

The New Guy in Moon Base Twelve

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Chapter One

They weren't exactly the crew President Spud Goodman had in mind when he first announced his intention to establish a permanent base on the moon just so the Chinese wouldn't get there first. Goodman was not just a Republican, he was an ultra-Republican, the very distillation of antique notions of values and morality. If there was an old-fashioned bias to be had, Goodman had it in spades, so to speak. He loathed everyone not Caucasoid, Christoid and Heteroid, which was just enough bigotry to swing him the particular swing states he needed to get into office. Once ensconced, he set about launching his bold, grandiose (and micro-managed) ideas as if the presidency was a game of Frisbee golf, just tossing stuff out there to see what happened. Moon Bases One and Two were among the first eagles to land.

The settlements had to be staffed, of course, and according to Goodman's precise calculations the chosen crew were meant to remain there for at least ten years at a stretch. He formed a commission to determine the bestest and mostest qualified persons to meet his audacious requirements. The commission worked very diligently, took their task quite seriously, and eventually came to the conclusion, after numerous conferences and meetings, that the proper candidates would need to meet four essential criteria; they would have to be bisexual, atheist, socialist vegetarians. Their reasons were multiple and their logic quite unassailable.

Since there were to be relatively few persons on the base, bisexuality would be a highly adaptive quality, ensuring the most possible partnerships among the population. Atheism was considered extremely desirable due to the tendency of religious persons to argue amongst themselves as to which of their fairy tales was the least incoherent, and which of their imaginary friends the least prickly. Also, the landscape of the moon was one of the most god-forsaken places in which it humans had ever attempted to live, and it would help to have no god to blame this forsakenness on. Socialist, even Communist, was highly regarded in a similar way because of the limited quantity of goods that would be distributed, and the lack of quality of same. People with a will and desire to share and share alike on principle would get along much better than those perpetually looking out for number one. Vegetarianism, the final consideration, was perhaps the most obvious. There was to be no meat on the moon, excluding cannibalism, of course. The settlers would be growing their own food hydroponically and developing additional nutrients chemically.

The commission decided not to tempt fate by letting the President in on these requirements right away; in fact they managed to keep it all secret for just long enough to staff and propel the original crew of twenty six souls into space. Among them were fifteen men and eleven women, and together they were commissioned to construct exactly two moon bases within three hundred yards of one another. The commission arranged for everything and everyone to get shipped off all at once. They didn't have a lot of confidence in the staying power of this particular program. They had the feeling, which was later borne out to be prophetic, that the President would lose quickly interest and drop all funding altogether. The commission did not want to leave the bases either half-staffed or half-equipped, and so it was that in one single week, more than twenty launches carrying men, women, tools and equipment blasted off, along with an assortment of potentially useful odds and ends that seemed to have randomly occurred to one commission member or another. Thus there were volleyball nets but no volleyballs, pool cues but no tables, decks of cards, chewing gum, battery-powered flashlights without the right kind of batteries, and many other surprises which made those early days feel like Christmas-in-a-foster-home for the crew, who from the start referred to themselves, only half-jokingly, as Loonies.

They worked hard in those early days. Quarters were cramped in the rockets so they were in a hurry to build Moon Bases One and Two. In the end, those buildings resembled cube farms more than anything else, with each resident allotted an eight by twelve gray area to decorate in their own idiosyncratic way. The cubes had ten foot walls but no ceilings, gaps but no doors, and were laid out in four-by-three grids, twelve per base. Each base also had a large, open common area so that the cubicle region occupied about a third of the total space. The rest was filled with tables hosting lab equipment, kitchen-

type gadgets and setups, two conference rooms apiece for more private communications, and large common seating areas for general meetings and entertainment. The buildings themselves were basically metal boxes all around with heavy doors and flat roofs dotted by occasional skylights.

They were not much to look at, but after the first, hectic few months, there was no one to look. There had been twenty-four hour video coverage of the camp, and for a time an audience on Earth that was interested in the goings-on up there - the busy construction, the novelty of the thing - but as they got to know the personalities of the crew, and as the crew settled in to a life of everyday routine, the audience lost interest, as did the President, and soon there were only a handful of die-hard Moon Base addicts watching their daily activities. The truth was the settlers were rather boring. They all got along pretty well with each other, and made a point of avoiding conflict at every turn. And then the ratings had fallen through the floor in a hail of protest and outrage once Americans fully discovered the root belief systems and sexual proclivities of the Loonies. They didn't mind the bisexuality too much - at least the girl-on-girl stuff was fairly popular for a time - and they could deal with the whole sharing thing as long as it was couched in Jesus-like terms. It was the Atheism that broke the whole show.

The crew had been advised to keep that topic on the down low, but what could you expect from wall-to-wall continual coverage? People are people, after all, and the subject kept coming up in emails from the folks back home in the U.S.S.A.. Could they see Heaven? Was there any audible harp music up there? And once someone down below caught on that nobody ever ever saw anybody praying up there, that's when all Hell broke loose and the demands came quick and fast to return those sinners and exchange them for more acceptably Believing settlers.

It was far too late, though. Contracts had been signed and decisions made. The Loonies Show was subject to boycotts and the producers to all sorts of threats, so after a time, though the cameras remained turned on for the sakes of history and security, the scheduled broadcasts ceased, and the Loonies were left alone to themselves.

The biggest problem they had was not what one might think. They had no issues of supplies - they were able to generate all the food they needed and had enough oxygen supply to last until they were able to produce more on their own. All in all they enjoyed a decent standard of living. They had no basic survival issues - moon life wasn't all that difficult given the proper equipment and pressurization. The latest advances in these areas provided them with very light-weight garments and headsets, and the bases were quite secure. They had no interpersonal problems at all in those earliest days. Without leaders or any political structure, they managed to hash things out pretty well amongst themselves. The biggest problem, indeed the only major one, was their utter lack of a job description. There was nothing

they absolutely had to do.

It seemed obvious, in retrospect. There is nothing you can do on the moon that you can't do as easily - more easily, in fact - on Earth. There was no really good reason for anyone to even be there, aside from President Goodman's desire to beat the Chinese. As it turned out, the Chinese had already realized the utter pointlessness of such an undertaking and had no plans whatsoever to do so. Yet there were certainly some things that could be done, and some of the crew set about doing them. One band of four crew members - the Farmers - had ambitions to cultivate the lunar surface, to develop a new kind of agriculture that might serve well on other planets. A group of three known as the Drillers began a mining operation to extract ice or water and whatever else they might find beneath the Moon's surface. The communications expert, an extremely tall woman by the name of Fydia Sooth, had her own pet project, seeking out extraterrestrial life forms by means of certain encoded broadcasts which often sounded suspiciously like Disco. These were not idlers, although there was a man by the name of Pete who, in the name of scientific research, began a project to see how long he could sleep, working his way up to several weeks at a stretch.

Then there were the Builders, the crew who had originally done most of the work of putting together the bases. Left without any specific tasks they began to plan construction of an extra base, made of spare parts and whatever they could find. These ad hoc architects scavenged whatever bits of rocket and rubble were laying around, and eventually put together a sort of structure which came to be known affectionately as Moon Base Twelve. No one inhabited the thing. It was thought that no one could, that it was not really suitable for human residence. It was just an ongoing pile of junk thrown together by a group of bored men and women, intended primarily to keep them from going entirely out of their minds. And so it was quite a surprise one day when one of the builders, a gentle, long-haired man by the name of Galen Harbid, found The New Guy living in Moon Base Twelve.

Chapter Two

The fact that he was living in Moon Base Twelve was not nearly as shocking as the fact that he was even there at all. No one had come to the moon since that first exciting week already so long ago that most of the settlers had effectively lost track of the time. They had remained in occasional contact with mission control back home, calling every once in a while just to make sure that everyone they knew was still alive and to reassure the folks back home that no one among them had cancer or anything. It

would be a shame if they did, because there were no plans or money to send any rocket ships to bring anybody home. It was in the contract. Get sick up there and too bad, deal with it. Live and learn about death and dying on the moon. Someone would have to file a report and that was about it.

Also, no one had seen or heard an arrival. Maybe they'd all been asleep at the time, but even so, where was The New Guy's space ship now? There wasn't any sign of one. None of this occurred to Galen Harbid at first. He didn't know what he was thinking. One morning he'd gotten up and meandered over to Moon Base Twelve. It was a sort of habit. As a Builder, he was used to tinkering with the structure. He'd tighten a bolt here, loosen another one there, hammer out some folds in the corrugation, or move a little pile of junk from one corner of the unit's small room to another. He'd gone through the double-lock doors, removed his breathing tube, and started scouting around for anything to do. The New Guy was sprawled out on the red foam couch, snoring loudly through his open mouth. He was a regular sized guy, maybe five ten, a hundred and eighty-some pounds. He had short, straight dark brown hair, brown eyes and a decent crop of stubble around his face. He was wearing a t-shirt and jeans. The guy was nothing out of the ordinary; he could have easily passed for one of several other guys in the place. In fact, Galen thought at first it was Hardin Harwell, one of the Farmer crew, and assumed that Hardin had had a falling out with his regular cube-mate, the green-eyed botanist, Gayle Henderson.

That was okay. It wasn't normal, but it was acceptable, for a non-Builder to appear in Builder territory. There were no rules preventing that. Galen was prepared to step lightly so as not to wake up his fellow Loonie, and was tip-toeing past the couch when The New Guy awoke and sat up, looking startled himself. Galen froze in place as he realized he did not know who this person was. The first words out of his mouth were,

"Do what have a who?"

The New Guy regarded him suspiciously and scratched his chin for a few moments as Galen stood and gaped.

"Oh, that's okay," The New Guy assured him. "Everything is A-okay."

"A-okay?" Galen echoed the sentiment.

"Tip-top," said The New Guy, nodding vigorously in agreement with himself, and attempting what he must have thought was a smile. To Galen it looked like the guy's teeth were slickly sliding off his face.

"Okay," Galen murmured as it occurred to him that he had no idea how to handle this situation.

Thinking he'd be much better off yelling for help and running away, he back-tracked toward the door, put his breathing piece back into his mouth, crept out the double-locked doors and took off leaping, as

only a moon-resident can do, and in a dozen or so hefty bounds found himself back home in Moon Base One, breathlessly ranting about his encounter to the first people he saw hanging around.

These included Demaryius Ballantyne, the master chef, Rolanda Lin, the medicine woman, and Harriet Karat, one of the Driller's water specialists. They'd been clustered in the kitchen area discussing the genetics of a new mushroom the botanical team had come up with when Galen burst onto the scene, and they all sat calmly as he sputtered through several physical contortions and raspy attempts to emit a rational sound. These were people especially selected for their relative blandness and mild dispositions, which was one of the reasons why the television series had gone so badly.

The commission had had the opportunity to cash in on the process. They could have hosted a tournament of sorts, like those for singing talents or barbecue cook-offs. They could have held a nationwide lottery and picked ordinary clowns at random for the settlement, but they'd taken their job seriously. If a whole book had been written about the planning and execution of their mission, it would have been a dull one indeed, consisting mainly of meetings with psychologists and sociologists and former astronauts discussing the incredible boredom of space and the kind of people likely to be able to handle a scenario once and best described as 'sitting in a tin can, far above the world'.

The most surprising thing, perhaps, was how well they had done their job. Blue ribbon committees like theirs were not famous for doing things right, but so far the people they'd stuck in those boxes on the moon were doing pretty well.

"And he's, and he's, and and he's ..." Galen sputtered. His audience of three looked at him expectantly, then exchanged glances among themselves as Galen, for the ninth or tenth time, ran out of gas.

"Sounds like he's trying to say there's a new guy over on Moon Base Twelve," Demaryius remarked.

"That was my interpretation, too," Rolanda agreed, "although it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense."

"We should check with Maya," Harriet added. Maya Nguyen was the official liaison and diplomat, the one who was most frequently in contact with mission control. She lived in Moon Base One, but worked most days over in Moon Base Two. Harriet tapped a code into the two-way transmitter on her vest and at the responding crackle, said,

"Maya? If you wouldn't mind popping by for a moment. Something's come up."

"Right-ho," came Maya Nguyen's voice through the yellow, penguin-shaped plastic tab.

"Maya's coming," Harriet said to Galen, to calm him down. He was still standing there before them, shaking uncontrollably, and now seeming to enter into a very uncharacteristic panic mode.

Chapter Three

This was not like Galen, not at all, was Maya's first thought when she arrived on the scene, and she would know. She and Galen had been monogamous socio-sexual partners since the early days of the mission. Somehow they'd hit it off right away and kept on hitting it off every day. She had never believed in 'love at first sight', and Galen was not even what she would have called 'her type'. He was too tall, for one thing, at six foot two compared to her five foot tininess. He was kind of shaggy and messy, with his long brown hair and scratchy full beard. He dressed poorly - not that she was some kind of fashion maven herself, but she did value neatness at least. He was also Caucasian and she'd never had a thing for that kind before. But all those negatives were washed out by the friendly look in his eyes and the sound of his quiet laughter, and Galen had a way of blinking that somehow went straight to her heart. He reminded her of a pet rabbit she had treasured as a child. For his part, Galen was fascinated by Maya's endless theories and speculations on the very topics that interested him most - aliens, music, and stars - and her way of getting along just fine with everyone and everything all the time.

"Honey?" Maya approached cautiously. Galen was twitching in a most peculiar manner. She had never seen him like this before. He blinked at her as she put her arms around him and felt his heart pounding away like never before. Her presence certainly helped. In a short time he was able to breathe again, and, relaxing, let her lead him to a sofa where he sat down. She sat beside him and patted his arm while the other three remained attentive, if a little annoyed by the ongoing interruption. Harriet in particular wanted to get back to the subject of the mushroom, which could be grown in different shapes and colors, and added an interesting sense of variety to almost any meal. She was a foodie, and in her eyes Demaryius was a Kitchen God. An expert herself in nothing but water and deep wells, of which she was at least a leading one, Harriet was easily impressed by people who knew about more than just one or two things.

"He's over there taking a nap," Galen was saying when Harriet snapped herself out of her fungal reverie.

"What did you say his name was?" Maya said.

"Dang, I can't believe I forgot to ask," Galen threw up his hands in disbelief at his own stupidity.

"I doubt he's going anywhere anytime soon," Demaryius put in.

"But what's he doing there?" Rolanda directed her question at Maya. "Do you know anything about this?"

"No, nothing at all," Maya replied. "Mission Control never said anything about a new guy. Fact is, as you all know, there's nothing planned coming or going for another seven years at least."

Everyone nodded and shrugged. They'd known what they were getting into when they first signed up. None of them were in it for the money, which wasn't going to be much anyway. They weren't in it for the publicity or potential book sales once they got back home, assuming they ever did. It was pretty clear from the start that after the first wave of excitement had passed, they'd be pretty much on their own to do their best to wile away the time and make something out of nothing if they could.

This was their focus now, in each of their individual ways.

"I'll check with HQ again," Maya added.

"I guess we ought to go see for ourselves," Demaryius muttered. He didn't seem too enthusiastic. He was not the most adventurous type, unless he was in front of a stove; then there was no limit to his boldness.

"Group meeting?" Rolanda suggested and the others sighed in agreement. No one really liked group meetings, but they were occasionally necessary. Whoever called one would present their question for discussion, and everyone would come to some sort of conclusion as rapidly as possible. There hadn't been too many such meetings in the history of the colony. For example, they had assented within minutes to Marco Velez's proposal to blow up a few craters. They had once allowed themselves to be subjected to a barrage of probing, personal questions by the resident psychologist, Anita Frey. They had voted on the concept of voting on concepts, unanimously supporting the notion. They also had a rule limiting such meetings to no more than once every thirty days, barring an emergency.

"Call it," Maya agreed, and Rolanda tapped the special code into her transmitter.

Chapter Four

No one was thrilled with the summons, but as it was part of the protocol, those who were nearby ambled along and joined the group in Moon Base One over the next twenty minutes. There was no hurry. There was never a hurry about anything in the settlement, and fortunately the residents had been selected for their patience and equanimity along with the other useful traits. It may seem like a highly specialized collection of personality quirks, but the committee had found it wasn't too much trouble to

sort it all out. One thing seemed to go pretty much with another. People who fervently believed in cooperation and sharing tended likewise to be tolerant of each other's faults as well as their virtues. People who volunteered to spend a decade or more in relative isolation (on the freaking moon, no less) also had in common the ability to relax and take things easy, more or less. Some were a bit too laid back, perhaps, and such minor temperamental differences were certainly amplified under those conditions, but the walls were plastered with various philosophical reminders, such as "the moon wasn't built in a day", and "was there somewhere you needed to be?"

Michael Gelano was the first to arrive. He was one the closest things the group had to a 'leader' personality, aside from Maya Nguyen and the old guy, Rayburn Willis. Gelano was one of the Drillers and tended to be the guy who pointed at new spots, while the rest of the crew followed along and did their thing. It didn't seem to matter where they poked their equipment. The moon was pretty much what they thought it would be - a lot of rocks and dust, occasional ice and grayish surprises that were probably life forms of one kind or another, but nothing that anyone had figured out yet. The Drillers were perpetually bringing back specimens for the scientists to inspect. Gelano was also the biggest man in the group, at six foot six two forty, with an enormous bald head riddled with a plethora of dark pits and spots, resembling the moon itself more than anything else. He strode into the kitchen area and, sizing up the situation, suggested that everyone move over to the larger carpet area where group meetings were usually held, with most members sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Others soon arrived, and when they reached the quorum of fifteen, and the myriad greetings and murmurings were dying down, Maya stood up and began the meeting.

"Galen had an interesting encounter this morning," she began. "It seems there is a new guy living over in Moon Base Twelve."

"Impossible," blurted out Redmon Chanoo, a handsome young workout fanatic who was another of the Builders group. "I was just over there last night and didn't see anyone."

"Wait a second?" interrupted the resident artist, Helen Green Brush. Almost everything she said took the form of a question, but in this case there were legitimate ones to be asked. "How could there be a new guy anywhere? Was there a landing we didn't hear about?"

"Not that we know of," Maya replied in her customary even tone. As the resident diplomat and official go-between, she was a master of the art of conciliation. "I just spoke with Mission Control and they claim to know nothing about any arrivals."

"So has Galen gone crazy?", asked Fydia Sooth, examining him for telltale signs of space madness.

Fydia was always on the lookout for people going crazy. It had been her intuition from the beginning of the mission that someone was bound to, sooner or later, and it was her intention to be the first to know about it. She had read up on all the symptoms and Galen was definitely exhibiting some of them.

"Go see for yourself," Galen sullenly responded from his spot on the floor, where he was rocking uncomfortably and occasionally scratching his left arm with his right hand. Fydia made a mental note of that particular move.

"You do seem especially agitated," Anita Frey observed.

"There's a freaking New Guy!" Galen nearly shouted. "What's he doing there?"

"I guess we ought to go ask him," Michael Gelano declared.

"Should we all go?" Rolanda asked and from the sound of her voice it was clear this was something she wanted no part of. Rolanda was much more comfortable peering into her microscope at moon rock samples.

"Maybe just a group," Gelano suggested. "Do we want to vote on it?"

Everyone present shook their heads. No one ever wanted to vote. That meant you had to take a side and it was better for all concerned if decisions were unanimous and there were no factions, not even on the smallest issues. If these people were religious about anything, it was this.

"Maya, for one, I'd think," Gelano continued. The group murmured assent. Maya was always the point of contact. Assuming they ever encountered alien life forms, it was already decided she would go first.

Even Fydia Sooth had agreed to it, though she privately thought she would deserve the honor, seeing as she was the one most likely to draw the alien's attention to their presence with her incessantly creative broadcasts.

"And I'd like to go," Gelano added. Again there was a positive rumbling and a unison of nodding heads.

"Anyone else?" he asked, looking around. He would have been fine with just him and Maya. It was his opinion that the two of them were always the right choice for everything.

"Me," Fydia hurriedly said. If she couldn't be the official meeter-and-greeter, she at least intended to be there.

"Me too," piped in Rayburn Willis, the aging astrophysicist and all-around expert on everything. So far there had never been any subject he wasn't interested in, nor was there much about which he didn't already know the most among them all. Beside being the oldest and wisest and most experienced, he had also been the first settler selected, and had had a voice in selecting all the others. This was no

accident. He was actually a founding member of the commission.

No one else volunteered. It was typical of the settlement that whenever they formed groups, aside from these general meetings, the group never exceeded the number four. It was a sort of unspoken arrangement. If anyone else had wanted to join in, they would have refrained, seeing as the quota had already been reached.

"Well then," Gelano said. "Is there anything else to talk about here?"

There wasn't, and the assembled folks were happy to get the meeting over and done with. Demaryius and Harriet returned to the kitchen to continue discussing their mushroom, while the other non-volunteers returned to their own various activities. Rolanda remained with Galen to question him further about his anxiety, finally giving him an herbal sedative. She was puzzled by his condition. He was normally a mellow guy, and there was something very unusual about his behavior. It almost seemed physical, like an allergic reaction. She decided to do some research on the physio-biology of initial encounters, and wandered off to her study area. Galen, meanwhile, fell fast asleep right there in the middle of the floor.

Chapter Five

The greetings committee made their way out of the building, through the double-lock doors and into the vacuum. All around them was the familiar sight of blackness interrupted by stars. To their left was the other official Moon Base, and a few hundred yards ahead lay the heap of scrap and junk known as Moon Base Twelve. They stepped along side by side, faces shielded only by their breathing masks and foil skull wrappers. Gelano opened the outer door of the hut and after the other three had entered this chamber, pulled it closed, and opened the inner door. As they entered, The New Guy looked up at them, startled. He had been turning over some metal plates, inspecting the pattern of scratches on their surface as if he could read them like a book. Now he lowered his arms and gazed at the newcomers as they removed their masks and hoods.

"Hello," Maya Nguyen said mildly, bowing slightly out of diplomatic habit. The New Guy awkwardly returned this gesture and the greeting, in a cracked voice that seemed unused to speaking. Maya introduced the members of the group.

"My name is Maya Nguyen," she said, slowly. "This is Michael Gelano, our Chief Engineer. This is Fydia Sooth, Communications, and here is Rayburn Willis, Science Officer."

"Hello, Chiefs," said the New Guy, looking mainly at Gelano, whose presence typically overwhelmed the scene, his shining dome nearly grazing the ceiling of the shed.

"What is your name?" Maya asked. The New Guy didn't seem to hear her at first. After studying Gelano, he had just begun to move on to the others when she'd spoken. She waited while he turned his attention to each of them, scanning them with focused eyes. When he returned his attention to her, she repeated her question. He didn't seem to understand it. She tapped her own sternum with her right palm and repeated her own name, then asked, for the third time, about his. The New Guy nodded, and said,

"Martin."

"Is that your first or last name?" interjected Gelano, despite Maya's attempt to wave him away from speaking. The New Guy studied Gelano's face again for a few moments, before replying.

"Martin," he said.

"Where did you come from?" Maya said rapidly, before Gelano could get another word in. The New Guy took a step toward them - they were all in a line a few feet away from him - and cocked his head slightly to one side.

"America," he pronounced.

"Or course America," said Rayburn Willis, shaking his head. "This IS an American base!"

Maya sighed. Her moment of first contact had come and gone, and she'd only gotten one question in. From here on she would have to take turns along with the others. She did think that sometimes the whole sharing thing could go too far.

"Do you know where you are?" asked Fydia Sooth, sensing that it was her turn to speak. She was picking up a weird vibe from The New Guy, then even more of one as he leaned his face toward her and said,

"Of course the moon."

"What are you doing here?" Gelano burst in.

"Who sent you?" Willis demanded.

"One at a time, please," Maya said to her own people, straining to remain calm. They were all beginning to show signs of agitation and distress, reminding her of Galen's condition.

"Oh," Martin said, "of course the commission."

"We've spoken with Mission Control," Maya said.

"Where's your ship?" Willis interrupted. "Where did you land?"

"What are you doing here?" Gelano repeated, taking a large step toward Martin, who retreated two steps and drew his shoulders together.

"People, please," Maya said again. "Let's take a moment, okay?"

Fidya, Gelano and Willis responded automatically to this familiar instruction, and fell into the standard yoga posture. This was the settlers' common tactic for handling any impending stress. As the others focused on their breathing, Maya sized up The New Guy for herself.

He was ugly, no doubt about that. He reminded her of a caricature of a cave man, though thinner. She couldn't determine his age. He could have been anywhere from mid-twenties to mid-forties, she reflected. He seemed uneasy, uncertain, uncomfortable. "I could call him the Un-guy", she inwardly joked. She tried but failed to place his origin by his accent. It was unfortunate that nearly all regional American dialects had been killed off over the previous century, replaced by the bland standard TV-speak. Still, there was something slightly off about his speech, something not quite conforming, but she couldn't place it.

"Are you hungry?" she asked him. He shook his head.

"Thirsty?" Again he gestured that he wasn't.

"Is there anything you want to tell us?"

"I don't think so," Martin said.

"This is ridiculous!" Gelano blurted out, unable to restrain himself any further. Maya reached out and put a hand on his arm. She could feel the tension in him as if he was electrified. This was not a good sign. Gelano was a person of enormous strength, which was useful for drilling but not so handy in emotional situations. Maya was thinking they should re-group, and re-consider their whole approach to The New Guy in Moon Base Twelve.

Martin showed no indication that he intended to respond to Gelano's question, but he did raise his arms and half-hid his face behind the piece of scrap metal he was holding. He seemed to be trembling just a bit. Maya stepped forward and then turned around to face her group.

"I don't think this is going very well," she said, quietly.

"There's something so wrong about all this," Fydia offered.

"I don't like it," Willis agreed.

"Let me squeeze it out of him," Gelano suggested with a grimace.

"No," Maya quickly replied. "Let's all think for a moment, listen to our bodies. It's having some sort of effect, can you feel it? Like with Galen."

"Yes, you're right," Fydia acknowledged after a moment.

"He's just pissing me off," Gelano grunted, and then added, "and I don't think I've felt this way in a very long time."

"We need more information," insisted Rayburn Willis. "We don't really know anything about this guy."

"I'm sure we all agree," Maya said. "The question is, how? What we're doing now doesn't seem to be working."

"We should get out of here," Fydia said, peering over Maya's shoulder at Martin, who was still semi-cowering behind the jagged plate.

"Keep him quarantined," Willis put in. "We can't let him get away."

"It doesn't look like he has any apparatus," Gelano said. "I don't think he's going anywhere."

"That's just impossible right there," Willis said. "It doesn't make any sense."

"I agree with Fydia," Maya said. "We should all leave now."

Everyone nodded, and Maya turned back around to face Martin.

"We're going now," she told him, "but we'll be back. Please be prepared to answer our questions."

Martin shrugged and opened his mouth as if to say something, but then seemed to change his mind and, blinking rapidly, felt behind him for the couch he'd been lying on when Galen had first discovered him. He lowered himself slowly onto it as Maya and the others turned and exited the inner door.

Chapter Six

Once back inside Moon Base One, the delegation huddled just inside the outer door.

"I don't know," Willis said. "I don't like it, not one bit."

"There's a reaction," Maya countered. "We have to deal with that first. Something about contact. We saw it with Galen, now we've seen it in ourselves. We need Rolanda to check us out before we do anything else. I say we don't even move from here, don't go in yet."

"Okay," Fydia and Gelano said in unison as Maya tapped out the medicine woman's code on her

transmitter.

"Rolanda? Could you please join us in airlock one? And bring your scanner."

"Roger," came the crackling voice of the resident medic.

"We need a plan," Willis insisted. "I've got some ideas. One, send out a scouting party to find any traces of his ship. Two, talk to General O'Nail at HQ. Three, scan the db's for any history of this Martin fellow. See if we can find out anything. I've got some snaps I took on the sly. I'll do that."

"All in good time." Maya nodded. "We can do all that, after Rolanda."

"Right," snapped Willis. "Of course you're right. I'm just a little antsy, that's all."

"Antsy?" queried Rolanda as she walked through the inner door. "Is that a professional diagnosis?"

Willis chuckled and relaxed a little as Rolanda brought up her device and waved it seemingly at random around the room. The group stood still as she meandered about them, tapping on the little black box and shaking it this way and that, all the while muttering like a fictional shaman might. Rolanda looked more like a librarian than a witch-doctor, though, with her round coke-bottle glasses, frizzy, short blond hair and oddly shiny little nose. She hopped into the air for a moment to get a read on Gelano's head.

"Anything, doctor?" he asked her after she'd landed.

"A lot," she replied, studying the small screen. "All of this and nothing," she murmured.

"Meaning?" Maya prompted after Rolanda had remained quiet for several moments. The doctor looked up at her and said,

"Like Galen, if that's what you mean. I thought it might be the case, so I brought these. Each of you needs to take some now. Just chew on it like a cow would grass."

She passed around some leafy twigs, similar in shape and smell to small bits of fennel. Maya sniffed at it, then put it in her mouth and followed the doctor's orders. The taste wasn't bad and the effect was rapid. She could feel her heartbeat rate immediately decline to normal, and she hadn't even realized it was racing so fast before. All four did the same, and felt the same.

"How is Galen?" Maya asked.

"Resting," Rolanda said. "I think it wears off, this effect. Takes a while, though. A few hours. Whatever it is, it's pretty strong stuff."

"What does the tran-fi say?" asked Willis, using the technical nickname for the nick-nack she'd used on them.

"Nerves," Rolanda said. "Whatever it is, it acts on the nerves. Fraying them, actually. Quite literally. You've all heard the term, I'm sure, but I don't think I've ever seen it in action before. For that matter, I don't think anyone has. I ran some scans from Galen through Central, and there's no record of any nerve-end response like this. Nothing even close."

"Frayed nerves?" Fydia snorted. "Like, with something getting on them?"

"Eating at them, more like it," Rolanda replied in all seriousness. "Look," she added, showing a picture to Fydia. "Degeneration here, and here, and see? Spreading right along the path? It's a shortcut to the brain from there."

"What is it, though?" Maya asked, and Rolanda shrugged.

"Working on it," she told her. "In the meantime, it doesn't seem to be infectious. Looks like you need direct contact with The New Guy to get it."

"Martin," Gelano said, and when Rolanda looked at him quizzically, he explained about the name, and about how that was the only bit of information they were able to obtain.

"We thought we'd better get out of there," he concluded, as if it had been his idea, when in reality he'd been thinking more along the lines of strangling the man with his bare hands.

"So it's safe to go inside now?" Willis wanted to know, "because we've got some work to do."

"I'd say so," Rolanda nodded. "Besides, we already have Galen. There's been no contagion as far as I can tell, and I've been looking for it."

"Good," declared Maya, and proceeded to unlock the inner door. As it opened, they found that several other residents had gathered, and were waiting for the news.

"Meeting time, I guess," Gelano sighed as he walked in.

Chapter Seven

"Hold on, everyone," Maya said as she waded into the crowd. "We can't tell you much, just the name he gave us and a general description.

We've got some work to do."

"First, we need some scouts," Willis broke in. "We need to check around for his ship, see if we can find it. Any tracks, any leads. Who wants to go?"

"Wait," Maya tried to hold back any surge, but already more than four had raised their hands and volunteered for that mission among a general clamoring of voices.

"Just don't go into Moon Base Twelve," Gelano was shouting above the din, and Willis joined in.

"Absolutely. No one is to go in or even near the place."

"No contact!" even Rolanda was yelling, but the first four were already out the door, and everyone else from the fifth on down stood back and watched them exit.

"I'm going to hit the screens," Willis said to Maya. "You get on to O'Nail."

"I'm going to take a shower," Gelano announced as if anyone cared. Fydia had already sneaked off to her cube to do some research of her own.

The crowd dispersed as Maya stood there, shaking her head. If the thing wasn't infectious, it sure was disturbing, she thought. She hadn't seen such excitement since the earliest days of the mission, and that was a much better kind of it back then. She was sure that this wasn't a good thing. The entire mission depended on the group maintaining its balance, its even keel, smooth sailing, all of that kind of thing. Up until now the team's chemistry had been nearly perfect. She was hoping it would all get back to normal very soon. There had to be a reasonable explanation for all of this. Rayburn Willis was right. General Pudsy O'Nail was the best place to start.

She padded over to her console along the hardware-room wall, and brought up a connection back to Mission Control. She had the General's direct contact and she used it. It was not supposed to matter what time of day or night it was, the General was to be continually available, and he was, but that didn't mean he was thrilled to be called at four forty three in the morning. He was groggy when he answered and Maya could see he was still in his pajamas and bleary-eyed. He looked like he'd been drinking, too, and heavily.

"How's it going, Captain?" he asked, using his customary form of address for Maya Nguyen. O'Nail, like most of the people back home, could never get used to the absence of rank and formality among the crew on the moon. As a lifelong military space vet, he'd always assumed that any such mission would have to follow the rules of war. The commission had seen things differently. There was to be no need for rigid discipline, since there was to be no particular object or goal. The settlers were simply to be there, and to get along with each other as best they could. For this reason, a flat organizational structure seemed the most fitting. It sounded suspiciously like Communism to the General, and when he was informed that in fact, it literally was, and that the very same outdated and repudiated model was indeed the one which had been selected for this mission, his mind simply flew straight into denial and

he refused to accept or acknowledge the fact. As far as he was concerned, Nguyen was the Captain, the rank she had in fact held in the Air Force, and Rayburn Willis was Lieutenant, since the old man had been precisely that way back when in his youth, long before he'd launched his long and distinguished academic and research career. The few other former military men and women among the group likewise retained their ranks in the General's mind, and as for the rest, well, they didn't count and he tried to pretend they weren't even there.

"Questions, Sir," Nguyen respectfully replied. "We have a situation."

"I sure hope so," the General barked. "Calling me in the middle of the goddamn night, there better damn well be a goddamn situation!"

"We have a visitor," Maya said.

"A what?"

"Visitor," she repeated. "A man. An unannounced arrival. A guest. We don't actually know what he is, or who he is, or what he's doing here. That's basically the question, sir."

"How in the hell could you have a goddamn visitor?" the General grumbled. "Are you on the goddamn moon or not? Or maybe you're all in some fancy fhotel and this whole thing is all just a hoax like that idiot Scraham Markham says on his show all the time."

"No sir," Maya smiled. "No hoax. It's all legit. Says his name is Martin. Won't say if that's his first or last. Just Martin. Sending you a photo scan now."

She pressed a button on the console and waited while the General turned his attention to a parallel screen and studied the image she'd transmitted. While he examined it he continued to grumble, probably some more "goddamns", Maya thought to herself. She enjoyed the General, always, his gruffness and bluntness was a welcome counterpart to the placid correctness she herself exuded at all times.

"Looks like a goddamn moron," was the General's eventual pronouncement.

"Can't really say," Maya informed him. "Seems like we can't near him for more than a couple of minutes. We're getting some kind of allergic reaction. The doctor says it's nerve damage. Maybe it's us," she conjectured, considering that all this time on the moon might have altered them all in some way, and that The New Guy might be the normal one after all. It was worth mentioning to the doctor, she thought.

"I'll look into it," the General told her, now more alert. The photo seemed to have snapped him into

consciousness. "If you can't be near him, then don't. Where is he, anyway? Isolated, I hope?"

"In Moon Base Twelve," Maya nodded. "He just appeared there. We don't know how he got here."

"Maybe he walked," the General snorted. "Well, good," he added. "Lock it down. Get some supplies in there if he needs 'em, then lock it down. And that's an order!"

"Yes, sir," Maya replied. "We look forward to hearing from you."

"Right," the General said sharply, shutting off the connection. Maya smiled. The General might believe he was issuing orders which had to be followed, but the truth was the settlers could do whatever they pleased. They were under the command of no one. Still, she thought his was a good idea, and decided to bring it up at the meeting. First, she wanted to see what Rayburn Willis had come up with.

Chapter Eight

As a professor and leader of men, Rayburn Willis had a way with students, especially young male students, whom he impressed as being the sort of man they should all like to become some day. This pattern had carried him through his years in the service, academia, the commercial world and straight on through to the Moon Base Project. He was already on his third such young man at the Base, a physicist and programmer named Barley MacDunhill. Barley was the most youthful of the whole crew. At a mere twenty two years old, it was a close call for the commission, but they'd decided his attributes outweighed any possible age-related concerns.

His main qualification was software wizardry. Even as a tween he'd pioneered mind-numbingly obvious (in retrospect) algorithms for interpersonal search, using published lifestyle patterns to detect and predict behavioral patterns with results so startling they had previously been seen only on every crime scene detective TV show. The proofs he offered were so complete it made a person's daily life hardly seem worth living at all, as predictable and trivial as he could easily demonstrate it all to be. Your opinion of your neighbor's new haircut was intimately related to the next brand of shampoo you would purchase. Your remark at a certain moment after dinner was tied directly to the next beverage you'd select. There was no effect for which Barley could not reasonably presume the cause. It was a relief to many of his colleagues to see him blasted off into space. They all immediately felt slightly less superfluous.

MacDunhill had no evil intentions. He didn't even use his programs. He was a shy, pimply young man who still smelled of his mother's bath salts, who still wore the same red wool sweaters his grandmother

gave him every Christmas. He was perpetually in a bit of a sweat, even though his stress levels on Rolanda's tran-fi measured lower than a sleeping possum. He lived in a virtual world of infinite ifs and else-ifs, and would usually look right past the person talking to him as if they had pointed at something interesting off to one side. When he spoke it was with polite hesitation, as if he expected to be always interrupting someone far more interesting than himself. He saw Willis as a sort of God, a man who had been everywhere and done everything and washed his hands and started all over again from scratch. He jumped at the chance to do any favor Willis asked of him.

This favor especially - to track down the real story of one New Guy named Martin. From the image scans Willis had taken, Barley MacDunhill immediately began several parallel global queries, not just a mere visual search. He pounded out scripts heretofore unimagined and unimaginable, based on combinations of left eyebrow and bottom right molar, on pupil dilation in combination with cheekbone inflation, on individual hair strand swirls, on the universally unique identifiable markers of bi-facial arrangements of freckles and pores. There would be no chance this Martin could escape the ultimate resolution, and within minutes, the target was in his sights. Targets, actually. Martin has a hybrid, according to Barley MacDunhill's results. He was part-Albert Gwynn of International Falls, Minnesota, part-Palash Kapoor of Anaheim, California, part-Derek Lee of Hoboken, New Jersey and part-Chura Kliwvasha of Spangle, Washington. Barley handed the printout to Rayburn Willis, who glanced at it skeptically.

"There can be no doubt," Barley told him. "Martin is these men, precisely."

"How can one man be four men?" Willis growled. He had a lot of respect for Barley's programming skills, but he recognized nonsense when he saw it, a skill MacDunhill apparently lacked.

"The program doesn't lie," Barley shrugged. It was clear to him, in any case. A properly formulated question produces a single and proper answer every time. He had submitted the evidence, and received an absolute verdict. Martin was these men, these men only and no others. Willis wasn't satisfied.

"Try it again," he insisted, handing the paper back to Barley, who widened his eyes in the most condescending manner possible, and returned his attention to the computer. He would plug in a few more variables, but was certain the response would be the same. Willis shook his head and walked away. He not only recognized nonsense, but also knew a dead end when he came to one. There would be no outlet there.

The news from the survey team was equally unenlightening. The group had been led by Redmon Chanoo, who'd listed on his resume such skills as wild animal tracker along with his other, more civilization-worthy accomplishments. He liked to assert that he could sniff out a dinosaur fossil ten feet underground given the proper humidity and windflow conditions. Here on the moon those particular talents had found no useful outlet until now. Bearing in mind the team's warnings to stay away from the suspect and Moon Base Twelve, he and his three companions had circled around the structure in ever widening orbits. They cataloged, and systematically eliminated from consideration all the known footprints of the settlement and tire tracks of the various vehicles. Chanoo hadn't realized it before, but in the long months of their residence, the pioneers had managed to make a bit of a mess of the surface of the moon, especially in the local environment. You might have thought a herd of buffalo had been stampeding around there for years given all the dust and disturbance they'd managed to kick up.

Even with all that, it was clear that no new vehicle had entered anywhere within twenty-five clicks, and no new human footprints either. From all the signs they could glean, The New Guy had materialized in place right inside the Moon Base he presently occupied. Unfortunately, no one had thought to rig up the Moon Shack with video surveillance cameras, so it wasn't possible to track down the exact time or method of his arrival that way. Comparing notes with every one associated with the structure - mainly the Builders group of which Redmon was one - Martin would have had to arrive sometime between oh twenty hundred hours GMT the previous evening and oh seven hundred GMT that morning, when Galen first encountered him. That left, if Redmon's calculations were correct, a window of approximately eleven hours during which The New Guy may have arrived.

Redmon presented his finding quite meticulously at the general meeting held, as Redmon would have said, at approximately thirteen ten that afternoon. By this time, everyone in the colony had been alerted and filled in on the situation, and twenty five of the twenty six residents (Pete was still sleeping) had gathered on the common-use carpet in Moon Base One. Redmon concluded his speech and resumed his squatting position on the floor. The next to speak was Rayburn Willis, who rather sheepishly presented Barley MacDunhill's report, appending that he himself did not necessarily accord with this findings but merely that it was his duty to provide the information, however pointless it might seem. His presentation was greeted with the absolute silence it deserved.

Maya was next. She had heard back from General O'Nail by that time, and what he'd given her was precisely nothing. Mission Control was completely in the dark about The New Guy and had nothing to offer, not even suggestions other than 'why not send somebody over to ask the man more questions'.

Rolanda was quickly on her feet objecting, reporting the results of her own research, which concluded that The New Guy seemed to be the carrier of some sort of detrimental and possibly dangerous virus. No one should go near the man or Moon Base Twelve until she could come up with some sort of antidote or at least a kind of protective equipment. For this to happen they needed more time to study the effects of the strain. Rolanda thought it would be useful if the people who'd come into contact could speak directly of the effects they'd experienced, as this would serve not only to caution the others but also help illuminate any issues she might have overlooked so far.

Galen was the first to offer his impressions. He had already begun to recover from the shaking and the overall nervousness. With the sedative he'd been given, the worst of the feelings had diminished within a couple of hours. By now, nearly six hours later, he felt he was returning to normal. Gelano, likewise, related the slackening of his symptoms, though he admitted he was still in the grip of some residual rage. Fydia Sooth claimed to be all better, and insisted she hadn't really felt much, just a little tension was all. Willis described his impatience and involuntary finger-twitching. Rolanda thought that data point worth noting.

It was decided then. The settlers would do nothing at all until further notice. Rolanda and the other scientists - biochemists, botanists and molecular engineers - would get down to the matter of more study and research. In the meantime, outdoor activities were to be restricted and limited, in case The New Guy were to suddenly emerge from his den, and watchfulness enhancement would be the watchword of the day. Consent to this approach was, naturally, unanimous. Mission Control would be informed that the mission was presently under control.

Chapter Ten

Fydia Sooth didn't know whether to laugh or merely chuckle. The whole science department was absorbed in a technical analysis of how someone could literally "get on your nerves"! This would revolutionize the field of interpersonal relationships. "Imagine," she said to herself, "if you could wave a gadget at every new person you met and immediately know how aggravating they were going to be!" It hadn't been that bad, had it? Now that the effects of her encounter with The New Guy had pretty much worn off, she was tempted to sneak out of the Base and head on back to Number Twelve by herself. She could wrangle the truth out of him one way or another, she was sure. But she was well aware that the process they all followed here on the moon was paramount. They were in it for the long

haul, and everyone, at every moment of decision, had to keep the long view in mind. There was no room for adventurism here, and she was certainly no Trotskyite. Now was not the time for any infantile disorders.

Fydia had always excelled at discipline. This was often the reason her own interpersonal relationships never worked out. She liked ground rules and she insisted on agreements being honored. Trust was essential, and she had never found anyone who could live up to her standards in this area. Yet she was not, as you might expect, a serious person. On the contrary, she was quite light-hearted and liked nothing better than to sing out loud and dance. Here on the moon she took these activities outside, so as not to disturb her barrack-mates, and conducted her SETI broadcasts using the very best noise-canceling headset equipment.

The search for extraterrestrials was her other great hobby and passion, and she had official sanction to perform that function here. Rather than broadcast random or regular patterns, or mathematical equations, or fractal sequences, or other such sophisticated notions as dominated the academic approach, Fydia believed in the transcendent attraction power of music. Besides, she would often say, any alien that doesn't dance isn't really worth contacting anyway. She focused her beams on the basis of galactic background radiation, following a color theory of her own invention. Certain types of music were more likely to be receptive in appropriately filtered settings. This was merely an extension of consumer theory back home, where pink walls and light jazz went together in high-end bistros, and throbbing electronica seemed to pair well with flashing neon in blackness.

She had numerous patents in her name to this effect, and had already demonstrated an extraordinary ability to attract various animals through unlikely renditions. Her work had made for happier zoos and theme parks, as well as serving as the foundation for several new trends in popular music. Fydia was both famous on Earth and well-liked on the Moon, and since she intended to keep it that way, she did not give in to her instincts and rush out to confront The New Guy solo. Instead, she sat in her cubicle and pondered. She thought about her recent experience and tried to associate what she had felt with some other sensation from her life. The closest she came was how it felt when she had a song stuck in her head, a song she didn't even like and couldn't get rid of. "Yes," she told herself, "that's exactly what it was like." Her next thought was whether that condition could be objectively studied and measured, and if so, if it were possible to develop a cure. That would be worthy of another patent for sure, not to mention another excellent opportunity to make the world an even better place.

It so happened that her most recent ex-girlfriend, Pina Peru, was not only an excellent neurologist, but was also right there, in Moon Base One. Fydia pinged her, and before long had presented her concept.

Pina, a normal-sized person who had never gotten used to Fydia's rather imposing height, was still very fond of her, even though she'd been the one to break off the relationship. There had been no hard feelings, and Pina was excited to try this new experiment. All Fydia had to do was commit to lying completely still inside a 'mental echo chamber' while having a horrible tune lodged in her brain. Fydia had selected a truly grating oldie, a song called 'Waterloo' by a thing called ABBA.

She lay perfectly placidly in the chamber and let the dull, repetitive, silly chorus swirl around and around in her mind. In the meantime, Pina recorded every synapse and cortex and and filament in Fydia's head.

Pina gathered the other scientists and they compared notes from the measurements made earlier from The New Guy encounter team. There were definitely some pattern matches. Fydia's temperamental lobes were displaying the same corrosion and grinding as had been seen on the tips of Galen's fingers, and from just behind Gelano's right knee ligaments. But although these similarities were clear, it wasn't at all obvious what could be made of it. The immediate problem was protection, rather than prevention. They needed to find some kind of shielding, and even Pina had to conclude that the 'song' approach was more long-term than immediate in terms of potential benefit. Fydia was disappointed, but not downhearted. Once she got that idiotic tune out of her head, she was certain she'd come up with another good idea.

Chapter Eleven

The science delegation was, of course, a team of four, consisting of Pina Peru, Gayle Henderson, Rolanda Lin and Rayburn Willis. They gathered to compare notes for a half an hour out of every three for the rest of that day and into the night, dispersing in the intervals to work on their own or with other colleagues. They had come to a formal agreement on the goal of prevention, and the immediate task was to discern some sort of protective material that would make it possible for contact to recur with The New Guy. No one had to tell them that sooner would be better. Everyone on the moon was eager to discover more about this fellow. Nothing had yet been ruled out. Just because the scouting expedition had not turned up any evidence of a ship did not mean there was none. It could be somewhere further out, where they hadn't yet looked, and the man could have walked in and his footsteps lost in the chaos of tracks in the dust. The possibility of error was never excluded by the members of the crew. They were not the kind of people to be overly confident or to quickly jump to conclusions.

Maya Nguyen did not want to be seen as hovering, yet she couldn't help but check in now and then with the delegation, who took turns mildly dismissing her with a lack of news. She carried these messages throughout both Bases, as she made the rounds keeping everyone up to date. By nineteen hundred hours GMT, however, she was beginning to show some signs of impatience.

"How about guessing?" she asked Rayburn Willis as she butted in on a delegation conference. Willis glanced up at her with a look of disapproval, but then drew his eyebrows together and reconsidered.

"Hmm," he murmured, "you might be on to something there."

"I don't see how," Pina countered. "Science isn't guesswork."

"You can't pick the truth out of a hat," Rolanda Lin chimed in.

"No, but you can experiment," the botanist, Henderson, added thoughtfully. "We could subject different substances to the same conditions, and compare results."

"Sure," Pina said, "but what conditions? Arbitrary? We don't know what we're dealing with here."

"There's the music, for one thing," Willis said, recalling Fydia's gambit.

"So we play pop music to plastic and see what happens?" Rolanda sniffed.

"Not to plastic," Willis replied, "but to people wearing plastic."

"Or newsprint," Gayle Henderson suggested.

"Or fibers?" Pina Peru was catching on.

"At least do something," Maya said quietly, and departed. Her attitude was not a good sign, and she was the first to realize it. It wasn't fair to the scientists. They had been working hard for hours and it wasn't their fault they hadn't yet solved a new and puzzling riddle. Maya told herself to stay away for a while, better yet to go and get some sleep. If she herself was beginning to show some symptoms of distress, what could she expect from the rest of the settlement? Keeping cool and calm was paramount. The whole fate of the station depended upon it, from everyone.

Since Fydia had already been recorded and was willing to subject herself to further tests, the new experiments got underway rapidly. They could not necessarily rely on Fydia keeping up the strain of keeping horrible noises clanging around in her head voluntarily, so they piped it in audibly through speakers. She lay on the cold gray table, keeping perfectly still and with her eyes closed as they repeatedly pulled her out of the chamber tube, piled some different material on top of her, pushed her back inside and played snatches of sincere and sappy songs from decades long past. While she was undergoing this unique form of torture, Pina Peru carefully calibrated and calculated the responses of

Fydia's nerve endings.

They used whatever materials they had lying around in bulk, or those they could manufacture in quantity if they had to. These included straw mats, tin foil, printer paper, algae, plastic wrap, and peat moss. Then they added sheets of lead, blankets, tapestry cloth, duct tape, and plywood. They tried denim, leather and cardigan wool. They used house paint, curtains, and glue. Finally, after several hours of this, in the very early dawn they let her go take a shower and take a nap. They all needed desperately to sleep, and while they did, they entrusted all the data they'd collected to Barley MacDunhill, to see if he could work some more of his inscrutable magic.

Chapter Twelve

Barley was happy to take the data and see what he could do with it.

"But," he proposed when Maya came to ask him, "why not send GIMM over?"

Maya was stunned that she hadn't already thought of that. After all, GIMM was there on her recommendation, having served with it previously in a top-secret installation miles below the surface of Antarctica. GIMM, pronounced Jim, stood for Gregarious Intruder Monitoring Mechanism, and took the form of a life-size, pewter-colored, elaborately detailed, lead-clad imitation of a Golden Retriever. On detecting an intruder, GIMM would bark extremely loudly and mercilessly until deactivated by several combinations of secret codes and vital sign transmissions. GIMM also had the special attribute of being able to transmit and receive vocally, using enhanced multilingual communication techniques. In other words, it could talk and listen. All Maya would have to do was control it from her end. GIMM, being a machine, was likely to be completely immune to the tissue damaging effects of The New Guy. She hurried over to the cabinet where GIMM was currently resting, pulled him out and rapidly placed his several component pieces together. There were reasons why GIMM had to be disassembled between missions. While she was doing this, she called Fydia, Rolanda and Rayburn Willis, and briefed them on her intention. They all gathered together in conference room Jedediah where they could operate the radio equipment required for GIMM. When turned on, the dog-machine began to wag its tail and smile. It appeared to enjoy its activation. Rolanda fed it some holographic biscuits, which it liked to jump up to reach, while Maya and Willis discussed the necessary steps of operation.

GIMM would be dispatched out of Doorlock Six and directed towards Moon Base Twelve, where it

would need to open the outer and inner doors in the proper sequence. GIMM was agile enough, but it would be tricky getting it to balance on its hind legs while operating the door controls with a paw. They discussed whether one or more of them should accompany the dog, if only to open the doors, but decided they would first try to let the dog accomplish these tasks itself and only follow up later in person if needed. They practiced some broadcasting and receiving, while Fydia made notes of the questions they would put to The New Guy and in which order. Then they dispatched GIMM and prayed, in an atheistic manner, for the success of this attempt.

They need not have worried about the logistics. GIMM had no problem getting into Moon Base Twelve. His arrival startled The New Guy, who had been snoozing comfortably on the couch and had only recently awakened. He scratched his belly and gazed thoughtfully at the dully shining metallic creature.

"What are you?" The New Guy asked, and nearly jumped back when the dog opened its mouth and spoke in the clear, calm tones of Maya Nguyen.

"This is GIMM," she was saying. "He is our ambassador. I am Captain Maya Nguyen. We met in person earlier, however, we seem to be having some trouble with direct contact. Hence, the dog."

"The dog," Martin echoed enthusiastically, emphasizing the latter word as if it told him everything he needed to know.

"Your name is Martin, is that correct?" Maya asked, checking off item number one on Fydia's list.

"Martin, yes," The New Guy told the dog. He approached it cautiously. The thing was wagging its tail and smiling broadly whenever it was not engaged in talking. Martin reached out his hand to its face but GIMM took no special notice of this gesture. Martin's hand retreated. He knelt down before it, as if he felt easier chatting on the same vertical level as the thing.

"We would like you to tell us a few things. First, how did you get here?" Maya asked.

"The usual way?" Martin said questioningly, after a few moments pause.

"Why have you come here?" Maya proceeded, as if that previous answer was satisfactory. Rayburn Willis was by her side, shaking his head and trying to get her attention, but she ignored him.

"I came here," Martin began to say, then paused again. "To be here. Yes, I came here to be here."

"For what reason?" Maya insisted.

"The reason being?"

"Yes, for what reason? Why?"

"A reason is usually an explanation, is it not? It supplies an answer to the question 'why'"

"Why are you here?" Maya repeated, feeling her teeth beginning to clench. Something was completely wrong about this whole situation and she felt certain it was going

to drive her insane long before she could make any sense of it.

Martin did not respond this time. He had reached out his arm again and was now manually investigating the dog, not petting it, but poking and stroking at it. He had a puzzled expression on his face, but the group inside couldn't see this, because they had forgotten to enable the camera lenses in GIMM's eyes. They could only hear his voice. Martin was confused. He was getting nothing from the machine, feeling nothing at all. He couldn't read it, couldn't interpret it, couldn't understand it. It was only cold. It looked happy but it had no heart. It looked not really alive but not dead either. It was a fake of some sort, he concluded. It existed but was not a being. The thought of that word reminded him of the voice he'd been hearing, the female voice that was coming from the dog.

"This is not a being," Martin announced, and waited for Maya to reply.

"No," she said. "It is only a messenger."

"I cannot feel it," he told her. "I cannot know it."

"I don't understand," Maya said. Fydia's list of questions was going to have to wait. They had gotten nothing out of The New Guy so far. He didn't seem to speak their language, although he spoke in English. There was a gap between their way of talking and his way of comprehending.

"A being has a reason," Martin said. "That's your 'why'. There is no 'why' for this thing here, this dog as you called it. It does not exist."

"It's a way of communicating," Maya explained. "We cannot be in the room there with you, so we are in another room and talking to you through GIMM."

"I cannot be talking through this GIMM," Martin sighed. He had retreated to the couch and lay down again. He closed his eyes and refused to say anything further. Maya tried, kept asking questions through the dog, but The New Guy didn't reply. Eventually she shook her head, turned off the radio, and put GIMM through his paces out of the doors and back to Moon Base One, where she patiently and sadly took him apart and returned his pieces to his cupboard.

Chapter Thirteen

Maya didn't get much brooding time. Even before she'd finished putting away GIMM's pieces she was told that General O'Nail was waiting to speak with her. She stalled a bit, then gathered Rayburn Willis to join her on the conference call. If there was one thing the General disapproved of- well, actually there was quite a long list - but 'failure' was at the very top of it. He demanded a thorough accounting of their progress and when she told him there had been, in fact, none, he was not at all pleased.

"I don't understand, Captain," he frowned at her. "You've got one sole civilian in a hidey-hole a hundred yards away, and you still can't tell me anything about him."

"It's complicated, sir," she said respectfully, "and it's not like we're not trying. We're working very hard. We've got everyone on board ..."

"Yes, yes, I know," he rudely interrupted. "You even have that Barleycorn fellow eating up all our bandwidth with some kind of download to Los Alamos here."

"Data, sir," Maya began, when he interrupted her again, nearly shouting this time.

"Of course it's data, dammit," he said. "What else does somebody download I'd like to know? At least tell me you got that video hookup we talked about."

"Video hookup?" Maya mouthed to Willis, who was sitting beside her. He shrugged and shook his head. They were going to have to look their notes at a later time to double check on that one.

"Yes, the damn video hookup," General O'Nail blared. "Don't think I can't see you whispering up there! We've got a video hookup on you too, you know. So what about that hut out there? Didn't you even get the robot dog to put in a camera?"

"No, sir," Maya acknowledged sheepishly. "We sort of, didn't think of it, I guess."

"Didn't think of it? Dammit, what kind of ship are you running up there? I'd come out there myself if they hadn't of canceled the entire damn space program. How do we know this guy isn't Chinese?"

"Chinese?" Willis and Maya blurted out together.

"He doesn't look Chinese," Willis added to the added fury of General O'Nail.

"What do I care what somebody looks like?" he fumed. "Listen. You've got to get that video pronto and that's an order. I've got my own orders too, you know. Right now the President's breathing down my neck and then there's Mister Wonderful to deal with too."

"Mister Wonderful?" Maya asked wonderingly. The name was unfamiliar to her.

"He's demanding crowd-sourcing," the General informed them, "and he's got the world-wide audience we need."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Maya said.

"Mister Wonderful!" the General repeated. "Oh, maybe you wouldn't, seeing as you're on the freaking moon and all. He's a TV guy. Got some kind of talk show. Number one, they tell me. Anyway, he's on me day and night with this crowd-sourcing idea. Seems your New Guy leaked out. It's all anyone's talking about down here. They're even planning to turn your show back on."

"Oh no," Willis groaned, "not that."

None of the settlers had ever been happy about the Loonie Show. Everything had been better for them since it was canceled. They had tried not to let it interfere with their work, but there were emails to answer and constant reminders of the folks back home. In the pleasant era since then, they'd hardly bothered to think about Earth at all, other than watching it rise and set as it liked to do.

"So do it," O'Nail barked. "I want to hear back no later than oh five hundred hours that it's done. After that, we'll turn it over to Mister Wonderful down here and see what he comes up with. Got it? Right. Over."

Maya and Willis switched off their microphones and left the area, muttering to each other that everyone knew very well that the General was in no position to give them any orders, and that they were under no obligation to follow them. Maya was particularly annoyed about the leak. She had hoped to solve the problem of The New Guy before anyone else on Earth even heard about him. Now it looked like she had to feed him live to the globe without knowing anything more about him. Her only hope now was to get one last chance before turning the cameras on. They needed a breakthrough. They needed a way for someone to be able to get in there and squeeze something out of that guy without him causing any further damage.

Chapter Fourteen

Barley MacDunhill had needed the extra processing power that only the Earth's entire network would supply. He'd had his contacts back on the home planet tie in to every available computer they could connect to, and launched his massively parallel data processing program on the collection of materials analysis the Moon Base scientists had put together. The aim was to discover which if any of their available materials could be adapted and produced to create an nerve-protecting body suit. The answer was surprising, and at first disheartening to the entire settlement.

"Kentucky Blue Grass?" Rayburn Willis exclaimed. "Really?"

"I know, right?" said Anita Frey.

"How's somebody going to wear grass armor?" Marco Velez wanted to know.

A quorum of the crew had gathered for the third general meeting in less than forty-eight hours, a new record. No one cheered the news Maya Nguyen brought about Mister Wonderful or the potential resurrection of their lunar reality show. The carpet area was filled with sighs and moans as she spoke. Then, when Barley appeared with these results, the groaning only grew louder.

"They wear grass skirts in Polynesia," Galen Harbid remembered, hoping this would be a positive contribution.

"We're talking full lawn jacket here," Barley reported. "The emissary's got to be covered from head to toe, and even under-toe, so to speak. Wrapped in at least a solid quarter inch carpet of the stuff."

"What about the eyes and mouth?" Rolanda Lin questioned him.

"Everything," Barley replied. "Whoever it is will have to see through a mounted camera and speak through a surface mic. Not a millimeter of human body can show through."

"I don't know." Rolanda shook her head. "It sounds impossible."

"I can do it," Gayle Henderson spoke up. All eyes turned toward her as she stood and addressed the group.

"I used to do some weaving," she said, "and I did some experiments with plants at one point. I had this idea about wrapping roses within ivy within clover. It was for a highly classified project, but never mind about that. I just think I can do it. The Blue Grass was mine, by the way. I had a hunch about the stuff. It showed some peculiar properties when cultivated at low gravity."

"How long?" Maya Nguyen wanted to know. She was feeling the pressure from the planet below, and felt that time was not on their side. This could be their last private meeting before the twenty-four seven surveillance kicked in again.

"It depends on the emissary, I suppose," Gayle replied. "The smaller the better, I'd think."

"That's too bad," Maya told her. "What if it's someone, let's say someone tall?"

"Like Fydia?" Gayle asked.

"Exactly Fydia," Maya said. This caused another round of murmuring which Maya brought to an end by asking if anyone had any objections. After all, she told them, Fydia had been the least affected by The New Guy the first time around and besides, she was an expert on first contact, which this still was, even if it was with a human male. No one objected. Fydia smiled. She had been hoping she'd be picked.

"Five hours," Gayle said after making some mental calculations. "I'll need some help, though."

"Naturally," Maya said. "Anything you need, just ask anyone."

This time the round of muttering was affirmative and hopeful as people raised their hands and politely informed Gayle of their constant availability.

"I can start the growing," she said, "but then I'll need a few harvesters. While they watch the grass grow until it's ready for picking, I'll need some Builders to help construct

a few looms. Then I'll need a couple of weavers to join me. Anyone with the relevant experience please follow me now. We'll be working out of Moon Base Two."

She turned and headed towards the structure in question. All of the Builders and several other volunteers went with her. Fydia wanted to join them, but Maya held her back.

"We should talk," she said. "Gayle will send for you when she's ready for a fitting."

Fydia, Rolanda, Maya and Rayburn Willis, the original diplomatic corps, held a separate meeting, this time to discuss Fydia's strategy. They had to get through to him somehow. They were willing to try anything at this point.

Chapter Fifteen

Gayle Henderson's project would have made scientific history had anyone on Earth been paying much attention to anyone on the Moon. Instead, Moon achievements were quickly discarded as having been accomplished by "those people". American audiences wanted nothing to do with them, even as Mister Wonderful cranked up his massive public relations machinery with the intent of garnishing a large viewing public for his upcoming show, tentatively entitled 'Showdown on Moon Base Twelve: The Taking'. Mister Wonderful, also known as Wilbur Cranshaw, was a smallish gentleman with a large head, always very well dressed and extremely photogenic with his slick thin black hair and throwback pencil mustache. His uncanny resemblance to Walt Disney was not unintentional. While Gayle and her team were working frantically to construct a complete body suit woven out of some of the finest turf known to mankind, Mister Wonderful was constructing all sorts of theoretical narratives involving spies, secret agents, Albania, and plots to set off a chain detonation which would engulf the entire asteroid field in a fireworks spectacular long since predicted by the ancient Yanomamo.

Gayle's concern was more immediate - the grafting of plant material onto nylon so that it formed an

impenetrable weave. There could not be a gap of even a millimeter, so the layering and intricacy required was demanding. While the looms were being built and the grass grown she was envisioning multiple scenarios, but it wasn't until she took a brief nap that the perfect solution came to her mind. She later described it as a "mandala moment" when the entire universe and a previous hallucinogenic experience conspired to inform her of an interlocking scheme that would have confounded even the great Escher. She grabbed one of Fydia's extra large onesies and began to sketch out her dream.

The project had other aspects worthy of accolades as well. Instead of eyes, remote wireless cameras were placed on the outer part of the head and correspondingly connected screens were placed inside. Fydia would hardly know that she wasn't seeing out of her own sockets but through tcp/ip addressable ones. A similar technique was used for speaking and hearing. When Fydia was finally stuffed into the costume, and enduring a number of gentle "jolly green giant" taunts, she was ready to march. And she did parade up and down Moon Base Two for a quarter of an hour or so while other scientists made measurements and calculations and performed a number of tests upon her. The suit was more than tailor-made. It was a genuine marvel. She was completely encased in the growing green stuff (which was rooting in the nylon, thanks to a feat of truly incomprehensible genetic manipulation). Her only concern was how long it would be until she had to be mowed!

The work had a side benefit as well. The entire crew of the Moon Base had come together to participate and contribute, and their camaraderie, which had always been a strength, was even more formidable than ever. The importance of team chemistry can not be overstated for those who are spending at least a decade together in isolation on an inhospitable extra-terrestrial orb. The whole team, except of course for the sleeping Pete, gathered to send her off with all their hopes in this final pre-televised quest to discover the origin and purpose of The New Guy in Moon Base Twelve.

Chapter Sixteen

Fydia had several tasks on her list and she was determined to check them off in order. She knew that the installation of video was of great importance to the people back at Mission Control, and she intended to get that over with first. She entered Moon Base Twelve and ignored The New Guy while she set about this job. The cameras looked like nothing more than transparent bandages, and she slapped them in various locations on the walls and ceilings all around the hut. The New Guy looked on from his perch on the couch, where he had once again been sleeping. If he was bewildered by her

activities, that was nothing compared to his shock at her appearance. He had no idea what this very large creature was that was stomping around his living quarters, smacking various parts of its structure here and there for no obvious purpose.

"We've met before," Fydia finally spoke as she stopped and stood directly in front of him, no more than a few feet away. He was still sitting, and started up at her, saying nothing.

"My name is Fydia Sooth," she said. "I was one of the group who visited you recently. Unfortunately, we were unable to stay very long. There is something about you, or about this place, now that I think of it ..."

Her voice trailed off as the idea occurred to her that she ought to inspect the room for any unusual items that The New Guy might have brought with him. There may be some substance, some device that was responsible for causing the nerve attacks, but her inspection did not take long. There were very few things in Moon Base Twelve. It was not only a small place, but a largely empty one as well. Aside from the couch there were practically no furnishings. The walls and ceilings were bare except for the cameras she'd just glued on, and the floor was flat and uncovered, concealing nothing, just the random pile of junk the Builders had left over.

"It was just a thought," she spoke again. "Listen. A lot of people are interested in you. Do you understand that?"

"People?" It was the first word he'd said since she had entered. He was struggling to make any sort of connection between Fydia and the idea of people. Now that she was wandering about, he stood up and vaguely followed her, shuffling his feet in one direction or another in a sort of ambivalent dance.

"Yes, people," she said. "You know, like you, like me, like the others who came here. Humans. You do understand me, don't you?"

"I am human," The New Guy said, and there was something about his tone that caused Fydia to stop, and focus on his eyes. Was he stating a fact, or asking a question?

"Human," she repeated. "Aren't you hungry? Thirsty? I notice you do sleep but I haven't seen you do much of anything else."

"Humans sleep a lot," The New Guy replied.

"What about food?" she asked again. "I don't see any here. In fact, there's nothing here. You came here with nothing? No equipment? No supplies?"

"I hear your words," he shrugged, "but without seeing your face it's difficult to understand."

"Sorry about that," she said. "But I can't show you my face right now. Later, when I get back. We have two-way video now. We'll be able to talk through that. You see? We'll show up on that wall over there where you can see and hear us."

"I don't know," he said with a sigh. "That's not how it's supposed to work."

"How what's supposed to work?"

"Learning," he said, sitting down and closing his eyes, "I am to interact and learn."

Fydia fell silent. The New Guy looked like he was about to go to sleep again and in fact he lay down on the couch and began to breathe slowly and deeply.

"Wait a minute," she said, and she walked over to him and pushed his shoulder until he opened his eyes again.

"You're here on a mission, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean" he said as he tried to shake her hand loose but her grip was too tight. He squinted his eyes tightly together and trained them on her head. His whole body seemed to shake with concentration. Fydia saw this but felt nothing. She had questions.

"You said you're here to interact and learn. Learn what? About the Base? About us? Who sent you? What do you want to learn?"

"Humans," he sniffed. Fydia released her hold on his shoulder and stepped back.

"Maya?" she murmured, "Are you hearing this?"

"Ten-four," came the captain's voice in her ear.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking? This is contact."

"Could be," Maya said. "That was interesting about the food. Hadn't thought of that."

"Something else," Fydia said, retreating to the far wall in case The New Guy was listening. "The way he was looking at me just now. He was searching for something, trying to do something. Of course! That's it!"

She took three long strides back to the couch and loomed over The New Guy.

"You were trying to read my mind just now, weren't you?"

The New Guy squinted at her again.

"Whatever that is on your head is hiding you," he told her.

"Yes, of course. Telepathy. Maya, I think that's what's causing the nerve damage. When he reads your

mind."

"Okay," Maya drawled, sighing. "Could be, I suppose, if there even was such a thing as mind-reading. Machines can do it to some extent of course, we know that. They can reconstruct recently heard words out of brain waves, that is, but it's still a long way from actual spur-of-the-moment, live mind-reading."

"For us it is," Fydia countered. "But he's not one of us. I don't think he's human."

"I heard that," The New Guy said, popping up from the couch. "You're mistaken. I am to be human. Completely and totally. One hundred percent. I was made to be entirely human."

"Made," Fydia jumped at the word. "Yes, but by who, and why?"

"I already told you why," Martin said. "To learn."

"But who made you?" she demanded.

The New Guy thought for a few moments, and then said, with a shrug,

"I don't know."

Chapter Seventeen

"It doesn't know anything," Fydia reported upon her return to Moon Base One. "His name isn't even Martin. That's just something he picked up from someone's mind."

"I think it was me," Michael Gelano spoke up. "I remember thinking he looked like a guy I once knew named Martin, and then he went and said that's what his name was."

"He can definitely read minds," Fydia acknowledged. "In fact, it might be the only thing he CAN do." Fydia had returned a hero, having solved the riddle, if not the problem of what to do with The New Guy. Now everyone was together for what they all agreed would hopefully be the last time for a long time.

"So basically he's a probe," Maya put in

"Pretty much," said Fydia. "He can read minds and store the information but it doesn't seem like he's in contact with anyone or anything else at the moment. Still, we don't know how he got here, or who sent him, or anything else."

"There could be a whole army out there waiting for his report," Marco Velez suggested, to a chorus of groans.

"Maybe they're all giant cockroaches," Barley MacDunhill suggested sarcastically.

"Or lizards," said Rayburn Willis. "Aren't they usually lizards?"

"Or how about little green men?" volunteered Redmon Chanoo.

"We have no idea," Maya Nguyen spoke up with some authority in her voice to quiet the chuckles now echoing around the room.

"And there's nothing we can do about it," she concluded. "We'll report what we know to General O'Nail and see what they want to do."

"That's the army we're most likely to see," worried Demaryius Ballantyne. "Our own, come to blow us all up."

"Not likely," Maya said. "It would cost too much, and anyway, Martin doesn't know it, but he's about to go live worldwide on the Mister Wonderful show."

"They're not going to like it," Fydia said. "All he wants to do is sleep."

"It'll be like Pete TV," Galen Harbid chimed in.

"Okay, okay, that's enough," Maya declared. "I don't think there's anything else to be gained here. My own advice is for everyone to forget all about it and just get back to our lives as best we can."

"Maybe we ought to seal it up," Rayburn Willis suggested. Maya nodded.

"We don't know if he can get out," she agreed, "or even if he can breathe the air out there, but just in case, he's a menace, so I think you're right."

"I can block it off easily," Galen offered, and Gelano said he'd help, so the two of them went off to barricade Moon Base Twelve. There was no point in anyone else going in anymore, and they certainly didn't want "Martin" coming out and wandering around freely.

General O'Nail was inclined to agree when he received the news. At first he blustered in disbelief and questioned Fydia extensively. He'd watched the recording of her visit several times and finally came to the same conclusion they all did. This was no human but a humanoid probe, placed by some force and by some unknown other into their midst for some unknown reason.

"Learning, he keeps saying," O'Nail muttered. "That would seem to imply that they, whoever they are, don't feel they know enough about us yet."

"They knew enough to make a construct," Willis said.

"A copy of sorts," added Barley. "As my program clearly demonstrated, the probe is a composite of

four different human beings, all of whom I named individually as you will recall."

"We recall," said Willis huffily, already tiring of his latest companion. Barley was okay for the most part, mild and easy going, except when it came to anyone demonstrating the slightest doubt about the results his software produced. Then he became quite the arrogant ass.

"So how did they get access to those four individuals?" Maya mused thoughtfully.

"All unknown, dammit!" snorted the General. "They could be among us even now, more of them like this Martin creature, just sitting there, maybe in a classroom, maybe in an office suite, sitting there not saying much just listening and gathering information, pretending to be human. Hell, you wouldn't even know! Could be my own damn secretary, tell you the truth! Never says a word but yessir and nossir."

"You can't trust the quiet types," he concluded.

"So what do we do now?" Maya asked and the General shrugged.

"Damned if I know," he said. "It'll have to go to the President, no doubt about that. And there's Mister Wonderful too, of course."

"That's about to happen," Maya said. "The lights go on at oh nine hundred hours."

"That a fact?" the General beamed. "Guess I sort of did push you into that one, didn't I? Oh well, no harm done, I suppose. Or hope. Or pray," he added, growing more agitated every moment as it dawned on him that an alien tool was about to dominate the global airwaves for potentially the first time ever. He had memories of certain Christmas variety shows which made him wonder about that fact.

"I suppose I'd better make sure it's all okay with the President," he murmured and hung up.

Chapter Eighteen

It so happened that President Spud Goodman was not only a big fan of Mister Wonderful, they were also old friends. Wonderful had been a major Republican donor in his earlier life as a billionaire media mogul, an incarnation not well known to his multitude of admirers. They were largely unaware of his role behind the scenes in the origins of the Frantic News Network, a twenty-four-seven shouting frenzy that had been dominating the airwaves for some time. FNN had a way of whipping up new hysterias around the clock, and Mister Wonderful could hardly contain his glee when his good buddy President Goodman relayed the information about The New Guy.

"A freaking Alien with a capital A? Are you freaking kidding me?" Wonderful chortled in the East

Room where he and the President were dining on a nice fresh lobster salad.

"That's what they tell me," Goodman said, unsure why this was such good news. After all, his own imagination was running in the same wild direction as probably every other man who'd grown up with crappy science fiction books and movies. Aliens were always disgusting, vile, and out to destroy mankind. This new development was not, Goodman felt, likely to turn out to help his upcoming bid for re-election. It's true he thrived on controversy, especially those which were manufactured out of nothing by his friends at FNN, but they were generally directed at specific, Earthly enemies, such as the other political party, its leaders and its members. He was already suspicious of the news, seeing as it came directly from those faggy pinko pagan vegetarians on the Moon. "How in the hell did THAT ever happen," he was asking himself for the millionth time, although he was pretty damn sure it was a conspiracy. He had fired every single member of that commission, and tried to harass them all into utter poverty and disgrace, but the damage was already done, and one of them had even managed to snag himself a spot up there. And to think he had once trusted that man!

"So they call him Martin?" Wonderful was still rubbing his hands together like one of those greedy villains in vintage cartoons. "As in, dare I say, it? My Favorite Martin? Ooh, it's all too good. Too good!"

"So you really want to do this?" Goodman double-checked. Mister Wonderful merely sniffed and said, "Of course we do. Of course! Why, this will be the show of the century. The Moon Man From Outer Space. How could it get any better?"

Thus the stage was set. The New Guy was completely unaware of the fact, but the cameras in his little hut were activated as a live studio audience was being primed for the premier by a long, exuberant introduction presented by Mister Wonderful and his Moon Goddess Dancers. There was music and fireworks and special guests, interrupted only by commercials for trucks and beer and birth control. At last the great moment arrived, and the lighting was turned up and two.point.something billion live viewers were able to see, for the first time ever, a regular looking guy, lying there snoozing on his couch in a dirty little room.

Mister Wonderful, however, was a professional, and didn't miss a beat. Proclaiming that the alien was no doubt worn out from his extensive inter-stellar journey, Wonderful immediately turned to a so-called expert in long distance space travel, a scientist with of course no practical experience whatever in the subject. While this professor droned on for a few minutes, the audience was left to gape at the figure draped over the sofa. Wonderful, off-camera now, was furiously jabbering into his mouthpiece at a

producer in the booth. This person evidently informed him about the holographic projection capabilities installed by Fydia Sooth, for Wonderful abruptly reappeared, suavely interrupted his guest and resumed his video-hogging stance.

"And now," he intoned, "we are going to attempt to communicate with this creature. I myself will beam my own image into its very chamber, and from there conduct the first-time ever live globally broadcast interview with an alien being."

He snapped his fingers a few times, glanced warily to the side of the stage and then, when assured that his visage was indeed appearing on an inner wall of Moon Base Twelve, he cleared his throat and began, in a loud voice, to summon The New Guy to attention.

"Greetings, Alien Visitor," he declared. "All of Earth bids you welcome at this our time of great disturbance and peril."

The New Guy scrunched his eyes together and squirmed on the couch.

"Behold!" Mister Wonderful continued, "We appear to you via the magic of holographic imaging, a technology no doubt familiar to your own transcendent kind."

The New Guy turned again, and this time opened one eye, slightly. He focused on the sight of the wavering two-dimensional representation of the famous television personality.

"Hello. Hello," waved Mister Wonderful, also turning to his audience and signaling an intern to flash the APPLAUSE sign, at which the crowd reacted appropriately. The sudden burst of noise caused The New Guy to sit up and stare more closely at the wall.

"We ALL bring greetings," Wonderful said, gesturing at the cameramen to pan and display the folks to The New Guy. This made a further impression, and The New Guy stood and walked over to the wall. He reached out to touch what he saw and showed bewilderment when his hand passed right through it. He withdrew his hand and inspected his palm as if he expected to find some residue on it. Mister Wonderful was smiling his most beneficent smile.

"We come in peace," he said, adding, "and we hope you do too!"

The New Guy nodded, at which the studio erupted with excitement, but he must have meant something else by that gesture, for he turned around and walked back to the couch, where he lay down, and within moments was peacefully snoring again.

Later that day Mister Wonderful, in the privacy of his luxurious office suite, swore that someone was going to pay, and pay a heavy price, for this incredible fiasco. Nothing had gone right after The New Guy had seemingly switched himself off. Shouting, screaming, music, Moon Goddess Dancers, nothing had re-awakened him or caused even the slightest twitch. Fifteen more minutes Mister Wonderful endured, trying everything he could think of to revive the apparently comatose alien. The ratings weren't bad, his secretary assured him, but the social world had erupted in scorn and derision, most of which aimed directly at Mister Wonderful himself. The consensus was that the entire thing was a hoax from beginning to end. There was no such alien. There was no such Moon Base Twelve. In fact, the general public was quickly coming to believe that there was no Moon Base One or Two either. The whole thing was a fraud, a setup, a publicity stunt engineered by President Goodman and his media cronies. All of those alleged astronauts had probably been relaxing poolside by some mansion in Arizona all this time.

Meanwhile, no one on the Moon had bothered to watch the show at all. Fydia Sooth had been studying her mix tapes in a vain attempt to calculate which point in the music stream might have captured the attention of an alien population, but there was simply no way to tell. Maya Nguyen was catching up on some quality time with Galen Harbid, and Rayburn Willis was gently breaking up with Barley MacDunhill. They were all therefore surprised to be summoned to the conference room for an emergency call with General O'Nail.

The General was in a rare good humor. He'd only just returned from The White House, where he'd been in a meeting with the President. He told the three to expect a call any minute from the man himself.

"The President wants to talk to us?" Maya asked, amazed. She knew very well how much he despised them all.

"No, no, not the president," O'Nail laughed. "Mister Wonderful!"

"Do we have to?" Willis grunted.

"Afraid so," the General said. "But don't worry. Tell him anything you want. You have official clearance from me. I'll back you a hundred and ten percent."

"One hundred would suffice," Fydia commented.

"Don't start with me," the General warned as Maya tried to shush Fydia from any further wisecracks.

"But what does he want from us?" Maya asked.

"Oh you'll see," said the General. "I'd tell you but I'd hate to spoil your fun," and with that he rang off.

They had only a few minutes of suspense, which they used in agreeing that Maya would do all the talking. Mister Wonderful prided himself on being a ladies' man so they felt he might be more susceptible to her "charms", but Wonderful did not bring his flirtation game to the call.

"Captain!" he declared, revealing the General's hand behind his preparations, "you've got to do something about your alien."

"It's not MY alien," she began, but he cut her off.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're responsible as commanding officer up there."

"Actually," she started to say, "we're all equal here." but he wasn't listening.

"I understand from the General that the creature requires the immediate presence of a human in order to respond. That's why the hologram trick failed. Apparently it responds only to flesh or something like that."

"It needs an open and available brain," Maya agreed.

"So do it!" Wonderful demanded. "Send somebody in there. I'd do it myself except for the obvious logistical reasons! You've got people up there. Send somebody in."

Maya let him stop talking, and then wait a little longer until she felt she had his attention.

"We can't do it, sir," she told him. "It's too dangerous. His mind-reading causes us physical harm. Surely the General told you ..."

"Damn the General! Damn the physical harm! We're talking first contact here! What could be more important?"

"The health of the crew," she countered.

"I don't give a damn about that!" he shouted. "Send someone inconsequential. Send one of those idiot builders. I've got a list of them right here. Let's see. Marco Velez. Galen Harbid. Michael Gelano. Useless, every single one! Send one of them. I don't care which."

At this, Fydia and Willis jumped up from their seats and barely managed to keep themselves from screaming at the mic. Instead they paced rapidly in circles around each other while Maya took a deep breath, and then another, and then another.

"Mister Wonderful, sir," she said, as calmly as possible. "I believe you know where you can shove it."

"Why you stupid lesbo ..." he shouted but Maya turned off the speaker before they had to hear another

syllable.

"You'll pay for this!" he was yelling. "You and all your kind. You'll pay and you'll pay and you'll never stop paying as long as that damn Moon revolves around MY PLANET! Do you hear me? Are you listening?"

They weren't. They were too busy laughing instead.

Chapter Twenty

There was no general staff meeting about the Mister Wonderful affair or the cancellation of his plans to revive the Loonie Show. Word got around. Word also got around about how, a few days later, the cameras in Moon Base Twelve revealed that The New Guy had gone missing. Maya and Willis reviewed the tapes and saw that he had simply vanished. One moment he was there, switched off and snoring on the couch, and the next moment he was gone. Fydia agreed to don her "big green woman" suit one more time, and with Galen's help removed the makeshift barrier and entered the place, only to confirm that he was indeed no longer there, not that there had been any doubt about that. They concluded that he must have originally arrived in a similar fashion - all at once and out of nowhere.

General O'Nail had mixed feelings about this news. On the one hand, the immediate concern about the creature's intentions were allayed, but on the other hand, it left open the unanswerable question of what it all meant, and what it might mean for the future. It was still unknown who or what had sent the probe, or for what reason, or what they might have learned or concluded, or what their plans now might be. Maya's opinion was that yes, you could worry about all that, but you didn't have to, especially since there was absolutely nothing you could do about it. The General said it was all very well for her to feel that way, but he had to answer to the President, who was nothing if not an incurable alarmist.

And so, back in the U.S.S.A., public opinion was professionally mixed and stirred to the tune of billions of dollars to be spent on "defense" against a purely theoretical, if not wholly imaginary, threat. Once this funding was herded through the proper channels and every last drop of pathos had been wrung out of the ET threat-concept, "Martin" was conveniently forgotten. Mister Wonderful also moved on and never mentioned the subject again on live TV. He did not forget, however, and whenever he had the opportunity to deny employment or any kind of compensation to any distant relative of any one of the moon crew, he did so, without anyone ever becoming aware of it. This revenge was meager, though, and he longed for the day when he could make a more dramatic gesture.

Moon Base Twelve itself was eventually dismantled, in favor of a newer and more sophisticated structure called Moon Base Thirteen. By that time, the Drillers had found enormous reserves of ice beneath the surface, enough to generate water and oxygen for generations of settlers, and the Builders, in conjunction with the Botanists, had developed a way to fuse moon rock with a kind of rubbery glue to form even more perfectly sealed enclosures than the original moon bases had been made with. This was an especially useful development, since there was a new generation of settlers in the works, and additional housing was going to be needed. No one up there was particularly concerned about an alien invasion of the Earth, which was no longer their home. They had unanimously decided to remain where they were.

Maya and Galen were the first to produce a moon-child, who was auspiciously born in the month of July. Martinique was a brilliant child, beautiful and sweet, with no dark side that anyone could ever see.