here it is: #12 Mare Crisium Terrace!"

"Aww, drat! Looks like the offices are closed for the weekend."

"Hold on, let's see if the hatch will open."

Andromeda tried the knob.

"Darn, locked."

"Got a hairpin, Andrie?"

"I don't put my hair up."

"Anything sharp and pointy?"

Andromeda felt around in her pockets.

"Hmm, a wad of gum, some lint, a bit of string, a few coins, half a chocolate bar wrapped in foil... ooh, I FOUND IT!"

“Really? What?”

“My neon-green silly putty. Been looking for it for ages!”

“Andrie, c’mon!”

“Will a rusty old paperclip do?”

“Gimme,” snapped Pixie, snatching it out of Andromeda’s hand.

She jiggled the clip in the lock for a minute and then heard a satisfying snick as the door opened.

“*Wah*, Pix, you know all KINDS of tricks!”

The girls both tried to squeeze through the doorway at the same time, bumping shoulders.

“You first, Pix. You got it open.”

“No, no, guests first.”

“Really, Pix, you go ahead.”

“You’re not SCARED are ya, Andrie?”

She was a little. But no way she was gonna show it!

“Oh, alright. C’mon.”

Andromeda led the way up a winding spiral staircase.

At the top they were treated to a most unusual sight. The room was filled with row upon row of plastic heads with wigs on them. Some were long, some short. There were blondes, redheads, brunettes, blacks, even grays. Why someone would

want a gray wig was another matter, but the bigger question was why the Deckers came here at all!

“Andrie,” said Pixie slowly in dream-like wonder, “do ya think this could have anything to do with Jason’s rocketboarding accident?”

“You nailed it, Pix! Maybe my afterburners melted right through his space helmet -”

“And toasted his hair! Oh my gosh, Andrie, that’s SO hilarious...”

Then they both gasped. They’d missed the engraving at first, since it blended in against the darkened window glass:

Dr. Manglewort, M.D., Hair Replacement Surgeon
Satisfaction or Your Money Back!
All Visits Kept Strictly Confidential.

“No, not just wigs,” said Pixie, tapping her chin with her index finger. “Hair transplants, too!”

“Interesting,” allowed Andromeda. “But why make such a fuss? Why the big secret?”

“Cause Jason wants everyone to think he’s soooooo cool. He’s always been the top dog. This would RUIN him!”

“So THAT’S why the Deckers wouldn’t tell anyone where they went,” concluded Andromeda. “They were too embarrassed!”

“So I guess this means Jason has new hair,” Pixie said, thoughtfully. “I wonder what kind he chose...”

“Maybe some nice long red hair,” suggested Andromeda. “He’d be pretty as a redhead.”

“Ooh! Look at my beautiful curls.”

Pixie twirled her fingers and swung out her hips. The girls giggled.

“No, wait,” said Andromeda, pointing at a huge poofy wig with waist-long hair. “This is IT, Pix. I think our sweet little Jason needs the PRINCESS HAIRDO.”

“Ohhhh, Andrie, it’d look GORGEOUS on him. With those lovely tresses.”

“And the elegant French braids on top. Ooh-la-la! Absolutely STUNNING.”

It took a while before the girls could stop laughing and breathe again.

“Well, I suppose this rules out Jason and Decker senior,” concluded Andromeda, now sobering up a bit. “They were our prime suspects.”

“I was kind of hoping he was the culprit,” sighed Pixie.

“We both did, *pally*,” agreed Andromeda, “but I’m afraid the Evil Cupcakes have hit a dead-end.”

“Well, since we’re here, we might as well stop by my house...”

It didn’t take long to reach Pixie’s place. New Columbia is very compact and really only a small town by Earth standards.

The tunnel wound past several round hatches, each of which had a special decal imprinted in the middle. Most decals were combinations of stylized letters, flags, animals and various other symbols. Each was unique.

“What are those for?” asked Andromeda.

“What, the family crests?” Pixie asked back. “It’s just nicer than a street number, I guess. Everyone designs their own,” she explained. “They tell the story of each family.”

They stopped at a hatch featuring a sailing ship on a roiling sea with three words beneath it: “Prodeo et exploro.”

“What’s it mean, Pix?”

“The ship is for my granddad, who used to be in the merchant marine” —*well, a Somalian pirate, actually, but no use frightening Andrie*—“the words are Latin for ‘go out and

explore.' After all, isn't that what we're doing here on the Moon?"

Pixie flashed her band at the wall port and the hatch to her home clicked open.

"Da, Andrie, us Lunies are pioneers just like in the old Wild West!"

Inside stood a small bot that looked basically like an upside-down trash can with several mechanical arms coming out of its sides.

"Welcome home, Miss Pixie," said the bot, which Andromeda saw was covered randomly with stickers and decals all over.

"Ta, Freddie. How's our little Neily?"

"Same as usual."

"Up to mischief, no doubt."

Pixie's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Pix!" called an excited voice from the next room. *"Whatcha doin' home? I heard there was a lockdown!"*

It soon became apparent that the voice belonged to a young boy. He ran out to hug his big sister, but then froze stiff when he saw Andromeda.

"Hey, where's your mom and dad?" she wondered aloud, peeking around the corners.

She soon realized there were no adults home.

“Well, Mom’s on her shift at the mines and Dad’s off on another expedition,” Neil replied nervously.

“You mean your parents left your little brother all alone?” Andromeda asked, turning to face Pixie squarely. “How old is he?”

“Five,” answered Pixie.

“Five and a quarter!” interrupted Neil, forgetting to be nervous.

“Well OF COURSE they had to leave him,” continued Pixie, ignoring her little brother. “Can’t babysit a kid that old.”

“Whaaa???”

“I guess things are different Earth-side then, huh Andrie?”

“I’ll say!”

“Besides, when he’s not in Early Care, we got our nanny bot Freddie to watch him and make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble...”

Andromeda shrugged. She was discovering lots of things were different here on the Moon. What other surprises lay in store for her?

One surprise was right in the next room. It had an easel with a pencil drawing of kids riding ponies (real ones). One of the riders looked a lot like Pixie. Another, if Andromeda had

examined it closely enough, resembled herself. The drawing was good. REALLY good.

But Andromeda didn't enter Pixie's art studio. Instead, she plopped down on a comfy couch in the foyer.

"So, um, what do we do now, Pix?"

"Well, I think we'll need some time to figure out a way back into the base – and we could probably use Rad's help, too."

Back into the base... It dawned on Andromeda that returning to Apollo Base during a lockdown might be even harder than it had been slipping out.

16. Threedee



“Play that back one more time, Elan,” ordered Inspector Ride.

The video recording showed two girls in an airlock. The smaller of the two was tapping madly on her wristband while the other got ready to open the inner hatch.

“Now!” the younger girl in the video yelled.

“Stop,” the Inspector interrupted.

Elan paused the video just as the older girl was starting to twist the wheel on the hatch. The camera zoomed in on her face.

“Who is she?”

“Th-that’s Andromeda St-Starwell, ma’am. A recent arrival.”

“How’d they break in, Elan? I thought Decker shut off all access ratings below Priority One.”

“He d-did, ma’am. I checked the s-system myself.”

“Hackers?”

Elan nodded.

“They keep getting younger and younger,” Ride murmured, pacing back and forth and rubbing the back of her neck, which was getting sore from always craning it up to watch the overhead video monitors.

“It’s a little disturbing, ma’am. I mean they broke a P-Priority One access code. Isn’t that a federal crime?”

The Inspector stopped rubbing her neck and looked thoughtfully at the paused video again.

“M-Ma’am? Should I pick them up for questioning?”

“Not now, Elan,” she rasped. “Let’s just keep an eye on them.”

She turned to face her aide.

“I want a daily report on their whereabouts. The last thing we need is a bunch of meddling kids tipping off the suspect before we can nab him – or her.”

I also don’t want anyone else cracking the case before I do.

Ride kept that last thought to herself.

“I’ve got it!” Andromeda shouted triumphantly.

She didn't worry about anyone overhearing her. All three roomies were out and only Pixie and Rad were in Cabin #5 with her. The door was closed.

"If the thief didn't get out through the Tube, maybe he went out the main portal."

"Nice try, Andrie," countered Pixie, "but our special agent here already checked the dressing room. Tell her what ya found, Rad."

"All spacesuits are secured in their lockers, Andrie."

"Couldn't someone have an extra?"

"No. Each suit is custom-fit to the individual. It would be almost impossible for a full-grown human to fit into somebody else's spacesuit. There are no records of any extra suits being made."

Andromeda slumped in disappointment. She climbed onto her bunk and lay down.

"Andrie?" Pixie said softly. "Maybe it's time to take a break from being Evil Cupcakes. I mean, maybe we should leave the investigating to the professionals."

Seeing her friend didn't answer, Pixie went on, "*Way*, I have an idea. I wanna show you something neat."

Andromeda rolled over and buried her face in her pillow. She was still sulking. It was the weekend and she was

depressed. The mission was a failure. She was a failure. And she wanted to ride her brand new mountain bike. How she longed to stretch out on a field of green grass, with the blue sky above, white puffy clouds, and her warm furry cat curled up warm and snuggly next to her. *Which reminds me...*

“C’mon, you slug! *Yalla!*” Pixie chided, yanking Andromeda’s arm until she slid off her bunk.

“Oww! Okay, okay, quit pulling!” Andromeda whined. “But first I have something special to show YOU.”

Andromeda grabbed Pixie’s hand and led her up the escalator to level two.

Minutes later, they arrived at the petting zoo. Andromeda lifted Pickle out of his glass case and scratched behind his pointy little ears. He purred like a motorcycle as Pixie watched in awe.

“*Wah!* He’s soooooo cute. I’ve read about cats in e-books ya know, but this is the first... Can I touch him? Can I touch him? Puh-leeese?” begged Pixie.

“Sure, Pix! Just don’t grab his tail or anything.”

Pixie gently stroked his fur. “It’s so soft!” she gasped, eyes wide in wonder.

Time seemed to stand still as the two girls enjoyed the company of their tiny furry companion. At last, he finished all of his kitty yum-yums and was ready for a nap. Andromeda hugged Pickle goodbye and carefully placed him back in his case.

Now it was Pixie's turn. She led Andromeda through a maze of lower-level corridors past the gym until they finally reached the power plant. The low hum and whirring of machinery filled their ears.

"You sure we oughta be here, Pix?"

Pixie just placed her index finger over her lips. She crept silently over to a floor hatch, which looked like a sewer manhole. Pixie got down on her hands and knees and pried open the hatch. The girls peered down into a long, narrow tunnel. Darkness seemed to ooze out of the hole.

"Where does THAT go, Pix?"

"Goes right to the Playpen, Andrie. That's where we go to *threedee*."

"Um, what's that?"

"Oh, they're kind of game rooms where everything looks like an old 3-D movie except you're playing inside of it," Pixie tried to explain.

“Let’s see, we also have a lounge, a playground for the little kids, and of course there’s a whole bunch of steam and water pipes,” Pixie continued, climbing down into the tunnel.

Andromeda followed reluctantly.

“Grown-ups just about never come down here – the ceilings are too low – which is what makes it so much fun. We built most of it ourselves... Well, only Harry sometimes snoops around fixing pipes.”

“We?” Andromeda ducked just in time to avoid banging her head into a pipe.

The ceiling WAS low! She found herself stooping over more often than walking upright.

“Harry’s okay. He doesn’t bother us. Actually, he even helped Dr. Jade invent the *threedees*. She’s the –”

“You’re TOAST, Buzz!” a rough voice cried out somewhere up ahead.

Pixie paused. “*Sec*, I wanna see this.”

They arrived at a door with a tiny window in it and she and Andromeda peeked through. Andromeda blinked and rubbed her eyes. Inside it looked like an old saloon from the Wild West!

“Eat lead, sucker,” came a second voice from inside the room.

Jason (now with a full head of bushy hair again) jumped atop a barrel right behind Buzz. Andromeda saw with horror that he had a gun pointed at Buzz’s head.

“Rock-a-bye, baby,” Jason snickered, his finger starting to squeeze the trigger.

Andromeda lowered one shoulder and crashed through the door.

“Don’t worry, Buzz, I’ll save you!” she cried.

Suddenly, the Wild West scenery and guns disappeared.

“Error. Error. Game disrupted,” a computer voice echoed throughout the room.

Both boys looked at Andromeda in pure disgust.

OMG. It was all just a holographic game, she realized. So THAT’s what “threedee” means.

“Figures you’d ruin everything, stupid girl,” sneered Jason.

“Hold on, Jay-dawg,” Buzz jumped in, laughing good-naturedly, “She probably had no clue –”

“Da,” interrupted Jason with an evil gleam in his eye.

“I have an idea,” he whispered aside to Buzz.

“Andrie,” Jason twittered in his sincerest, sweetest-sounding voice, which I assure you was NOT very sincere or sweet-sounding, “How would you like to join in?”

“Well, okay, I guess,” replied Andromeda, wondering at the sudden change that had come over Jason.

Pixie eyed him suspiciously, sensing a trick.

Jason strutted over to the wall screen, tapped a few times, and two pen-sized objects rolled out of a small slot and into his outstretched hand. He tossed one to Andromeda and the other to Pixie.

“What is it?” Andromeda wondered.

“It’s your wand,” explained Buzz in his deep, mature voice. “It can be whatever the game calls for.”

“Game on!” commanded Jason in a firm tone.

Immediately everyone’s wand turned into an old-style Wild West revolver.

Funny. It feels the same, thought Andromeda, but it sure looks real!

She slowly swiveled around, marveling at how life-like the saloon looked – even down to the holograms of the bartender and the guy hunched over playing the piano. Except that everything was completely frozen and silent.

Buzz laid down the rules: “Each of us gets six shots, which is why these revolvers are called six-guns. No reloading and no physical contact with other players. We’ll play in teams— Jason and me against the two of you—until one team loses both players or runs outta ammo. Got it?”

Pixie nodded.

“I—I think so,” Andromeda stuttered.

“Alright, take your positions,” Buzz instructed.

“Over here, Andrie,” urged Pixie, pulling her friend behind the saloon bar. “We need to get behind some cover.”

“Game start!” hollered Jason.

Now the room came to life. Card players dealt their hands. The bartender poured whiskey. The pianist’s hands glided over the piano keys. The background chatter and music sounded right out of an old Western movie!

“Where are they?” asked Pixie urgently.

“I dunno. They ducked outta sight,” Andromeda answered. “Say, Pix, can their bullets go through these wood panels?”

“I don’t think so, Andrie. But it depends on the game rules.”

“Well, I’ll try and see around the end of the bar.”

Just as she stuck her head under the flip-up countertop and around the edge, she heard a pop and instantly knew

someone had fired their six-gun. Splinters flew off the countertop and the air smelt of gun smoke.

It was so real!

Immediately, Andromeda pulled her head safely back behind the bar.

“Close one!” Pixie whispered loudly. “Can you cover me?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Good. Just lay down a shot or two and I’ll do the rest.”

Before Andromeda could protest further, Pixie slipped around the other end of the bar and somersaulted behind a table full of card players. So up popped Andromeda. She scanned the room, ready to fire at the first boy she saw.

There! Someone was hiding behind the piano. Buzz. He was laying under the bench aiming right at Andromeda!

She fired first and missed. He rolled out of the way and knocked over a table—well, a virtual table. All the cards slid off to the floor.

“*Way!*” yelled a card player. “Watch where yer fightin’, cowboy,” threatened another.

Buzz ignored them of course, knowing they weren’t real. He whipped out his six-gun and shot back at Andromeda, who promptly ducked down behind the bar again.

The distraction was all Pixie needed. She'd crept up behind Buzz during all the ruckus and—BLAM!—got him from behind.

But the game wasn't over yet—not by a long shot. Jason was not defeated so easily. He had good cover on the far side of the saloon and plenty of time to set, aim and fire at Pixie.

His first shot went wide and hit one of the holograms who made a good show of being pretend-hit in the arm. The next blasted off a nearby chair leg as Pixie ran for cover. Finally the third shot nailed Pixie.

Andromeda gasped in horror.

“Awwww, I'm DEAD,” wailed Pixie.

According to the rules, both she and Buzz had to exit the saloon until the fight was finished.

Now Andromeda was alone against Jason, one on one. She couldn't get a fix on him behind his barricade of tables and chairs.

“So, Earthie, it's just you and me. I'm more experienced, I'm smarter, and I'm a better shot than you,” he crowed. “I'm the baddest, meanest gunslinger in town. Know what that makes you? DOG MEAT!”

Now Andromeda was REALLY furious. But she cooled her anger because she had a plan. It could work—if she was lucky.

“Bet you can’t hit me, butter-fingers,” she taunted, sticking her head up over the bar for just a second.

Jason didn’t fall for it; he was waiting for a better shot.

“You too chicken to shoot me?” she teased again, this time poking half her body around the end of the bar. “Bock, bock, BOCCCCCKKKKK!”

He still didn’t bite.

“What’s the matter, afraid to hit a girl?”

Now it was Jason who lost his temper. He fired wildly, missing. The bullet shattered a row of glasses and bottles behind the bar, blasting shards of glass in every direction.

Luckily, none of it was real.

Okay, that’s five. I just hope I counted right.

Andromeda bolted across the room. The computer-animated piano player stopped playing and shouted, “Not here, lady. I’m just the piano man!”

Jason pumped another shot at her as she dived behind the piano.

“Ha!” he howled in triumph. “Now I got you cornered.”

He started snaking his way toward Andromeda’s hiding spot.

“Now look who’s chicken,” he mocked her. “Told ya I was smarter... you’re toast, ya little runt.”

“I think you’ve made a big mistake, Jason,” Andromeda called as he drew near.

“Oh?” scoffed Jason. “YOU’RE the mistake around here, *pally*. Never should’ve come to the Moon. Ya Earthies belong on Earth, not floating out in space.”

“No, I mean you lost count,” she continued. “That’s six shots you’ve fired.”

Jason stopped dead in his tracks. His hair poofed out even more than usual. He realized with complete shock that she was right... and that’s what killed him.

Andromeda ran straight at him. Jason pointed his six-gun directly at her and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Desperately, he tried firing again.

Click. Click.

She HAD counted right. Jason was out of ammo.

Andromeda raised her gun and pumped him full of virtual lead.

“Game over,” echoed a computer voice from the ceiling. “Blue Team is the winner.”

Of all the kids on Apollo Base, I HAD to lose to Andromeda, Jason thought miserably. This SUCKS.

“Hooray for the Evil Cupcakes!” cried Pixie. She rushed over and nearly tackled Andromeda with joy.

“Evil Cupcakes?” asked Buzz, scratching his head.

Jason just stood there. Moaning.

17. Evidence



“Say, Pix...” started Andromeda. “Pixie...”

No answer.

“PIXXXIEEEEEEEE!”

She jabbed an elbow at her friend.

“Uh?”

“What if the thief came down here?”

Now Pixie livened up. “*Da*, Andrie, a good place to hide.”

“No, I mean could there be another exit outta here?”

“Hmm, dunno. I’d probably heard of it by now if there was. Can’t hurt to check though. We’ll need torches.”

Minutes later, after ransacking Harry’s utility closet, they reappeared armed with flashlights.

“The maintenance tunnels go on for a while. It’s kind of a maze down here,” Pixie restated the obvious.

“Hot, too. And steamy...”

“What’s this?” Pixie asked curiously.

She lifted her foot off something she’d stepped on. A loose screw.

“I think it came from over there, partner.” Andromeda pointed to a vent cover. “Wait a minute. I wonder if someone’s been in there recently...”

“I have an idea,” said Pixie eagerly. “Here, take the torch.”

She passed Andromeda the light and took out her magnetic screwdriver – the one she’d used to hot-wire their ponies back in the Tube to New Columbia. In seconds Pixie had all the screws out. The vent cover toppled to the floor. Then she crept inside the vent shaft. Andromeda followed close behind.

The going was slow squeezing through such a narrow space flat on their bellies. Andromeda had the harder time, being the bigger of the two. It was also dangerous going second, since you never knew when your friend’s feet might slip and kick you.

“Pix, will ya QUIT kicking me?”

“Sorry, Andrie, it was an accident.”

Their flashlights reflected off the shiny, slippery aluminum sides of the shaft and shone back into their eyes. Both girls squinted. And Pixie’s foot slipped again.

“Get your smelly TOES out of my nose!” Andromeda screeched.

“Sorry, *pally*, really I am... *Way*, what’s this?” Pixie asked suddenly, stopping in her tracks.

She scooted aside and focused her flashlight beam on a spot on the floor of the ventilation shaft.

“Looks like skid marks,” said Andromeda, slithering up alongside. “Like something heavy scraped it.”

“Like maybe a great big chunk of glass?” Pixie guessed. “The Lavalight Crystal?”

Andromeda brightened. “There’s also some streaks of grease on here, too.”

She took a picture with her band.

Click.

They continued on until the shaft ended in a large exhaust fan protected by a metal grate. Pixie inspected it just to be sure. She pushed on the grate.

“Andrie, there’s a bit of a gap here. I think I could get through.”

“Really?” The gap looked pretty narrow. “I don’t think I could.” Andromeda paused. “And you can’t go alone. Where’s it go?”

“Into a big dark tunnel, I think. Can’t see much.”

“Well let’s go back and tell Rad... No, wait, we need one more thing... scrape a sample of the rock off the tunnel wall.”

“What for?”

“Might help Rad figure out which tunnel this is.”

“Gosh, Andrie, that’s awfully smart of ya.”

Pixie wiggled through the gap and, with Andromeda holding fast to her feet, leaned over into the tunnel below. She collected a rock sample and gently deposited it in a pocket in her cargo pants.

“Ah, just in time, just in time.” Harry sounded pleased, swiveling around in his office chair. “I’ve just about set everything up for you, Andrie.”

“Huh? Set what up?”

“The link-up... to Earth!”

Harry prided himself on having his office (and living quarters) way up near the top of the dome on level four where he could get the best radio signal. He tried never to think about what would happen in a really bad meteor storm...

“Harry,” said Andromeda. “First I need to ask you a question.”

“Sure, Andrie. Ask away.”

“Rad identified this rock sample as coming from one of the maintenance tunnels,” Andromeda said, holding out a bit of coal-black rock in the palm of her hand. “We also found greasy skid marks in a ventilation shaft. Here—look at this pic.”

Harry examined her wristband.

“What could make that kind of skid mark, Harry? Is that grease from you fixing something in the vent?”

“No, Andrie. I don’t go into those shafts hardly ever. And no reason to track grease everywhere like that. No, that was probably made by wheels.”

“Wheels???” both girls asked in high-pitched voices, astounded.

“Sure, like someone moving equipment on a dolly—you know a board with wheels on the bottom,” Harry explained, scratching his head. “Curious that it’d be found in a ventilation shaft though.”

Andromeda leaned over to Pixie and whispered, “This is IT. The robber must’ve wheeled the Crystal away on a dolly or hand truck—I bet it’s heavy even in your one-sixth gravity. Then he rolled it down the shaft, and dumped it into the tunnel through that gap you found.”

“Da, Andrie. One person couldn’t carry a piece of glass as big as the Crystal for long. This must be how he got it out of Apollo. It’s our best lead yet!”

“Yay! The Evil Cupcakes are back in businesses!” Andromeda hooted. “Now we’ve GOT to get down into those tunnels... The Crystal might still be there!”

Meanwhile, Harry was busy fiddling with the master video console, flicking switches and twisting dials. At last he looked up.

“Okay, Andrie,” said Harry. *“I got it all hooked up... ready?”*

“Ready for what?”

“The link-up, remember? Here goes...”

The snowy white fuzz on Harry’s wide-screen TV monitor formed into a rugged-looking, unshaven face with intense eyes set under a crinkled brow.

“Dad!”

“Andrie!” The face broke into a relieved smile. *“Glad to see you well.”*

Andromeda studied her dad on the screen. He seemed different, older, tired. Maybe the whole affair had given him a few new gray hairs? That must be it.

“Listen, Andrie, we may not have much time. There’s a heavy tropical storm front moving in.”

So THAT was the howling noise in the background. It sounded like a wind tunnel.

“The lunar shuttle got cancelled. Delayed by the bad weather.”

Andromeda looked crestfallen.

“Don’t worry, Kiddo, I’m sure it’ll blow over in a couple of days... So what’s all this about a lockdown? What’s going on up there?”

“I’m not a kid.”

“What?”

Even though the transmission beamed back to Earth at light-speed, it still took over a second to reach across the roughly 380,000-kilometer void. This made for some awkward lags with people talking over one another.

“I said I’m not a kid,” Andromeda insisted aloud for the first time in her life. “I’m a young lady.”

“A HANDFUL is what YOU are.”

Andromeda stuck her chin up to pout and folded her arms. Adam Starwell broke into a wide toothy grin.

I’ll have to remember to poke him in the ribs – hard.

“Well, nothing’s going on that I can’t handle, Dad,” she concluded.

“I’m sure you’re right, MISS Andrie,” he said. “However, I am concerned about you getting involved.”

“Who, me?” Andromeda asked in mock surprise.

“I may be your dad, but I’m not a COMPLETE moron,” he said, only realizing afterward that he’d just insulted himself. “I know you’re doing your own investigating work or you’re name’s not Andromeda Starwell.”

Busted! Well, I might as well fess up.

“Okay, ya got me. We think we’ve found a clue under the base—”

“Andromeda,” her dad sighed. “Look, this is much more risky than you realize—”

“The tunnels below MUST hold more clues,” insisted Andromeda. “We got some flashlights and we’re gonna check around.”

“No, Andrie, I don’t want you going down there. It’s too dangerous.”

“But, Dad! I’m old enough—”

“It’s not about your age. They’re still working on the tunnels with drill—”

But then Adam Starwell's voice cut off and turned to noise that sounded like a rushing waterfall. His face quickly melted back into white fuzzy static.

"Uh-oh," said Harry. "That electrical storm on Ta'u Island has cut off our signal. Don't worry, Andrie, it's just the rainy season now down there in the South Pacific."

Harry walked rapidly over to the master video console.

"Here, I'll see if we can get some reception ba—
aaaaaaaack!"

He tripped on the power cord and extended his arm out to stop his fall. By pure bad luck, the spot on the wall he decided to stop himself against was a live power outlet. His hand landed right against the socket.

Zzzzzzap! Fffffttt!

Every hair on Harry's head stood straight up. His eyes bugged out showing only the whites and his tongue rolled out like a red carpet. And then he turned into a human domino, tipped over backwards, and crashed to the floor.

Pixie knelt down and cradled Harry's arm. She pressed her index and middle fingers together against the vein under his wrist.

"What are you doing?" asked Andromeda.

“Feeling for his pulse. It’s kinda weak... Don’t ya know first aid?”

Of course she’d seen this on TV. Just never on a real live human being before.

“Um, I think we’d better call a doctor, Pix.”

Pixie nodded. She flicked the walkie-talkie on her band into “talk” mode.

“*Da*, Nurse Sullivan? It’s Harry... again...”

18. Suspect



Andromeda fastened her rope to the grate of the ventilation fan and gave it a tug. Then she tried pulling harder, putting more weight on it. The rope held firm.

Okay... Here I go!

Andromeda felt a sudden twinge of regret for having to lie to Pixie. She'd told her that she was just going to the gym and they'd meet up later...

No, I did the right thing. This mission is simply too dangerous for little Pixie. What was it Dad was trying to tell me about the tunnels? Too bad the video got cut off.

She wrapped the rope around her waist and squeezed through the gap headfirst, one hand on the rope, the other holding a flashlight. Gently, she lowered herself down. There must've been a thirty-foot drop from the vent shaft straight down—too far to jump in the dark, even in Moon gravity.

The vertical shaft was so narrow and rough that Andromeda could barely fit. Every couple of feet she had to twist her body, suck in her stomach or raise her arms to squirm past a bump or a jag of rock. Her elbows and shoulders were getting full of scrapes as she descended. Andromeda was quite sure that a grown-up or a large boy like Jason would never be able to get through.

Finally, the shaft opened into a wide, dimly lit tunnel.

The air's thin down here, Andromeda noticed with alarm. Really thin. And it'll be hard climbing back up that shaft. Lucky I tied a strong knot at the top.

The rocky sides of the tunnel were smooth like they'd been scooped out and sanded down with a giant wad of sandpaper. Andromeda waved her flashlight around examining the walls, ceiling, and floor. The Lavalight Crystal was nowhere in sight.

She decided to explore the tunnel and, not knowing which direction to go in, picked one at random.

After only a minute or so of walking she couldn't go any farther. The tunnel ended in a flat wall. Andromeda studied it closely and found a seam running around the edges.

It was a door – a SECRET door! But with no way to open it.

She tried pushing, first with one hand, then with two. It wouldn't budge. Then she tried knocking and found it hard as a brick – in fact, it was made of solid moonstone.

Guess I'll try the other direction, she figured, turning about uncertainly.

She took a few tentative steps back down the tunnel. Behind her, an eye peered through a tiny peephole high in the moonstone door. It watched her until she disappeared down the tunnel, then blinked once and pulled away from the hole.

The tunnel in the other direction went on for a hundred yards or so, and then forked. She took the right fork, since it seemed to have better lighting. As she moved closer, Andromeda discovered that the light was actually moving toward her—and quickly! A horrible grinding noise grew louder and louder until her head began to thrum. A bright flash filled the tunnel, sending shadows scurrying up the walls.

Then she saw the drill car. The sharp tip of its ginormous, jagged cone of steel spun rapidly. It was heading straight for her.

That drill's gonna shred me into Andromeda applesauce! Back to the shaft!

She sprinted back to the spot where she'd climbed down. With the drill car close behind she grabbed hold of the rope and started to pull herself up.

A faint voice called down from above, "Ahoy there, Evil Cupcake!"

“Pixie! Help!” cried Andromeda, expecting her friend to reel her up.

But Pixie had other plans. She grabbed the rope and bravely slid down the shaft. She wasn’t just any Pixie. She was a SUPER-PIXIE.

“Don’t worry, Andrie, I’ll save you!”

SNAP!

The rope snapped in half and Pixie collapsed in a heap next to Andromeda.

“Oops. That wasn’t supposed to happen,” she said, almost as embarrassed as she was scared.

Now the drill car was about to crush them both.

“Hurry!” said Andromeda, dropping the now-useless rope.
“This way!”

She grabbed Pixie’s hand and yanked, fleeing down the tunnel. In a few more seconds they’d reach the dead-end with the secret door, but the drill wasn’t stopping.

There was no escape.

“Down!” Andromeda yelled, pulling Pixie down to the ground with her.

They flattened their bodies against the tunnel floor and closed their eyes.

The drill car rolled right over them! They'd just barely fit under the wheels. The car banged into the wall and stopped. The girls leapt to their feet and ran.

"The shaft's too high up! How will we ever reach it?" Andromeda moaned.

"Over here!" shouted Pixie, with a wave of her hand.

She led Andromeda down the left fork of the tunnel. They ran and ran until their breath was short from the thin air.

At last, Pixie found a service stairwell that took them up one flight to a long, pitch-dark tunnel that seemed to stretch forever in both directions.

"*Wah*. I can't believe it!" she marveled, staring at the door to the stairs they'd just climbed.

At first Andromeda thought she was spacing off again.

"Pix, I could swear that driver MEANT to run us over."

"I know," replied Pixie absent-mindedly. "But look at these markings on the door, Andrie."

She pointed at a stylized letter "L" and the number "1."

"What's so special about that?" asked Andromeda.

Pixie huffed and puffed, trying to catch her breath.

"This must be the old Tube to Luna One. They started building it when I was a little kid" – Andromeda smiled at

that – “but ran outta money... it was *loco* anyway; Luna One is too far east across the *Tranq.*”

“So, *noo?*”

“So, that means we’re saved! One of these tunnels should take us back to Apollo.”

“Great!” gasped Andromeda, furrowing her eyebrows in thought. “But how do we decide which direction?”

Pixie scratched her aching head as if trying to remember which was the right way. Her band would tell her their GPS coordinates, but she was feeling so tired and confused...

Ack, the low pressure down here must be getting to me, she thought.

“Hey, let’s call Rad!”

Andromeda burst into action tapping furiously on her band.

“Rad, this is Andrie. Come in!”

“Rad here. How are you, Andrie?”

“We’re okay, but we need your help... Pixie is uploading our GPS coordinates now,” she said, nodding to Pixie, who promptly fiddled with her band.

“We need to find the closest way into the base without being seen.”

“That will be easy, Andrie. You are very close to the side passage to the Apollo greenhouse portal. Ask Pixie to rotate her body clockwise until I say stop.”

Pixie heard and obeyed.

“Keep going... keep going... stop!” Rad guided her. “The hatchway is just a quarter-*click* away.”

“What about the door-wardens, Rad?” asked Pixie.

“No guards anymore, *pally*. The lockdown is over. You will be able to enter without any problem now.”

The Evil Cupcakes were caked with soot and moondust when they arrived at the greenhouse portal. Their hands and faces were filthy, their hair powdered with moondust, and their grungy clothes were ripped and torn.

Fortunately, no one was hanging around the hatchway. They quickly decided to find a sprinkler or hose and rinse off before anyone caught sight of them. (They didn’t know about the hidden security camera...)

“Hey, there’s a water pump over there,” said Pixie, pointing past a row of orange trees.

“Good call, maestro.”

“Race ya!”

In seconds, Pixie was at the pump cradling Pressure Hose #1 in her arms. Her lips curled upward into a playful smirk.

“No, Pix, NOOOOOOOO!”

Pixie unleashed a high-pressure blast of water at Andromeda, who got knocked on her butt. She immediately retaliated by scooping up Hose #2 and aiming the nozzle right back at her naughty little companion.

“DIE, YOU TRAITOR!”

The force of the water jet made Pixie stumble back three steps before falling flat on her back. Peals of laughter ripped through Pixie’s delicate body as if they’d tear her right in two. The girls were getting clean and having a great time doing it. The air in the greenhouse was rich with oxygen. They felt full of energy.

“And just WHAT are you young ladies doing wasting my precious water?”

They stopped laughing long enough to look up and see Harry the Mechanic’s sour expression. Then the air whooshed out of their mouths and through their cheeks and they fell into the puddle they’d made – in cackling hysterics again.

“Oh, bother,” muttered Harry. “Looks like your messing around blew the seal again. Now I gotta go fix the leak before we lose even MORE water,” he mumbled unhappily.

Harry rushed into the pump room and whipped out his toolbox. He propped open the spring-loaded pump room door with his hardhat and got to work at once. Of course all that “lost” water would just drain into Apollo Base’s underground cistern and would eventually be filtered and recycled for needle showering, drinking or watering the plants.

But still, water wasn’t a toy. Not here. Not on the Moon.

“A few more turns...” he said, tightening the nut with a pipe wrench while the girls dried off “outside” in the greenhouse orchard with the help of some of Harry’s cleaning bots.

“Got it!” Harry shouted, turning his head toward the doorway.

Suddenly, the pipe burst and water sprayed right in his face, knocking him sprawling to the floor. His hardhat rolled away and the pump room door slammed shut. Harry tried to fish for his pipe wrench, but it had sank to the bottom of the now-swimming floor. The room was small and the water was pouring out at an alarming rate. It was already up to his knees! He tried the door. It was locked!

“Hmmmph. Mmmmm,” was all Andromeda and Pixie could hear through the solid steel door of the utility closet.

Even Harry's fists banging on it were muffled. It took Harry calling them on their bands before they finally got the idea that Harry was in trouble again.

"Andrie!" Harry's voice crackled from her wristband. "I'M DROWNING IN THE CLOSET. Help!"

"Quit talking nonsense, Harry. That's just ludicrous."

"It's true... I'm glllphhhbloop –"

The water had reached to the top of the pump room and Harry was now underwater.

"What do we do?" puzzled Pixie.

"I dunno!" whispered Andromeda, shocked into inaction.

She was about to run for help when suddenly the door burst open and a ginormous wave of water crashed over them, carrying Harry along with it. He landed in a huge mud puddle. Dripping wet and slimed with brown sludge, he started back to his feet.

Some little kids who had jobs picking fruit in the greenhouse gardens had rushed over to see the commotion firsthand. When they spotted Harry covered in slime, one girl shrieked. Another yelled, "AAAAHHHHH, IT'S A GIANT MUD MONSTER!!!!"

All the kids now started running and screaming. Some of their moms were nearby and were not fooled by the mud.

They knew it was Harry and were angry at him for scaring their kids.

“Take that, ya jerk!” shouted one, chucking a rotten tomato at his head.

Direct hit!

Another pitched a melon, which cracked open and slimed down his chest. A whole volley of over-ripe peaches, berries, squash and other rotten fruits and vegetables started flying from every direction. The cucumbers boomerangs hurt the worst.

Now the cleaning bots noticed the mess. “We have detected dirt. Must clean, must clean.” They started cleaning Harry with scrubbers and spraying him with cleaning fluid.

“Wait a minute!” he protested. “No, stop!”

Then they began the blow-dry cycle. The stinging heat turned Harry’s skin red as he hollered at the stupid bots.

With all the fluffing and blow-drying, his hair was now sticking up ten feet tall. It made him look like a combination of mad scientist and punk rock star. This sent the kids running and screaming even more.

Andromeda and Pixie were beyond laughing now. Their stomachs couldn’t take any more heaves or snorts. It was making them sick.

Finally, as the commotion died down, Pixie placed an arm around her friend's shoulders and said, "Seriously, Andrie, *ta* for saving me from that drill car down in the tunnel. I'd be a gooey little puddle right now if it weren't for you!"

Andromeda looked at Pixie. "Well, you WERE trying to rescue me..."

Pixie grabbed Andromeda by the hand. "*Wah*, ya know what this means? We're *biffled!*"

"We're what???"

"*Biffled*, silly. Don't you have that on Earth? B-F-F'd. Best-friended forever."

The girls dried off together in the pure sunlight shining brightly through the meteor-proof dome above. (A layer of water in between the double panes of artificial diamond protected the greenhouse from radiation, too.) Andromeda closed her eyes and breathed in deeply through her nose.

She could almost imagine she was home.

That night, Andromeda tossed and turned in her bed. She could hear the soft wheezes and snores of her three roomies. Now that the lockdown was over, all the kids were back in their cabins.

I still can't figure out how the robber could've escaped into the tunnel, Andromeda thought, trying to sort out the facts she'd learned that day. That vent was too narrow for a grown-up. Even I could barely squeeze through.

She rolled over and pressed her face against her pillow.

Hmm, maybe a trained squirrel monkey or space dog could have done it. Or an evil chimp?

After all, animals had been sent into space even before the first astronauts...

Wait! If a monkey could fit, so could a small child –

That thought made Andromeda jolt upright in her bed.

Could a classmate have done it? Someone like... Pixie? Well, SHE had no trouble squeezing through – and she knew the tunnels underneath Apollo as well as anyone.

The idea terrified her. In that half-awake, half-asleep state, everything seemed like it could be real – or unreal. Was Earth just a dream? Was there really a blue sky?

“Grass...” she yawned, laying back down and rolling up in her blankets. “Somebody get me some nice green grass to lay on...”

Andromeda spent a restless night. She did not sleep much. And she missed Pickle sleeping on top of her blankets.

She even missed her bratty little sister.

19. Work Day



“You asked me to p—to put a watch on those two girls,” said Elan, as Inspector Ride paced back and forth. “Here’s the video we recorded of them coming in the greenhouse portal last *waykup*.”

“Of them WHAT???”

The Inspector stopped pacing and stared hard at Elan. He took a step back as if physically afraid of his boss.

“Coming INNNN???” Ride exploded. “How’d they get OUT again without us knowing about it?”

She resumed pacing feverishly back and forth, hands clasped behind her back.

“Get me Decker – that incompetent flookyhead!”

“*O-hayo*, Andrie!”

It was Pixie and it was Monday *brekkie*-time in the galley. Andromeda shook the night-shadows out of her head.

I can't believe Pixie could have stolen the Crystal. No way.

Over a meal of waffles, eggs, and hash-browns, Pixie outlined her plans for the day: "Today's a work day, Andrie. My job's in the factory."

Andromeda couldn't hide the surprise on her face.

"Factory?"

"Yes, factory," Pixie explained. "Kids on the Moon need to work to help the colony survive. There's not enough grown-ups here to take care of everything. You'll probably be assigned to the mines..."

She cupped a hand over her mouth to hide a slim smile.

"Wait a minute. The mines! Maybe we can get some clues..." Andromeda thought aloud.

"My mom's a forewoman for LunaCo. They run the mines, ya know. She can give you a tour."

"*Way*, isn't it child labor to have kids working in mines and factories?" Andromeda asked. "On Earth that would be against the law!"

"But this isn't Earth. We can do whatever we want here."

Of course Pixie didn't tell her friend that Lunie kids really do the safer indoor jobs, letting the bots and adults do the

really dangerous and nasty stuff. Kids mainly stuck to factory-work, gardening, helping in the labs, and making deliveries. But Pixie thought it'd be awfully funny to see the expression on Andrie's face when she saw those mines...

Andromeda was sorely disappointed to find that the mines were aboveground.

How am I gonna search for clues down in the tunnels if I'm stuck working topside?

Her padded spacesuit felt itchy and hot in the blazing sun and she couldn't even scratch through all those layers of spandex. Turns out the drill cars were only used underground to carve out tunnels, not for real mining work—at least not this side of the *Tranq*.

“Andrie? Something wrong with your headset?”

It was Jo, the LunaCo mine forewoman—Pixie's mom. She rapped on Andromeda's helmet to get her attention.

“As I was saying, before we started mining helium-3 here on the Moon, your energy Earth-side came mainly from oil, coal and gas. Nearly ruined the planet.”

It's a marvel how close a call it really was, Jo thought, shaking her head.

“Takes a hundred million tons of regolith to make one ton of helium-3,” she continued with pride, “but this patch of Moon provides enough to power the entire East Coast USA.”

Andromeda swiveled her helmet around 360°, amazed by the swarm of all-terrain loaders, excavators, and mining bots working to convert the Moon’s crust into an invisible gas.

One thing was confusing her though: “If helium-3 is a gas that can just float away, how can you possibly get that out of moondust?”

“Well, we start by pouring a bunch of regolith into the hopper here,” Jo explained as they walked around a huge metal bin. “It filters out the Moon rock and lets only the valuable moondust through...”

Andromeda’s attention drifted. She noticed something different about the the mining bots: They were all bi-pedal, walking on two legs like Rad instead of rolling around on wheels like the cleaning bots, ponies and other indoor robots. That got her thinking... but her train of thought was interrupted by something small and fast whizzing by.

What was that?

“See, we pump the moondust into the smelter and roast it over hot copper coils, like firing pottery in a kiln,” Jo carried on, ignoring another marble-sized object hurtling over their heads.

Hey, where'd that come from?

“Then we shake it around some.” (Indeed, there was a lot of shaking going on in there.) “This releases gasses trapped inside the dust. And *wah-lah*,” Jo shouted triumphantly, as if it were the grand finale of a magic show, “out comes the dust!”

Andromeda looked skeptical.

“But where does the helium come out?”

“Right out the top!” Jo stretched up her hand. “Goes through that pipe, and as the vapors cool, each kind of gas goes into a different tube. We even manage to capture a little H₂O...”

Andromeda was trying to listen, but she couldn't stop thinking about the mining bots.

What IS it about them?

“...and finally we separate helium-3 from the everyday kind that goes into birthday balloons and makes your voice all squeaky. Sorry, are your legs tired from all the hopping around? I know it ain't easy for Earthies.”

Legs. That was it! The mining bots have legs and can walk outside – WITHOUT A SPACESUIT.

“Whoa!” Andromeda exclaimed aloud, almost falling over backwards as a third flying marble zipped by and this time rammed noiselessly right into the smelter.

It left a small dent.

“You okay, Andrie?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. But what was that?”

“Oh, just a micro-meteorite. We get ‘em about every day.”

“Um, what happens if we get hit?”

“Just imagine getting whacked by a pebble traveling thousands of miles per hour. That’s why our suits use ‘liquid armor’ – it’s the strongest fabric ever invented. So all you get is a nice big welt. Now this is probably a good time to talk about safety here on the mines. Rule number one...”

More boring rules.

Andromeda tuned out again. She had too much on her mind.

What if a bot carried off the Crystal and dropped it down the shaft into the tunnel below? Then whoever programmed it could’ve come for the Crystal any time. And that bot probably slipped outside later when it was safe – and blended right in with all those mining bots. Disguised in plain sight! I HAVE to tell Rad and Pixie. Oh, wait, Jo’s saying something important now.

“...and at LunaCo we have plenty of safeguards to prevent this highly volatile gas from exploding. We’re also super-careful with the machinery.” Jo paused and snorted. “Yeah, I

remember poor Samuel Zinger. Guy got four fingers shredded in a crusher...”

Hmm. What if there's more of those lava tubes nearby like the ones me and Pixie hid in last meteor shower? Maybe that villain has a secret hideout somewhere out there!

Andromeda scanned the horizon, certain she'd find some sort of clue.

“Now are ya ready to get to work? Andrie?”

“Huh?!” Andromeda's whole body stiffened. “What, ME?”

Could Pixie have been serious about kids working in the mines?

“Sure, all Lunie kids have to work. You DO want to be a Lunie, don't ya?”

“Yeah, but isn't it dangerous?”

“Nah. Not really. Now are ya ready to get started?”

“What about the exploding gases and the crushers and the shredded fingers?” Andromeda backed away in shock and alarm. “You can't MAKE me work here!”

“Out here?” Jo looked incredulous. “Nah, nah, nah. Of course not HERE,” she chuckled. “Way too dangerous! Besides, too much time out here and you get old fast—like me.”

Jo gave a crooked smile behind her mirrored visor.

“Even grown-ups can’t work more than an hour a day unshielded. That’s why we use the bots.”

Andromeda bit her lip as the blood rushed to her face.

That joker Pixie is going to get it. Seriously. She’s gone too far.

“Now come on with me, young lady, or we’ll both miss the next shift.”

The factory dome had full pressure—no spacesuits required. Jo seemed to enjoy playing tour guide indoors, too.

“Apollo is almost totally self-sufficient. They make nearly everything they need,” she lectured. “This little factory chops up and packages the fruits and veggies from their greenhouse... Now I’ve gotta get back to mining, but I’ll find someone to show ya your job.”

Jo spotted a familiar face among the crowd of factory bots.

“HARRY?” she bellowed. “HAAAH-REEEEE!”

A stout, beardless man in a mechanic’s uniform raced across the factory floor.

“Coming, coming... Be there in a jiffy,” huffed Harry breathlessly, pausing on the way to flip a switch or two and check a few dials and gauges.

“Well, I’m off,” Jo waved. “See ya and good luck!”

“*Ta* for the tour,” Andromeda called to Jo’s back as she headed for the spacesuit lockers.

Harry now materialized right next to her.

Gosh, he’s EVERYWHERE!

“Ah, Andrie. Glad to have you on the team,” he said. “This factory is pretty simple to operate. Our factory bots pour the bins of fruits and veggies in there.”

He pointed to a small hopper.

“The computer sorts them by size and shape and slices them up. Any rotten or inedible parts like stalks and ends go down the chute and the rest come out shrink-wrapped on the other side for more factory bots to box up and deliver to the galley or sometimes down to New Columbia city. Our fresh produce tastes better than the *da-byan* those poor city-dwellers get from the AgriGro canneries. Anyway, your job will be to just supervise the bots and make sure the veggies are going in the right bins.”

It sounded simple enough. But with Harry it was NEVER simple.

As he turned around to leave, he accidentally knocked over a bucket. Some pink gooey sludge oozed out of it. Harry kicked the bucket back upright with his left foot, but his foot somehow got stuck inside. There was Harry, standing with

one foot in the bucket and the other in the puddle of pink sludge.

Uh-oh.

The bucket's label told Andromeda everything she needed to know:

ULTRA-SUPER-GLUE

Collins Construction Materials Co.

The fast-acting formula that hardens in seconds!!!

GUARANTEED RESULTS

Things were not looking good for Harry Hu, Apollo Base's number one handyman.

Harry first tried to yank his foot out of the bucket. Then he tried wiggling it out gently. When that didn't work either, he sat right down on the floor and tried to pry off the bucket with both hands. That's when he realized that both feet were stuck. And now his pants were stuck to the pink glue, too.

But Harry, who had years of experience escaping from difficult situations, did not panic. No, not Harry. He calmly smiled up at Andromeda and proceeded to untie his right shoe. Then he pulled out his right foot and rolled over away from the glue puddle, which was now hardened anyway. As he rolled, Andromeda heard a horrible ripping sound.

Yes, you've probably guessed it: That was the seat of Harry's pants. There was now a gaping hole on his *peegoo* where you could see his underwear.

Super heroes in little blue airplanes and parachutes? Gross!

Andromeda turned away in disgust.

Harry climbed to his feet, right foot and body now free from the glue, but left foot still attached to the bucket. He stumped around back to the factory's main entrance with Andromeda in tow.

"Need some help, Harry?" asked Andromeda, charitably.

Other kids working the factory shift were starting to notice.

"No, no. I'm okay. I'll just, ahem, go for a change of clothes," he replied, glancing over his shoulder to examine his backside.

He kept walking now like a pirate with a peg leg using both hands to cover up the hole in his pants.

But this was NOT Harry's day. What happened next would be recorded in "The Lunie Chronicles" as one of Harry's greatest tragedies ever.

As he reached the exit, Harry tripped and bumped into one of the pony bots that were used for hauling people and things in and out of the factory. His elbow accidentally hit the pony's

“go” button. It lurched forward and flipped Harry over its back.

At first, the pony scooted around in random directions, while Harry held on for dear life. Then it started rolling toward the assembly line at a galloping pace. It rammed right into an unlucky factory bot, sending Harry flying through the air.

He landed on top of the conveyor belt, which carried the poor man along toward the choppers and slicers.

“Aaaaaah, HELLLLLLLP!” cried Harry.

OMG! thought Andromeda, I'd better figure out how to shut down the assembly line or Harry's gonna end up in tomorrow's lunch!

She sped over to the control board and frantically pulled all the switches and levers she could find. Other kids and grown-ups were dropping their work and racing over to help, too.

Just in time, she found the switch that shut off the choppers and slicers. But that did not stop the conveyor belt. With a yelp, Harry disappeared into a dark tunnel of clacking machinery.

As Andromeda read the label over the chute (“Shrink Wrapping”), Pixie ran up from behind. She was panting like a puppy.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just Harry being Harry again.”

“You mean –”

“I mean we’ll find out at the other end of the line. Let’s go!”

They’d dashed next-door to where the fruits and veggies normally came off the assembly line for boxing and delivery. Something big was trying to push its way out of the chute. Pent up steam whistled piercingly as the aluminum sides bulged.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Sally, who also happened to be working the shift.

“IT’S GONNA BLOW!” warned Deke.

A grown-up rushed in and started herding everyone away from the chute.

“Get back, everyone!”

POP!

A great big roundish blob flew through the air, bounced twice, and rolled across the floor. It was Harry! And he was trapped in a ginormous wad of bubble wrap, his face and hands pressed against the plastic sides. His mouth silently shaped the words “helllllp meeeee.”

Before anyone could come to his rescue, a big pincer swiveled overhead and grabbed him.

“WAH! IT’S A HUMAN SQUISHY-BALL!”

All the kids jumped up. Some tried to free him. Some tried to bat him around. And still others just wanted to pop the bubble wrap. But no one could quite reach.

The crane dumped Harry into a suitably large box, which factory bots promptly sealed up with packing tape. Then they tacked on a label that read “To New Columbia City.”

Before anyone could say “mumbo-jumbo,” the bots had strapped Harry-in-a-box to the back of a pony and wheeled it out the back exit.

As the pony took off, someone yelled, “It’s heading for the Tube!” A crowd of yammering kids chased it down the passageway.

Andromeda had visions of a family down in New Columbia opening up the box. What would their faces look like when they saw a one-shoed, glue-covered, banana-flavored hobo trapped inside a blob of plastic instead of their usual order of fresh fruits and vegetables?

She shrugged and tore off after the other kids.

20. Another Suspect



Andromeda, Rad, and Pixie huddled together beneath the ginormous telescope in the cramped little attic that was the Apollo Base observatory. Well, Andromeda and Pixie sat; Rad was not so flexible and preferred to stand. Sandwiched between the unfiltered sun beating down from above and the heat rising up from all the lower levels below, the room felt sweltering hot.

It had been a long *waykup*. Working in a food processing factory was not Andromeda's idea of a relaxing start to the week. Still, she had some ideas that she wanted to share with her friends...

"All of our suspects are turning out to have alibis," complained Pixie before Andromeda could even open her mouth. "In fact, EVERYONE does."

"The only way someone could have left the base is with a spacesuit, but they were all accounted for," Rad chimed in.

“What’s more,” Pixie added, “they locked down all the portals before it would be humanly possible to get there.”

“*Da*, it fits. Humanly possible...” Andromeda trailed off.

“Explain.”

“A bot could sneak out faster than a human could,” she suggested. “And a bot doesn’t need a spacesuit.”

“Logically speaking, a bot cannot commit an act of sabotage,” Rad pointed out. “Impossible.”

“Hmm,” Pixie thought aloud, “What if one of the bots brought the robber’s spacesuit to the airlock from outside and then put it back afterward?”

“An interesting idea,” Rad agreed. “However, I have already checked the video records from every closed circuit camera at every portal and found that no one, person or bot, exited the base.”

Andromeda was stumped.

“Well, I’d like to watch those videos anyway,” she insisted.

“Suit yourself,” replied Rad as he trotted off to the hatch downstairs – that is, if you can imagine a six-foot tall, half-ton of metal bricks trotting.

Soon the girls were alone.

“I think you’re onto something at any rate,” said Pixie. “With so many pieces of heavy equipment, trucks and other

moving machinery out there – and so few people – a bot could wander around and no one would notice at all.”

“And our mystery bot could’ve entered the base many days before the theft... hidden in plain sight where no one would ever suspect. Plus, it wouldn’t get hungry or tired.”

“Only thing is, Andrie, all the bots on Apollo Base have wheels, so Rad’s right; it’s impossible anyway...” Pixie yawned. “I’ve gotta get home now. See ya next *waykup!*”

That started Andromeda on another train of thought.

All the bots on the base had wheels... except one. No, it couldn't be...

“Wait, Pix, not so fast! There’s one more thing we gotta check out.”

“C’mon,” whined Pixie, spinning around in the Base Commander’s office chair. “Mom wants me home for *din-din* and I’m sick of watching these stupid recordings.”

She didn’t say it, but she was also nervous about getting caught. Ooh, Decker would really get steamed up if he knew they’d broken into his office after-hours.

“Sec. I think I found something.”

Andromeda rewound the video and played it back. There was a shadow from something moving off-camera, then the

video went black for a second and, when the picture came back on, the main portal hatchway looked the same as always.

“Pix, how do you make it go in slow-mo?”

“Like this, dope.” Pixie tapped twice in quick succession.

The video played a third time and the shadow again crept over a sliver of moonstone floor in the bottom-right corner of the screen.

“There!” exclaimed Andromeda.

“Where?”

“Can you zoom in? On that comm-link viewscreen over there. The one built into the wall.”

As Pixie magnified the image of the viewscreen, she could see a shiny coating on it.

“*Way*, it’s reflecting something. Looks like somebody walking over to the hatch.”

“Exactly. Zoom in some more... that’s right, focus...”

Pixie did and then they found what they were looking for...

“FREEZE!” Andromeda shouted, standing up on her chair – well, Base Commander Decker’s chair.

The image in the video paused. The reflection on the viewscreen showed a perfect image of –

“Oh, no!” she cried. “RAD!”

“It can’t be,” whispered Pixie hoarsely.

The Evil Cupcakes found Rad at a recharging station juicing up his batteries. They showed him the video they'd copied to Pixie's band.

"Impossible," he said in complete disbelief—a most unusual and risky state for a robot to be in. "I will ch-check my mmm-memory banks."

Bots tended to stutter when having trouble with their logic circuits. Rad stood there silently for a full minute, eyes getting brighter and dimmer, brighter and dimmer.

"My memories of the t-t-time right beffffore and after the theft are completely wiped out," he concluded.

"What's the last thing ya remember, Rad?" asked Pixie.

"I recall walking down a hallway and through a door into a room... then waking up and exiting the room and realizing there was an alarm. I immediately went to look for Andrie to make sure that she was safe. It was what I was programmed to do."

Programmed? By who? Andromeda wondered suspiciously. Could Rad be on the bad guy's side – without even knowing it?

"Rad, could you be programmed to harm us?" she asked.

"There is no such progrrrrram on my hard drive, Andrie. It would be un-th-thinkable."

“But we’ve already proven that a robot must have stolen the Lavalight Crystal,” Andromeda insisted.

Pixie unexpectedly defended Rad. “He’s telling the truth, Andrie; bots can’t lie. That’s not the way they work. Not when asked a direct question...”

Flash! Andromeda struck on another idea.

“Pix, could he have been programmed to steal the Crystal and then had the program erased afterward?”

She still couldn’t bring herself to think of Rad as an “it.”

“Well, yes,” replied Pixie, astonished that her friend had thought of this possibility.

Not bad for an Earthie!

“Not just possible – all too likely!”

Rad’s eyes were now flickering feebly and the poor bot looked like he was about to teeter over – almost as if he was about to faint! The two girls caught him just before he crashed to the floor.

“What is it, Rad?” asked Pixie, concerned.

She’d never seen this kind of *loco* behavior in a bot before.

“I j-j-j-ust remembered the r-room where I blanked out, P-p-p-pixie,” the robot said painfully, still swaying.

His stuttering was getting worse. He could only say one more word before he shut down for self-repair.

“Harrreeeee.”

Harry... Andromeda was blown away. He pretends to be a clumsy, bumbling fool. But what if he's really not?

She pounded herself on the forehead.

Of course! He KNEW we planned to visit the tunnels where the drill car was. And he's as good as anybody at programming bots – I mean he's got like a whole fleet of 'em!

“Rad’s power cell failed,” reported Pixie. “He went into hibernation.”

She fumbled around in the utility closet while Andromeda slowly circled around the robot, who was leaning up against the recharging station no more life-like than a log or a hammer. Andromeda felt a deep sense of loss well up inside of her. She closed her eyes.

“*Way*, Andrie, I SAID hold the power cell for me while I pull out the old one.”

Andromeda snapped her head back and eyes wide open.

“Will he be okay?” she asked while Pixie patched up the robot.

“Sure. He’ll self-repair in a few hours once I restore power,” Pixie said confidently. “We oughta be worrying about Harry.”

“You’re right.”

“Well,” said Pixie, wiping off the grease with a rag. “Let’s go see what he’s gotten himself into.”

“Gotten HIMSELF into? I’d like to know why he stole the Crystal from Dr. Vee’s lab.”

“What? Harry? Are you out of your mind, Andrie?”

Pixie’s eyes got big.

“I’ll explain as we walk. Let’s go!”

Harry’s quarters were right above the galley. It was his one luxury that he could wake up, slide down his fireman’s pole into the kitchen below, and grab *brekkie* before anyone else on the base. This made up for all the *da-byan* he had to put up with as chief mechanic. Well, the only mechanic, he sometimes was honest enough to admit—unless you counted the repair bots.

The Evil Cupcakes found a big “Do Not Disturb” sign hanging on Harry’s hatch. They rang the buzzer. No answer. They rang the buzzer a few more times. Still no answer. They tried kicking, slapping and even head-butting the hatch.

Okay that just hurt, so Pixie got out a socket wrench from a pocket in her cargo pants and started banging it loudly.

An irritated voice groaned through the comm-link, “Go away!”

Inside, Harry was sitting in a bathtub full of ice-cubes, trying to soothe all his sores from being bubble-wrapped, zapped, smacked and whacked—not to mention nearly amputated, drowned, de-bearded, and dragged around New Columbia by a delivery pony. It was all very humiliating. And now he'd like to rest in peace for a few hours, thank you very much.

“Didn't you see the sign?” the voice asked.

More groans.

“Still playing dumb,” said Andromeda, shaking her head. “Hmm, that would make this a PERFECT time to go. After all, if the evil mastermind isn't there, you've got a much better chance of not getting caught by him!”

Pixie scrunched up her nose.

“You're not making sense, *pally*. Go where?”

“Pix. This is our chance to find his secret lair!”

21. Clues in the Dust



“Andromeda Starwell. Pixie Flutter. Please report to the Base Commander’s office.”

“Oh no, Andrie, we’re sunk!” fretted Pixie, sure that Decker had discovered they’d broken into his office to view the video recordings.

He probably even knew she was sitting in his chair. Boy was she gonna get into so much *da-byan*.

“Andromeda Starwell. Pixie Flutter...” the announcement continued over all comm-links.

The whole base echoed with it. The Evil Cupcakes walked briskly to the office. At that moment, however, they were not feeling particularly evil or bold.

Base Commander Decker and his mustache were there waiting for them. So was Inspector Ride.

“Girls,” Decker began – and Andromeda’s eyes narrowed at the wrongful use of that word – “we are aware of your antics in New Columbia and general misbehaving in and out of the base.”

His mustache rippled like an octopus’s tentacles reaching out to snatch them.

“You violated a strict lockdown and are therefore grounded and will be assigned extra work duty this week. Furthermore, you are to remain on Apollo Base premises at all times.”

He looked back at Ride as if checking to make sure he didn’t say anything wrong. She gave just the slightest nod.

“Dismissed,” Decker growled and waved them away.

Once back in the corridor, Pixie whined, “Now whadda we do?”

“I’m gonna escape out the crawl space again. Only this time I’ll need my spacesuit.”

“You mean WE’LL need OUR spacesuits,” Pixie corrected her. “This time, you’re not giving me the slip.”

“Alright, alright. And we should probably take Rad, too.”

“*Da*. He’s probably better now.”

“Aren’t you coming, Rad?” Andromeda asked.

Rad’s eyes just glowed dimly.

“What’s the matter?”

“Andrie, I feel that I should not come with you. It could be dangerous.”

“Well of course it’ll be dangerous. You’ve got to be brave to be an Evil Cupcake and fight the forces of, um, evil.”

“No, I mean whomever hacked into my programming—perhaps if I were to encounter him or her...”

“Then you could get hacked again!” interrupted Pixie.

“Exactly. In any case, I will still be able to assist you remotely. I will stay hooked into your wristbands.”

“*Way,*” said Andromeda, “I think I’ve got another plan...”

It was driving Inspector Ride crazy. Elan had been gathering reports all *waykup*-long of people who swore they’d heard Andromeda’s or Pixie’s voices. But no sightings. Zero.

“There’s something more to this,” she said half to herself, chewing on her pinky.

“It’s not c-curfew-time yet, ma’am. I bet the kids are p-playing hide and seek around the base or something.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Ride, suspicion oozing into her voice.

Rad's first job was to go around Apollo Base playing recordings of the girls' voices over his built-in speakers. That way no one would suspect they'd left the base.

His second objective was to watch Harry's hatch to make sure he didn't go back to his secret lair. Rad thought it'd be safer to keep his distance from Harry—to avoid getting re-programmed again—so he rigged up a hidden camera and hooked it into his band so he could watch it remotely.

Meanwhile, the girls had snuck down into the tunnels with their spacesuits right past where they'd almost been squashed by the drill car. Using the GPS coordinates from their bands, Rad guided them to the exact location of a little-used maintenance airlock not far from the New Columbia Tube.

It opened at the far side of Apollo Base. Pixie stood with hand over visor surveying the scene.

Looks like a whole lotta nuttin'. Like the Moon always does. What would an ocean look like, I wonder? Or a forest? More interesting than this airless desert, I'm sure!

Andromeda brushed her hand slowly down her sides. She still marveled at how light and natural her space activity suit felt. She took a few tentative steps, looking down at her feet, and noticed something strange—something she'd never really grasped before.

It was the regolith. When you step on moondust, every grain of the charcoal-colored sand lifts up and lands exactly the same distance away in perfect semi-circles. She was not the first to notice this. Buzz Aldrin, one of the original astronauts to explore the Moon, noticed the same thing. Of course Andromeda did not know that and felt secretly proud to have made the discovery.

“Where to, partner?” asked Pixie over her walkie-talkie.

She’d already scanned the horizon and hadn’t seen anything that so much as resembled a clue.

“The main portal.”

“What ever for? Wouldn’t a secret lair be AWAY from the base, not NEAR it, genius girl?”

“Let’s just say the moondust gave me an idea.”

And that was all. Andromeda took off and Pixie had no choice but to follow. It would’ve been no more than a *click* if they could fly over the domes, but since they didn’t bring their boards—now wouldn’t THAT look suspicious for kids who’d just been grounded—they had to leg it the long way around.

“It’ll take forever if ya keep walking Earthie-style,” Pixie groaned.

“Well if you’ve got a better idea—”

“You gotta hoppity-hop. Just watch me,” said Pixie, as she bounced into the air.

She touched down lightly on her tiptoes and then bounced again, hopping along the crater-pocked moonscape effortlessly. An onlooker might have suspected she’d been lost as a baby in the Outback and raised by wild kangaroos.

Andromeda tried it. The push-off went fine, but when she landed, her knees crunched and her legs felt all wobbly. She flapped her arms to steady herself, feeling (and looking) like a clumsy penguin in a space helmet. Then she staggered forward a few paces and crashed to the ground.

“Ow. You make it look so easy!”

Pixie giggled. “Silly Earthie, don’t jump so high. You gotta skim the ground closer, see, like this.”

Andromeda watched carefully this time and gave it another go. After a few more crash landings, she gradually felt herself getting into a steady groove.

“That’s right, Andrie, there’s a kind of rhythm to it. Maybe there’s hope... I’ll make you a real Lunie someday!”

“Won’t THAT be nice,” scoffed Andromeda.

They weren’t sure whether they’d been moonjumping a minute or an hour – only that they were sweating. But finally,

the Evil Cupcakes, huffing and puffing, made it to the main portal. Andromeda kneeled down and traced her finger along the sand-like moondust. It was a confused mass of shallow footprints in almost every direction.

“What’re ya lookin’ for?” asked Pixie.

“I thought maybe we’d find the bot’s footprints leading away from the portal,” replied Andromeda, looking stumped, “but there must be zillions of ‘em out here...”

“*Da*, moonprints last practically forever, Andrie. No wind, no rain. Only meteor showers now and then. We’ll be wrinkly old *pasas* and those prints will still be there.”

“But then how will we ever find the right pair of footprints to follow?”

Only a bi-pedal bot could walk on the pitted surface of the Moon, Andromeda knew. So that ruled out the ponies, cleaners, factory-hands, nannies and most other kinds of everyday bots.

“We can’t. Not without the right tools,” answered Pixie. “No, wait a minute! Whenever a ship lands, that blows a whole bunch of the regolith around like a tornado. Maybe Rad can narrow ‘em down to just those prints made since the last landing!”

“You’re onto something, Pix. R.A.D. means Regolith Analysis Device. That means he’s programmed to analyze moondust!”

Andromeda felt suddenly encouraged.

“He could probably also weed out the people footprints from the bot prints! Oh, wait, but Rad can’t get outside of the base.”

Her excitement faded in disappointment.

“But we don’t need him to, silly. Just use your band. The videocam connects with the microphone in your space helmet, remember?”

Duh.

Andromeda manipulated her band until Rad popped up on the viewscreen. For privacy’s sake, they’d all agreed earlier to switch over to a secure channel. Chances were pretty good that no one was eavesdropping.

“Rad, can you look at the moonprints out here and tell me which are the most recent?”

“Of course, Andrie. I can analyze regolith with ninety-nine point nine percent accuracy. Please point your wristband toward the surface area you would like me to scan.”

Andromeda flipped her wrist over and started slowly passing her upside-down arm over the ground, tip-toeing forward in gradual baby steps.

“Twelve degrees to the right, Andrie,” Rad’s voice instructed through her band.

Andromeda angled her movements in the new direction and, once again, waved her arm in slow motion across the moondust.

Rad continued to guide Andromeda step by step, while she twisted and arched her body to maintain her balance. To a passerby, if there were one, it would’ve looked like some bizarre form of ancient Egyptian cult worship. They’d call it “moondancing” back on Earth and, inevitably, some rock band would start using it in their concerts. Probably within a few years there’d be a whole moondancing movement and Andrie would be world-famous!

Unfortunately, there were no passersby—just Pixie. Fame would have to wait.

“It’s working, Andrie!”

Pixie could see that the moondust grew less disturbed and there were fewer footprints the farther they trekked from the portal.

“Destination reached,” Rad’s voice at last informed them. “The footprints end here.”

But they were nowhere!

“Let’s feel around the surface here. Maybe...” Pixie trailed off. “*Sec...* Found it!”

She peeled something off the lunar surface that looked like a flimsy piece of rubber and held it up. It was clearly a cover designed to look like a chunk of Moon rock.

Underneath was a hatch.

The girls smiled at each other behind their mirrored space helmets. This HAD to be it.

22. Logic and Lies



Buzz saw right through the fake voice trick. He'd used it himself to pretend he was sick in his cabin when he was really playing hooky from school. How they'd hacked a Seleno-class robot like Rad to do it was beyond him though.

Yep. That about seals it. Their spacesuits are gone.

And it was after curfew. Now he had to decide what to do next. He started down the north-side escalator that led toward the Base Security office...

The secret hatchway had opened into an airlock, but Andromeda found the inner hatch locked.

"Rad, can you hack it?"

"Trying, Andrie."

"Code verified," said a female computer voice with a friendly British accent.

The voice seemed to echo from inside the walls.

“Master, it was your last instruction that I verify your identity using seemingly impossible questions that I randomly select from the Lunar Academy Intelligence Test.”

“Um, I did?” asked Andromeda.

Pixie elbowed her in the ribs, prompting her to add, “Oh, yes, of course I did!”

“Master, since you use a voice distorter and mirror visor on your space helmet,” the computer voice patiently explained, “it was decided that only a set of three randomized questions could be fool-proof against spies and snoopers. Shall I proceed?”

“*Da*. Go ahead,” Pixie answered before her friend could open her big mouth.

She kept her voice calm and level like one should when trying to outwit a computer program.

“Very well, Master. The first question: Two brothers were born on the same day in the same year and have the same parents, but are not twins. How is this possible?”

Pixie scratched her head. “How IS that possible? Maybe this isn’t going to be so easy... uh, Rad?”

“It is illogical, Pixie. There is no possible answer.”

“Oh yes there is,” smiled Andromeda, who had read books full of riddles when she was Pixie’s age. “Computer: The answer is that the two brothers aren’t twins because they have a third brother and, together, they’re triplets.”

“Answer correct, Master. The second question: A person rolls a six-sided die twice. Both times the die lands on the number three. What are the chances this person will roll the number three a third time?”

Now it was Andromeda’s turn to be stumped. It sounded simple, but sometimes those were the trickiest problems of all.

“Let’s see, if he’d rolled a three twice, wouldn’t it be more likely he’d roll something else this time?”

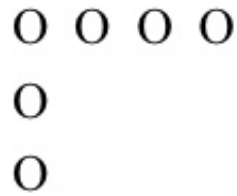
Fortunately, Rad came to the rescue. “Andrie, the data about the first two rolls is irrelevant. It could just as easily be zero rolls or a million. Since the person will roll a six-sided die that means the answer is —”

“One in six!” Pixie blurted out.

She couldn’t help it. But the computer didn’t seem to notice the difference in voices.

“Answer correct, Master. Third and final question: On my viewscreen is a formation of six circles. One row of four and one column of three. You may move one circle — and one circle only — to create two sets of four. You have thirty seconds to solve this puzzle.”

Pixie aimed her band at the viewscreen so that Rad could see, too.



But Rad was no help. “I am unable to find a possible answer. I am, as you human-friends say, stumped.”

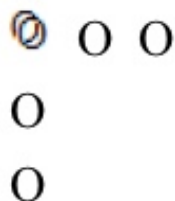
Andromeda stepped up to the viewscreen and pressed her index fingertip against a circle, moving it around to various places on the screen.

“Five seconds remaining. Four, three...”

“Hurry, Andrie!” squawked Pixie.

“Two, one...”

Andromeda slid the circle over the top-left circle and it snapped into place. She’d created a stack of two circles, one on top of the other!



This was, of course, the only right answer and indeed made two sets of four-in-a-row.

“Answer correct. Identity verified. Access granted.”

The inner hatch swung open and the Evil Cupcakes climbed through.

Rad’s voice crackled over their headsets: “Someone is coming, Andrie. I will need to mute my band until I can find a safer location.”

“Okay, Rad, we’re in. *Ta* for your help.”

After closing the airlock behind them, they removed their space helmets and placed them on a rack on the wall. The air inside was well-filtered and smelled clean.

“After you, Andrie.”

“Oh, *ta*, my brave little cupcake,” Andromeda teased back.

The corridor led in only one direction, so she started down it... and bumped right into a robot coming out of a doorway to one side of the passage.

The bot was a cylinder about Pixie’s height with a small turret on the top that swiveled around. A long tube protruded from the turret – clearly a weapon of some kind.

“Stop. Do not move. Identify yourselves.”

“Um, we’re like, well, I’m Andrie and this is, uh, Pixie and like we’re –”

“Intruders.”

“No, no, not exactly.”

“Not exactly?” Pixie muttered, “Oh, that’s just brilliant, Andrie.”

“You will be taken prisoner,” the bot declared, paying no attention to Pixie. “You will not resist.”

“Let me handle this, *pally*,” murmured Pixie to her friend. “Robot: We are authorized visitors. We have been commanded to report here.”

“I—I have no r-r-r-record of such a command. My Master did not inform me.”

“Your Master informed US. Your Master commanded us. Why else would the computer have granted us access?”

“Insufficient d-data. In-n-n-n-n-n-nnnnnnnn...”

“Quick, Andrie! Shut it off!”

Andromeda rushed at the robot and knocked it over.

“Why’d ya do THAT, Andrie?”

“Couldn’t find the ‘off’ button.”

Pixie shrugged, then knelt down to switch the bot off.

“C’mon, Pix. Now let’s find the —”

“You are intruders,” an unexpected voice stopped her cold in mid-sentence. “You will not be able to fool us a second time.”

“Oh, nuts,” Pixie sighed. “Not again.”

The Evil Cupcakes slowly turned around, hands high in the air. There were two more guard bots, and they were aiming their blaster turrets right at our fearless investigators.

“You will not resist,” declared the first guard bot.

“You will not resist,” echoed the second.

“We’re doomed, Andrie.”

“No, I have a plan.”

“You do?”

“Robots,” said Andromeda. “We are not intruders.”

“You are intruders. You will follow us to be taken prisoner. You will comply or be terminated.”

“Robots: listen carefully. Everything I say is a lie... I’m telling you the truth.”

Now one guard bot turned to the other and announced, “If she is telling the truth, she is lying. If she is lying, then she is t-telling the trrruth. Both are impossible.”

“Impossssible,” repeated the second bot.

“Immmmmmmmm –” Hsssssssssss-POP!

The robots’ circuits sizzled with bolts of electricity. Smoke began to pour out of their domes, which were spinning wildly. In seconds they were completely fried.

“*Wah*, holy logic burn-out! You did it, Andrie!”

With all the guard bots deactivated, the girls raced down the corridor until they reached a large, circular room. It was filled with computers, lab tables covered with half-finished bots or long tubes and wires, and large cabinet-shaped machines that Andromeda could only guess what they were for. And, in the middle, another guard bot.

“The other models were too primitive to stop your logic attacks. I am superior. I will take you prisoner now.”

“Do something, Andrie!”

If it couldn't be tricked by logic, what could she do? It would zap her before she could tackle it or run.

“Follow me to the end of the left-hand corridor. You will comply or be terminated.”

The end... Yeah, that's it! Something with no end... something that would keep a bot busy – forever!

“Robot: Compute the highest prime number.”

The guard bot thought for a moment. It did not need to obey commands given by an intruder. But how could it disobey an order without first understanding what it was disobeying? It would be logical to first compute the answer. Yes, quite logical.

“One... two... three... five... seven... eleven... thirteen...”
The robot spoke the numbers faster and faster until it was past the point where you could even hear the sounds.

Pixie was somewhat awed. “But Andrie, what happens when he’s done counting?”

“He’ll never be done counting, Pix,” Andromeda said with a wicked grin. “The highest prime number is infinity.”

“Nice! Now... where would I be if I were a Lavalight Crystal?” wondered Pixie, nosing about the room.

“Over there.” Andromeda pointed to a low archway leading to an adjoining room.

They both stepped under the arch...

Zzzzz – ffffffft!

“YEOW!” yelled Pixie, jumping back.

The archway was charged with high-voltage electricity!

Andromeda’s reaction was not much different, except her fright turned quickly into a laugh. No, actually, it was a guffaw. Lots of them.

“What’s so darn funny?” asked Pixie, hotly.

She wheeled around to face her friend, hands on her hips and elbows stuck out. Then it was Pixie’s turn to break out bawling.

“Andrie,” she giggled, “Your hair!”

Pixie tried to point at Andromeda's head, but the giggles kept ripping through her body and she had to bend over to catch her breath.

"MY hair?" Andromeda replied in such amazement that she was able to stop her next guffaw, "You oughta see YOURS!"

Pixie's hair was standing straight up on her head about two feet high. She looked like a skinny pencil with a giant eraser on top.

Andromeda's hair spiked out in every direction like a cat plugged into an electrical socket.

"Oh no, a static electricity field!" exclaimed Andromeda.

"Exactly, my little imps," croaked a raspy, gravelly voice behind them, "but your silly game is over now."

They spun around to see a man in a silver spacesuit, but they couldn't see his face. The helmet had a mirrored visor. It just reflected their own faces, which were pale and frightened.

23. End of Line



The man in the silver spacesuit stood there watching them. He didn't take his helmet off. Instead, he began to make a speech!

"Many years ago, a brilliant young scientist working late one night made a ground-breaking discovery: He discovered mathematically how one could travel thousands of times faster than light... speeds at which space and time itself become warped, meaningless..."

The man sighed, turned and paced the other way.

"But were they grateful? Did they give the brilliant young scientist a chairmanship? A Nobel Prize? Respect even? No! Instead, they called him a quack, a nut."

Now the distorted voice turned bitter and angry.

"They RUINED my reputation. So I left Earth in disgrace and started a new life on the Moon. But always, ALWAYS

with my ultimate goal in mind: to build the first faster-than-light ship and traverse the stars, to visit another galaxy, to take my rightful place in history!”

“You’re *loco*,” said Pixie.

“Why not just ask for help instead of all this sneaking around?” asked Andromeda.

“Fools! So when I succeed, they can steal my invention? Take all the glory? No! I’ll destroy them first. Melt them all to spacedust. It’s mine, I tell you.”

He clenched his suited fists in the air.

“MINE!”

“But who ARE you?” Pixie wanted to know.

“Eh?” The man sounded as if startled out of a daydream. “Mmm. You can call me... er, well, how about... Mr. Evil?”

“*Way*, not fair!” protested Andromeda. “We already chose the name Evil – as in Evil Cupcakes.”

“Yeah,” seconded Pixie. “Quit copycatting us.”

“Evil what? Oh, very well. How about... hmm... let’s go with Mr. X.”

“X?” Pixie scratched her head. “What kind of a name is that – ah – ah –”

“Excuse me?” asked Mr. X, leaning his helmet forward politely to listen.

“ACHOOOOOO!” Pixie sneezed, sending droplets of sneeze spray flying in every direction.

Some landed on Mr. X’s visor. He flinched visibly.

“Oh, now that’s just gross,” he griped, carefully cleaning off the visor with a wet wipe in his gloved hands.

“I mean, really, you MUST promise me you won’t do that again. You could infect EVERYTHING,” he pleaded. “Please, PLEASE no more sneezing while I’m off terrorizing the world, okay? Ack, now I’ll have to disinfect my whole evil lair...”

“You’ll never get away with... well, whatever it is you’re going to do,” said Andromeda.

“That’s right, we’re going to stop you right now!” shouted Pixie.

“I think not.”

The man in the silver spacesuit pressed a small remote control he was carrying and two pairs of robotic arms shot out of the wall and grabbed the girls in their pincers.

Trapped!

“With you pests out of the way, no one will ever know who took the Lavalight Crystal.”

Seeing their expressions he added. “Oh, *da*, it’s right there in the next room. Behind the static field. Quite safe from your poking around, my little microbe-mongering friends.”

“We’re NOT your friends,” hissed Pixie, squinting angrily.

Mr. X waved a hand and turned off the static field with his remote control. Another bot entered the room. This one had no wheels; it walked on two legs. Its four metal arms cradled a dazzlingly bright crystal. Blue, green, yellow, and red splashes of light danced across Andromeda’s cheeks and forehead.

The Lavalight Crystal!

“Ah, yes, the centerpiece of what will soon be the world’s very first solar death ray. Nice, isn’t it? As for this confounded robot, he bungled the job.”

Andromeda couldn’t look directly at the robot because of the blinding light from the Crystal.

“The drill car... That was your robot driving it,” she said in a sudden flash of intuition.

“Precisely, Ms. Starwell. It would have been a terrible ‘accident.’ By all rights your escapade should’ve ended –”

“You’ll find I’m more resourceful than you expect, Mr. X.”

“No doubt, no doubt. But don’t worry: He’ll finish the job this time.”

The mysterious thief pointed his remote at a garage-sized aluminum roller door built into the wall. The rollers folded up

like Venetian blinds, revealing a drill car with engines powered on.

“I’d save your breath, my little germ factories. In minutes this room will have no more atmosphere,” Mr. X gloated.

Then he laughed with pure evil pleasure. At first it was a chortle mixed with a kind of nasal guffaw. Then they heard a bit of a wheeze and a snort. Next came a gurgling sound like small jets of frothy spittle bubbling out of the corners of his mouth, although the girls couldn’t see into his mirrored helmet to confirm this. It was a uniquely sinister laugh—unlike anything they’d ever heard before—and not one they’d easily forget.

Mr. X jumped into the drill car with the Crystal and drove out into the tunnels beyond. The roller door clanged shut, leaving the girls alone with the robot. It looked like...

“Rad!” Andromeda gushed out in shock. “Rad, you have to help us!”

She struggled against the pincer arms, but the bot made no move and no sound. Its eyes just glowed a strange and mysterious green.

“Warning,” announced the friendly British computer voice over the intercom. “Airlock breach. Oxygen levels are unsafe.”

“Andrie, he wasn’t kidding. He must have opened the airlock on purpose. We’re doomed!”

“Warning. Airlock breach...” the computer voice repeated. They could feel a breeze now as the air started whooshing out of the lair.

“Rad, please!” Andromeda begged. “Help.”

The girls were twisting and kicking, but they were getting weaker. Soon there would be too little oxygen for them to even stay awake.

“Andrie?” whispered Pixie feebly.

“Yeah, Pix?”

“I think we’re at the end of the line, *pally*. Before I die, I have just one little song I’d like to sing ya.”

And so, with her last breaths, Pixie belted out “Pink fluffy unicorns dancing on rainbows! Pink fluffy unicorns dancing on rainbows!”

“The pressure drop. It’s making you loopy,” Andromeda tried to say, but it came out as one long giggle.

Then she forgot all about air pressure and evil robots and escaping—all she could think about was those stupid pink fluffy unicorns bouncing all over the Moon.

Oops! My unicorn stuck his horn into the giant ball of cheese.

She couldn’t stop laughing. The room began to fade.

Suddenly, there was a flash of blue.

It streaked across the room toward Rad like a missile. The bot staggered toward the archway and into the static field. Bolts of electricity surged through its mechanical body and its eyes grew unbearably bright—until they sparked and dimmed into darkness. The bot lay motionless. The visions of pink fluffy unicorns went “poof!”

Rad! Nooooooooo!

Andromeda wanted to yell, but all that came out of her throat was a hoarse croak. She was surprised to find that she thought of Rad as a person.

She looked up and noticed that the streaking blue object was actually a young man in a spacesuit.

“Buzz!” croaked Andromeda.

“Your helmets,” he said urgently, fastening one on Andromeda first, then Pixie, along with their oxygen tanks.

He unclipped them from the pincer arms, slung their arms over his strong shoulders, and half-pulled, half-carried them to the airlock.

“C’mon, I’ve got to get you outta here,” Buzz urged.
“Yalla!”

“But Rad... we can’t... leave him... here...” Andromeda gasped.

Her chest heaved as she gulped in air.

“There’s no time!” Buzz insisted.

As he dragged her out the hatch, she stretched out an arm as if still trying to reach Rad. But she was too weak to resist.

Andromeda felt numb. In the back of her mind, she knew that their mission had failed; whoever the man in the silver spacesuit was, he still had the Lavalight Crystal.

24. Like Fish



They thought they'd slip in through the main portal unnoticed at *brekkie*-time. But as Andromeda, Pixie and Buzz hauled their gear in through the airlock, a small crowd was already waiting for them: the Base Commander, Nurse Sullivan, a couple of armed door-wardens, and a blocky-looking, bi-pedal, Seleno-class robot.

“RAD!” Andromeda shrieked with the shock of recognition. “You’re alive!!!”

The green-eyed model that had stolen the Crystal and that Buzz had destroyed was only a look-alike! She rushed toward him.

“Well, hardly alive, Andrie. After all, robots cannot really —”

“I KNEW it wasn’t you!” she shouted joyfully, throwing her arms around the embarrassed robot — assuming of course that a robot can actually get embarrassed.

Minutes later, after being escorted two levels down to the Base Commander's office – it was beginning to feel like home – the kids were sitting around a conference table sipping ice water (with real ice cubes!). Rad sipped a cup of warm oil, of course. Decker sat at his desk by the window staring vaguely in the direction of his computer monitor.

It had been a super-long, *loco waykup* for the Evil Cupcakes and they were still bleary-eyed from their all-night caper; they'd gone without even a wink of sleep! And it wasn't over yet.

The door creaked open and everyone looked up. Inspector Ride was standing in the doorway, her thin, elegant eyebrows arched over curious eyes.

"Ah, our volunteer investigators are back at last," the Inspector said with grim amusement as she marched into the room.

Elan trailed meekly behind her like a puppy coming to heel.

"Why don't you start from the beginning, kids," prompted Decker.

Andromeda looked at Pixie. Pixie looked at Buzz. Buzz looked at Rad. Rad completed the loop by looking back at Andromeda.

"Yyyyes?" Ride demanded impatiently.

Before Rad could offer a properly logical explanation, the girls immediately jumped in. It all spilled out in a discombobulated rush...

“It’s the madman, ‘X.’ He stole the Lavalight Crystal.”

“He’s trying to take over the base!”

“And he’s got gobs of evil robots to help him!”

“He was wearing a silver spacesuit.”

“He had a funny laugh.”

The Inspector couldn’t get in a word edgewise. “Hold on... slow down... WAAAIT!”

Decker came out from behind the safety of his desk—he still seemed edgy around the Inspector—and chopped his right palm outward, the sign to zip it.

They zipped it.

Is it my imagination, or has the lip-squirrel grown bushier since I last saw Decker? Andromeda wondered.

“Now you kids have got to stop making up silly stories and causing a ruckus around the base, y’hear?” Decker growled, his mustache hair bristling like an aggressive attack dog. “Buzz, I’m ashamed to see YOU taking part in this *loco* little prank, too.”

“It’s no prank, sir. These girls nearly got—”

“Let’s not waste time,” interrupted the Inspector. “Can you identify the suspect? Any of you?”

“Well, no, I got there too late to see him,” said Buzz.

“We couldn’t see nothin’ other than the silver spacesuit, ma’am,” added Pixie. “He used a mirrored visor—and a voice distorter.”

“Great. So no one saw his face or heard his real voice. No identifying traits. No clues. How do you expect me to investigate THAT?”

Andromeda had an answer: “You could go check out his secret lair. We can show you where it is!”

“A point of interest,” interrupted Rad.

It was the first time he had spoke up and this had the strange effect of quieting everyone else in the room. His eyes were glowing brightly now.

“I believe you may have overlooked the true danger.”

Decker was not buying it: “Look, sure we had the Crystal theft. But nothing has been damaged, no one hurt. Let’s not panic here, people!”

“I mean, sir,” Rad continued with infinite patience, “that the Crystal, if positioned at the correct angle during a period of lunar daylight, could destroy Apollo Base.”

“WHAT?” Decker was almost choking with a mixture of rage and fear—rage that these stupid kids were causing him so many headaches, and fear that it could be true.

Rad walked over to Decker’s computer console and extended a robotic arm. It hooked into the console, and read-outs and diagrams started displaying on the monitor.

“Placed in any of these locations,” Rad explained, as a blinking spot lit up on screen, “a solar array with a few reflectors could harness the sun’s light and focus it using the Crystal right on this weak spot on our main dome.”

A targeting sight overlaid a real-time picture of the outside of the Apollo Base. Then a simulated beam of light hit the target and melted a hole right through the dome’s protective moonbrick shield.

Everyone flinched.

“I have accelerated the time cycles. In reality, it would take several minutes to reach critical melting point—”

This time it was the Inspector who cut in: “You mean this Crystal thing could have taken out the whole base... and it would’ve looked like a plain old meteorite accident?”

“My point is that it still can.”

Decker’s jaw dropped. His mustache no longer bristled. Instead, it drooped like a soggy sponge.

Inspector Ride started pacing.

“Okay, people. I want no moonstone unturned here. Let’s scour the outer grounds. Elan! Get those GPS coordinates from Buzz...” Ride barked out an endless string of orders and various aides and helpers raced to carry them out.

Andromeda and Pixie sat dejectedly on top of a giant crate in the Petting Zoo. Andromeda sunk her balled fist into her chin. Pixie stared blankly at the aquarium, watching the zebra fish zip back and forth. Rad stood nearby cradling Pickle in two of his arms. A third arm was rummaging around in search of more cat food. Rad’s last arm seemed to scratch his own head, which made him look more human than usual.

“Why does your pet-creature make that thrumming noise?” he asked. “It sounds like an Earth motorcycle.”

Andromeda sighed. “It’s called purring, Rad. It means he’s happy.”

She let her hand flop down, but the chin that had been resting on it still sagged.

“What if they don’t stop him in time, Rad?” she asked, gazing into his softly glowing eyes.

“Mmm-mmm. Not good. The Lavalight Crystal will burn a hole through our dome, sucking out all the air and rendering

Apollo Base uninhabitable. It is unlikely there will be sufficient time for you to safely evacuate before—”

“Um, Rad? I was hoping you might just say something comforting like ‘it will all be okay, Andrie,’ or ‘everything will work out just fine, Andrie’—instead of ‘you’re going to die a painful and freezifying death on this barren, airless rock.’”

“I see.” Rad’s eyes dimmed a little. “Do not worry, Andrie. You will not freeze. The temperature is two-hundred forty degrees outside.”

“Oh, *ta*, that’s SO much better.” Andromeda shook her head. “How about you, Pix? How’re you going to spend your final minutes before melting into a smelly little puddle?”

Pixie ignored her. She kept observing the zebra fish as they swam in and out of tiny holes in the lumps of Swiss cheese-like rock at the bottom of their tank.

“Pixie!” Andromeda snapped her fingers in front of the spacey girl’s nose.

Pixie twisted her head and shoulders sideways to face Andromeda squarely. Her almond-shaped eyes flickered.

“I’ve got it, Andrie. I know where X went.”

“Uh, you do? How—how do you know that, Pix?”

“It’s easy. Like the fish.”

“Like fish. Um, I’m not like making the connection, *pally*.”

“They swim through tunnels. He’ll use the tunnels to escape, too. He zoomed off in a drill car, remember? He’d need a vehicle to carry heavy equipment for the solar array, and the quickest way from point A to point B is to drive underground.”

“Okay, but there’s lots of tunnels around the base, aren’t there?”

“*Da*, but most of ‘em are access tunnels to the various domes and underground garages nearby. He’d have to set up the Crystal further away to avoid attention... There’s only one tunnel that goes out far enough and where there’s no people who would spot him,” Pixie concluded.

Suddenly Andromeda saw the answer. “That old unfinished tunnel we stumbled on when we came in through the Greenhouse!”

“*Wah-lah*. The Tube to Luna One. If I remember right, the Tube heads toward Double Crater...”

“Brilliant deduction, Pixie,” Rad joined in. “Double Crater is the perfect spot.”

“How so?” asked Andromeda.

“The crater is rimmed with a ridge of hills,” answered Pixie. “Mr. X’s Beam-o’-Death would need a straight line of sight, probably from the top of a hill. Otherwise the light beam would be blocked by the ground.”

“Blocked by the ground? Huh???”

Rad attempted an answer: “The Moon is not flat like that syrupy breakfast food you like to eat – what is it called?”

“Uh, pancakes?” suggested Andromeda.

“You have syrup with your pancakes?” Pixie asked, surprised. “I like them with peanut butter and sour cream myself.”

“Eww. No wonder your breath st—”

“Right,” Rad continued patiently. “Well, actually, the Moon is a sphere like the Earth. That is to say, the ground curves. So, if you were shooting a beam of light across it for several *clicks...*”

“Ah, I get it...you’d either fire it off into space or knock right into moonrock instead of hitting your target,” Andromeda finished.

“Unless the beam started higher up, such as on top of a hill,” Rad couldn’t help adding. “So, that gives me the data I need in order to plot possible locations for the solar array within reach of the Luna One Tube...”

He paused awkwardly and turned toward Andromeda.

“Just one question, Andrie: What exactly are you supposed to do with this thing?”

His soft-glowing eyes looked down at the furry bundle in his arms.

“It’s a cat, Rad. You pet it.”

25. Escape



The Evil Cupcakes parked their stolen, hot-wired ponies in the dark by the abandoned drill car. So far, Andromeda's latest plan was working. She and Pixie, dressed in their custom-fit Apollo spacesuits, helped Rad dismount his pony. It was a good thing they were in one-sixth gravity, because on Earth he would have weighed more than the two of them put together!

Andromeda crept up to the front of the drill car. She pointed her *torch* through the driver's side window and peered inside for a while, heart thumping.

"Noo?" Pixie whispered.

"No one there. But this is the one. I'm sure of it."

"Okay, where to now?"

"There must be some sort of exit to the surface or something, right?"

“Da, there’d be maintenance hatches, I suppose, all along the route.”

“Look there,” said Rad.

He’d swapped out two of his arm sockets for powerful spotlights. They lit up the end of the tunnel. It was smooth as glass.

“This must be as far as they drilled,” Pixie muttered.

“And they must have had a way to haul out all their equipment,” Rad chimed in, as Andromeda scouted ahead.

“Footprints!” she yelled into her radio. *“Of course! The drilling dust must have settled years ago and there’s been nothing down here to disturb it ever since... They go this way!”*

The others hurried to catch up as Andromeda disappeared down a small side tunnel. They found her standing on a metal platform at the tunnel’s end.

“A hydraulic lift! Come on, let’s see if it still works!”

“STOP!” roared a voice through their headsets.

A bright beam of light suddenly transformed the darkness into dazzling near-daylight. A crowd of people converged on them. Andromeda and Pixie covered their eyes and squinted painfully. Through her fingers Andromeda made out some faces: Buzz, Decker, Inspector Ride...

Ugh.

“Andromeda Starwell. Pixie Flutter. By the authority granted to me under Article Three of the Space Naval Charter, I am placing you under arrest for hacking base security, accessing classified information, violating curfew, stealing ponies, destroying property and... for the theft of the Lavalight Crystal,” shouted Ride.

“An impressive list,” sneered Base Commander Decker, “and all in the last week!”

“What?!” hissed Pixie, who grabbed the Inspector by the lapel of her uniform and looked up into her icy-steel eyes. “Are you totally *loco*? X is out there about to melt the base and —”

“Take them away,” ordered the Inspector.

Two marines stepped forward and pinned Pixie’s arms behind her back before she had a chance to duck through their legs as she’d planned.

“*Way!* Get your grubby hands off me!”

The marines assigned to arrest Rad were having somewhat more difficulty. For one, he had four arms to pin down. And, on top of that, a robot’s steel pincer arms are a lot stronger than human arms.

That gave Andromeda time to make her decision. She slammed her hand against the red button on the hydraulic lift, sending her hurtling toward the ceiling.

By the time Ride noticed, a large hatch in the roof had spiraled open.

“Reverse the controls! Reverse the controls, you fools!”

Decker pushed and shoved his way over to the console and slammed the green button. Andromeda felt the lift suddenly jerk to a halt and then start falling. Worse, the roof hatch started to spiral closed.

Only one chance, she thought, taking a big gulp. No time to be afraid.

She squatted down and quickly launched herself straight up in the air.

“Go, Andrie!” Pixie yelled in her headset as Andromeda vaulted up over twenty feet through the narrowing opening above.

An instant later, the door’s steel jaws clanged shut.

Full lunar daylight made the bright light in the tunnel seem like a child’s nightlight by comparison. It seared right into Andromeda’s brain, like piping hot sand pouring into her skull. She quickly flipped down her sun visor, but it was too late.

She raised her hands to her face. Nothing.

Moved them around. Still nothing. Andromeda couldn't see a thing.

OMG. I'm blind.

26. Sacrifice on the Hill



Bright flashes and dark spots danced in front of Andromeda's eyes.

Got to get off the hatch, she thought, stumbling in a random direction until she tripped on a jagged piece of Moon rock.

Kneeling in the moondust she tried to calm herself. *Relax, Andrie. It's just flash blindness. It won't last long. Relax.*

Sure enough, the spots stopped swimming so much. Andromeda swiveled her head around trying to see. She was able to sense an area of brightness above.

Probably the sun, she realized.

But wait, high on the left was another bright spot—except this one was slowly growing brighter.

Oh, no, the Crystal! Mr. X must be activating it.

Andromeda scrambled blindly toward the growing bright spot and ran headlong into a rocky slope. She'd have to crawl up on hands and knees.

Wait!

There was a bit of gray color now. She couldn't focus on anything, but the colors were returning. Up the hill she went!

In the vacuum of space, the only noises were the empty crackle of her radio and the sucking sound of her breathing gear. That's why the sudden laughter made her stomach leap into her mouth.

First, she heard a wheeze and a snort, then a frothy gurgle like small jets of spittle bubbling out of someone's mouth. Still on all fours, Andromeda looked up and saw a tall, dark shadow outlined by bright light. The edges of the shadow flashed silver.

"X!"

"That's MISTER X to you, young lady," an evil, distorted voice rasped.

How ironic. Finally I find someone who doesn't call me "kid" or "girl" and it's my freaky archenemy.

"So, you escaped my secret lair, eh? No matter. You're just in time for my little surprise."

The shadow stepped closer.

“Did you know that ‘Apollo’ was the Greek god of light? He fought with a silver bow and arrow. And now Apollo Base will die by the light. And I will be the arrow fitted to his silver bow. The god of light! Oh, how the irony kills me. No, kills them! Get it? Tee-hee-hee,” the evil voice tittered with glee.

At last Andromeda’s sight was recovering. She could see Mr. X standing on the hilltop above her. Ripples of sunlight cascaded down his silver spacesuit. He was surrounded by what looked like giant mirrors. And, next to him rested a five-foot-high crystal that glittered with sparkles of red, flashes of blue, glints of yellow, purple and green.

The Lavalight Crystal!

Suddenly, a powerful beam of light shot from the hilltop toward Apollo Base. A small dot of orange instantly appeared on the distant main dome. Andromeda watched in horror as it grew into a red-hot glowing circle.

“Melt, melt, melt!” Mr. X chanted.

I have to stop him!

She tensed her muscles and crouched like a tiger, then pounced. Andromeda soared through the airless sky straight at Mr. X. They collided and fell over, tumbling together down the hillside.

Their momentum carried them about halfway down before they crashed into a boulder. The impact loosened

Andromeda's grip and Mr. X was able to scramble to his feet an instant before Andromeda could. Worse, her opponent was stronger than her. He steadied himself against the boulder and pushed Andromeda with the sole of his boot before she could regain her balance.

She pitched over the edge.

The man in the silver spacesuit watched with satisfaction as she rolled all the way to the bottom of the rocky hill and lay still. He grinned evilly, then turned his back to climb the hill.

Turning his back was Mr. X's first mistake. The second mistake was underestimating Andromeda Starwell.

Sound can't travel in the vacuum of space, she thought. So, if I just turn off my radio he won't hear me coming...

After a dozen or so moonjumps, she finally caught up with her opponent. You see, Andromeda had only been pretending to lie still so Mr. X would think she'd been badly hurt. She hunted for a loose stone in the still-blurry sunlight, then snuck up behind him and...

BLAM!

"Why... are... the stars... spinning..." Mr. X asked in wonder as he stumbled around in his dented helmet.

Soon he found himself tumbling down the hill—this time all by himself.

Andromeda didn't waste any time congratulating herself. The red-hot glowing circle on the side of the Apollo Base dome had grown even wider.

How much time left? Minutes? Seconds?

She immediately moonjumped over to the Crystal and landed right in the middle of the array. She braced herself for some serious heat... but there wasn't any! Andromeda's spacesuit stayed cool as a crater.

Hmm. That beam's burning a hole through moonbrick that's several clicks away. It's three thousand degrees! So why don't I feel any heat?

Then she stepped into the path of light reflected off one of the mirrors. Almost instantly, it felt like a hot summer day in the Grand Canyon—the kind of day on those sun-heated rocks where the hotness comes at you in waves from every direction.

Andromeda had a sudden vision of her wavy, auburn hair bursting into orange flames. She staggered toward the Crystal, but the heat grew even more intense. She could smell her suit melting. It was awful.

How do I turn this thing off?

She wasn't going to last long in this heat. She was already feeling dizzy. In fact, she was so disoriented that she was barely aware of the hand grabbing her shoulder.

Then another hand grabbed her other shoulder.

And another two hands grabbed her by the waist.

Wait a sec. Four hands?

“You can’t be X,” she mumbled as she felt herself carried out of the path of the light beam. “Too many hands.”

Two softly glowing eyes gazed down at her. “Rad!” exclaimed Andromeda, feeling more alert as her cooling system kicked in.

Someone in a blue spacesuit stood next to her robot-friend. “Buzz?”

The blue guy tapped his helmet.

“I get it! My radio!” Andromeda realized, switching it back on.

“What were you doing with your radio off, Andrie?” Buzz demanded. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? If there was an emergency –”

“Um, this IS an emergency, Buzz.”

“Oh, right. So what do we do?”

“Only one more minute until the beam melts through the dome’s moonbrick shielding,” Rad reported.

“The reflectors!” yelled Andromeda.

“*Da*, that’ll do the trick. Let’s do it!” agreed Buzz.

The two split up and each ran to the nearest reflector. They tried tilting the mirrors upward to reflect the light away from the Crystal.

“Stay out of the path of the reflected light, Andrie. That is why you almost melted into gooey sludge just now,” explained Rad. “Remember, heat cannot travel in a vacuum, but light energy can.”

Heat can't travel. Sound can't travel. Light gets a free pass. Nice to know.

“Um, could we save the lecture for later, professor?” quipped Andromeda. “These mirrors are so dang hard... to... move,” she groaned, every muscle in her body straining.

“Maybe if we do them together...” Buzz suggested, running over to help.

“Fifteen seconds,” Rad updated.

“Out of time!” Andromeda croaked.

She wasn't sure if the croaking was because her throat was parched from heat or whether she was choked up knowing that all those poor people inside the base were about to have one VERY bad day.

Buzz halted as he reached Andromeda's mirror. To his surprise, Rad was walking straight into the middle of the solar array.

“Rad, what are you doing?” shouted Buzz.

Rad didn't answer. Only his eyes glowed brightly as he stabbed one of his arms directly into the light beam. His arm pulsed orange-red like molten lava as it slowly twisted the focusing mirror around.

“Rad, no! Your arm!” Andromeda hollered.

“Five seconds left,” was his only response.

His arm shimmered and began to liquefy as he continued to twist the mirror.

Finally, the beam reversed itself to strike the Crystal's titanium frame. By the time Buzz and Andromeda pulled Rad away from the beam, his arm was completely vaporized.

“What have you done? What have you done?” cried a distorted voice.

“We have to get out of here!” yelled Buzz.

The titanium was rapidly heating up now that the beam was reflected back at it.

“But X—we can capture him!” groaned Andromeda.

“No! We have to go,” insisted Buzz. He grabbed her arm and yanked hard. “Come on!”

They stumbled quickly down the hill and hopped to the hatch as the sky brightened behind them. Rad followed.

“NOOOO! My beautiful solar death ray!” Mr. X raged, alone on the hilltop.

The Crystal’s frame had grown white-hot and that was, in turn, causing the glass itself to warp and bend. It would never be usable again.

“I’ll get you, Andromeda Starwell. You’ll pay for this!”

“Your friends are here, Andrie. I’ll leave you alone for a while.” Nurse Sullivan said in her pleasant Jamaican accent.

“*Ta,*” said Andromeda, sitting up.

The nurse exited the infirmary just as the other Evil Cupcakes filed in. Andromeda pulled the bandage off her eyes to see them: Rad, Pixie... and Buzz.

“Look, Andrie. I am as good as new,” Rad beamed, showing off his new arm (to replace the one that got vaporized).

Andromeda grinned. *It’s sure nice to have replaceable arms!*

“I’m sorry I led Inspector Ride after you,” Buzz apologized. “I really thought you needed the help.”

“Yeah, some help! Well, I suppose you half made up for it in the end,” replied Andromeda coolly, “but I’m afraid I’ll never be able to forgive you.”

Buzz looked really worried. His face twitched. His hand ruffled through his eyelash-length hair.

Andromeda smiled mischievously. “Well, I might forgive you if you tell me how you and Rad escaped from the Inspector’s clutches and found me.”

“It was Pixie’s idea, really,” Buzz admitted, looking much relieved. “After Ride’s goons stuffed her in their truck, they kind of left her alone in there. So she texted me on my band with her, uh, orders.”

Pixie stuck her chin up proudly. “After all,” she said, “Buzz wasn’t under arrest—only us. And ya can’t really arrest a bot either, can ya?” she added, nodding at Rad.

“True, Pixie,” agreed Rad. “That would indeed be the height of dumb-idiot grownup-ness.”

All of the Evil Cupcakes laughed.

27. Safe?



The days crept by and Mr. X was still nowhere to be found. His secret lair was empty by the time Inspector Ride arrived – just a few deactivated bots laying around in an old underground garage – and the whole solar array on the hilltop had been smashed by a meteor shower into broken shards of glass.

That left the Inspector with just enough evidence to half-believe Andromeda and friends and to drop all charges, but nothing that yielded any real clues about the true villain or his whereabouts. If it weren't for the nearly life-threatening damage to Apollo's main dome (right outside the galley!), they might have thought the whole thing just a prank.

So, the Evil Cupcakes were safely back on base... but was the base itself safe anymore?

At last the day came when Andromeda's dad was going to arrive on the Moon. Everyone was eager to meet him and sad that tomorrow she was scheduled to fly back home. The long lunar day was nearly over and that meant it was the last chance for kids to play outside for another two weeks.

"Andrie, Andrie, guess what?" Pixie came running into her cabin early that morning.

"What?" Andromeda groaned.

She was still half-asleep. Her roomies weren't any happier for getting woken up either.

"It's another Moonjump Day," she whispered loudly, bouncing up and down like a Mexican jumping bean. "In your honor, Andrie!"

All the girls jolted up in their bunks with big smiles on their faces.

Their excitement was understandable. Lunie kids are only allowed outdoors two hours per day – per LUNAR day, that is – and only if there aren't any solar flares or other surges of dangerous radiation. (Solar flares tend to cause havoc for settlers living on the Moon.) This meant that kids could only get outside at best twice per Earth-month.

This Moonjump Day featured a new event: magball. It was a bizarre and frightening sport that Andromeda had never heard of before. Few Earthies have. Quite frankly, it's a game

that's hard to understand unless you see it with your own eyes. Each team, Blue and Gold, had about a dozen kids each, from ages six to fourteen (younger and you have to stay in Early Care, older and you're in Self-Study—no more classes for you).

Coach Shepard reviewed the rules for magball: "Each of you gets four electromagnets to attach to your spacesuits," he said, passing them around in their velcro wrappers. "Fasten one around each arm and one for each leg—and stop that, Danny."

Danny had velcroed a bunch of magnets around David's faceplate and poor David was stumbling and tripping everywhere.

"In each hand, you've got your mag trigger. Pull the trigger and your magnets flip on and attract the ball as it zips by. Pull again and the magnets go in reverse and repel the ball. That'll make the ball swerve AWAY from your magnets."

David had fallen over and was having trouble getting up. The magnets Danny had wrapped around his head were sticking to the ground; some areas of the *Tranq* have high surface concentrations of iron, and these were strong electromagnets... When David finally lurched to his feet, there was a huge meteor fragment attached to his face. It looked

like he'd sprouted a ginormous tar-colored wart so that now he had two heads, one normal and one warty.

"Very good, Dave," quipped the coach, "two heads are better than one... Now listen up, everyone: You can pass the ball forward. You can pass it back. You can throw it up a hundred feet in the air and do a triple back flip. As long as you don't touch the ball with your hands or run while the ball is attached to your magnets."

Coach Shepard paused, savoring for a moment the insanity of this native Lunie sport.

The day that Earth has anything like it will be the day raspberry jelly donuts learn to fly, he mused.

A magball can fly at truly stupendous speeds that make even race cars look slow. But the truly *loco* thing about the sport is that it has eight periods.

"In first period, you'll start with one ball. In second period, we put a second ball in play. In third period, we add yet another ball. And so on. Is that clear?"

What Coach Shepard didn't say was that each time another ball is added to the game, all the tactics change and the pace speeds up until your eyes go batty trying to keep track of where all the balls are.

Now Andromeda couldn't keep all these rules straight like you and I can. She just stood there in total shock for the first

minute as she watched the balls whizzing overhead. Then she decided to duck her head down to avoid getting hit. This game was positively DANGEROUS!

Buzz passed to Pixie. Pixie hurdled high over Deke and pitched to Sally, who chucked the ball at the goal post. Jason leapt to block it. The magball glanced off his head and rolled back to Buzz. The ball flew up to his arm magnet and he dove under another opponent and jumped to throw, only to be tackled in mid-air by Jason again.

Now David picked up the ball.

“Pass it here, Dave!” cried Danny.

“No, over here!” hollered Jason.

“Dave, give it!” yelled Deke.

Poor David got dizzy and glassy-eyed trying to decide. He never got the chance...

Andromeda and Sally combined forces to knock him flat on his back.

He burped.

You’ve probably guessed by now that Andromeda didn’t score any points during her first magball game. She was quite pleased just to survive it without any serious injuries – and to find herself on the winning team. She was even more pleased

and surprised when after the game Jason proved himself a good sport for once and actually shook hands with her.

“Good game,” was all he said, but hey, it was a start.

Andromeda aced the Aerial Obstacle Course this time and did a fine round of Moondiving, but it was the Moonjumping that was nearest and dearest to her heart. She found that after two weeks on the Moon she could control her jumps—and landings!—almost as well as any Lunie could.

As Andrie headed for the airlock, she heard a voice from behind.

“Well done, Miss Starwell.”

Only one person spoke that way.

“Dad! You finally made it!” He was here! She spun around, eyes shining, “Dad, you won’t BELIEVE—”

The only thing behind her was a big blocky robot. Andromeda’s eyes dimmed.

How am I going to get home NOW?

“I’m sorry, Andrie,” said Rad, his eyes glowing softly, almost as if he really WAS sorry. “Your dad’s flight got canceled. Bad weather at the spaceport.”

Weather! Andromeda was sick for the sight of weather. The green grass, the blue sky, white puffy clouds—heck, even a thunderstorm would be welcome—and an over-sized

mechanical robot was just no substitute for a warm furry cat purring on your lap.

Rad stepped closer and reached out a robotic arm, almost as if he were trying to comfort her.

“Perhaps it is time for me to explain who I really am.”

Andromeda stepped back, avoiding Rad’s arm. *What did THAT mean?*

“You see, after you accidentally took off for the Moon, I was imprinted with the voice of Adam Starwell,” revealed Rad. “Your dad re-programmed me by satellite uplink to look after you while you were here on the Moon.”

Huh?

“R.A.D. actually stands for Replacement for Andromeda’s Dad,” he explained.

No, this can’t be right.

“But I thought you were my friend!” Andromeda sobbed. “And you were just PROGRAMMED to like me? I don’t wanna talk to you ever again!”

She ran back to the portal, trying not to cry. She felt like such a baby.

“No, Andrie,” Rad said quietly after Andromeda had left. “I AM your friend.”

An unexpected knock came on Andromeda's door around bedtime. The face at the door was even more unexpected. It belonged to Base Commander Decker!

"I just wanted to say that, despite all the misunderstandings, it's been a pleasure having you on the base," said Decker.

She could see that he wasn't used to speaking this way, but meant well.

"I suggest you get a good night's sleep since tomorrow is your Farewell Party. The shuttle for home takes off right after the party, so you'll need to pack first thing in the morning."

"I'm already packed, *ta*. Sorry I've been such a hassle. I guess it's time to go home now..."

After Decker left, Andromeda wondered how she felt about going home. Could she really miss the bleak moonscape? The long, winding tunnels? The now-darkening sky filling with twinkling stars?

She knew the answer. She just didn't want to admit it.

Now there came another knock on the door. Her roomies were still brushing their teeth and hair in the bathroom making swishing and gurgling sounds and talking with mouths full of toothpaste.

This time it was Rad.

“I brought you a parting gift, Andrie.”

Is he really being thoughtful? Or is he just programmed to act that way?

Andromeda decided it didn't matter. She couldn't stay mad at Rad.

He handed her a thin cardboard box.

“Please open it,” he insisted.

She did. Inside was a T-shirt. She unfurled it to find some writing and decals on it. The front had the official Apollo Research Base logo – an eagle landing on a large space dome.

She laughed when she saw the back of the shirt. For all his robot smarts, Rad wasn't very good at spelling!

“HUMANZ ROOL!” it read.

Andromeda explained the correct spelling with a chuckle. Rad seemed even more embarrassed than when she'd hugged him in public.

“Ah, my mistake is most regrettable, Miss Starwell,” he said, even forgetting to call her by her nickname.

But Andromeda loved how he called her “Miss.” She ate it up.

“I have one more gift for you,” Rad continued. “Something special.”

One of Rad's arms flipped open a small compartment where his stomach would be if he was a person. Another arm pulled out a small ball of tissue paper plastered messily with electrical tape.

"Here."

He handed the gift to Andromeda, who accepted it gently in her cupped hands. Whatever it was, it felt rock-hard and heavy under its thick wrappings.

"What is it, Rad?"

"A keepsake to remember your adventures by. But please, do not open it until the ride home."

I wonder what it could be?

Andromeda wasn't used to robots who liked riddles!

At last she had no more guests and her roomies were settled in their beds. The world grew quiet once more.

That night Andromeda's dreams were of home on Earth, but the funny thing was that she kept on moonjumping everywhere.

It was a pleasant dream up until the end—when she heard the faint echo of strange laughter.

28. Farewell



Andromeda woke up before the morning chime, while the lights were still dimmed. She was in that half-awake, half-asleep haze that you feel after a long sleep.

The only thing she recalled from her dream was the strange laughter. It was a kind of nasal snort with a bit of a wheeze mixed in with the sucking sound of small jets of spittle.

She looked around fearfully.

After all, X hasn't been caught yet... he might even be inside the base right now!

But the only sounds were the peaceful snores of her roomies.

Pixie had arranged to meet her for *brekkie*, so as soon as she was dressed and groomed, Andromeda strolled down the corridor to the galley. Her friend was waiting. So was Rad. (Of

course, he didn't eat breakfast—or lunch or *din-din*—robots seldom do.)

“O-hayo, Andrie!”

“Way, Pix. Howdy, Rad.”

The robot tipped his cowboy hat.

“Why the long face?” asked Pixie.

Can they tell I'm worried? Andromeda touched her hand to her cheek to see if she really felt any different.

“Well,” she began, *“Inspector Ride still hasn't solved the crime and that silver-suited madman and his evil bots are still on the loose—no offense to you, Rad.”*

“None taken, Andrie.”

“With all the excitement yesterday, I never got a chance to tell anyone my hunch. Remember Harry Hu? The fake-clumsy scheming mechanic who builds robots and has access to practically the whole base? Well I bet he's up to no good RIGHT NOW!”

Pixie looked shaken.

“Gosh, Andrie, you're right! Let's go now—food can wait!”

“Wait a moment,” said Rad.

His eyes were glowing brighter now as his new upper-left arm rotated high over his head.

“Loading... loading...”

The two girls looked at each other, a little puzzled.

WHACK!

Rad's robotic hand slapped the table hard. Andromeda and Pixie both scooted their chairs back in alarm. The hand lifted up to reveal a small, dark speck on the table.

It was a squashed fly.

"Mission complete. Ready to roll, *pallies*."

Andromeda, Pixie and Rad stood outside Harry the Mechanic's door. Andromeda cupped her hands to form a makeshift megaphone.

"Alright, Harry. We're onto your tricks. Open up now or we'll call Decker and his goon squad."

"My door's open," called a voice. "Come on in."

"You first, Andrie," smiled Pixie.

Andromeda shook her head and tiptoed in carefully, suspicious of booby traps and hidden guard bots that Harry might use to capture them. But instead she found Harry just sitting there in his den, fiddling with an old sound mixer.

"It's for the Playpen lounge, Andrie. You know how Deke and Danny like playing at DJ sometimes... they asked me to fix it up. Say, what was all that yelling about Decker?"

Now Andromeda was filled with doubt. He certainly didn't SEEM like an evil mastermind. But she stuck to her guns and decided to play it straight.

"Harry, where were you at the time of the theft?"

"You mean the lockdown? Well, actually, I was talking to your dad."

"WHAT?!"

That was pretty much the last thing Andromeda was expecting.

"Well, sure, I got a direct line into the communications tower. One of the perks of being mechanic-in-chief, I suppose... Here, lemme show ya."

Harry flicked a switch and tapped a few menu items on a little viewscreen attached to his sofa armrest. Then a ringing sound filled the room.

"Hello?"

"Dad!"

"Oh, hi, Andrie. I'm so glad you called!"

"Dad, is it true that you were talking to Harry when we went into lockdown last week?"

"Well, yes, Andrie. As a matter of fact, Harry was helping me with an important project."

Now Harry jumped in, “You see, I built Rad, but needed your dad’s help to program him. He uploaded the software from Earth over the link-up.”

“And Harry used my voice imprint, which explains why Rad sounds a lot like me!” Adam Starwell concluded. “We thought it’d make you feel a little more at home in a strange place. I programmed him to be as useful and helpful as possible. It seems to have worked out nicely.”

“I am honored,” said Rad, bowing stiffly – his joints were anything but flexible.

Everyone smiled.

“Andrie, I gotta run. I’m still stuck on Earth, but the U.S.S. Explorer is already on the way back from its mission and will pick you up tomorrow. Can’t wait to see you, honey. Harry here will help you out if there’s anything special you want for your going-away party. Catch ya in a flash!”

“Bye, Dad!”

And he was gone. Andromeda felt a little better, but she was no closer to solving the mystery.

“Harry, about my going-away party...”

“Mmm, *da*?”

“There is one thing I want. It’s something special for my friends.”

She scribbled a few things down on a notepad and handed it to Harry.

“Well, sure, I think I could arrange to make that...”

The crew of the U.S.S. Explorer was back. All three of them. They were milling about the Viewing Room as Miss Plum, Nurse Sullivan, and some other Apollo Base residents laid out the Farewell Party tables, with the help of a bevy of kitchen bots.

Several tables were already filled with various snacks and foods. It looked like quite a spread!

“Andromeda,” smiled Pilot Cassandra. “Glad to see you again, sailor.”

“Glad to be seen,” Andromeda smiled back. “How was the mission?”

“A success,” answered Commander Richards easily. “A little trouble with my spacesuit and some frostbite” –he raised his hands to show blackened and malformed fingertips, sending shivers down Andromeda’s spine – “but it all turned out okay.”

“Where’d you end up going?” wondered Andromeda.

She noticed Mission Specialist Shaw had a long, deep scar along his cheek wrapping back around to his left earlobe—right under his dangling earring. It did not improve his looks.

“That’s classified,” replied the Commander, “but if you must know, we were on the Far Side.”

“It’s a lonely place,” added Cassandra, “full of dangers both natural and otherwise. Barely been mapped.”

“And now, after fending off giant space scorpions and lava beasts, we’ve been assigned to be your ride home,” concluded Shaw smugly.

That about killed the conversation, so Andromeda decided to help prepare for the party. Guests should be arriving any minute now. But Ms. Plum would have none of it. She wouldn’t let Andromeda lift a finger.

“It’s a party in your honor, my dear. You should relax. Have a snack while you’re waiting.”

So she did.

After gobs of healthy snacks of chilled celery, carrot sticks, and melon balls, Andromeda felt the need for something a little, well, junkie. Then she spotted an “Andromeda Bar.” It was a special kind of chocolate bar that she’d invented. In fact, it was the going-away present she’d persuaded Harry to make. He had dutifully programmed the kitchen bots to fill the order using Andromeda’s own special recipe.

And so, the inner battle began...

Should I? she asked herself. *No I shouldn't. Should I?* she repeated. *I really shouldn't. But would just one hurt? It's MY party – and my recipe. And it's soooooo long to wait. And I had my healthy veggies. And Dad's not here to boss me around. This may be my only chance!*

She picked up a bar, bit down and closed her eyes in delight. She could savor every delicious, scrumptious ingredient: the melt-in-your-mouth milk chocolate, rich gooey fudge, dense chewy caramel, fluffy whipped nougat and that oh-so-smooth peanut butter. Everything was perfect. What really shocked her was that Harry had finally done something right. Brilliantly right! It even tasted better than... than an evil cupcake!

Mission Specialist Shaw, too, was attracted to the buffet bar. He hadn't had fresh food the whole mission long.

"Mmm, this stuff looks good," he grunted, grabbing some finger sandwiches and cramming them into his wide maw.

"Hey," growled Cassandra. "Can't you wait for the other guests to arrive? The party hasn't even started yet!"

"Well SOMEBODY's gotta start this party, sweetheart." Shaw wiped his nose on his sleeve, then picked up a plate and started piling food on it.

"I'm not your sweetheart. And quit behaving like an ass."

Shaw ignored her. The Cap'n was off mingling with some newcomers who'd just arrived – and he only took orders from him, not some sensitive, do-gooder pilot. So he snarfed down a stack of roast beef and then a chain of sausage links, snorting happily like a pig as he ate.

Cassandra looked on in disgust. “Can't you even PRETEND not to be a big, hairy ape for a day?”

“No?” Shaw replied carelessly, his mouth full of crunchy eggroll.

He continued to stuff himself silly with food. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped.

The next moment the Mission Specialist was on his knees gasping for air. His thick, rough hands were clawing at his neck, as if he was trying to strangle himself! His mouth flapped open and shut like a fish out of water, but no sound came out.

Richards ambled over calmly and looked at Shaw's gagging blue lips with some interest. He reached out his fingers and pinched Shaw's nose. Instantly, Shaw coughed up whatever was stuck in his throat. He could breathe! His broad, beefy chest heaved for air. Yes, he would live to choke another day.

Nurse Sullivan was impressed.

“Where'd ya learn to do THAT?” she asked the Commander.

“What, oh, the nose-pinch?” Richards answered casually. “I think, uh, I read about it in a comic book once.”

Shaw’s face was now back to its normal look—that is, its normal crooked, brutish, lopsided look...

“It was a grape,” he rasped, rubbing his nose. “I almost got freakishly killed by a measly little grape.”

Richards snickered. “I can see the headline... Man versus Grape: Grape Wins.”

“I feel sorry for the grape,” Cassandra added.

“Need a teddy bear?” Andromeda chimed in.

“Aww, the Space Devil take you all!” Shaw stormed out. Everyone else cracked up.

“Mmm, I wish it was always that easy to get rid of him,” sighed Cassandra.

“That’s enough, Cass,” said Richards, now sobering up. “We gotta get the lander ready to head back to the mother ship. Need to run through the pre-launch checks.”

He turned to face Andromeda. “Don’t forget; we leave at nineteen-hundred hours.”

And he left.

Cassandra smiled. “The Cap’n always gets a little nervous with his baby out in orbit. He’s always worrying ‘what if the autopilot goes haywire’ or ‘what if an asteroid hits her while

we're down here feasting and gorging ourselves.' Well, I bet that calm exterior of his didn't fool you none... Enjoy the party, Andrie!"

Cassandra filed out behind him.

Andromeda looked around. The kids hadn't arrived yet. It was just her and a bunch of boring grown-ups who were still setting up.

There was Ms. Plum, Nurse Sullivan and Pixie's mom, Jo, laying out plates and cups. A few of the controllers from the Pit, arrayed in their dress uniforms, were tying balloons to chairs and hanging up signs and streamers. One said, "Farewell Starwell" on it. Dr. Villin came by with a group of his Lab workmates who were chatting amiably about their latest scientific experiments. And she recognized some of the workers she'd encountered while visiting the factory and the greenhouse.

But no one really to talk to, nothing to do.

She walked over to the window. The view outside was stunning. The sun had set last *waykup* and the stars were even brighter and shinier than when she'd first landed. Andromeda searched the sky for her galaxy, but it was nowhere to be found. The Moon was facing the wrong direction.

Suddenly, she heard a noise behind her.

“Psst!”

No, it was above her.

“Pssst!”

Maybe in the next room?

“PSSSST! ANDRIE!” came another urgent whisper. “Over HERE.”

She spotted Harry behind the drinks table. His head seemed to be buried in the wall. A label above his head read “TRASH.”

“What is it THIS time, Harry?” asked Andromeda, amused.

“My head. It’s stuck in the garbage chute.”

So it was. And somehow Andromeda was not surprised.

“How can I help?” she asked, trying not to giggle.

“Maybe give me a pull? If you don’t get me out, I’ll be sucked into the trash chute next time anyone presses the garbage disposal button—even if they’re in a different part of the base.”

She tried yanking his arm.

“Harder!” he begged.

She tried harder. People were starting to notice.

“It’s no use, Harry.”

“*Fay-hwa!* You’ve got to get more leverage,” insisted Harry. “Try picking up my feet and pulling.”

Andromeda grabbed both his feet and tugged.

Suddenly, the garbage light turned green and she heard a great big “whoosh!” Someone, somewhere had hit that garbage disposal button. Harry was sucked into the chute like a chunk of strawberry up a milkshake straw.

Oh. Poor Harry.

Everyone was laughing.

There were peals of hysterical laughter, deep booming guffaws, high-pitched cackles, throaty chortles—all kinds of laughs. But among all the laughs, there was one that was different. It rose above all the others. It was sort of a nasal snort with a bit of wheezing combined with the sucking sound of spittle. And it lingered long after the other laughs were done.

That laugh. I KNOW that laugh.

It was behind her. Andromeda felt a drop of spittle land on her neck.

Turning around, she saw who was making the laugh. I supposed you’ve guessed it already. You’ve probably been snickering up your sleeve at Andromeda for some time now. That’s right, the laugh belonged to Mr. X, the man in the silver spacesuit, the man who’d stolen the Lavalight Crystal. The face that went with the laugh belonged to that evil villain... DOCTOR Villin!

Yes, of course, Andromeda thought. HE knew our every move. HE could program his bot to infiltrate Apollo Base or to run us over with a drill car. HE could have it break into his very own lab to carry off the Crystal. Who would ever suspect a scientist would want to steal his own creation? HE had a perfect alibi while he let his evil bots do the dirty work.

Then Dr. Villin noticed her staring at him. Andromeda shivered.

He knows.

She was in great danger. Run. She had to run!

Andromeda had been hiding in the ventilation shaft right outside the locker room for hours. She'd bounded off like a scared rabbit and found the nearest hidey-hole to squeeze into.

People had searched for her, calling out "Andrie! Andrie!" but she didn't know whom to trust. After a while the voices had grown fainter and then stopped. Her pounding heartbeat had taken a while to return to normal.

The bell for *din-din* chimed as the lights all over the base dimmed slightly.

It must be safe by now, Andromeda thought.

She loosened the vent grille and poked her head out. The coast was clear. She slipped out into the corridor.

Then she heard a footfall. What bad luck!

“Ha! There you are, you miserable brat. I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Shaw! That evil space pirate. He was in cahoots with Dr. Villin for sure!

“C’mere ya little squirt. You’re coming with me.”

Andromeda tried to duck back into the shaft, but Shaw grabbed her by the leg.

“Get off me!”

“Ha! Got piglet by the tail.”

“Let me go!”

She tried kicking at him with her free leg. That left boot prints on Shaw’s forehead. He grimaced.

“Lemme go! Lemme go!” Shaw mocked, copycatting her. “Now quit squealing, will ya?”

Shaw had now yanked Andromeda completely out of the shaft and pinned her against the wall. He had her by both of her wrists.

But if he thought he’d won the fight, he was wrong. Andromeda knew just what she had to do. She aimed her foot

carefully at the spot where Dad taught her to. Right below the belt. She kicked. Hard.

Shaw's mouth dropped open. His face turned all purple, a mixture of intense pain and amazement written all over it.

"Aww, you kicked me... right in the goobers," he groaned.

Both of his hands let go of Andromeda's wrists.

Andromeda did not stop to feel sorry. Instead, she dove right between Shaw's legs and shimmied under him flat on her belly. Then she got up and ran.

She didn't get far. Now Shaw was *loco*-mad. He jumped up and, before you could blink, tackled Andromeda from behind, crashing her to the floor. Andromeda squirmed, trying to free her legs, but it was no use. Shaw's grip was as strong as an eight-hundred-pound gorilla.

Ugh! He smelled like one, too!

"Now WILL you cooperate?" Shaw's breath reeked of tuna and peanut butter.

"Not a chance, fish-breath!" She spat in Shaw's face.

A little drop of saliva fizzled on Shaw's red-hot angry nose.

"Of all the bone-headed jobs Cap'n makes me do, THIS takes the cake," Shaw growled. "C'mon, our ship's gonna take off without us. Been waiting for hours."

It was just a trick. Shaw was clearly an agent of Dr. Villin's.

“Help! Somebody please help! I’M BEING KIDNAPPED!!!”

But there was no one around. Shaw hoisted her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“I ain’t kidnapping you, stupid,” Shaw grumbled, as he carried her off. “NO ONE would wanna kidnap YOU. In fact, I’d pay good money NOT to have to kidnap you.”

Andromeda wasn’t fooled. Where was he taking her? Back to the evil doctor’s lair?

Wait, there’s Pixie!

“Pixie! No! He’ll snatch you, too!”

Her friend ran after them and pounced on Shaw’s leg, while Andromeda struggled to break free from his grip. Shaw dragged Pixie along with them for a while, but finally succeeded in shaking her off. He had one arm around the back of Andromeda’s legs and used his free hand to shove Pixie to the ground.

They reached the end of the passageway. Shaw flipped his band up and a computer voice said “Access granted.”

The landing bay hatch opened. He stepped through before Pixie could recover, carrying his kicking and squirming bundle with him. The hatch closed behind him.

Pixie pushed and strained. It was no use. Her access rating wouldn't get her into the bay. Even a sumo wrestler couldn't break through a portal.

"Pixie!" hollered Andromeda. "It's the doctor! He's the one!"

But her friend couldn't hear even a peep through the thick metal hatch.

"PIXIE!!!"

Andromeda had never been so scared in her life. The strange thing was, she wasn't scared for herself. It was more like a dark and terrible cloud had settled on the base. A cloud of evil that would strangle everything good and beautiful in the world.

And its name was Villin.

Shaw didn't seem to notice or care. "Ya nearly screwed up our first mission and now we go out of our way to pick you up... and whaddya do? You get all batty again," Shaw muttered. "You're just stone-crazy, girl. Know that?"

With Andromeda's loose hair blocking his view, Shaw just about collided with Pilot Cassandra. The Pilot had run over when she saw Shaw with the girl flung over his back.

"What are you DOING with her?" Cassandra demanded to know.

“She tried to run when she saw me...”

“Well, who wouldn’t???”

“... so I just grabbed her and brought her back.”

Shaw slid Andromeda off his shoulder and laid her down about as gently as a spaceport baggage handler.

“And?”

“And she kicked me in my precious man-parts,” Shaw complained. “I STILL can’t walk right.”

“You never could, ya big, hairy oaf,” scolded Cassandra, fists on her hips, “You deserved it!”

She bent over slightly to look Andromeda at eye level. “Are you okay? Did that big, nasty ape-thing scare you?”

Andromeda nodded, half-pretending to be terrified. (Only half!)

“Aww, poor thing...”

“Poor thing?” Shaw protested. “I can barely walk and you’re sorry for that little pipsqueak?” He could barely contain himself. “I may not ever be able to have kids!”

“On the bright side,” retorted Cassandra, “if Andrie saved the world from you having children, now THAT would be a blessing.”

Andromeda pictured lots of little mini Shaws running around, noisily snarfing down dinner buffets, chasing little girls, and scaring away everything in their path.

Now THAT would be a disaster.

A deep, tired voice sighed from above: “Kids. Don’t have any. Don’t wanna.” It was Commander Richards. He was frowning. “Better get on board, crew. We’re blowin’ this joint.”

Cassandra and Shaw started up the plank to the ship’s hatch.

“Wait!” cried Andromeda. “We have to go back!”

“Huh?!” exclaimed all three grown-ups in chorus.

“Oh, of course! Her cat!” said Cassandra, whacking her palm against her forehead. “Don’t worry, Andromeda, we’ve already got Pickle tucked in all nice and neat. The Commander here even gave him a ribbon for being first cat on the Moon.”

“I think he ate it,” said the Commander, clearing his throat. “Okay, we’re a little behind schedule. We leave NOW.”

Andromeda shook her head. “Dr. Villin. We’ve got to stop him!”

The urgency showed in Andromeda’s pleading eyes.

“She’s been funny like that all day, Cap’n,” said Shaw. “Our troubles ain’t over yet, mark my words.”

“You probably scared her outta her wits with all the man-handling and—GAH!—not to mention the tuna fish peanut butter hairy armpit aroma.”

Cassandra fanned her hand around trying to blow the bad air away.

“Shaw, what’s this about man-handling—”

“—Cap’n! See, she’s getting loose again!”

Andromeda had darted back down the plank again. The others all dashed after her. She got her face right up against the soundproof bay window to see the crowd of people gathered in the Viewing Room to say their goodbyes. There was Pixie, Rad, Sally, Buzz, Deke, David—even Jason with his dad. They were all waving farewell.

“Pixie! Rad! Anyone! It’s Dr. Vee. He’s the villain!” She turned back to the spaceship crew and threw her arms up in desperation. “You’ve GOT to believe me. Those people are in danger!”

“Must be one of those childish fantasies,” said the Commander to his crew.

“Poor darling,” said Cassandra.

“She’s cracked,” agreed Shaw. “Cuckoo!”

He weaved his fingers in the air like a dizzy bird who smacked into a tree trunk and was seeing stars.

“YOU’RE cracked,” added the Pilot.

Dad would believe me, thought Andromeda.

But he wasn’t there.

She’d tried, but now Cassandra and Shaw were taking her away. It felt like being pulled by the under-toe of a strong wave, dragging her in. Except instead of an ocean, there was a spaceship. Its hatch yawned wide open, a big mouth ready to swallow her.

Strange, her thoughts grew misty, as time seemed to come screeching to a halt, *I was so eager to go home. And now I think I’ll miss the feeling of weighing fifteen pounds, the wide open spaces, the twinkling stars and* – she turned around to face the bay window again – *and my new friends.*

Before she disappeared into the ship, Andromeda took one final glance over her shoulder and gave a last wave.

The slow-motion scene would be burned into her memory for a long, long time. Rad stood tall as a tower, eyes glowing softly. Pixie had her nose up against the glass and was making sad puppy faces. Other kids were pressed against each other,

some standing on tiptoes and craning their necks to see her off.

And then she spotted one more face in the crowd that she hadn't noticed before. It was Dr. Villin!

Even at that distance, she could feel the glare of his eyes as they met with her own. Andromeda's nose scrunched up and her eyes narrowed. Her archenemy snarled, teeth bared. His normally handsome, space-hero appearance was twisted with hatred. The two stared silently, locked forever in a secret battle that no one else could understand.

But even forever has an ending and at last the ship's doors clanged shut.

The well wishers kept watching as the lander rolled out of the bay and onto the launch pad. Except that one of them was not really a well wisher...

Dr. Villin's lips curled into a sneer. True, the Crystal was ruined, but it was only one means to his ultimate goal. There were other... possibilities. And now, the one person who knew his true identity had gone.

Who will believe a trouble-making twelve-year-old?

Yes, he could bide his time, preparing his next move while the authorities continued their fruitless search.

Nothing in the whole universe can stop me. Nothing!

- THE END -

Curious readers may visit AndromedasMoon.com to find answers to their questions about Andromeda and her story.

If you enjoyed this book, please post a review on your blog, on GoodReads.com, on [our blog](#), or wherever else suits.

Don't miss Andromeda's next adventure in Book Two of the *Andromeda's Moon* series:

ANDROMEDA'S RETURN

Find the first two chapters of the sequel below the Index...

Index of Lunie Words

Since Lunies come from all over Earth, their language is a mish-mash of various Earth languages, with a few new words thrown into the mix.

Band: Wristband communicator with read-outs of GPS, temperature, air pressure, radiation levels, and various vitals.

Biffled: Best-friended forever (American slang)

Bot: Robot (Lunie)

Brekkie: Breakfast (Australian)

Click: Kilometer – when talking about distance (American slang)

Da: Yes (Russian)

Da-byan: Crap (Mandarin Chinese)

Din-din: Dinner (Lunie)

Fay-hwa: Wasted words – B.S. (Mandarin Chinese)

Garny: Sick as Deke Garn, a real astronaut who got extremely space-sick in 1985 (Lunie)

Loco: Crazy (Spanish)

Noo: Well? So? (Hebrew/Yiddish)

O-Hayo: Good morning (Japanese)

Pally: Pal / buddy (Lunie)

Pasas: Raisins (Spanish)

Peegoo: Butt (Mandarin Chinese)

Portal: A system of airlocks that serve as entry and exit from Moon colonies (Lunie)

Pyan-nee: Cheap (Mandarin Chinese)

Rille: A natural Moon channel like a dry canal (Lunie)

Sec: Wait a second / just a moment (American slang)

Ta: Thanks (Australian)

Torch: A flashlight (U.K. English)

Tranq: A nickname for Mare Tranquillitatis, a.k.a. the “Sea of Tranquility,” located on the Near Side of the Moon (Lunie)

Tube: Underground tunnels used for long-distance transportation from one settlement to another. (U.K. English)

Wah: Wow (Mandarin Chinese)

Wah-lah: There you have it! (French)

Waykup: A “wake-up” is a 24-hour sleep and work period, equal to one Earth Day. (Lunie)

Way: Hey / hey there (Mandarin/Lunie)

Yalla: Hurry up / come on / let’s go (Arabic)

Andromeda's Return

Chapter 1: Message



When she arrived home early from school, Andromeda Starwell was not expecting to hear two voices coming from Dad's bedroom. Mom had gone missing three years ago—when she was ten.

“Cold, I tell you, the trail's cold,” a muffled female voice echoed through the closed door. Andromeda detected a faint accent that might have been East Asian.

“But yesterday you—” a second voice began to protest. It sounded like a man's.

“Yesterday I hadn't had time to run the full trace, Adam,” the first voice insisted. “It's just a random bounce from the Far Side. Probably some daredevil mountain climber. Or one of the new mining operations.”

“Dammit, the transmission codes match, Kai. Now I KNOW those codes didn't change since yesterday,” the second voice oozed with suspicion. “So what did?”

“I want to find her, too, remember?” the female voice protested. “If I had any clue where she was—”

Thwack!

Oops. Andromeda had intended to close the front door quietly, but instead knocked over that dratted purple umbrella Dad always kept in the corner.

Where WHO was, I wonder?

The male voice lowered to a hoarse whisper. "Somebody's here. I'll wave you later."

The bedroom door knob began to jiggle and turn. Andromeda quickly retreated into the kitchen. She could hear the door swing wide open and then the creak of heavy footsteps on the hardwood floor. She sucked in her breath.

"Who's there?" called the gruff voice of Adam Starwell.

"Just me," replied Andromeda, popping her head out across the kitchen threshold. She nearly head-butted her dad in the nose.

The startled Mr. Starwell jerked his head back and put a hand to his heart. "Oh, Andrie, it's you! What are you doing home so early?"

"I'm sick. Didn't you get my wave?"

"Uh, no, I was, uh, busy... working."

That didn't sound like work. I wonder what the big secret is?

That night, Andromeda waited until her kid sister Mayall began snoring. Then she crawled into bed with her homework tablet on her knees. The glow from the screen reflected off an attractive nose, strong chin, and determined aquamarine eyes.

Long auburn hair draped all around the tablet like so many strands of willow.

She pulled up the message she'd copied off Dad's computer one muggy day last summer when he'd been careless and forgotten to log off. She'd read it a zillion times since then:

Call Log: Received distress call from NASA civilian craft Atlantis V at 08:21 Earth Universal Time 5.1.2110. Location: 12 nautical miles east of Roshdestvoensky Crater, Far Side. Reported under attack. Crew intended to evacuate in lander.

Findings: Rescue team found lander wreckage with remains of one crew member. Three more found some distance from craft. Footprints led off in multiple directions. Air recon shows no nearby settlements. Mission rules do not permit ground recon beyond half-click perimeter in blackout zone. Known pirate activity in area. Missing: Commander Phineas Blake and fifth crew member, Mission Specialist Adrianna Starwell.

Conclusion: Loss of vehicle and crew.

Reporting Officer: Commander Bruce Richards, U.S. Space Patrol

Andromeda was in the middle of her third reading when suddenly a pink unicorn charged across her screen.

"Catch me if you can!" it taunted.

Way! Andromeda tapped madly on the screen as the unicorn ducked and weaved. Finally, she nailed the animated beastie in the ribs with her index finger. At that, the screen transformed into the face of a dark-haired, deeply tanned girl with almond-shaped eyes that twinkled mischievously. The face was giggling uncontrollably.

“Pixie!” rasped Andromeda, trying not to wake her six-year-old sister. Curled up in a nest of stuffed animals, Mayall seemed quite content – although it was hard to be sure: a mop of thick brown hair covered her face so that Andromeda couldn’t tell whether it was the front or back of her head.

“Ahoy there, *pally!*” Pixie greeted her brightly. “How’s life on the big blue ball these days?”

“I’ve missed you! Where’ve you been all week?”

Pixie frowned. She was hoping her best friend in the whole universe might at least remark on her awesomely cool unicorn. “We had another lockdown,” she answered. “Didn’t you hear? It’s been all over the news, even on Earth!” Pixie rummaged around on her tablet. “Here. Check out this video.”

There was a slight delay as the transmission took one long second to reach Earth from the Moon. That gave Andromeda just enough time to plug in her headphones. “Renowned physicist Dr. Horace Xavier Villin, inventor of the Lavalight Crystal and also known for his wacky theories on faster-than-light space travel, is missing,” reported a well-dressed woman. She stood on a mid-air walkway in the heart of the lunar city that Andromeda recognized as New Columbia. Its vast circular rim crawled with green vines and trailers. The camera angle then panned up to give a view of the great dome of double-paned artificial diamond sparkling above.

“Investigators say Dr. Villin left abruptly in the middle of the night and appears to have stolen certain items from the Apollo Research Base labs,” continued the reporter.

The scene quickly shifted to the Apollo Labs, where a second reporter stood holding a microphone up to the mouth of a severe-looking woman in patterned blue-gray military fatigues. “We’ve opened a full inquiry into the matter and will report back to the public once we’ve examined the findings,” the woman announced. The news ticker below read “Space Patrol Special Agent Kalpan H. Ride.”

“And which items were stolen, Inspector?” asked the second reporter, a small pale man with a youngish face and bushy black hair.

“No comment. Now, if you’ll excuse me, we’ve got work to do.” Ride didn’t even try to hide the disdain in her tone.

“Wait, Inspector! Can’t you provide any more details on the case?” the reporter pleaded. Ride rudely ignored him. She abruptly brushed past the camera crew and strode briskly down the corridor, flanked by her entourage.

Andromeda's Return

Chapter 2: A Family Decision



“I have an announcement to make,” declared Mr. Starwell over Friday night’s candlelit dinner. Piping hot crocks and bowls brimming with Moroccan stew festooned the table. Savory spices wafted up in dense puffs of steam, then melted into invisible scented mist.

The way he said the word “announcement” made Andromeda sit up straight in her chair, despite her low-grade fever. Mr. Starwell’s eyes flickered in the candlelight beneath half-steamed reading glasses.

Even Mayall must have picked up something unusual in his tone. She stopped humming and dropped her fork with a clang onto her plate of couscous. The old analog clock in Grandma’s glass cabinet ticked by. Sometimes Andromeda would close her eyes and listen to it when she wanted to relax, but right now she felt as tense as a violin string.

Sensing he had his daughters’ attention, Mr. Starwell calmly patted his chin with a napkin and continued. “I’m going to the Moon.”

Three pairs of unblinking eyes watched him. Mayall's eyes grew wide in surprise. Andromeda's narrowed in suspicion. The third pair of eyes were a luminous green and rested atop a small forest of white whiskers. They belonged to the family cat, Pickle. He crouched patiently on the floor, ready to humor his pet humans by listening to their ridiculous people-talk sounds.

"You said 'I'. Don't you mean 'we'?" argued Andromeda. The way she phrased it didn't sound like a question.

"Well, I'd arranged for Ms. Penderson to look after you while I'm gone. Besides, it'd be far too expensive to take you along."

"But you can't leave us here. And the trip would practically pay for itself."

Her dad took the bait. "How do you figure?"

"You could rent the house out while we're gone."

"Well, I suppose —"

"Yay!" Mayall squealed with glee. "We're all going to be astronauts!" She jumped recklessly out of her chair, sending it skidding back in Pickle's direction, and started twirling around. The frightened cat meowed and scampered out of the room. As amusing and useful as his Food Givers could be sometimes, they were also dangerous and unpredictable.

Mr. Starwell smiled wistfully. The debate was over. He never really stood a chance against his daughters. "I'm glad you share my enthusiasm, Maya," he said, admitting defeat

gracefully. "I'd be happy to have the company. We'll ship out in mid-July after school lets out."

He leaned toward Andromeda, seeing the puzzled look on her face. His deep brown eyes seemed to invite her to speak. "Why, Dad?" she asked hoarsely. "Why now?"

Of course it wasn't the words "mid-July" that confused Andromeda. In fact, few of us now are old enough to remember the good old days of the 21st century when summer vacation in the U.S.A. lasted a glorious twelve weeks from June until September. Armed with research showing that students forget too much over the long break, schools chipped away at vacation one bright sunny day at a time until only six weeks remained – a sadly shrunken half-summer made all the more precious for the loss.

"Why now?" repeated Mr. Starwell, as if thinking carefully about his answer. "Because Dr. Jade's new positron rocket engines are almost ready. Apollo could use a good spaceship designer..."

Even after several more minutes of steady going, Mayall was able to make only a small dent in her mountain of couscous. She was too excited to eat. When Andromeda excused herself to go rest, her little sister bounced along after her, leaving Mr. Starwell to shake his head sadly as he cleared the table. *Maya pushed all the carrots to the side of her plate. Again.*

The girls both lay on their beds. Andromeda needed some quiet time to think. But Mayall couldn't stay put for long. She rolled onto the floor and kangaroo-hopped over to her big sister.

"Aren't you excited, Andrie? What's the Moon like? I can't wait to go there!"

Andromeda pulled the covers over her face in a vain attempt to hide. "Maya—" she groaned.

Her little sister yanked the blankets away. "Please, Andrie? Puh-leeese? What's it gonna be like?"

"Loads of fun, Freckle Face. But listen, don't you think this is all a little strange?"

"Whaddya mean, Andrie?"

"I mean all year I've been begging Dad to go back to the Moon... Too dangerous, he says." She tried imitating his deep voice, "You know, Andrie, I don't think that would be wise."

Mayall giggled.

"And now all of a sudden we're going? It doesn't add up," concluded Andromeda. She sat up, pulling back her long, auburn hair and folding it into a scrunchie. "I think it has something to do with Mom."

At that, Mayall sobered up. "Do you think she's still out there, Andrie?" she asked in a very small voice.

"Well, Dad thinks so. THAT'S the real reason we're going to the Moon, Maya. To look for HER. I'm sure of it."

Andromeda's Return will be released in the summer of 2012. Please [contact us](#) if you wish to be notified when it launches.



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