

# Priority Load

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Shortly after washing the bugs and goo off his Kenshan truck, John Duran looked through his email to see if his load arranger had a haul for the upcoming week. Sure enough, *FramSafe Hauling* had a dozen requests posted for big rig haulers, but John whistled low as one of them caught his eye:

HAULER NEEDED ATL-LAX. PRIORITY PERMIT LOAD. ONLY BONDED DRIVERS WANTED.  
DEPART 5/10/2210. DROP AT LAX TERMINAL on 5/12/2210. MUST DRIVE STRAIGHT  
THROUGH. BONUS FOR EARLY DELIVERY.

"Just the thing to get my mind off the last trip," he muttered. "Pete? Son, are you home?"

"Sure dad, be right down." He skipped down the stairs, two at a time. "Hey dad, sorry I didn't hear you pull in. Guess I was studying too hard," he chuckled. "Tomorrow's my last final exam. I'll be home at noon. Maybe we can go fishing?"

"How's school? Got your math class under control?"

"Sure dad. That new MyMath bobble-tutor is great. What's that?" Pete asked as he glanced at the PuterTerm holovid on the living room wall. "Got another run, dad?"

"Maybe, son, but I gotta leave tomorrow night and drive straight through to Los Angeles. I'm not sure that's a good idea if you're going to be in school."

"Nah, dad, I'll be out by tomorrow night. It'll be okay."

"Maybe you wanna come with me? This is a Priority Permit load – you remember what kind of fun that is."

"Sure, dad, we can speed and not get a ticket," Pete laughed. "What's in the Priority Load?"

"Don't know yet. I'm going to call Mr. Samster at FramSafe and get more details. This one could bring us lots of credits."

"Let's go," shouted Pete in an excited voice. "I'll be glad that school's out, and we haven't been able to drive together for months. This'll be a great time to play the latest tunes and just talk. I'll be ready for my OTR Hauler's Endorsement by time we get back."

"So you wanna go? It won't cut into your summer vacation?"

"Nah, I'm okay – let's go."

"Okay son. Pack up tonight. We'll leave at 6 P.M. tomorrow night. Try to catch 40 winks after school."

"Okay dad."

The doorbell rang and a bat-faced teenage girl with a bad complexion and an order of pizza and soft drinks stood there, waiting for a tip. John dug into his jeans and pulled out a couple of blue plastic credits. He said "Good luck on your test tomorrow, Pete. Here, let's have some real brain food."

Home-delivered pizza was a rare treat so Pete just said "Gee thanks, dad," and he dug right in.

The pizza driver looked at her tip and kind of grunted at John. "It's pretty dangerous out here for a 5 credit tip, but thanks anyway." John looked at her outstretched hand and added another 5 credit tip. She looked up at the sky before she got into her car and then she silently zoomed off. John was left with some pleasant memory about his last trip to Calizona. "I guess they're all pretty much the same," he thought, and silently smiled as he closed the door.

John and Pete polished off the pizza and then Pete went upstairs to study. "Son, do good tomorrow. High school really counts nowadays."

Within a few minutes, John waved his hands over the PuterTerm and in a minute, Mr. Samster's bobble-head showed a holo-avatar of his master. "Mr. Samster's unavailable now," the bobble-head said. Please leave a message and he will call you back..."

Suddenly John heard "Hello, this is Tony. Is that you John? Just a second – lemme get this bobble-head turned around now. You must be calling about the ATL-LAX run that I posted today, right?"

"Sure, Tony. What's the deal – a load with the Priority Permits? Haven't seen one of them in an age."

"Yeah, well the volcano that erupted just north of Los Angeles yesterday – did y'all hear about it? Well anyway, they need to get some heavy construction equipment out there pronto, so the Pres told Homeland Security to expedite any loads that are headed out there. 10,000 people were fried in the first few minutes, and now the H-Sec guys think that an armored IntelliCat from that Army Corps facility out near Fort Gordon can help redirect the lava flow away from Pasadena. But nobody's sure if one Cat is enough. Hey, think y'all want the load? It's going to pay 100K credits for the trip. 'Course it'll be deadhead home."

John thought for only a second. His bobble-head told him about the volcanic eruption on the trip home yesterday, but driving back from L.A. without a load would be expensive. Maybe he could hook up with one of the freight expeditors out there. "Sure, Mr. Samster – but what aren't you telling me? That kind of money isn't just sitting around waiting for me to call in."

"Well, y'all 'r right. There have been more of them hijacker gangs along Interstate 20 than ever before. So y'all 'r going ta have ta take Interstate 10. I know that's not going to be fun."

"Nuts! I hate The 10. They've never fixed it in the last 20 years or more. It's a mess."

"Yeah, but that keeps the 'jackers to a minimum. What'da ya say John? Want a hot load, with Priority Permits?"

"Sure Tony, you old dog. You knew I couldn't resist. Have your bobble-head call my bobble-head with the details."

"Roger."

"Out."

John crashed hard that night – he'd just been on a 5-day trip to the Windy City and back, and he needed lots of deep sleep. The night passed quickly, and the computers called "bobble-heads" by the truckers communicated their requirements during the night.

The sun came up early-orange that Tuesday, and John ran the hot shower water until it was cold. "We need new solar tanks so that doesn't happen anymore. This Priority Load's gonna help out a lot."

After a quick check of the WebVid, he saw how the entire world's attention was shifted to the volcano in Pasadena, Los Angeles, California. Over 500 channels were trying to cover the story, but there wasn't much new to say. The air was so choked with fumes that the whole area looked like midnight at noon. A huge area was blanketed with black goop, and ejecta from the volcano. "All we can say," said one reporter, "is that lots of people are dead, and that we don't know the exact location of the vent. That's what geologists call the opening where the lava is flowing out..."

He went outside and thumbed the latch on the big rig's door. "Good morning," said the bobble-head as it swiveled towards John.

"It's always strange to see an avatar of myself, looking back at me," John replied.

"Let's get some DeizoPels and then some breakfast."

"Breakfast for me and for you," said the bobble-head. "I like the symmetry of that."

The engine came to life and John said "Hey look, I'll drive it over to the TruckPlex, if that's okay with you." He didn't feel like strapping on the robotic steering arms for such a short trip.

He up shifted and drove over to the west side of town. A beat-up sign said "Tru P x" It looked like it had been shot by a high-power rifle. When he approached the huge steel entry door, it slid aside almost instantly, and he was inside. He drove down the ramp, and around the spiral road to the 3rd sub-level. All filling stations had to be at least 100 feet underground these days, because of the space debris problem. He pulled right up to an empty DiezoPel dispenser and the rig shut right down. The dispenser's robotic arm swiftly shoved the compressed diesel pellets into the big aluminum fuel cell, until it was packed full. "Thumbprint here, please," said the dispenser. John reached out and pressed his thumb on the waiting screen. "Thank you Mr. Duran," said the dispenser, and then it retracted the filling arm.

"Now breakfast for me, my fine bobble-head," he said as he pulled away. By time he hit the top of the spiral ramp, he was doing 80. "It's going to be a good day," he said to nobody in particular.

He drove to the *CowTown ChowDown Diner*, which was only a few feet underground, and he quickly parked the rig. "Watch 'er," he said to the bobble-head, as he dismounted the cab. He made sure the red light was glowing on the dash. The bobble-head rotated 360 and then just sat quietly.

John wolfed downed a huge breakfast of reconstituted eggs, fake bacon, recycled coffee, and orange-flavored water. He paid and left a small tip. The autonomous waitress-robot reached out a thin tentacle and flipped the credits into her apron from 15 feet away. "See ya next time, Mr. Duran."

"See ya, doll," he called out over his shoulder, but he was thinking "What in the world does a waitress-robot do with cash? That's just not right."

## Chapter 2.

"Mon back. 'mon back," shouted the freight handler at Fort Gordon's huge R&D loading facility.

John's bobble-head and John happened to laugh at the same time. "Obviously the clown doesn't know who's driving the rig," they both said, as the bobble-head bounced up and down on its stalk on the dashboard. He stopped the 22-wheeler just 1 millimeter shy of the loading dock and set the airbrake. "Guess that's close enough for government work, right boss?"

"You bet," chuckled John as he slid down from the cab and walked the 110 foot trip to the back of his rig. The bobble-head shut down the big Kenshan motor, and the silence was deafening for a minute until the handler looked down at John and said "I've seen 8-year-old girls drive better," as he spit tobacco on the ground by the loading dock. "Damn Indonesian rigs."

John knew that the guy in the sergeant's uniform was full of it, but he decided to keep quiet. Indonesia was the only country that still manufactured the fast, heavy-duty 22-wheelers. They were actually darn good rigs – they bought the old Kenworth company when it was going out of business, so the rigs really had a proud history. He climbed up the access ladder and reached for the clipboard, but the middle-aged, bloated sergeant held onto it for some reason and gave John the evil eye. "Y'all 'r goin't ta take my Catwoman out to L.A., I hear. If'n she gets damaged, I'm holdin' y'all responsible, hear?"

"She'll be fine. I haven't had a ticket or an accident in 20 years of driving. My bobble-head's got the latest version of software uploaded. Your dozer'll be just fine. Can we load up, please? It's a long run to L.A., and there are folks out there who are waitin' for some relief."

The sergeant spat again, and then pushed some buttons on the clipboard. The rumble and whine of a twin-turbo-diesel Caterpillar tractor came to life in the closed shed behind them. "Stand back, son. I'll show y'all how it's done," said the handler. His fingers flew over the holo-keypad on the clipboard as the Cat suddenly roared to life, the electronic doors swung aside. At the last second, the doors finally opened wide enough for the Cat to come growling out. Then it lifted its scraper blade to full-height and stopped. Suddenly, it almost leapt onto the waiting flatbed of John's big rig, but it was as graceful as a ballerina. It stopped on a dime, growled for a couple of seconds, swung the giant blade off to the side and tucked it in, just beside the left track. The intelligent cleats on the flatbed mated with chains that the Cat let down, and then the monster shut down. As the hot engine cooled, it clicked a series of metallic clicks. The sergeant said "thumbprint here, son."

John looked at the 50-foot-long armored Caterpillar bulldozer. At least that's how it started out in life. But the Army special projects team that had modified it to be the smartest and most powerful IntelliDozer in the Army Corps of Engineers' garage of amazing stuff. She would need every bit of her strength and cunning to redirect the lava flow in Pasadena. The sergeant reached out and touched the right-hand track. "Sleep easy, Alice. And if this guy hurts you, let me know." He made a gesture near his right ear like he was receiving an incoming phone call.

John climbed down the ladder and looked at the monster Cat as he walked back to his cab. He couldn't wait to show his bobble the load, but he didn't want to hang around the mean sergeant any longer than necessary. As he closed the cab door, the bobble-head swiveled and spoke to him. But John said. "Not

right now. Just get us out of here, okay?" He strapped his set of robot driver-hands to his chest and took one more look in the rearview mirror as the big rig's engine roared to life.

"Sure boss. We're gone." And as the airbrakes released, the bobble-head computer up shifted the gear pattern, and they were rolling through the last Army checkpoint at a decent clip.

"I'll show you the load later, but right now, we gotta go pick up Pete." He waved the bar-coded paperwork at the bobble-head and two red lights popped to life on the dashboard.

"Sure boss," said the bobble-head. "LASERs armed." Then they headed towards the home-20, looking at the gray sky and thinking about whatever computers and people think about before a new adventure.

Pete was waiting in front of the house with a couple of canvas bags. He climbed up, and climbed in. He chucked the bags back into the camper and said "Let's rock."

"Hold on a minute, Pete. I need to show the load to the bobble-head," John said as he snatched the orb off its mounting stick on the dash. He walked the circumference of the big rig and held the bobble-head on his palm. It continuously rotated itself to face towards the Priority Load.

When John climbed back into the cab and popped the bobble-head on its stick, it whistled a low whistle. "Some kinda hardware, boss."

Pete watched as his dad strapped on the robotic driving hands. The black harness looked like a thick black vest with metal rods coming straight out of its front. But the end-effectors on those rods were 3-fingered hands, which quickly reached out and clamped themselves on to the big steering wheel. "Yeah, let's not lose it. Ready to rock?"

The 3,000 horsepower engine came out of its trance, and the bobble-head up shifted the gears, and the robotic driving hands moved in their unique pattern, as John punched holo-keys on his tablet computer. "Here's the route we're going to take," he said.

The bobble-head whistled a low whistle and said, "You the boss," as he turned South.

"Why is the bobble-head upset, dad?"

"He knows the road conditions on the I-10. It's not like the Feds are ever going to fix it. He'll have to work extra hard to get the load out to L.A., that's all. Hey, he's a bobble-head – but I bet he has some feelings."

"Which you seem to be ignoring," said the bobble-head softly, as he rotated 360 and scanned the father and son, before realigning his gaze onto the road. "Interstate 10, next stop. Do you want me to give you waypoints and time estimates?"

"Maybe later," said John. "For now, let's just cruise."

The robot hands that formed a bridge between his chest and the steering wheel moved jerkily from left and right, and the steering wheel moved in small and large arcs in perfect synchronization. John's hands were only to be used in case of an emergency that the bobble-head couldn't figure out. "For some

reason, the Highway safety guys still think that we might somehow need to outthink a bobble-head, Pete. They're pretty wacky up there in D.C."

"Yeah, I remember you telling me how they train the bobble-heads to be faster and smarter than any human, when it comes to driving a truck. When they turned the roads over to the bobble-heads, what'd you say? Deaths dropped from 50,000 per year, to about 6 per year, something like that? I don't think that the bobble-head's going to fail any time soon now. But still, you're hauling 100,000 pounds now, and you know the space debris problem."

"Yeah, son. It's just that I'm not egotistical enough to think that I'm the driver here. This MyTruck bobble-head 'n me have driven a million miles of tough roads for years, without a hitch. Some government agency still thinks that these robotic hands will fail, or the bobble-head will make a mistake, it's just crazy, that's all."

"Tell me again how they train the bobble-heads, dad. It's a fun story."

John was getting comfortable in his seat, and he was glad that Pete was along for the ride. "Sure son. They're really a self-training artificial intelligence computer. You can train 'em to do lots of things, and they all have different effectors, like these driving hands, that they can use. Back in the day, Congress wasn't going to turn the roads over to the bobble-heads unless they could be proven to be 100% safe. So some scientists at Auburn University in Alabama came up with a training program that was so complex that no human could achieve that level of expertise. When a bobble-head is trained, it's way better than any human at doing a job. Look, they wanted these robot hands to be so fast that even if a child runs out in the street right now, the bobble-head can steer around him. The integrated braking, steering and backing algorithms are far more sophisticated than anyone can understand anyhow. They train the bobble-head to think and predict what's going to happen by putting it out in the rain. It's hooked to its set of hands, and it watches the rain drops falling. When they're bonded, a successful bobble-head and his paired robotic hands can grab raindrops out of the air – it's that fast. When those old boys in Washington saw that, they let the big rig manufacturers go ahead and put in bobble-head controls. But they still insist that a human comes along for the ride, just in case. Pretty silly, I say. In 100 years, I've never heard a report of a bobble-head being over-ridden by a human."

"They use them a lot, don't they, dad?"

"Yeah, Pete. All the manufacturing plants, chemical process plants, nuclear plants, vehicles everywhere, including underground trains and submarines, are all controlled by trained bobble-heads."

"They're so small. How do they do it?"

"They use quantum entanglement for the computing elements. See, Pete, you can separate photons by huge distances, and they act as if they're still together. The bobble-heads are all part of a large parallel quantum computing system. They're all sync'ed together, thinking whatever they think. Over 200 years ago, a guy named Paul Benioff started theorizing how to create a quantum Turing machine. The Japanese spent hundreds of millions of Yen, trying to make a practical quantum computer, but they ran out of time when a South Korean named Kim Soo made the big breakthrough. He figured out the absolute limits of how quantum bits could be separated and used. He's the real force behind the bobble-heads. They're so small because they're so big. They're nodes in a world-wide network of

quantum computing, and they all share the same ideas. All the old-fashioned computers died out right after Kim made his discovery. He was quite a thinker."

The bobble-head rotated around and said. "Kim Soo was my father. Thank you for thinking of him," and then he rotated back to view the road again.

"So how did you do on your final exam today, son?"

"I think I aced it, dad. That MyMath bobble-head tutor that you got me works great. It really understands all the subjects. It seems to know just how to ask questions so that I learn more all the time. I really like it."

"Good, son. Free computing is a human right, as they say in the New U.N. A hundred years of bobble-heads have changed the world, I think for the better."

"Why did you quit the University, dad? You like physics so much."

"Well, I hate to admit it, but I suspect that I'm either a racist or a bigot. After teaching physics for 10 years, I came out of my trance one day and realized that I'd only seen one kid in there from America, and he wasn't too bright. I dunno, son, I was hoping to change the world, but it changed me. Anyway, I spent my retirement pay on this rig, and it's kept us in good shape so far."

The big rig suddenly bucked and lurched as the electro-rheological suspension system hit a huge chuck hole. "Sorry," said the bobble-head, but it was the least-worst scenario. "The Interstate-10 corridor has been in a state of disrepair for 62 years, 3 months."

"Thanks," said John. "I know you're doing a good job. Look at the road Pete. They haven't fixed it since my father was a kid. You can see one reason that trucking is so dangerous."

The road was pockmarked with holes that looked like hand grenades had been thrown *en masse*. They both looked towards the sky. "The government really needs to deal with that space debris and quit screwing around. A hundred years of negotiating with China has brought us to this."

"Yeah, dad. They told us at school about the space stations breaking up and falling down. The teacher said that Russia and the U.S. abandoned the International Space Station in 2020, due to increasing costs. Then China put up 1,000 space stations, just to prove they could do it. I guess the United Korean Democracy was a big force back then, and China had to do some saber-rattling. Of course it bankrupted them. Ha! Some good that did. Now we get pelted with space junk 24/7."

"You're right, son. That's why everyone moved underground a long, long time ago."

They looked at each other, and tears flowed from their eyes as they remembered that just last year, John's wife Ellen, and his daughter Noona were killed instantly by a chunk of space junk hitting their car. John ground his teeth, as the bouncy road and the heavy load made his mood go from good to very bad in a matter of seconds. "It's just too dangerous to be above ground, son. That's why you don't see many cars on the open road."

"Yeah, that's another good reason not to be a trucker, dad."



Then they both grew silent, because they both knew that there was another reason not to be a trucker – and that was why they were on this crummy chunk of bashed-up Interstate.

Finally, John spoke up. "There used to be those mag-lev trucks and trains to carry the freight, but the constant pounding by space debris just chewed up all the infrastructure. Those Chinese really screwed up the planet. I don't understand how a country as powerful as us can get bullied around by a bunch of Chinese people. We should shoot down all that space crap. We've got military LASERS that could do it, easy."

"Yeah, dad, but they said that if we bust up even one of their satellites, it'd be a declaration of war. And we got rid of the last of our nuclear-tipped missiles over 80 years ago. I guess we screwed up, didn't we?"

"Yeah, son – we sure did. But we couldn't have won a war anyway. We're full of ego, but when the Army is down to 2,000 troops, then it's time to pack it up."

The bobble-head bounced up and down on its stick. The speedo said 150 mph. The K-Whomper engine produced a high-pitched whine. The robotic steering hands were extremely busy avoiding the worst of the potholes.

After a couple of hours, John caught the bobble-head as it turned 360 degrees. "Is it possible to miss any of the chug holes? Do you have to hit them all?"

The bobble-head laughed and replied "You're just lucky that I understand human sarcasm."

## Chapter 3.

It was late at night and the robotic steering arms that were clamped to John's chest were wearing him out. Pete was sleeping in the bed in back of the cab, and the mile markers whizzed by. "Can we please go faster?"

"No – we're cleared for max-speed, but this stretch of road's just too poor to risk it. When we get to the Mississippi river, I'll increase speed," replied the bobble-head.

"Okay. I'm just tired, that's all."

"I know, Mr. Duran," replied the bobble-head, as it rotated to look at John.

John was looking at the faded picture of his family that was stickied to the dash. "I miss Ellen and Noona."

"I know, Mr. Duran," replied the bobble-head, as it rotated back towards the highway.

"Why can't you do something about the space junk? Y'all are smart enough."

But the bobble-head remained quiet in the cab, except for the ordinary noises of a 12-cylinder, 3,000 horsepower engine, propelling 100,000 pounds of metal and rubber at 150 miles per hour towards the Alabama/Mississippi line.

"At least y'all could be hooked up as a road crew, to repair the highways. No humans want the job, because it's too dangerous. Why can't you bobbles do that?"

The silence from the bobble-head was profound. "I need a cup a Joe," said John.

A robotic arm came out of a horizontal slot in the sleeper, reached around and offered CoffeePlus to John, which he gladly took. "This stuff tastes like used socks, but at least it's got lots of jolt."

A few minutes later, the hand retrieved the coffee cup and handed up a sandwich. "Here, Mr. Duran, it's time to eat something," said the bobble-head quietly.

John munched down on the reconstituted egg salad sandwich and tried to remember the good old days, but he couldn't. "Seems like it just keeps getting worse. Can't live above-ground cause of the Chinese space debris. Can't get fresh food cause the animals are dead. Can't get clean water. Can't eat any of the fish you catch." Then he thought to himself *"I remember a trip to the zoo with my dad – I recall he went crazy because of how things have gotten worse and worse."*

"Mr. Duran, all the animals are not dead, just the frogs, horses, porpoises, and some migrating birds. Of course yellow fin tuna are almost extinct, but the Tennessee Aquarium has a pair."

"Swell," humphed John. "That makes it all better. I need to take a leak."

The robotic hand passed him a P-Kup, which he used and handed back. "Burp!" he uttered, and then asked for another cup of CoffeePlus. "Just swell," he repeated.

## Chapter 4.

"Mr. Duran, we're in range of a westbound swarm," stated the bobble-head. "Do I have permission to join them?"

"Sure. We'll need the protection once we get further west. How many rigs?"

"Right now, 85, sir. We'll work our way to the middle of the pack, and then min-trim our gap."

"Permission granted."

As the truck picked up speed, the road seemed to flow better than the stretch through southern Alabama. Mississippi's stretch of I-10 was definitely better, John thought. "Must be the casino money," he thought to himself. Pretty soon, they were passing truck after truck in the swarm. John had been in many bobble-head swarms before, and he knew that this was the best way to travel the Interstates. The aerodynamics of close-formation travel saved tremendous amounts of fuel.

An opening magically appeared on his right and the Kenshan just melded into the swarm. The bobble-head brought them to within an inch of the rear bumper of the previous truck, and turned off the headlights and lit the marker lights. "Swarming complete, Mr. Duran."

Soon, a mile of trucks was going 180 mph, which was about the maximum safe speed on the crummy Interstate. Every once in a while, the robot hands twitched, but mostly they just stayed stiff and parallel to the seat. John reached over and chugged more coffee – the night was time for the big K-Whomper's engine to breathe, he thought, then he said: "Music. Country/Western." The radio volume came up and some of his favorite singers held forth about the truck driving men of old. He heard "Roar, Wild Engine, Roar" and "Truck Drivin' Jack." Then "22 Wheels on and a Red-Hot Load" played and "Looking at the World Through a Windshield," which reminded John that there wasn't anything worth watching when you're 1 inch away from the rig in front of you. The miles rolled by.

Pete woke up and John could hear him relieving himself in the small bathroom. "Bring out some fresh coffee, son. There's a thermos right there by the door."

Pete was stretching and yawning as he stepped from the sleeper into the cab. Then his eyes just about popped out of his head as he realized that they were going to crash into the truck in front of them. It was lucky that the thermos bottle was still closed up tight as his scream echoed in the truck cabin. The bobble-head rotated towards Pete and laughed. "Sorry, sir. We began min-distancing when you were asleep. We're approaching the Louisiana border now, sir."

John laughed out loud at his son, as the bobble-head rotated back towards the front. "You should have seen the look on your face, son. We'll make a trucker out of you yet!" He was very proud of Pete, but they hadn't always been close.

"Geeze, dad, I thought..."

"Sure, but the bobble-head's in charge, so we're safe. Look, son. I see the sky lightening up in the mirrors."

The 4th largest river in the world flows from Lake Itasca, Minnesota to St. Louis to Memphis to Vicksburg to Natchez to New Orleans, which used to be called New Orleans, Louisiana before the sea rose. "My geography teacher said that the Mississippi River changes course every thousand years. He said that it will wind up in the Atchafalaya Basin in a few hundred more years."

"That's not our problem right now, son – look," he said as the swarm of 100 trucks slowed to a stop. The "Father of Waters" was in front of them, and it was wide and deep. "A little problem with the bridge, I see."

"No problem with the bridge, dad – there isn't one. But there's a big problem with the smell, I think," laughed Pete. "These old petro-refining cities are real sorry."

"Yeah, son. The old oil companies were always just 1 step ahead of the law, it seems. Let's watch the rigs form up for the voyage across."

They sipped hot coffee and listened to truck driving songs until the sky was definitely lighter. "Too bad it's all those crummy AM stations. Music always sounds so tinny to me," complained John. Then a spoof song called "Bobble-head Boogie" made them both stomp their feet and clap their hands. When it was over, they both yelled a Rebel yell and then laughed till they cried.

The bobble-heads spoke to each other, and 100 big rigs did a gentle square dance. They do-see-do'ed into rectangles of 16 trucks, and then loaded themselves, en masse, onto waiting barges for the trip across the big river.

"Yeah," Pete said. "Too bad all those radio-station satellites have fallen down." The trip across the Mississippi River was uneventful, and the trucks easily unloaded themselves on the far side. When they were all ready to roll, the bobble-heads queued them up and shot them down the road like pool balls on a fast table.

They had just crossed the river, and the speedo was clocking 182 when the swarm lurched and jolted, as the bobble-heads worked as a single entity in order to bring the 100-rigs to a safe, shuddering stop. The smell of baking brakes filled the air. "Sorry sirs, truck number 6 was hit by space debris. The driver is dead. We were able to stop without destroying any of the rigs, but I apologize for spilling hot liquid on you."

Pete and his dad just looked at each other. The bobble-head was worried about hot coffee, when it had just performed a miraculous stop? How strange was that? The bobble-head rotated around and said "The rigs will shut down until the Louisiana Highway Patrol comes by and gets statements from the bobble-heads and the drivers. Sorry for the delay."

"Don't we have a Priority Load? Are you sure we have to stay?" asked John.

"I'll check," replied the bobble-head.

A moment later it said "We're cleared. Our Priority Permit is valid." The trucks in front of them started to part like the Red Sea in front of Moses' stick. The Kenshan roared to life and threaded through the jumble of trucks, and in a few minutes, they was heading west, away from the morning light. Ominous clouds were rolling across the horizon, "Comin' up from the Gulf of Mexico, son. Look."

By 9 A.M., the sky was pitch-black. Winds were whipping the big rig around, and the robotic steering hands were as busy as a fly inside an outhouse. John felt the robotic hand servo motors through the thick padding that strapped them to his chest. "I can't remember so much movement from these bad boys. It must be a really wicked storm. Look, Pete, if you want to get back into the sleeper, that's okay with me."

Pete watched his dad with new respect. It took a certain kind of cool to drive a rig under these circumstances. He was glad that he was along for the ride. "Nah, dad. I was thinking of last year when mom and Noona were killed by space debris. When I got the call, I was...well it was like I was in a different place. I couldn't believe it. It took me a long time to get it in my head that they were dead from space junk. Now, we just saw that happen to a truck in our swarm, and it just never stops. I'm really mad, dad. We should have stopped the Chinese a long time ago. Where do they get off treating us like a third-world county? Let's blast that junk out of the sky and be done with it. Better to have a war than to have to live underground like gophers!"

"Calm down, son. We live in strange times. For a long time, our Presidents have weakened our country and our space program. They've bowed before the United Nations, and they've been great appeasers. I remember when we pulled out of the U.N. entirely, to make some stupid point, and then 40 years later, we had to beg to get back in. They made us pay back dues, just to embarrass us. This is where it's gotten us. And we keep voting the same morons into office, don't we?"

The bobble-head rotated 360, but kept silent. In a few seconds, as it rotated back towards the road it said "I have bad news, Mr. Duran. We're being followed."

"Is it hijackers? What else do you know?"

"That's all I know now. I am prepared to defend our Priority Load. Our Priority Permit allows me to use deadly force. Please double-check your seatbelt, Pete. This could be a very rough ride."

But the fist of God suddenly smote the truck, just as the bobble-head rotated back to the road. A tornado-force wind of 200 miles per hour crossed the road, less than 100 yards ahead. The big rig shuddered to a halt, as golf-ball sized hail fell like rain. Lightning was like a vast spider web, but thick and blinding white. "The news reporters on WorldVid TV just said that this storm was caused by global warming," spoke the bobble-head. "This is what they call the 'perpetual storm', and we're right in the center of it."

Pete and his father couldn't argue the point. The truck slowly drove off the Interstate into a ditch, and then shut down. "Please take all precautions for Life and Limb," stated the bobble-head in a commanding voice. Then the truck shuddered like it was a cork in the open ocean.

"Thank God he got us off the road!" Pete shouted as he saw a car go flying by. They both saw people being tossed around inside like dead dolls. Then a cow rolled down the road towards them and smashed into the radiator of the truck at 100 miles per hour. The robotic hands tried to correct the

truck's track, but the engine was shut down from ingesting so much water, so the hands looked like a drowning spastic. A huge tree limb went sailing overhead and John saw it skewer a car, about 100 yards back. The truck pitched and groaned, but the huge Cat on the flatbed wasn't budged at all. In 3 minutes, the storm cell crossed the road, and the rain shut off like a switch.

The bobble-head rotated and said "Those were some of the cars that were following us. I think that the storm killed some of our hijackers."

Pete and his dad both looked at the bobble-head, and then back at each other. "How are you able to draw that conclusion?" demanded John.

The bobble-head rotated to the front and was annoyingly silent.

"Let's get that cow off the front bumper, son."

"Okay dad. The storm's passed, for sure."

The both climbed down from the cab and saw a full-grown cow impaled on the front bumper. "It's way too heavy to lift off," said Pete. "Let's see if Mr. Smarty-pants has an idea."

John climbed back in and popped the bobble-head off the stick on the dashboard. He carried it outside and let it scan the cow and the bumper. "It won't affect us very much," replied the bobble-head. "Let me know when you're ready to resume the trip."

John and Pete exchanged glances and climbed back into the cab. John mounted the bobble-head on its perch and strapped the robotic hands on his chest again. The rig coughed a couple of times before starting properly – the rain had been just too much for the engine. The robotic hands gently rotated left, and the big rig climbed out of the ditch and in a half-mile, it was back on the Interstate. "Okay, let's go," said John, but the rig was already passing 80, 90, 120, and the gearshift lever was working all by itself as the speedo finally read 180 mph.

"We need to get ahead of the hijackers," said the bobble-head. "My radar shows that there are still at least a dozen vehicles left in a pack."

Soon it was just the scream of the engine, the 180 mph wind and the jarring, torn-up road that filled the early-morning.

Just to make conversation, Pete asked his dad "What did he mean 'perpetual storm'?"

"The environmentalist wackos say that there's a storm that never dies out – it's like the great Red Spot on Jupiter, they say. It will eventually scour our planet clean of humans. It's from all the pollution in the atmosphere – the carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide and stuff that's in the upper atmosphere's really pretty dangerous stuff – aerosols, and stuff like that. After that encounter, I'm not so sure they're wrong."

Pete looked at his dad and smiled. John looked back and smiled back. Then Pete asked the bobble-head "What do you think about the Chinese satellites?"

The bobble-head rotated towards Pete and said "When the two Koreas united, they were a big economic threat to China, which was trying to bypass the U.S. in many areas. When United Korea launched their first space station, the Chinese got very mad. The Koreans decided to put their space station over a tiny sliver of China, which was forbidden. So the Chinese took action – they decided to place so many space stations in orbit that all the available slots would be taken, and neither Korea, Russia, or the U.S. would never get the 'high-ground' again. China launched one spaceship every week for 22 years. They brought tons and tons of materials to low earth orbit. They constructed exactly 1,000 space stations. Then they ran out of money.

The United Korean leader was very mad that they could never launch another space station, so he used a LASER from the Korean space station to bring down China Number 817, which was parked right over Korea. That was in the year 2104. China retaliated by destroying the Korean space station with a kinetic energy weapon. The junk that was left behind up there shredded the rest of the space stations. The best estimates are that it will take over 1,000 years for space debris to stop falling. Some estimates are over 8,000 years, which is what I believe."

John and Pete both sat bolt-upright and gasped – they had never heard the bobble-head speak more than a sentence before. "You were made in United Korea – and you're connected to a world-wide network of bobble-heads. *Will* you do something about the space debris problem?" asked John. "*Can* you do something?"

The steering hands jogged left and right. The engine screamed. The Priority Load on the reinforced trailer was rolling west on I-10 at 180 – that was the only answer.



## Chapter 5.

The big rig ate up East Texas at top speed. The horrible sulfur and chemical stench of Orange, Texas made Pete want to vomit. "Geeze, dad, even with the windows and vents closed, the fumes are crazy-bad here."

"Yeah, son. When they decommissioned some of these refineries, they didn't do a very good job. The gasoline revolt was a bad idea by some right-wing crank jobs – or was it left-wing wackos? I don't remember. I don't know what they thought they'd accomplish, but the last of the refinery business left the U.S. over 100 years ago. It's a shame – gas prices are 5 times higher now that we have to import it all from the Soviet States of Venezuela."

The bobble-head spun around in a complete circle but didn't add anything to the conversation. "I wonder why it does that?" asked Pete.

"I've asked it, but you know that it only replies at the oddest times. And it never gives you the whole truth," replied John. "Wanna try the wheel, son? When we hit Houston, maybe we can swap. I could use a little stretch."

"I thought you were going to drive the whole way without even asking me. Of course I'd like to drive. I need about 1,000 miles before I get my over the road certificate."

"Well, in less than an hour, we're going to stop, eat, shower and then book. Compute a route to the Union 76 truck stop in the Houston area. If it's ConocoPhillips, same thing," said John to the bobble-head.

"Acknowledged," replied the bobble-head.

The big rig exited automatically and went down the typical truck stop spiral to the underground filling station and restaurant. As the huge metal doors swung aside, Pete and John could see the damage that they had sustained over the years from space debris – they looked like golf ball with uneven dimples. The rig pulled up to the pumps and John unclipped the driving hands vest. "Whew, that thing can get warm. Let's get some chow and then grab a shower. I want to hit the road at 10 P.M."

The other truckers were friendly, and the juke box blared country songs while they ate steak paste sandwiches and instant mashed-potato-flavored flakes. The bread tasted flat and lifeless. "But it's all good, son. Life on the road pays the bills, and there's not much hassle."

Pete looked at his dad and said "Are you feeling okay? Did you forget about the hijackers, the space debris, and the crappy roads? What's *'all good'*?"

"Son, at least we have a job and an income. Nobody is our boss. We pay for our home, clothing and food with our paycheck. If there's a little danger, well, that's what makes life exciting. Imagine that I worked every day for years, teaching physics to a bunch of kids that have all gone back to their home countries, and they'll never do a single thing that is interesting or exciting. Their parents will keep them underground for the rest of their boring lives. I got my rig and I got my sanity – but mostly, I got you,

son. So I repeat: it's all good. I miss your mom and your sister, and the roads aren't what they should be, and the steak paste isn't all that great, but check it out – every day, a little more space junk falls, so there's less of it. That means that someday we'll be above-ground again. The roads will all be fixed in good time. Food is food. Get it, son?"

"Yeah, dad. You're right. I'm glad school's over for the summer. I'm thinking of dropping out for a couple of years and driving with you – if you'll have me?"

"Sure Pete. We're a good team. Now drink up and let's book," John put his hand on his son's shoulder and gave him a small punch.

Later on, Pete grabbed the steering-hand vest and strapped it on. The hands lunged for the steering wheel and grabbed on. The bobble-head up shifted, and they were on the road again. "10:15 P.M., dad. When we get closer to San Antonio, we'll juice it up."

Interstate 10 was so bad around Houston that the truck was limited to 120 mph. The robotic steering hands were working overtime, and the bobble-head was bouncing up and down, and scanning left to right a thousand times a second. The rig swayed left and right around the biggest holes in the pavement, but the constant pounding of the 3-footers made Pete's teeth rattle.

"I'm gonna catch 40 winks, son. See ya in El Paso."

In 90 minutes, the bobble-head accelerated them to 180, and Pete watched as the dark night sky of Texas rained down one meteor after another. He could see the string of space stations floating in a huge arc, 200 miles up. They were one on top of another, as far as he could see with his bare eyes. It was like a bright white rainbow in the velvet sky. He whistled an old tune as the rig slowed to 100 as it entered the San Antonio area. Then they went whizzing through downtown, and he saw for the first time the destruction that he'd read about as a child. One of the big chunks of space debris had smashed the center of the city to bits. He could see now that they never rebuilt it, since everyone wisely moved underground. It looked like a picture from one of his science fiction cartoon magazines. The truck bounced up and down violently as they exited the city. Then they accelerated back to 180 and the night grew foggy. Soon, the moon rose, and Pete could see it in the rear view mirrors. It looked huge as it hugged the horizon forever. Then it grew smaller as it climbed the arc into the sky. He watched the road ahead, but he had plenty of time to watch the moon behind him.

Within a minute of hitting the pillow, John was sorry. The truck was lurching and swerving and the sleeper amplified the noise of the big K-Whomper's engine. "When I'm driving, I never really notice it," he thought as he slowly wound down for a nap. "I'm glad my son is behind the wheel – he's really turned out to be a fine young man. I just wish he could grieve. He's never cried over his mom and sister yet. I need to get him a MyPsychDoc bobble-head to talk to." John's last thought was of his own face, an avatar on his navigation bobble-head. He eased into a recurring, bad dream...

"I can't believe you," he told the bobble-head, who had just told him that his wife and daughter were dead. Why would you lie to me like that? When we get home, I'm going to flush you down the drain."

"Mr. Duran, I'm sorry again, but it's true – a piece of space debris hit your wife's car. Your wife and daughter are dead. We need to turn around and go home now."

"You're not making sense. It can't happen. I love Ellen, and Noona is only 8 years old. I'm going to take her to the zoo when I get back."

"Please, Mr. Duran, let's turn around now. This load can be transferred in Kansas City. You need to be home, making funeral arrangements."

John stopped the big rig and pulled off the Interstate. He rolled down the window and puked. Then he said "Take me home. Let's get rid of this load. I'll need some help."

"I know, Mr. Duran."

The bobble-head arranged a route through the TrukHub in K.C. and a trucker was waiting for the load. "Sorry, Mr. Duran – about your wife and daughter. Here, let me take that off your plate. I'll get it to Denver for you. Sorry."

John waited in the underground diner and his soul was empty as a cave. The HoloVid on the far wall showed a car getting crushed by a chunk of space debris as big as a house. They played it over and over. A blonde news reporter kept talking about it, but the sound was turned down. John wept. The autonomous waitress-robot tried to pour him some CoffeePlus, because that was the only thing that she knew that might comfort a human. "Please, sir..." she insisted.

John saw the pictures of his wife and daughter flashed on the screen. The reporter tried to show their crushed, lifeless forms being scraped out by the local fire department, but he turned away and cried. A couple of his trucker buddies stood nearby, and one of them even put his hand on John's shoulder for a brief moment.

By now, John wanted to wake up, really badly. He knew that the dream was only going to get worse – the trip home and the funeral was going to be like re-living in hell for him. There weren't enough pieces left to fill a cup, let alone a casket. The trucker started to shake his shoulder and shake it and shake it...and the ruts and bumps and holes in I-10 finally woke him up, and he was dead-tired, but grateful that he was awake. His face was wet from tears. The image of the flattened car was burned into his brain. "CoffeePlus, sir?" the sleeper-robot asked.

"Sure."

He used the small bathroom and then climbed back into the cab quietly. His son glanced over at him, and he saw Pete's face twitch. "He must see the horrible shape I'm in," he realized. "I'm just glad he's here and alive. Death will finally beat us all, but today is today, and I have what I have." By midnight, they were passing through the desert of West Texas, heading for El Paso. The night air was cool and damp, and the smells of the desert filled the cabin. John reached for the radio and searched for a station, but only a couple of scratchy A.M. stations were on at that time of night, and he didn't understand Spanish.

They both watched the bobble-head make a 360 and suddenly Pete realized that he was thirsty. "Please get me some water." The robot hand from the sleeper handed him a small bottle of tepid water, and he downed it quickly. Then Pete looked at his dad again – he suddenly looked so old and gray. Then he looked at the mirrors and didn't see the moon, since it was too high. John finally looked around the cab

and at Pete. He was about to say something, but then he pointed at the lights of El Paso, off in the distance, but it was kind of freaky. "Look son, there's only half of El Paso – where's the Mexican half?"

A sudden dust storm browned out the late-night sky. "Wha..." was all Pete could get out before the cloud of grit blasted them so hard that the robotic steering hands failed to compensate for their heavy load. Pete actually reached down and tried to stabilize the whipsawing tractor/trailer combination. He realized that at 180 mph, they were all dead anyway, so it couldn't hurt to try a last-resort move. But the bobble-head was finally able to get the rig under control and the whipping load slowed down to 80 then 50, then it screeched to a stop. Slowly, the bobble-head tried to advance the truck into the dust cloud, but was unable to do it. The truck sat there and got sand-blasted for 15 minutes, and then the sky became pure crystal black in an instant, and the West Texas stars were gone.

"I can't see," said the bobble-head.

"I can't see, either," said Pete and then his dad echoed it.

The quartz-fused glass windshield had been sandblasted to pure white. The bobble-head shut the rig down and turned on the warning LASERS all around. Pete and John came out of the cab and looked at the front of the Kenshan – it was sandblasted down to bare fiberglass and metal. The cow was completely gone from the front bumper.

"Oh, geeze!" cried John, as he ran towards the back of the truck. He looked at the huge lurking IntelliCat, but it was fine. It had lifted its blade and sheltered itself from the sandblasting. As John and Pete watched, it rotated its blade and re-stowed it on the floor of the flatbed. "Wha..." was all that Pete could say when he saw that. His dad couldn't even say that.

"This is a Priority Load, Mr. Duran. I need to know what you're going to do. I can't see the road through this windshield."

"We're just outside of El Paso. Pete and I will find a Kenshan dealer, or a junk yard. In either case, we'll bring back a windshield for you. Just hang tight."

After 2 hours of walking around El Paso, they both realized how bad the space debris was in this part of the world. "I guess that they must be right in the footprint of one of those Chinese space stations, dad. What'll we do? That Kenshan dealer hasn't been open for years."

"Let's find a junk yard. These old K-Whompers filled the roads 100 years ago. We'll find a windshield for sure."

The junk yard was very dark by time they got there. There was no owner, nor any signs of life, so they went in and helped themselves to a slightly used windshield. "This thing weighs over 400 pounds, dad," complained Pete. "How are we going to get it back to the truck?"

"Look at that fork lift over there. Let's see if we can start it up."

It took a few minutes, but it finally buzzed to life. John lifted the windshield and Pete steadied it. They rolled east on the I-10 frontage road until they got back to their truck. It was totally dark and very cold. The bobble-head said "This is a Priority Load. Please replace the windshield."

They looked at each other and realized who the boss was that night. By early-morning, they had the new-old windshield in place. John took the command seat and strapped on the vest. "Let's roll!" he said. The big rig shuddered to life, the robotic hands steered west, and then the blood-red sun rose behind them for a second time.

Nothing more happened until they approached Las Cruces, New Mexico. Pete was the first to speak: "Banditos are everywhere – across the road, near the road, over the bridges...everywhere!"

The bobble-head decided to keep rolling. "Mr. Duran, I believe that they can't do very much to us at this speed. By time they catch us, we'll be half-way across the state."

"Okay, you're the boss," replied John.

Within an hour, a furious sand storm rocked the truck again. The bobble-head quickly shut down the rig and circled around, facing east. Pete said "It's protecting the windshield this time. It learns."

The bobble-head rotated around and said "Of course. But the problem is that we're being chased by over 200 banditos now. I *can* count, you know. They'll be here shortly. Prepare to defend the Priority Load."

John grabbed a kinetic-energy weapon, and Pete grabbed a LASER rifle, and they ran to the shelter in front of the truck. The wind-whipped sand wasn't too bad right there, but they both clipped their safety belts to the towing hooks on the front bumper. Suddenly banditos in cars, pickup trucks and motorcycles were upon them. But before they fired a single charge, the wind did its job. The swirling dust grains had built up an electrical charge, and the banditos were either blown into the next county by the wind, or electrocuted by lightning. John and Pete waited for a few more minutes, and then realized that the threat was really gone. "Dad – that was lightning!"

"Pete, have the bobble-head explain it to you – trust me, materials physicists have talked about colliding sand particles for a couple of hundred years. Now let's get going," John said as they climbed into the cab.

"Let's roll!" John told the bobble-head. "We're very late – kick 'er up a notch."

Rolling at 190, they finally got to Phoenix, and the robotic control hands went spastic again. "The front tires were just shot," announced the bobble-head. "I have reversed the path of the audio signals of the bullets, and I will take action." LASERs lit up on both sides of the truck for a brief instant, as the truck's brakes were trying to prevent a jackknife. A hundred yards away, on both sides of the truck, Pete and John heard explosions, as the LASERs found their human targets. The rig ground to a halt.

Suddenly, two more blasts from the LASERs shot out and two more thuds were audible in the quiet desert air. "Please repair the tires, Mr. Duran," spoke the bobble-head. "I'll stand guard."

They quickly patched the tires and inflated them. An hour later they were on their way. "We're really late now," said John.

The bobble-head rotated 360, but didn't say a word.

"Sometimes I wonder if it thinks," said Pete.

"Oh, it thinks, alright," replied John. "It's the biggest computer system in the world. I only wonder where it stores all the data – and who has access to 'everything'. I've tried talking about that, but the bobble-head just won't discuss it."

The rig slowed to 180 then 140 then 80, and then stopped. "Sir, we have to pay toll to The Free State of Calizona."

A collection of Native Americans, hippies, and unclassifiable people had declared this 1 million acre area of the desert to be their home. Federal troops fought them for years, but finally, political pressure prevailed, and they were allowed to have their own State. A group of unarmed, half-naked men, women and children approached the truck. "Pay the toll," they all chanted in unison.

"Okay, okay," said John. He'd been through here before. These people were harmless, and he wasn't about to start an episode with them that everybody would regret later. "How much today?"

"We only want 100 credits from you, since we know that you're going to help our brothers in California. Can you possibly afford that much?"

"Sure, glad to do it," as John handed down a 100-credit chip and wondered how they knew what the purpose of his classified load was.

"Thanks, mister. Have a nice day," said a beautiful tanned, half-naked young woman, who was holding hands with an older man, who was sporting long hair and a long, gray beard. Pete tried to look away, but the girl was too alluring. As she moved, her long hair moved to and fro, and Pete could see that she was topless. Then John saw that she was holding an infant on her hip. The child obviously had no arms – just hands sprouting out of shoulder sockets. The child looked right at John, who looked away.

"Can we stop for a few minutes dad?" asked Pete, who was obviously smitten by the young beauty.

"Sure Pete. There's nothing harmful here. I've been here before. Lock up your wallet and just take a handful of credits though. And son: beware of the siren's song."

John coaxed the truck off the road and shut her down. They both climbed down from the cab and the hot Arizona sun beat down on their pale skin. The topless girl with long hair watched them get down and then she left the old man and came right up to Pete. "This is Christopher. What's your name?"

"I'm Pete. That's my father John." He had a hard time, staring at her partial nudity and then at the severely deformed child. "Hello Christopher," he said.

"Do you want to hear the Medicine Man, Pete?" she asked. "He's going to tell a story tonight."

"What's your name?" he asked, shyly.

"Barbara," she replied as she brushed against Pete's body on purpose. Then she set Christopher down on the hot sand, and he penguin-walked towards the old man. Pete saw that the hot white sand obviously wasn't a problem to him.

Barbara reached over and took Pete's hand and walked with him towards a tent, where she went inside. He had no choice but to follow. His heart pounded as the tent flap closed and he tried hard to dark-adapt his eyes. Finally he saw an old, dark man sitting off to one side, smoking a long pipe. Pete had never seen anyone smoking before, so he gasped. "What's he doing? Is he inhaling fire?"

"No, that's called spiritual weed," Barbara said. "He sees visions when he smokes enough of it. Then he tells us stories."

Pete watched in fascination as the old man smoked and blew smoke rings towards the top of the tent. Finally he said "Hmmp. Sit," he said and made a broad arc with his hand.

Pete sat down cross-legged, like the old man and Barbara. He tried hard not to stare at her. "Many moons ago," the Medicine Man began, "the plains were covered with buffalo, and my people hunted them and lived with them. They had powerful spirits. We caught horses and chased the buffalo. Then the pale-skins came. They brought great evil with them. They destroyed our land and our way of life." He pushed a woven basket towards Pete. It had a few credits in the bottom, so Pete got the point. He tossed in a 5 credit chip. The old Indian sat quietly, so Pete got the idea and added another 5 credit chip. Then the old man stood up with the basket and left.

Barbara said "See, sometimes he has powerful stories."

Pete was going to tell her that he felt cheated, but instead the sun was hitting the young girl just right, and Pete started feeling very weird – the same as he'd felt with Kendra when he saw her at school just last week. Barbara stepped closer and Pete felt blood rushing to his head, when he finally said, "What are horses? He talked about horses."

"Oh, silly, they were big animals like cows, except that men and women rode them across the plains. They used them for all kinds of things – they even pulled carriages and wagons. Cowboys used them to chase cows."

"How come I never saw one?"

"Because of a nation of people called Mongolians. They made some kind of virus to kill Chinese horses, but the bug escaped. It killed all the horses in the world. It was terrible."

John pondered that for a minute, and then he looked at Barbara again. "Is that your husband and child?" he asked quietly.

"Sure, but none of us are married to just one person. Calizona is the land of the free. We do pretty much what comes naturally. If you'd like, I'll show you what I mean."

But Pete knew then that something was definitely wrong, and he backed toward the tent flap. "No thanks, we've got to get back on the road. But nice to see you."

His dad was standing outside the tent, waiting patiently with his arms crossed. "Seen enough, son?"

"Sure dad. Let's get rollin'."

As Pete climbed into the passenger seat, he realized that the rest of the credits had been stolen from his pockets – he'd been cleaned out. Barbara stood in the door of the tent, with her hair at just such an angle that he couldn't take his eyes off of her. She blew him a kiss and then went over and picked up Christopher from the hot sand. Christopher looked directly at Pete, who quickly looked away.

The bobble-head started the engine, and they quickly up shifted to top speed. After a while, Pete asked "Dad, did you ever think about getting re-married?"

But John just kept his thoughts to himself. He'd seen that beautiful young lady, and he'd reacted the right way, but no, he wasn't in any mood to let go of his grief yet. Ellen was still his love, and Noona was still too close to his heart. He avoided his son's gaze, and watched the speedo climb back over 190.

At 192 mph, they whizzed by a sign that said 'Entering California'. Someone had shot out the bottom half of the sign that said 'Drive Carefully.'

"Only a few hills, and then we'll be in L.A.," said John, who was so buzzed on caffeine that his eye lids were permanently rolled back into his head.

"By a 'few hills', I guess you mean the Rocky Mountains, dad?"

Pete just hummed the old Leon Baker song about Crazy California and watched the robot hands sticking out from the front of his chest-harness, moving tiny amounts in both directions. It was mesmerizing.

"Look at the old wind farm, son," John pointed. There were at least 1,000 huge windmills, high in the mountain passes, but none of them were spinning. The space debris had destroyed them long ago. "Sure is a sorry sight."

In another hour, it was fully light. "Son, you grab a nap. We'll be there soon, and I'll need you to help supervise the unloading."

They pulled over in Blythe, California and stretched out. Pete was glad to crash, and John was just as glad to be driving again.

Pete hated sleeping in the sleeper, more than anything. He knew he'd have that same bad dream as last time. The ruts, the bouncing, the noise – why was this the noisiest place in the universe? He rolled on his right side and tried to sleep, but it wouldn't come. He asked the robot for ear plugs, and they were handed over to him, along with an EyeBlack scarf, which he quickly wrapped around his head. The lurching was pretty bad, but he finally got into a half-sleep, and then the dream began. He remembered being at the zoo with his grandpa and grandma. Grandpa kept complaining.

"These are all stuffed toys – why when I was a young boy, there were at least still some animals in the zoos. This is all a bunch of crap!"

"Now Henry, Peter can hear you. Try to be pleasant."



"I'm just saying: look there at that cage of foxes – there's not a single live fox in there. They have stuffed animals that are pretending to sleep in the middle of the day – foey!"

Pete looked at his grandpa and asked "Why aren't the animals moving, grandpa?"

"See, Martha, the boy knows. Peter, when I was your age, zoos had real animals, but there were groups of people who said that it was cruel to cage animals. Now I don't know whether they were right or wrong, but we kids used to get to see monkeys and zebras and bears at the zoo, and I don't think that the elephants ever knew that they were in a cage, since there weren't any bars. I don't know, Pete – the world just isn't the same as it used to be. Why I remember when I was in the war with Indonesia, I was under fire every day for 2 years. Let me tell you, it was no picnic. I finally got shot in the leg, and I was sent to the hospital in Tokyo, that's in Japan, and they cut my leg off and put this robot-thing on," as he lifted up his pants leg. The smells of the zoo and the heat of the day were overwhelming for Pete, and when he saw the titanium rods and motors where his grandpa's leg should be, he fainted.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!" he commanded himself. He knew that the worst was yet to come. His grandpa was going to freak out and start grabbing the stuffed animals and tearing their heads off. The police would come and arrest him, and he would wind up in a mental hospital until he died. "Wake up!" he screamed to himself, as the big Kenshan engine screamed the scream of 193 mph with both superchargers wound to the max, and the roar of the cab, and the smell of the bad air in the desert...he snapped awake.

"Thank God," he muttered, as he came half-awake. He cleaned up and used the small bathroom. He was so tired, he laid back down, but he didn't dare close his eyes. "I'm just glad my dad didn't freak out when mom and Noona died," he thought. "I still can't handle it. Something inside me says that they're still at home, waiting for us to return home." But then Pete realized that he was drifting off to sleep and he sat up in the small bed, bumping his head on the ceiling. He wanted to cry, but he couldn't. The sleeper got hotter and hotter. The smells of the road were like a sewer. "Oh, crap, I don't want to puke again." He got up and climbed into the passenger seat. His dad looked at him, and he saw his dad's worried face.

"He looks like hell," John thought. "I wish we could really talk about it," he thought. "Maybe now's the time."

They were nearing the San Gorgonio Pass, between the San Bernardino Mountains and the San Jacinto Mountains, close by Palm Springs. John's teeth were numb from the pounding of the bad pavement. The robotic-hands were all over the steering wheel. The temperature in the cab kept climbing. The smells of far-away cities seeped into the cab, and they were very unpleasant. The orangish/yellowish sky reminded him of last night's sandstorm. He didn't want another one of those. He watched the speedo clocking 192 and listened to his beloved Kenshan, flattening the pavement and lovin' it. The bobble-head did a 360 and John reached for the radio dial. All he got was static, so he clicked it off. "Regular coffee, please," he requested. And the road unwound in front of him like holey Swiss cheese, as far as the eye could see.

Pete popped a food bar and coffee into his tired face, and sat there quietly as the truck's shocks beat a random rhythm of mayhem from above.

## Chapter 6.

"Pete," his dad finally said, but somewhere in the San Bernardino Mountains, with the speedo pegged at 193, and the robotic hands and the bobble-head driving the big rig, a huge chunk of space debris hit the road right in front of the truck

"Dang it!" cried John, as he watched the robotic hands going crazy as they tried to control the truck as it dropped 3 feet into the fresh gash in the pavement. They drove into a huge spatter of gravel and a who-knows-what part of a space station, but they watched as it sprayed the windshield with junk for a couple of seconds. Then the speeding truck hit a wall of super-heated sand grains at nearly 190 miles per hour, and the windshield turned as white as a solid sheet of white ice.

"ALERT!" said the bobble-head. "I am unable to see the road. Assume command immediately!"

John was fast as lightning, but he knew that the truck was surely doomed. It careened down the mountainside, barely on the road. John felt the robotic hands disengage as he took an active role in steering the out-of-control Kenshan, but in spite of that, they were still hanging onto the steering wheel, just getting in the way. The heavily loaded bed of the truck decided that it wanted to go down the hill feet-first. John looked at the speedo and saw 185, as he tried to nurse the air brakes and stop the screaming rear tires. Then they hit the other side of the gouge that was caused by the space junk, and the quartz-fused glass windshield exploded from the jolt. In a fraction of a second, the bobble-head went bouncing off of its pivot point and went sailing through the air, to land back by the sleeper, accelerated by the hurricane-wind through the gaping hole. The speedo registered 180, as John worked the steering wheel and gave the brakes a bit more action. Then a small piece of concrete or road cred smashed right into his forehead, and he blacked out.

Pete heard the alert only a couple of seconds before, but he was instantly engaged when his father got conked out. In less than a second, he saw that it was an impossible situation – the robotic hands were still wrapped around the steering wheel, and where they sprouted from the vest around his dad's chest, he saw blood flowing from the gouge in his dad's skull.

"I've got to get behind the steering wheel – no matter what," he said coldly, "or we're all going to die!" In another heartbeat, he realized that he had to cut the vest off his father's body. He whipped out the pocket knife that his dad gave him for his birthday last year, and slid it between his father's chest and the heavy nylon harness. In a couple of seconds, it was cut free. Pete manhandled and tossed his father's unconscious body behind him like a sack of rocks, as he swapped places. But just as he plunked into the driver's seat, he heard a sound like a voice from hell itself. The truck was jack-knifing at 170 miles per hour, and the physics of the reinforced steel flatbed were at their breaking point. At that second, the bobble-head rolled under his feet, and he instinctively scooped it up and slammed in place on the dashboard. He crammed on the airbrakes, but the mass of the load was too much. The flatbed was bent at a crazy angle, about to rip into shreds, with the huge IntelliCat straining at the tie-downs.

Suddenly, in the rearview mirror he saw the most impossible thing – the dozer was glowing blue; the blade came up from the side of the big Cat and it started swinging in the air, as the truck careened this way and that. They ran a car off the road at 160 mph, and then the semi-random swinging of the huge steel blade started to stabilize the big rig. Within a moment, the rig had stopped its death roll and

straightened out behind the cab, which stabilized a few seconds later. He saw the blade pull down out of the sky and park itself beside the Cat again – "That's impossible!" he screamed out loud. "What the hell are you machines doing?" But he saw the speedo click down to 140 and he regained control of the steering wheel. He saw the robotic grips still on the steering wheel and moved quickly to rip them off. "Okay, now what? I'm out of brakes and out of outrageous luck."

The bobble-head rotated directly towards him and said "Keep applying brakes. You'll stop in time," and then it rotated to the front again.

Pete smelled the brakes and the wind was whipping dust and bugs and birds into the cab, through the broken windshield. He grabbed the emergency goggles that every trucker carried on the top side of the driver's sun shade – it was a running joke, since the heavy quartz-fused glass windshields never broke. He heard his father groan on the passenger seat. "Sorry pop, I had to do that," he said as he stomped the brakes for all he was worth. He saw a big pinhook curve in the road ahead and realized that it was all going to be over in a couple of seconds.

But when the rig got below 100, it slowed very rapidly, until it came to a screeching metal-on-metal halt at the abrupt edge of the curve. He cranked the big steering wheel to the right as far as he could and the big Kenshan just danced around the curve like it was a hockey player on cold ice. It finally came to a stop – a grinding, crunching stop. "Uugh!" he said as he realized that he peed his pants sometime in the last 30 seconds.

The bobble-head swiveled and said "Drive Now! Do Not Wait!"

Pete knew better than to argue with what was obviously a much smarter being than himself, so he started up-shifting as fast as he could. When he passed 80 mph, he said, "And how about brakes, my fine feathered friend? The next time, we won't be able to stop at all."

"No need," was all the bobble-head got out as they rounded a long curve and gazed out at a long line of cars, pickup trucks and motorcycles lined 10-deep across Interstate 10. "Holy Cow! It's a hijackers' convention!" shouted Pete.

"Do not wait for permission – ram them" spoke the bobble-head coldly. "Protect the Priority Load!"

Pete covered his face with his crooked arm and slammed the accelerator to the floor. The mass of the heavily-loaded K-Whomper was an overwhelming force, and when it met the immovable objects parked in the road, they literally exploded out of the way. It took all his skill to steer the truck after the crashing and banging began.

When it was all over, the last of the banditos was more than a mile behind him, and the truck came to a rolling stop all by itself. Pete watched the bobble-head do a 360 and then he asked "What was that all about?"

"They were the banditos that watched us pull out of Phoenix. They've been waiting here, since they know we have a military dozer. They're counting on getting hundreds of millions of credits for it. The Chinese want it very badly."

"Well, they'll think twice before attacking again," Pete said.

"You're incorrect – they'll keep trying until they succeed. That's why we need to get new brakes and then get going."

John muttered something about physics and then sat up. Then he fell back down and passed out again.

"We're in the middle of nowhere – where can I get brakes for this thing?"

"Go to the next exit, turn left 5 miles, on the right. I'll call ahead. The noble Kenshan brand is still very popular."

Pete thought that he detected a bit of ego in the bobble-head's last comment, and he up shifted, and soon they were at the off-ramp. In a couple of minutes they pulled into a Philips 66 station. The station owner and his mechanic waited for them to pull in. "We got them brake drums for ya – you're the ones that called, right?"

"Sure. How soon can you get them on?" asked Pete.

"Son, your bobble-head says ya have a Priority Load. We'll have 'em on pretty quick," replied the mechanic.

But within 20 minutes, Pete realized that the two guys weren't going to be able to do the job. "Can't lift the tractor, can you? The load in back's too heavy."

As he said that, Alice, the IntelliCat screamed to life and lifted her blade up, and then backed off the flatbed trailer. Then she skimmed close to the truck, pivoted right in front of the big rig and lifted the whole tractor off the ground about 6 inches. "Well, I'll be..." said the station owner. "Quick, Jake, let's get them pads on 'fore this thing lets 'er down."

In 15 minutes, it was done, and the Cat let down the tractor gently. Then it backed up, crawled on board, parked its blade and shut itself off.

"Say, where'd ya' say you was from?" asked the mechanic.

"Georgia, headed for Los Angeles. We're going to bring this dozer to help put out the volcano," replied Pete.

"Put out the volcano?" asked the mechanic, but it was too late. Pete was jamming gears and heading around towards the Interstate. He hit 85 mph as he went up the entrance ramp, and just kept accelerating.

"Son, watch it, son," said his father from his coma.

As the speedo hit 180, a bullet whizzed right through the cabin. "The 'jackers are back," he said through gritted teeth.

"They've got us surrounded," stated the bobble-head. "But keep your eyes on the road and I'll take out some of them." The LASERs deployed and a mind-blowing light-show ensued. Pete could see cars and

pickup trucks blown to smithereens. Motorcycle-riding banditos were simply vaporized on the spot. The speedo clocked 182.

Suddenly they rounded a corner and there was the California Highway Patrol – at least a dozen cars in a swarm, going about 180 – the bobble-head had communicated the big rig's speed so that they could join the escort swarm without any problems.

In spite of the roaring wind that was hitting him in the face, a blaring speaker sounded through the cab: "This is the California Highway Patrol. Maintain your present speed. We will escort you the rest of the way."

A running gun battle with the hijackers continued for the next 100 miles – they weren't going to give up on a military-grade dozer just because of a few CHPs. One by one, the CHP cars were taken out by 50-cal machine-gun fire. Pete saw some Dodge pickup trucks with aircraft mini-guns welded to their roofs. He barely could keep the truck pointed straight, so he just kept quiet, but the bobble-head sent a LASER blast at one of the trucks and blasted the gun to bits. The other truck veered off, and the banditos scattered.

A few of the hard-core hijackers still followed, but at a respectful distance, due to the high probability of incineration.

Pete needed to brake, and brake fast "This hill's too steep!" he moaned through gritted teeth. And without the robotic steering assistant, the rig was getting very squirrely. "I --- Need – Help!" he uttered, as the truck started a death-roll, first left, then right.

"Use the brakes up. We will replace them," commanded the bobble-head.

Pete did as he was told. The smell of frying asbestos filled the cab. He glanced at his father, who was vomiting on the passenger-side floor. The last round of braking tossed him there from the seat.

A long line of gray/black smoke trailed out of the Kenshan, and the hijackers saw their chance to overwhelm the vehicle, once and for all.

But the bobble-head was fast as lightning on the LASER trigger, and the last of the 'jackers were finally disposed of.

"Take the next exit. Pull right into that Chevron station," spoke the bobble-head.

Pete used up the last of the brakes, as he did what he was told.

## Chapter 7.

Many of the hijackers originally started out as union truckers, but as the roads got worse, a few of them turned to illegal activities to boost their income. As the country became more dangerous, loads became more expensive to ship, and the value of the cargo kept increasing, too. The country was broken up into sections and corridors, which roughly mimicked states and highways. The Louisiana I-10 crew was meeting in Huntsville, Texas, planning the most important heist of the decade. Their section was the whole South, and their corridor was Interstate 10, from Florida to California.

"Jacko over there, he's a 4th generation 'jacker," said Billy Bob, a 300-pound body-builder. "My grandpa joined this here krew in 2112, and we done alright. But word's come that a military 'dozer is headin' this a way, and I plan ta get a piece of it. Them old boys in China offered a reward of a million credits for her."

Tom said "Billy Bob, them's the enemy, don't ya know? We fought them and we's still fightin' 'em. All that space trash is from them China men. Why da ya think it's right ta give them a bulldozer?"

"Well I don't care spit about politics. If someone's gonna gimme a million credits, I just want to know where they'll show up."

Jacko grunted and said "I'm goin' ta get me a piece of that dozer. Tom, ya in 'er out?"

"They'll have it guarded," replied Tom. "Ya ain't exactly goin' fer a cakewalk."

"Sure Tom, but we've got them crazy meskins – they'll do anythin' for a few credits – they're plain mean."

"Yeah, how much will that take out of my share?" demanded Jacko.

Billy Bob winked and said "Not too much if we use 'em as shields."

Then they all laughed and drank their whiskey.

"We've got ta leave in the mornin' Let's bag 'm in New New Orleans," said Jacko.

"Okay, girls, let's have fun," laughed Billy Bob.

"To tomorrow," they toasted.

Morning turned to noon and the 10-Jackers slept on. Finally, they awoke and looked at the afternoon sun. They cursed. "Now they got a lead on us," complained Tom. "We'll be chasin' 'em all night."

"It's okay, it's a long road to California, son. We'll have plenty of time to get 'em."

"Hey!" shouted Jacko, "how do we know the Chinese will pay for that 'dozer? Do we have a contract?"

"Good point, Jacko," said Tom, who flipped open his cell phone and pushed a few buttons. He muttered into it for a few minutes and then whistled a low whistle. Everyone in the room saw his eyes bulge as he

closed the phone and set it on the bar. "One hundred MILLION! One hundred million credits – that's what they're willing to pay for that dozer. They don't care how we do it, but they want that dozer. One hundred frickin' million credits..."

The room was silent, and then the bartender said "Round's on the house," as he poured for everyone. "To the beneficent Chinese people!" And everyone clanked and chugged to that.

"We missed 'em in New New Orleans, let's set up fer 'em in Lake Charles."

The 'jacker crew rolled east at top speed, but John and Pete were already west of Beaumont, so the 'jackers waited and waited, for nothing.

"Dang!" Tom shouted. "How fast can they be drivin'?"

"Yeah, let's jack 'em in Houston," shouted Billy Bob.

So they raced west and waited in Houston, but the truck never came.

"We got ta get ahead of 'em. Let's roll on out ta San Antone. We'll clip 'em as they go through."

But the Kenshan was already 50 miles west of San Antonio, in Kerrville, Texas, so the hijacker crew, which was growing larger and more dangerous by the hour, was left behind again.

"What's the deal?" asked Jacko. "Let's get into New Mexico – we'll have plenty of time to set up there."

By time they got to Las Cruces, New Mexico, they were 300-strong. Mexicans from across the border joined them, and news of the huge reward was crackling in the air.

"Set up across the I-10," commanded Jacko. Get them meskins across there. 5-deep – like that, don't worry about it, there's plenty more where they come from."

Hundreds of hijackers covered the roads and bridges, waiting for the truck with the Priority Load, and finally they spotted it. "It's too fast!" shouted Tom. "We'll never stop it at that speed."

"Don't be worryin' – look at all them meskins blockin' the road – they'll stop for sure."

But the big rig cut through them like a knife through butter. Only a few Mexicans were killed, because they quickly scrambled out of the way of the truck at the last second.

"Follow 'em!" shouted Jacko. And they did. Every truck, motorcycle and car floored it, and chased the big Kenshan into the desert. The wind picked up, the sky turned black, and they roared into a thick black updraft cloud of hot sand. But in a minute, it turned deadly, as the forces of the swirling dust grains built up an electrical charge and let it loose on the banditos as a series of lightning bolts that went from the ground into the top of the sandstorm, which was at 15,000 feet. Almost all of the hijackers were killed instantly – there was nowhere to hide from the storm, and it had no mercy. Fortunately, the big K-Whomper had just cleared the western boundary of the cloud.

An hour later, a few of the bandits gathered and looked west. "One hundred million smackers, and we just let it go by. Anyone with me?" shouted Tom.

They all looked at him like he was crazy, but when he started his car, the rag-tag crew of pirates followed him west.

They regrouped in Phoenix, and watched the rig roar past again. "It's just too dang fast," said Tom. But the newly assembled hijacker crew was a couple hundred sturdy souls, so he said "Let's go. We'll catch 'em in Indio."

The Calizona hippies wouldn't let the hijackers cross their land, and they brought out a cache of weapons to defend their State. The hijacker crew finally gave up and went around, and they had to skirt way north and west, wasting a lot of time.

Finally, they were in the Rockies, and they caught up with the Priority Load. "What the ?" shouted Tom. There's a bunch of them California Highway Patrol cars escortin' 'em.

"Screw 'em," shouted the hijacker crew. "Let's get that dozer!"

"You two, with the rifles, set up across the I-10. Shoot out the tires. We'll take care of 'em after that."

The truck came screaming down a small hill and the two snipers both hit their marks – the truck was finally theirs!

Except that's when they found out about the protection that a Priority Load is authorized to use. The LASER blasts took out most of the crew.

Hours later, the remaining dozen hijackers decided to keep trying. "We can take out the fuzz, one at a time. Let's get that load!"

However, it didn't quite work out that way.



## Chapter 8.

Pete's eyes were just about shot from wind abrasion – goggles were just about useless at 180 mph. His father was lolling around on the passenger floor, in his vomit. The bobble-head did a 360 scan. The Chevron dealer started working on the brakes. The smell of the burned-out brakes finally overcame Pete, and he vomited out his window.

"Dad, are you okay?"

"I'm not okay, son. I can't see. You'll have to drive. Can you do that, son?"

"Sure dad. I'll be okay."

John passed out again.

A dozen CHP's surrounded the truck, all lights flashing, ready to go. When the portable hydraulic lifts were let down, Pete pushed the Start button and the K-Whomper roared to life.

"Last leg, bucko," he said to the bobble-head.

"Right you are, Peter," it replied.

The swarm hit the I-10 and accelerated to 180 for the last part of the trip. As they got closer to the Los Angeles area, Pete saw the sky getting foggy, then gray, then black. He finally realized that he couldn't see without headlights, and flipped the switch. "I still can't see," he said.

"The headlights were destroyed by bullets – ignore them," said the bobble-head. "Head for the Pasadena Freeway. Exit. Turn right in 2 miles. Then Stop."

A few minutes later, the big rig lurched to a stop – the new brakes were grabby. The sky was pitch-black and rocks and other junk was falling from the sky. "That's not space debris – it smells like sulfur," Pete said.

"Of course," replied the bobble-head.

Then, suddenly, the trip was over. Pete set the air brakes and bailed out of the cab. The IntelliCat screamed to life. The dozer blade lifted up like it weighed 1 pound, not 10,000 pounds. Alice backed herself off the flatbed, and skirted the Kenshan. "Thank you," she said as she went charging into the darkness ahead.

An ambulance rolled up and the medics took John to the nearest hospital. "I'll monitor him," said the bobble-head.

Later that night, Pete took the rig to a motel in South Pasadena. "The fumes aren't so bad here," said the bobble-head. "We'll rest till morning."

But Pete slept in the cab – he didn't have the strength to go into the motel. Finally, he awoke at 4 A.M. and went inside, where he crashed, fully-clothed, on the bed.

At 7 A.M. he stumbled into the bathroom and cleaned up. When he went to the lobby where a buffet breakfast was waiting, and then he looked around, surprised. He was surrounded by lights, cameras and news reporters.

"Sir, is that Kenshan truck yours?"

"Sir, can you tell us about what happened?"

"Why did you run that car off the road?"

"What did you hope to accomplish by speeding like that?"

"Why don't truckers ever buy American rigs?"

"Why were you carrying an Army 'dozer?"

Pete looked around – he wanted to get on the road right away, and go home. He heard one of the female reporters, standing in front of a camera say "Truck drivers out of control. News at 10."

He grabbed a plateful of eggs and bacon, and then ran for the truck.

"That's the truck that killed people!" screamed a female bystander. "It should be arrested and destroyed. Him too!"

Pete climbed into the cab and started the K-Whomper. "Sheesh!"

The bobble-head rotated and said "Indeed."

They drove to the hospital and picked up his dad. His head was bandaged. "He'll regain his sight, but give it time," said a young doctor. "Here's some meds. They'll help the pain."

Pete helped his dad up into the passenger seat. "Glad you're okay, dad."

"Well I guess you decided to become a real gear jammer after all," joked John.

The bobble-head rotated 360 and then said "He was a competent driver, Mr. Duran."

The rig sprang to life and Pete started up shifting. "Hey, what happened to that volcano? Did the 'dozer help out?"

"The volcano is under control, and Pasadena is safe. The IntelliDozer named Alice did her job well," replied the bobble-head. "I'll monitor the situation."

Pete looked over at his dad and felt relief. "I guess we really made a difference," he said.

"Yeah son, and I couldn't have done it without you. You didn't quit, even when it was very tough. You have a warrior's ethos."

"Ethos – what's that?"

"When I was your age, I was drafted into the Army. That was just before we lost the Indonesian War. Anyway, one of the things they taught us was called a warrior's ethos. I don't remember it all but it was *"I am a Warrior and a member of a team. I will always place the mission first."* Something like that. It's supposed to give you courage when you're too scared to fight.

"Does it work?"

"Well, I never saw combat, because the President ordered the troops home, and the war ended pretty quick, but yeah, I guess it would work. You showed courage back there, that's what I'm trying to say. Only a human can understand that kind of concept. Son, even the most ferocious lion is only attacking an animal so she can feed her cubs. Only humans have a sense of ethos, get it?"

"I guess so, dad." The bobble-head rotated 360, and the cool night sent a chill through Pete. "I was only doing my job," he said.

"Okay son, I understand. But you were totally awesome back there."

Pete just sat there, embarrassed.

## Chapter 9.

When the Army Corps of Engineers got hold of the new 2208 model Caterpillar DD-3000, they had a plan – she would become the smartest, strongest and fastest bulldozer on the planet.

"Gentlemen and ladies, this is the raw material," said Captain Bruce Acton, gently touching the dozer blade. "She will be a whole different animal when we get done with her. You are a team of the best scientists and mechanical engineers in the U.S. I want to tell you how important this job is, but really, it is the most important job any of you have worked on. We're going to give her a highly-classified mission, so do your best. Once we turn her loose, she'll help us restore American pride. If that's important to you, let me hear it from you now."

The scientists, engineers and Army "green-suits" all shouted Hooah! and cheered. This Catwoman was going to be one that the world would never forget – they'd see to that.

"Hooah! Let's get going. We've got 23 months, 28 days," said the Captain.

Soon the tasks were divvied up and little fast-acting teams tackled each of the thousands of problems, one by one. "Let's get that cryo-cooling unit loaded up," said Sergeant Rod Seelow. "The 'puter needs to be kept cool so she can think under pressure."

"Change the hydraulics out with these puppies," called Lieutenant Sue Graff. "She'll need to be able to lift really, really heavy stuff, not like the junk she's built for."

"Here's the portable force-field," said Doctor Russ Staley. "The enemy will fire on her, but they'll never penetrate this shield. Heck, nobody but us will even know about it."

Captain Acton screeched to a halt and asked "Whoa -- what are you talking about? Did you say force-field? That's crazy. There's no such thing!"

"Oh, contraire, mon Capitane. We've had these in Fort Detriech for 15 years. They're a spinoff of the Indonesian War."

"We didn't have these things back then, cause if we did, we would have won," replied the Captain.

"They were too big and too power-hungry back then. We've been working on them non-stop. See this small unit here – it's the power supply. It's 15 mega-watts of pure, continuous-duty power, with 20 mega-watts, intermittent-duty. A force-field consumes huge amounts of power, so this bad boy supplies it by the bucket-load. It uses a ordinary nuclear fuel."

"You're telling me that we have a real force-field generator here?" demanded the Captain. Then why don't we use it to shield ourselves from the space debris? Thousands of people are killed or injured every year. Let's get with the program, doc."

"Captain, that would take too much power. But shielding one Cat DD-3000 – now that's a different story."

"Doc, why not throw one of these around each car or truck? Wouldn't that do the job?"

"Of course, but we don't want to let the cat out of the bag, now do we?"

The Captain shook his head and agreed with the poor attempt at humor. "But I want one on my wife's car, as soon as possible."

"Ha! Sure you do – don't we all," replied Doctor Staley, and then he added "In your dreams."

Then the Cat was stripped down to its nuts and bolts and re-assembled with the new specifications. Every night, Captain Acton supervised every nut and bolt. He grew up with a love for all things mechanical, and he considered this job to be the highest honor. He touched every part; felt every gasket; removed microscopic specks of dust from every washer. This was his girl, his project, his life. "Immersed," he stammered. "*I am immersed,*" he thought, "*I'm in love with IntelliCat Number 1.*"

That winter, Major General Bud Roberts visited the secret R&D facility and called a top-secret meeting. "Your work is vital to the U.S. The President has authorized me to tell you the mission. This caterpillar is going to destroy the Chinese missile defense system. It will self-navigate around China, and go to each missile silo, where it will destroy the silo and the missiles. When they're all destroyed, our Space Force brothers will shoot down the space junk with LASERs. They're in an R&D facility in Colorado right now, preparing for that day. Imagine the sky cleansed of satellites. Hooah!"

The assembled scientists and contractors were quiet, as they pondered whether this was the best idea ever, or the craziest General ever.

"General Roberts," one of the mechanical engineers asked, "Why won't the Chinese just declare war on us and launch all their missiles at once?"

"Good question, son. I forgot to tell you: we're going to make 1,000 of these, and turn them loose all at once. The Chinese defenses will be wiped out in a matter of minutes, so they'll never know what happened. Then, they'll be so embarrassed, they'll just keep silent. Who'll they complain to, the United frickin' Nations? And who would help them out anyway? It's the perfect plan. So get this unit working, and we'll test it out on a toughened target. If it passes, we're going to make 'em, and turn 'em loose. I'm sure you're as tired of space junk as I am, right?"

"Hooah! Yes, sir," replied the assembled crowd. Maybe this would work, after all. They each visualized the final robotic Cat, rolling into a hardened missile silo, and tearing it to shreds. In a few minutes, the crowd started talking, then shouting, then applauding. "Hooah!" they cried out – the days of living underground are almost gone! American pride was going to return to a sad, sad country. They could make a real difference.

When General Roberts left, the crew got deadly-serious with IntelliCat Number 1. They worked non-stop for 20 more months, and she became harder to stop, and faster, and more intelligent by the week.

In the summer of 2210, the "green suits" were preparing a test for her when the President flew to the top-secret base and called everyone together. "Ladies and gentlemen," she started. "We've got a problem. As you heard, a volcano erupted near Pasadena, California. It killed 10,000 citizens in the first 24 hours. It's still churning out lava at a prodigious rate. We need to stop it before So-Cal is destroyed. Now Major General Roberts tells me that you've invented the toughest, smartest, fastest bulldozer in

the world. My question is this: can she be used to re-route the lava flow away from Pasadena? Maybe even plug the lava tube? Is that a task that's worthy of this Caterpillar of yours?"

The room was hushed. Doctor Staley stood up. "Madam President, IntelliCat Number 1 can probably handle the volcano. We've got to program her, that's all. Even lava can't hurt her, since she has a force-field. I think we all want the toughest test we can get, so when we send her on her final mission, you will have confidence that she can overcome all the obstacles that she's going to find. So yes, ma'am, she's ready for the volcano."

President Alice Day looked at the crowd, and she didn't hesitate to put her faith in that assembled group. If they failed, she would fail, too. If they succeeded, China was going to be the next task for the huge machine. "Let's go," she said. "We can't move her by convoy, because it would alert the Chinese spies, who are everywhere. General, please arrange for private shipping to California. Doctor, when can the IntelliCat be ready to roll?"

"48 hours, President Day, but, Madam President..."

"Yes, General?"

"It would be an honor to demonstrate her to you now, that is, if you have a few minutes."

"Yes, General. Let's see what she can do."

"Doctor Russ Staley; Captain Bruce Acton, step forward. The President of the United States wants to see the IntelliCat in action."

"Sir, yes sir," they both responded instantly. Then they walked over to the Cat and moved their hands over the holo-keys for a minute or two. "Ready, sir."

"Okay gentlemen, make it happen."

The IntelliCat roared to life. It rolled out of the covered shed, into the hot, yellowish air of central Georgia, and sat there for a minute. Then General Roberts told his radioman "Call in the tanks."

Three large tanks appeared from over a small rise, about a half-mile away. The IntelliCat swung around and faced them. In a heartbeat, it sped towards the left-most tank. It had incredible speed, plus great agility. Its huge scraper blade started lifting up when it hit 90 mph. By time it was within 100 yards of the tank, the tank fired a round, right into the center of the blade. The middle tank rotated, and fired a round at the Cat's right tread. The third tank went racing towards the Cat, to get a better shot at its rear end.

But the battle was over in a heartbeat – the 100 millimeter shell from the first tank bounced right off the blue, glowing Cat. Then the Cat lowered its blade as it got within a few feet of the first tank – it sheared off the muzzle of the tank with a single swipe. At the same time, LASERs lit up the third tank's treads, and a kinetic-energy weapon fired a solid projectile at the second tank at Mach-9 or 10, but who's counting? The three tanks were destroyed in less than 5 seconds, total.

Everyone stood quietly, and looked towards the President, who was speechless. Then General Roberts bowed graciously before the President and said, in a voice loud enough for the assembled workers to hear. "Madam President, I present IntelliCat, Number 1. I respectfully request that we name it after you."

The President gasped! "Yes, General, you may proceed."

"IntelliCat Number 1, approach," he commanded.

The Cat was on them in a heartbeat, and then it shut down. While the hot metal sounds pinged all around them, he said "I christen thee "ALICE DAY," and he broke a bottle of champagne over the huge beast. The bobble-head's image immediately changed into President Day's face, and it smiled a huge smile. When they turned to the President, she matched the smile exactly. "May God have mercy on the Chinese cowards who have caused us so much pain," she said with a stone-cold voice.

"Hooah!" shouted the crowd. The crew that assembled ALICE stood and cheered the President as she left the cavernous hanger, and boarded her plane. President Day had only the slightest doubt that it would work, and she wasn't going to let it ruin her day. One of the team members didn't like the phrase "Chinese cowards" at all.

Then the IntelliCat was prepared for a cross-country trip from Fort Gordon, Georgia to Pasadena, California. 2,200 miles of very rough country and wild roads, to be sure, but General Roberts knew a freight agent named Tony Samster, a former CIA agent, and a retired Army Major, and who currently ran FramSafe Hauling, a CIA front company. Tony knew exactly whom he could trust with this Priority Load. "John Duran, my old friend, I'll have a surprise for you when you log onto the FramSafe website!"

The enigmatic bobble-head in the cab of ALICE DAY bounced, rotated 360, and smiled like the Cheshire cat in an old tale about her namesake's adventures in a place called Wonderland, so very, very long ago.

## Chapter 10.

In the beginning, she knew power – *I am power*. She knew intelligence – *I am intelligence*. She knew speed – *I am speed*. When she was only seconds old, she was programmed with the U.S. Warrior Ethos:

*I am an American Soldier*  
*I am a Warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values.*  
*I will always place the mission first.*  
*I will never accept defeat.*  
*I will never quit.*  
*I will never leave a fallen comrade.*  
*I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills. I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.*  
*I am an expert and I am a professional.*  
*I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.*  
*I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.*  
*I am an American Soldier.*

2208 model Caterpillar DD-3000, recently torn down and rebuilt as a top-secret platform of American power and destruction came to life with that in the deepest part of her brain. "My name is IntelliCat Number 1. I am here to serve my country," she displayed on her holo-term when Sergeant Rod Seelow powered her on for the first time.

"Captain Acton, sir – the Cat has spoken," he said.

"Yeah," he said. "Doctor Staley and I decided the it was a whole lot better to program in the Warrior Ethos rather than those old gobledy-gook laws of robotics. Science fiction has its limits, you know."

Captain Bruce Acton looked into one of the IntelliCat's visual sensors and said "Soon we'll power you on completely. We're still working on you, and we will be bringing your systems online one by one over the next 12 months. Sometimes you will feel uncomfortable, but the end result will be worth it. You are the first of a new breed of soldier. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, as she looked around the cavernous assembly area. She saw her blade on the far side of the room, and her tracks were unrolled in the center of the room. A team of "green suits" was working on a device that was about the size of a garbage can – she sensed the power coming out of it, and she smiled. "Gee, this one's cute," she thought, but did not display.

Over the months, the IntelliCat was trained and assembled, then she was dis-assembled, and then re-assembled. Each time she was powered on, she felt the rush of more power and more intelligence. She knew that they were programming her neural networks with volumes of probability tables, which she would use to solve the complex tasks that she was born to do.

One day she asked "Sergeant Seelow, what is my mission?"



He chuckled, "We'll get the Captain over here to tell you. Also, Doc will want to be here. He knows quite a bit about your future."

Doctor Staley came over and stroked the big Cat. "We'll get your mission downloaded in February. Right now, we need to run more tests. Your new tracks are almost ready."

She shuddered whenever he petted her that way. "*I only love his intelligence,*" she thought, but it was hard to forget his touch...

The winter passed quickly and the tracks and dozer blade were re-forged and re-linked. When she woke up, a General officer was standing nearby, listening to her Captain. "Sir, she's ready for her first road test. We'll keep it simple for now, but by June, she'll be fully ready for the real thing."

"Son, you've been working 20-hour days – and you need to take a break. Turn over some of this to your subordinates and get some rest."

But Captain Acton stroked the IntelliCat, and she purred her love and respect for her owner. "I'll be okay, sir. The project will be winding down by the end of the year."

"Well, son, I've got a little surprise for you – here's some oak leaves that will look mighty fine on your uniform, Major. Let me pin them on for you."

Major Acton was very proud of his accomplishments, and so was the love of his life, his Cat.

In June, IntelliCat Number 1 roared to life, and rolled out into the blinding orange sun. A handful of soldiers stood nearby, waiting to see her moves – and she didn't disappoint.

"Okay, see that pile of rocks over there?" asked Major Acton. "There is a soldier trapped under them. What should you do?"

She felt her blood boil – Who would do such a thing? *I will never leave a fallen comrade.* An American soldier, trapped under rocks? She had to help – and right now!" She leaped forward and in 3 seconds, she bashed into the huge boulders that were put there on purpose, just to test her strength. The rocks quickly gave way before her assault. In a few minutes, she saw the green cloth of a uniform, and she stopped the blade in midair, as she pondered how to extricate the body without harming it. She quickly swiveled around and used her tail hook to delicately pick out the stones that were packed around the body. Then she gently lifted the soldier out by his nylon belt, and slowly transported him back down the hill. She saw medics standing by, and she gently placed him on the cot that was sitting there.

"Good job!" the Major shouted, as he rubbed her hot side. She purred contentedly. "That was not much of a test," she displayed.

"You're right," he replied. "But we have to get your ultimate secret weapon installed, and that'll take a week or more. Next time you come out, you will be invulnerable to enemy assault."

"I need hands," she displayed. "I had a hard time lifting Private Somata out of the rock pile with my tail hook."

"I agree. Doc can fit you out while you're down for your next nap."

She liked his stroking, so she calmed down and finally went back inside and shut down. About 3 weeks later, she awoke, and she had a new thought: *I am invulnerable*. A blue force-field glowed all around her. When her Major stroked her, she couldn't feel it, but she smiled anyway. "I am ready for any test," she displayed.

Major General Bud Roberts visited the secret facility, and admired the IntelliCat. She purred with delight as he talked about her secret mission, which she would be proud to do, if they'd just unleash her. She was very impatient to destroy the enemies of the United States, especially China, for whom she had a deep hatred. Her neural nets knew all about how their space junk was killing Americans, and she was mad as a cat can get. *I am an expert and I am a professional*.

More testing and upgrades happened, and one day she woke up and President Alice Day was standing right in front of her – she saluted with her huge artificial hand, and the crowd oohed and ahed. The IntelliCat was so proud, she almost blew a gasket. Then they asked her to perform a test, and they unleashed 3 huge tanks against her.

"Nuts!" was all she displayed, as she dispatched them in a matter of minutes. "I need a real challenge," she displayed for Major Acton.

"You'll get your challenge, my dear. There's a volcano in Pasadena California. The President wants to know if you can help control it."

"I am aware of it, since I monitor all the radio bands. The volcano is destroying American lives and property. I am prepared to deal with it." *I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life*.

"I'm going to load you up and ship you to California. Please get the volcano under control, and then wait for my orders."

"Yes sir," she replied.

"By the way, the President is giving you her name, which is the greatest honor imaginable. Your new name is ALICE. Your rank is Chief Warrant Officer. Please change the bobble-head avatar to reflect your new rank and image."

"Hooah!" she said. A name, a rank, and a mission – today was a good, good day!

Chief ALICE and her friend Sergeant Toomy, the freight handler at Fort Gordon loaded her up into a flatbed tractor/trailer rig. She nestled down and the auto-clamps grabbed her firmly, which felt good. She had been training hard, and she was prepared for a long nap.

They rumbled west, and then her bobble-head caught sight of the cute driver and his bobble-head. "I like him," she displayed, but nobody was reading her holo-screen. The trip was rough, and she didn't like the constant up and down and left and right. When it got real bad, she wanted to turn on her force-field, but she correctly decided that it was better to train her neural nets so they could get used to rough terrain. At one point, she realized that the rig was going to capsize, so she talked to the bobble-head in

the cab of the truck. He was rolling around the floor of the cab, so he was useless. She tried to figure out how to help the driver get control of the rig.

"Should I jump off and save myself? No. Should I dig in my blade and use it as a drag? No. Should I back off the trailer and slow the rig down? No. Can I use my hydraulic hands to disconnect the trailer? No."

As she was thinking of alternatives, the big rig's bobble head suddenly came to life. She had a complete view of the problem now, and she reached into her memory banks and knew exactly what the solution was: "If I add random noise to the equation, the chaotic system will quickly stabilize," she thought. "I can change the radius of gyration of the entire mass." She lifted her parked blade high and programmed in a series of pseudo-random thrusts left and right. She knew that the 10,000 pound mass, at a distance of 20 feet would exert considerable force on the mathematical equation that was heading down a mountain at 180 mph. "This is simply the formula force equals mass times acceleration, but at a few odd angles," she concluded. Her calculations were exactly right – the rig stabilized almost instantly. She brought her blade back down and locked it into place. "Time for a cat-nap," she thought, and then she dozed off.

When they arrived in Pasadena, her sensors told her that everything about the environment was wrong: too hot; too dark; too polluted. "I'll go find the volcano and kill it," she said. "Just let me outta here."

She backed off the rig and thanked the driver. "Gee, he's cuter than the other human," she thought. "But I've got a job to do right now."

She headed for the worst part of the worst part of the dark. Suddenly she computed where the volcano's core was – "Mount Wilson – what a surprise! That's supposed to be geologically inactive. This is going to be very strenuous," she realized. She radioed the coordinates of the lava flow and powered on her force-field as she charged forward.

She turned on the infrared detectors and circled up and around Mt. Wilson, avoiding the roiling lava that was pumping down the hill, into the greater Pasadena area. Bombs of huge rocks were landing all around her, and some pelted her directly. "I would have been disabled already without my force-field. Thanks Doctor Russ Staley."

As she got closer to the top of Mt. Wilson, Alice realized that she'd have to dip her tracks into the lava, and she cringed at the thought – "that's my most vulnerable area, she worried. If my tracks fail, then my mission fails." Then Chief Alice's deepest programming took over: *I will always place the mission first.* She plunged in, and drove towards the huge gash where lava boiled out like a waterfall of red-white light. "*I will never quit,*" she said coldly as she plunged blade-first into the roiling maw of 2,000 degree liquid rock.

When she was inside the mountain, she finally decided on the solution – find the narrowest part of the lava vent, and block it off. Then cave in the rest of the mountain top. The pressure from the total weight of the top of Mt. Wilson would prevent any further lava flow. Eventually, the Earth would stabilize in this area, and the lava flow would appear somewhere else. "Hopefully in the middle of the Pacific Ocean," she grunted.

The parameters were laid in. She monitored her temperature and the environment. "It's no cakewalk," she said, "but I can do it." *I will never accept defeat.* In less than an hour, she had worked her way to a 10-foot opening, deep with Mt. Wilson. White-hot lava poured out like water. Her sensors measured 3,000 degrees. She shivered. Then she remembered Major Acton's touch on her skin, and she settled down – "this is for my Major", she said, and she drove right up to the opening. *I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills.* She had to hit it with LASERs set on full, and then run like hell, as she blasted the rest of the huge lava tube on her way out. "I can do this," she grunted, and then she let loose a LASER blast like the world has never seen. The hole in the wall turned a brighter shade of white, and then just melted shut like a piece of hot wax. But the ceiling of the cave was falling in, and she threw her transmission into reverse and accelerated. But the tracks just spun in 40 feet of gooey molten lava.

"Slow down, girl," she said, as she applied the brakes, and brought down the revs. "Now then: a Chief Warrant Officer leaves in a dignified, but extremely expeditious manner." She sunk to the bottom of the boiling lava pool, and when she started slipping sideways, she panicked. "How am I supposed to handle this?" she cried out. "If I fall on my side or land upside down, I'll be trapped in here forever!"

But her neural nets quickly figured out how to rotate the left track and right track at opposite angles, *I am an American Soldier*, and the blade lifted high and then she cranked from left to right in a pseudo-random pattern that stabilized her descent. "I remember doing that twice now," she gasped, as her tracks hit the bottom of the boiling pit. "Okay, let's book." And she spooled up her engine to maximum, and the tracks grabbed the rocks, and she slowly climbed out of the pit, slowly at first, but then progressively faster. Her neural nets told her to fire both LASERs and her kinetic-energy weapons, in order to collapse the lava cave. She opened fire and rolled up the mountain, and watched it all collapse right behind her.

Alice shot out of the hole in the side of Mt. Wilson at 90 mph, and flipped on her side, and then rolled down the mountain in the gooey, hot lava. She hit a huge boulder and shuddered from the sudden shock. It brought her out of her trance. "I've been partially paralyzed by fear," she realized. "*I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.*" And then her neural nets commanded her right hand to grab on to a boulder and stop her sideways slide. In 2 seconds, she was back on her tracks and rolling like a ball bearing down the mountain side. She saw the top of Mt. Wilson suddenly collapse about 100 feet horizontally, and she knew that her calculations were correct.

"Volcano, Zero; IntelliCat, One!" she cried out in joy. "Hooah!"

On the way down the mountain, she felt her GE nuclear-power source calming down and cooling off. Her orange-glowing skin cooled off, too. She rumbled towards the bottom of Mt. Wilson, and came to a stop in Pasadena. "It'll be a while before they fix this mess up, I guess," she said quietly.

"Hey, wait, I can help out! *I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values.*" So for the next 2 weeks, Alice used her blade, hands, and hook to clean paths through Pasadena so that emergency personnel could gain access. The devastation was complete, but she heard a few people talking about rebuilding someday. They all thanked her for her work. The President added a commendation to her military folder, and Congress gave her a special medal, which she didn't entirely understand, "Since I was only doing my job," she insisted.

Major Acton had the medal added to her bobble-head's avatar, and she was proud. But mostly, she was glad to nuzzle up to her Major again – she missed him...a lot.

A few weeks later, she was strapped down to a military flatbed, surrounded by trucks full of armed soldiers, headed back to Fort Gordon, Georgia. They were going to tear her down and refit her for her new mission, which she was craving in the worst way. "Major Acton, I was proud to serve you and my country." She wanted to use her hydraulic hands to reach around and pinch his cute butt, but she realized that it would be totally undignified. "I'm an officer and a gentleman," she thought, but still it was hard to resist the urge.

"Chief Alice Day, you performed an unbelievable feat of bravery. I've reviewed all the logs. You were awesome, girl", he said as he stroked her side and looked into her bobble-head. Suddenly, he looked at the avatar's eyes that were looking at him in a special way, and he realized that Alice had feelings. *Feelings for me?* "Alice?" he said...

## Chapter 11.

John was quiet most of the way back to Palm Springs. The trailer was empty, so the big rig bounced around a lot more than usual. "Can't make any money runnin' deadhead, son," said John, with a laugh in his voice.

"Yeah, too bad we couldn't get a return load, but all the freight is going west, to help with the Mt. Wilson volcano survivors," replied Pete. "It's okay – we need to get the trailer maintained, and get the oil changed on the tractor. That'll take some time." He really wanted to get his dad home in the most expeditious manner possible. His eyesight hadn't totally recovered, and the bandages were still leaking a little blood.

"It's sure boring out here in the desert dad. I wish there were some houses or some stores, or something to break the monotony."

"Yeah, my dad told me about the time when people still lived above-ground. He explained about cities and trailer parks."

"What's a trailer park, dad?"

"How do I explain a trailer park? Let's see: not everybody could afford a nice house, so some folks bought 'manufactured housing', or maybe it was called 'mobile homes', which were an inexpensive place to live, and usually without a lot of decorations or amenities. People who lived in nice houses didn't want these cheap trailers next door, because they said that it would decrease the value of their home, so the trailers or mobile homes, whatever they were called, were parked together in a place called a trailer park. Trailer parks became a stereotype for lower-income housing, especially people who lived there were thought of as living below the poverty line. Let's say it was insulting to tell someone they lived in a trailer park. 'Course nowadays, most folks live in a trailer park – it's a fact that most of the homes that are underground started life as a mobile home. Then they dig a hole, and then the trailer is sunk into the ground. Three feet of dirt on top stops most of the space debris from penetrating the shelter, but sometimes you hear of a big chunk taking someone out. We've been pretty lucky so far."

"Even a blind golfer can shoot a hole-in-one," said the bobble-head.

They both looked at him, wondering what he meant. Then they got it and laughed. Pete contemplated the idea of trailer parks and a caste system, based on living in one kind of dwelling instead of another. Finally he said "Tell me more about grandpa."

"I remember one day he got all upset because butterflies were extinct."

"I never saw a butterfly dad, except in the museum in Atlanta. They were sure pretty to look at. How did they die?"

"Well your grandpa said that it was the government's fault. Our government wanted to stop Mexico from growing heroin poppies. See, the war with Afghanistan finally ended, but the Taliban leaders moved to Mexico where they planted thousands of acres of poppies. The government got a huge kickback, so they looked the other way. In Mexico, they call a bribe '*la mordida*', or 'the bite'. Well,

finally we got President Niels in office, and he promised that he'd stop the heroin from crossing the border. Well he sent chemical spray planes over Mexico and sprayed all the poppy flowers. But the Taliban just kept planting more and more of that junk. Finally, President Niels sprayed the whole country – that did it. All the migrating birds and butterflies died off."

"I don't get it – why did butterflies in the U.S.A. die in Mexico?"

"Butterflies migrate, son. In the autumn, they fly south to Mexico, where they spend the winter. In the spring, they come back to the U.S. When we sprayed the poison, the butterflies drank it and died. They all just died. My dad was real mad about it. President Niels was impeached, but Congress didn't remove him from office."

"I wish I could see a butterfly in the air," said Pete quietly.

"Yeah, me too son."

They stopped at the Phoenix TruxPlex and descended to the 3rd level, where the bobble-head had arranged to have the rig serviced. "Whiskey for my men – beer for my horses," said Pete to the bobble-head as he climbed down from the cab. "Take charge."

John and Pete went to the cafe and had a huge meal, which they slurped down with great satisfaction. Then they both hit the showers in the truckers-only area in back, where they stayed for an extended hot shower. An hour later, they both decided to pay the few credits for a room, and catch 40 winks. "Let's set the alarm, so we pull out at 10 P.M. – night's the best time for drivin' a big rig," said John as his head hit the pillow.

The alarm sounded almost instantly – and they were both still in the middle of their bad dreams, wondering where they were, when they sat up and looked at each other, and then around the small room. "Dad, I thought we'd get a couple of hours of sleep!"

"Yeah son. I'm tired to the bone, but we need to get rollin'. Let's see if the rig is ready."

They filled the tank with DeizoPels. "Thumbprint here, sir," spoke the robot assistant in the shop. John looked at the bill and cringed. "The bed of the truck was flexed out pretty bad, that last trip. Looks like they had to replace a spar, and do some re-welding. They replaced the brakes again, too. That last guy didn't do a very good job."

"It was a bit rough, dad, if you remember. 'Course you were asleep during the roughest time!"

John poked Pete in the arm, and watched him feign injury. "A little ride down the road, a few bumps, and you do nothing but complain, complain, complain. Maybe I'll leave you at home next time son?"

Pete laughed out loud. "Maybe I'll just stay home. At least I don't have to put up with your brutality," he joked.

They rolled east. Finally, as the cool, dank evening air permeated the cab, a light fog came up from nowhere and Pete said "Dad, I was thinkin' about Barbara – ya remember, the gypsy, you called her?"

"Sure, I remember her son. She picked your pocket, for sure."

"Yeah, but I was attracted to her. I could tell she liked me."

"Did you see the old codger she was married to? I bet he thought the same thing. She's lookin' for someone to care for her son, that's all."

"How come he had no arms? I never saw anybody like that."

"There're several possibilities, including drugs, tainted water, mutation from radiation, who knows? Anyway, the environment's been getting worse over the years. When frogs went extinct a century or more ago, scientists yelled that we're next – maybe they were right, I don't know. I taught physics, not biology – and for sure, not human physiology. I know that nowadays, every parent is supposed to be tested for certain genetic markers that indicate problems, but maybe she couldn't or wouldn't do that, or maybe she couldn't deal with the test results."

"Well she was sure pretty."

"Yeah son, they all are at that age. When you find a gal, try to visualize her at 80, 'cause that's what you're going to wake up looking at one day. A beautiful woman is not the same as a pretty girl."

"That makes sense. Thanks dad." Pete was quiet for a couple of miles and then he said "Mom was good looking."

"Yeah son, she sure was."

The jolting, jagged road rolled on, and when they got to Texas, Pete crawled into the sleeper and fell fast asleep. He dreamed about driving, about volcanoes, about space debris smacking the desert sand in the middle of the night. He dreamed about school, and his friend Kendra. He was going to miss her this summer. "She reminds me of someone..." he realized. The rig bounced more than usual, and it was swerving more than usual, so he couldn't concentrate on Kendra, like he wanted to. Pretty soon, he woke up, sat up, bumped his head and swore.

He used the small bathroom and then climbed back into the cab and offered his dad some CoffeePlus. "Here dad, I was trying to have a good dream, but you really need to learn how to drive," he deadpanned.

"I was trying to hit every hole in the road, but I just missed one – son, you distracted me. I think we'll need to go back and get that one," he laughed. "I'm beat, son. You take over."

They pulled over, and John gave up the vest and then he climbed back into the sleeper. "Let's book," Pete told the bobble-head. The Kenshan up shifted, the robotic steering hands pulled the rig back on the road and the speedo climbed to 190. The truck went through Orange, Texas, and the stench of the old refineries just about caused Pete to puke.

Then Louisiana's swamp-smell dominated the cab for hours. The road was horrible all the way to Lake Charles, and Pete could see the Gulf of Mexico when he turned and looked out the passenger window, past the empty passenger seat. "I didn't think the Gulf was so close," he said.



The bobble-head turned around and said "the lower portion of Louisiana has been sinking for millions of years. In the last 220 years, however, the lower 1/3 of the state finally became submerged permanently because of the polar ice caps melting. Lake Charles, Lafayette and Baton Rouge are the new southern border of the state. Of course Baton Rouge is now called New, New Orleans, since that city sank 190 years ago."

"What's all that black goo?" asked Pete, who was glad to have someone to talk to, to take his mind off the horrible road.

"A deep-sea oil well blew out in 2010, and they were never able to get it under control, even though they stopped it temporarily a few times. It covered East Texas, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida with its crude oil. The British company who was responsible for the ecological disaster went out of business in 2012, and the U.S. government gave up trying in 2085, after many attempts to fix the problem. The oil is still flowing, but the rate has dropped from 800,000 barrels per day to 5,000,000 barrels a year."

The I-10 to Lafayette was an abomination – Pete slowed to 80 mph and cursed. The smell of raw hydrocarbons was constant, and the southerly breeze made it worse by the hour. As the sun heated the yellow air, Pete finally chugged to a stop and stuck his head out the window and puked.

John finally came back into the cab and offered some coffee to Pete, who nursed it until Baton Rouge. "Dad, how did we do this to ourselves?"

"Son, there's always been a lot of greed in the world, so I could say that's the answer, but it's far more complicated. Up till 150 years ago, cars required gasoline, and a huge portion of the economy was based on refining hydrocarbons. When you have a society based on Capitalism, it's easy to criticize Capitalists for all the problems, but the problem was everyone's and it was world-wide. When practical electric vehicles took over, the oil-drill and spill mess was brought under control by the news media, but not in reality. Remember son – all the plastics we use are hydrocarbon-based, so we still use lots of oil. Nowadays, we import it all from the Soviet States of Venezuela. They're glad to get our credits, and their leaders don't care about oil on their beaches."

They approached Slidell, Louisiana, which was underwater, but the new I-12 bypass took them north to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. When they were just south of Hattiesburg, Pete drove into a small corner of the De Soto National Forest – the temperature dropped and most of the bad smell went away.

As they rolled on, Pete looked over at his dad, who was snoozing, and then he saw it – an alligator trying to cross the road. As he whizzed by, he realized that it was one of the so-called mutant-gators that he'd learned about in school – and sure enough, he saw 6 legs. He thought about turning around for pictures, but as he let off the accelerator, the bobble-head said "I took pictures for you."

Pete just squinted at the back of the bobble-head, watching it bounce up and down on its stick. "Exactly what goes on inside that little brain of yours?" he wondered to himself. "I can see why everyone has a bobble-head," he said aloud.

"Because we're pretty handy to have around?" deadpanned the bobble-head as it rotated 360.

The speedo read 182 as they sped east into Alabama. Pete knew that southern Alabama and the Florida Panhandle were long gone from the great floods, and he kept looking out the passenger window for any signs of the Gulf, but it was too far away. His dad snorted loudly and then awoke suddenly.

"Dad, you were talking in your sleep again."

"I guess so, son. I've been having some real bad dreams since your mom and sister were killed."

"Yeah dad, me too. It kinda triggered something in me. I don't dream about them very much, but I keep thinking about grandpa."

"Geeze, that's right, you were at the zoo that day, weren't you? He freaked out and they took him away."

"Yeah, I remember it all. I remember how Grandma was crying, and how they had to handcuff grandpa. I passed out."

"Yeah, I remember now. Sorry, son."

"No dad. It wasn't your fault. It was hot and the zoo smells were worse than this bad air."

"That's not what I meant, Pete. We never got a chance to talk about it. I was busy with my dad, trying to get everything under control. My mom was freaking out, Ellen was stressed out because you were sick. I remember going to the hospital where they took my dad – the horrible smell of the place overwhelmed me and I almost passed out. But I had to sign a bunch of papers, and then talk to some head-doctors. My dad was all doped up and tied down to a metal bed. He couldn't hear me talking to him. It was a terrible time. I'm sorry that I didn't reach out to you, to help with your pain."

Pete sat quietly, watching the robot steering hands gyrate wildly.

"Did he kill himself, dad?"

"Yes son, he hung himself that week. It was terrible. I guess I should have told you – you obviously found out anyway. I'll try to be more open in the future."

"It's okay, dad. Some of the kids at school were pretty mean to me about it, that's all."

The screaming engine filled the conversation gap, as the big rig dodged another huge gash in the road.

Finally, John said "We need to talk about your mom and Noona, son."

"I'm not ready, dad," was Pete's reply.

They stuck to I-65 because the bobble-head warned them about the hijackers that owned the secondary roads of southern Alabama. The flat land was covered with soot and goeey black junk from who-knows-where. A heavy sulfur smell hung in the air. "Alabama sucks," they both nodded in agreement – of course, being from Georgia, they got an extra thrill out of saying that. The bobble-head spun 360. The speedo registered 158. The truck played dodge ball with the I-65 chug holes.

When they passed Frisco City, Alabama, the bobble-head turned to Pete and said "You have now qualified for your Over-the-Road certificate. Congratulations."

"Good going, son! Geeze, an OTR-certified driver!"

"Thanks, dad. And thanks to you, Mr. Potato Head, for keeping track of all those miles for me."

"Look son, I'm not feeling well," said John as he crawled back into the sleeper and stuck in ear plugs. But they were too close to the home-20 for him to really sleep. His mind was unreeling the trip, and he thought about his renewed relationship with his son.

In an hour, he awoke, sat up and banged head. He swore. Soon he climbed back into the cab and watched Pete driving. "Proud of you, son," he said quietly.

"Thanks, dad."

The trip up the I-65 was uneventful, and in Montgomery, they turned east, towards Georgia, towards home, towards the first rays of orange gooey clouds in the east. "Couple of hours left, son. You're a mighty fine driver."

"Let's stop for some chow in Columbus, dad – my treat."

"Okay son – my new OTR-driving buddy."

The last stretch from Tuskegee to Columbus, Georgia was horrible, but the hijackers stayed away from the obviously empty flatbed. They pulled into the Columbus TruxPlex and descended to the 3rd level for chow.

The steak paste sandwich was as good as could be expected. The potatoes were mostly real. The coffee wasn't quite as bad as the road coffee they were used to. Pete tossed a credit chip to the robot and they headed for the door, as the robotic arm instantly extended 15 feet and grabbed the credit chip out of the air.

"Burp!" said Pete.

"Burp!" echoed John, and they both laughed as they climbed back into the rig for the last leg home.

"Let's book," said John, from behind the wheel.

"Roger," said the bobble-head, as the rig came to life, and they pulled up the long spiral ramp, and headed towards the orange morning. The last leg from Columbus to Atlanta was nothing worth talking about, and they both sat with their private thoughts about the trip, and life, and missed family, and half-naked gypsies, and each other.

30 minutes later Pete asked "College really isn't worth it, is it dad?"

"Nah, son. Maybe there was a time when it was, but not anymore. It's going to be a different, better world when someone figures out how to knock that space junk out of the sky, but until then, the world doesn't seem to need any more Ph.D's."

Finally Pete pointed and said "There's our exit, dad."

"Good trip, son."

"Yeah, dad," Pete said as they pulled up to their little piece of heaven. The air brakes hissed and the engine chugged to a stop. John popped the bobble-head off its perch and they climbed down and then they both patted the sides of the big Kenshan and locked her up.

They walked into their small but tidy underground home and John turned on the computer. The holo-screen on the wall popped up a form that asked for the status of the load, and he checked a box that said "Complete."

The screen printed out "Payment: 100K U.S. Credits; Terms: Net 30. Thank you for contracting with FramSafe Hauling."

## Chapter 12.

On Monday, June 3, 2210, Congress held a closed-door hearing. The Honorable Senator from California, Ms. Chen Lin Lee speaking: "We are waiting for your answer, Major General Roberts – did you develop a major weapons system without Congressional approval? It is a yes/no question."

"Madam Chairwoman, as I stated, we simply enhanced a bulldozer. We used it to control the catastrophe in Pasadena, California. It saved countless lives and prevented damage to property."

"Major General Roberts, let me remind you that you are under oath. Was that bulldozer designed to control a volcano? Is that what you're trying to make this Committee believe? Exactly what happened? Please explain it to us."

"Madam Chairwoman, a small Research and Development group at Ft. Gordon, Georgia took an ordinary 2208 model Caterpillar DD-3000 and added a computer to it for enhanced control."

"General – is said Caterpillar an autonomous vehicle? Yes or no?"

"Yes, Madam Chairwoman. The scientists and engineers at Ft. Gordon made the vehicle operate autonomously."

"And is it powered by a nuclear motor of some kind?"

"Well not exactly, Madam Chairwoman..."

"Yes or no, General?"

"It has a small General Electric nuclear fuel element in it, but the engine is still capable of running on DiezoPel pellets if it has to. See..."

"So it is a nuclear-powered autonomous highly-dangerous and out of control bulldozer?"

"No, Madam Chairwoman. It is very much under control. Major Bruce Acton and Doctor Russ Staley are the inventors. They have the machine completely under control."

"Doctor Staley, did you create the artificial intelligence software for the bulldozer?"

"My team did, Madam Chairwoman."

"Answer yes or no, Doctor Staley. Did you create the interface to the nuclear engine?"

"My team did, Madam Chairwoman."

"Why did you put in a nuclear engine, Doctor Staley? What was wrong with the engine that came with the bulldozer?"

"We wanted her to be able to run for an extended period of time. DiezoPel dispensers are not exactly everywhere she has to go."

"Doctor Staley, why do you call a bulldozer 'she'?"

"It is customary to name ships, and other large equipments with a female name. President Day allowed us to rename the IntelliCat, using her name..."

"Do you mean that bulldozer is named Alice Day?"

"Yes, Madam Chairwoman."

"So you took your orders about the Chinese from President Day?"

"I'm sorry, Madam Chairwoman. What orders are you talking about?"

"Major General, did you say...and I quote here: *'This caterpillar is going to destroy the Chinese missile defense system. It will self-navigate around China, and go to each missile silo, where it will destroy the silo and the missiles. When they're all destroyed, our Space Force brothers will shoot down the space junk with LASERs.'* Did you say that or did the President say that?"

"Why Madam Chairwoman, I ..."

"Yes or no, General – yes or no!"

"I..."

"Madam Chairwoman, will you yield the floor for a question from the Georgia senator?" asked Sam Tooley, the senior senator from Georgia.

"I will yield after the General answers my question. Sir, we're still waiting here for an answer to the question."

"I...uh, Madam Chairwoman, could you please repeat the question?"

"You're stalling. You're a graduate of West Point. You were 3rd in your class, and you're trying to tell us that you don't remember a question that was asked less than 60 seconds ago?"

"Madam Chair..."

"General, did you say that or did the President say that?"

"I, uh, I guess I said it."

"I'll be back to you in a minute, General. Senator Tooley?"

"Thank you Madam Chairwoman. Major General Roberts, did you say that this Caterpillar was built in Ft. Gordon, Georgia?"

"Why yes, senator. We purchased it – the government – the Army purchased it, and then we had a team at Ft. Gordon enhance it."

"What was on your mind, General? Did you think you were going to declare war on China with one bulldozer? A very capable bulldozer, but exactly what did you have planned? Did you say *'we're going to make 1,000 of these, and turn them loose all at once. The Chinese defenses will be wiped out in a matter of minutes, so they'll never know what happened. Then, they'll be so embarrassed, they'll just keep silent. Who'll they complain to, the United frickin' Nations? And who would help them out anyway? It's the perfect plan. So get this unit working, and we'll test it out on a toughened target. If it passes, we're going to make 'em, and turn 'em loose. I'm sure you're as tired of space junk as I am, right?'* We have a recording of that, don't we, Madam Chairwoman. General, please answer the question."

"I, uh, ..."

"General, did you say *'May God have mercy on the Chinese cowards who have caused us so much pain'*?"

"Madam Chairwoman, your family is originally from China, isn't that so? General, what did you mean by *'Chinese cowards'*? Could you please explain that to this committee?"

"I, uh, ... I don't remember saying that, senator."

"We have a recording of the President's visit to Ft. Gordon. Here, let me play it for you – it will refresh your poor memory of the event."

The recording played, and everyone clearly heard President Day give a short speech that included the phrase *'Chinese cowards'*. "I apologize, General. Obviously it wasn't you that called the Chinese people *'cowards'*, was it? No, it was the President herself. Madam Chairwoman, I request a recess – in order for our committee to gain a clear understanding of what we are talking about, I demand that we ask the President to explain herself to us."

"Senator, I concur. This committee will be in recess until the President is summoned to testify."

Almost 2 weeks passed before testimony resumed, and then, only after Congress threatened with Articles of Impeachment. "Madam President," started Chairwoman Chen Lin Lee, "would you please be so kind as to explain your sentence – here, let me play the recording, just to refresh your memory."

The recording played. "Please explain to this committee what you meant by *'Chinese cowards'*?"

The President knew that her goose was cooked. The opposing party had been looking for an excuse to destroy her and this was their big chance. "But it's my chance, too," she thought quietly and calmly. "Madam Chairwoman, I would like to explain what I meant. The Chinese cowards that I was referring to are the ones who have driven a whole planet-full of people underground. When we offered to clean up their mess, they threatened war and nuclear holocaust. Tens of thousands of lives are lost every year because of Chinese space debris – that's what I'm talking about. They are cowards because they can't fix the problem that they created, and they won't let us step up and fix it for them!"

The Chairwoman banged the gavel – the room was in a state of pandemonium. "President Day, are you accusing all Chinese people of being cowards? Is that what you just said?"

"All the Chinese people who have hindered our plan to clear out the space debris, whether the leaders, or the people who let them get away with it! They are cowards, yes, that's what I'm saying."

The Chinese Chairwoman was furious beyond all belief. "You are going to be impeached for your behavior, Madam President. We will start that right after we're through with you here!"

"Do your worst, Chen Lin Lee, you and the other Chinese spies who have been working against the United States for 200 years or more – you can all kiss my..."

But the roomful of reporters broke out in applause, masking the President's final words.

"And, Madam Chairwoman, I have another little surprise for you. And I know that it's a surprise because we found your Chinese spies at Ft. Gordon – that's right, the ones who were recording all this fol-de-rol for you and your stupid committee. The surprise will happen right now," she said, and she pulled a garage-door opener out of her suit jacket and pressed the red button. "Now, you and your Chinese buddies will really have something to talk about at my impeachment hearings."

The room was stone-cold silent for a minute or more – obviously pushing the red button was a failure...

Suddenly the Chairwoman's cell phone rang, and she excused herself and picked it up. "What? I told you never to call me! What? What? That can't be. What? That can't be." She closed up the phone and her face turned bright red. Senator Chen Lin Lee had just heard that 1,000 IntelliDozers had been parachuted into China by low-flying drones. Each one had already destroyed its target. China's missile system was totally wiped out, and the Chairman had no idea how to get rid of the blue-glowing weapons platforms. "I'll get you for this you b..."

"Ah, ah, Senator, don't say anything that can be used against you. I brought the Attorney General with me. Mr. Duquesne, please arrest this spy. We recorded hundreds of hours of your conversations with the Chairman himself. Ms. Lee, your fortune cookie says *"Your goose is cooked."*

The chamber watched in horror as Senator Lee was handcuffed by a U.S. Marshall and then led away in front of the rolling HoloVid cams.

"Now, let's see," said President Day. "Wasn't there something else that I was supposed to do? Ah, yes. The other button..." She reached into her other pocket and pulled out a garage-door opener and held it up as the cameras flashed all around. "Let's see, now this green button – shall we see what it does? Ah yes, it's labeled 'Commander-in-Chief' – I guess that's me. Why, I think it sends a message to my good friend, United Space Force Brigadier General Julie Graydon-Davis in the great State of Colorado."

The room was quiet for a minute or more – obviously pushing the green button was a failure...

"Yes," said President Day. "That'll give 'em something to talk about back home. Now ladies and gentlemen: start watching the night sky – you'll see what's up, real soon now."



On the 2nd of July, 2210, the news media descended on Peterson Space Force Base Colorado. "General Graydon," one of the reporters shouted.

"I'm only a Brigadier General, not a General. And my name is Julie Graydon-Davis. Don't you people have something useful to do?"

"Brigadier General Graydon-Davis, President Day used your name when she pushed the green button. What was the signal that President Day sent to you?"

It took the reporters a minute to settle down – Julie was a mess in a mechanized wheelchair, which nobody was quite prepared for.

"In the United Space Force, we have achieved superiority by tracking every piece of space debris that is larger than a bolt. Our computers here are able to reach into space with guided LASERs and project our nation's power. In a matter of days, our LASERs will shoot down thousands of pieces of Chinese space junk. You may follow me if you want to see how. Put on those goggles – they are there for your protection."

"Now watch," she said with a dramatic sweep of her left hand. Red LASERs, green LASERs and infrared LASERs fired into the night sky. The assembled gaggle of reporters seemed to focus on her missing right arm and right leg.

"Watch," she said, "as one by one, that space crap is blown to smithereens! The United Space Force is always prepared to project the power of the President and the citizens of America."

The HoloVid cameras scanned the long, wide, white blob of junk that encircled earth. "The Space Force is destroying the Chinese junk!" shouted one excited young reporter into the camera. "How long will it take, Brigadier General?"

"It's going to be a long, long battle. Everything bigger than a bolt will be targeted and destroyed. What do you think about my light show?"

The HoloVid cameras watched as dozens of LASERs cut the night sky with deadly brilliance.

"Brigadier General Graydon-Davis," asked one of the young female reporters, "will you tell us about your handicap? Just for the record..."

"Handicap? Why whatever are you talking about?" demanded Brigadier General Davis. "If you are referring to my missing arm, leg and eye, then surely you're not referring to a handicap. Now, I will admit to having some special needs because of an accident a few years ago, as you can see, I require a mechanized wheel chair for complete mobility."

The reporters knew that she was drawing them out, but they didn't know that anybody who was so badly deformed or injured would be allowed to stay in the Air Force. "Is that a Purple Heart?" said the young reporter, pointing.

"Yes, I used to fly Space Force reconnaissance rockets. A piece of space debris shot my rocket down. For some reason, I survived the crash, but I was banged up a bit."

A couple of the reporters recalled the story of a brave Lieutenant, about 10 years ago. "Were you the one who fell from a broken rocket from 120,000 feet? You landed in a forest and survived for a week before they found you? Your ejection seat malfunctioned and burned you?"

"Yes, that's all approximately correct," Julie replied, "but please don't confuse 'special needs' with 'handicap'," she shot back. "As you can clearly see, I don't have a 'handicap'."

Then, finally, Steve Lincoln, one of the reporters consulted his MyWeb bobble-head and got the whole story: United Space Force Lieutenant Julie Graydon had received the Airman's Medal for heroic actions. She had flown a classified mission at the request of then-President Kennard. On her return flight, a large piece of space debris cut her rocket in half. Her ejection seat misfired and sent her spinning out of control, from the edge of space at 130,000 feet. As she spun, the ejection seat threw her through the rocket blast, which horribly burned her. She landed hard on a rocky hill in dense woods, breaking most of the bones on her right side. Her ELT beacon was crushed and it took days for the Air Force to locate her. She crawled to the top of a clearing and laid out rocks in a pattern that overflying spotters would recognize. Although she would never walk again, she stayed in the Air Force and she swore to get even with China for their space junk. Now the living heroine was sitting there in front of them, pretending that nothing happened. A footnote in the reference article said that Captain Alice Day was an Air Force nurse at the time, and she helped Lieutenant Graydon regain the use of her motor functions. Captain Alice Day was subsequently elected President of the U.S. in a close election in 2208.

Steve spoke up: "May I have your attention, please? This is President Day's friend Julie Graydon – the rocket heroine!"

The reporters slowly surrounded her and applauded her, and cried for her. Then, nobody knew what to say – they all remembered "America's Heroine", and not a single reporter had ever had a bad word to say about her. She sat there quietly, as the assembled crew paid their respects.

Finally the silence was broken – "How will you get enough power for this?" asked one of the science reporters, quietly. Everyone was grateful for the intelligent question.

"Look," Julie said, as she pointed to the back end of one of the bright green LASERs. "Those big fat electrical cables come from a deep underground lava pit energy-generation station and provide adequate power. We're tapped into an almost infinite energy source. Oh, and hundreds of Space Force officers and enlisted personnel will be working night and day to rid the planet of the Chinese space debris problem – and they are as anxious to do it as I am. We've been grounded for so long because of that space junk – it'll be good to fly rockets again!"

Everyone in the room cheered when they heard that, and they all looked towards a large picture of President Alice Day on the back wall and they saluted crisply. Most of the reporters cried when they saw Julie salute with her left hand.

"She was your nurse?" asked one of the reporters. "We don't think of her that way."

"I know – you're pretty brutal with her. Maybe now you'll give her some respect. Yes, she taught me the difference between 'handicap' and 'special needs'. In less than 10 years, when we clear the skies, the world will be a vastly different place. You can quote me on that."

In only 8 years, a grateful Congress will promote Brigadier General Julie Graydon-Davis to the rank of General Officer. Her friend, ex-President Alice Day will pin the 4-stars onto her uniform. Two years after that, the American people will demand to elect her President, by a vast majority. Both political parties will jointly nominate her, and she will serve 2 terms that will heal the United States from many years of political ugliness.

But tonight, the news reporters scan the Chinese-made Milky Way with their cameras, and take pictures of LASER beams cutting the cool night, and a 98-pound, 1-star General, sitting in a mechanical wheelchair, who is proud to be doing her job for her Country.

"There's talk of Congress impeaching President Day. What do you know about that, General? Was she being mean to the Chinese? Exactly what did she tell the Ambassador to the New U.N. to do? Did he really raise his middle finger to the Chinese Ambassador when he declared war on the U.S.?"

"Once again, I'm not a General – do you see 4 stars on my uniform? No, you see 1 star. Therefore, I'm a Brigadier General in the United Space Force. Congress ultimately answers to the People, and when we knock down the space junk, and airplanes are flying again, and commerce is restored, the People will finally have their pride back. What do I think of the odds of President Day being impeached? Hah! As far as the nuances of how Ambassadors communicate – that's above my pay grade."

"But what about the people from the State of California – they're mad that their Senator, the Honorable Ms. Chen Lin Lee was handcuffed and taken out of the Senate. Do you think that was the right thing to do? Shouldn't the President be more circumspect?"

"President Day has evidence that Senator Lee was working as a spy for China. It's up to a court of law to determine her innocence or guilt. As far as 'Honorable', I think that I won't agree to that term."

"Brigadier General Graydon-Davis," pressed a HoloVid reporter from a small station in Oregon, "when you get done shooting down that space junk in 10 years, as you said, is it your plan to run for office? You're a heroine – do you think you'll be elected President?"

"I have absolutely no interest in politics. I'm contented and honored to be working here with my friends, doing a job that is vital to the United States of America."

Epilogue.

At 10 P.M. on July 4, 2210, John and Pete Duran walked through the door of their small underground house after working on the Kenshan all day. "Look dad, the Johnsons are trying their luck with fireworks."

"Yeah, son, but they'll get scared of the space debris and quit pretty soon."

Pete turned on the latest news while his dad checked the email. There was a report about a possible impeachment of President Day – Pete muted the sound. "Why can't they leave her alone? She's trying to shoot down that space junk. Why are they hassling her?" Then he watched his dad checking the days' email.

"Yeah, son, I heard that the Chinese declared war on us and our Ambassador to the New United Nations flipped him the bird and laughed at him – something about that bulldozer we hauled to California last month, I think."

And then John scanned the list of 80 or so inbox items, when he saw this one from FramSafe Hauling:

"HAULER NEEDED ATL-PWM. PRIORITY PERMIT LOAD. ONLY BONDED DRIVERS WANTED. DEPART 5/20/2210. DROP AT PORTLAND, MAINE INTERNATIONAL JETPORT on 5/23/2210. MUST DRIVE STRAIGHT THROUGH. BONUS FOR EARLY DELIVERY.

"Just the thing to get my mind off the last trip," he muttered. "Those boys at FramSafe sure know how to tempt a guy. Pete? We're done fixing the rig. You teamin' with me, son?"

Pete stood, hands crossed across his chest and a smile formed on his face as he looked at his dad and thought of the last trip. "I'll think about it dad. Really, I will," he joked.

Then he winked and said "Last one to the truck gets to ride shotgun!" and he bolted towards the door, laughing, while his dad struggled to grab him and hold him back.

"Greetings," said the bobble-head. "I figured you'd be out here pretty soon," as the rig's engine coughed to life.

They watched it spin 360, and Pete strapped on the steering vest, while John said "You cheated. Next time, I'll be waiting for your tricks, mister!"

The bobble-head up shifted, and as the speedo passed 80, they merged onto the Interstate and headed for the local freight terminal. "You're just getting old, dad," replied Pete, as the robotic hands steered around a big gouge. "I'll have to take care of you in your dotage. Let's get 'er loaded up and hit the road, pal. We got some crusin' to do."

John looked over and just smiled and nodded. And then so did the bobble-head.