

Jewels From the Sky

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The HUD in my helmet is flickering something awful as I slow down my intercept with the shift's second target of the day, giving me cruddy numbers and graphs as my approach speed slides down. The AirBike's spotlight up forward is doing a good job of illuminating the hulk of the slowly rotating satellite I'm approaching, but Maintenance should get an earful from me when this shift is over for the crappy way my HUD is working.

My foam-encased earpieces crackle for a moment. "Hey Amy, how's your speed?"

"Mine's just fine, Joe," I reply. "How about you?"

Joe Fisher, my line supervisor, laughs at me. "Mine's just fine. I'm right above and behind you. But I'll be a nice boy and let you have first crack."

"If so, that'd be the first time you've been nice to anyone today."

Another brief laugh. "Remember, Amy, up here in space, everyone can hear you swear. So don't screw up."

"I won't."

The disabled satellite grows larger in view as I feel the vibrations of the AirBike's maneuvering jets gently brake us as we get closer. The old satellite is in sorry shape as I slow within three meters. It's pockmarked and scored with lots of micrometeorite and debris hits over the decades, but at least its spin is relatively slow. I take over from the approach computer and gently squirt a few more jets of gas, to get even closer. It's about the size of an antique VW bug.

"Watch yourself," Joe cautions.

"I got it," I say.

A louder, male voice interrupts us both. "Salvage Beta, this is Traffic. Is everything nominal over there?"

"Traffic, this is Salvage Beta One," Joe says, speaking more formally. "All is nominal."

"Very well," Traffic says. "Let's cut down on the chatter."

With some difficulty, I swivel in my saddle and spot Joe just as he described, up and behind me, gently coming in as well. He's straddling his own AirBike and I note the tiny plumes coming out of his control jets. I hold up a gauntleted fist and do my best to extend a middle

finger, and I get a *click-click* from the Joe's transmit button in reply. Good ol' Joe, I think. I hope he's enjoying these last moments outside in LEO.

Some distance behind Joe and me, a fair number of clicks away, is the illuminated blob that's home, and where Traffic maintains its chatterbox with all of us crews out here today. It's still called Hilton-to-the-Stars, although the original owners went bankrupt years ago, even before I was born, when the expected market of rich people wanting to spend several megabucks for the privilege of eating crappy food and throwing up in orbit never materialized. Now the Company owns it, and it's been my unwanted home for the past two years.

I get back to work. The front of the AirBike has an opening from which I start to hand crank and unspool a stiff section of memory wire, shaped flat and wide, like one of those old-time retractable tape measures. It extends from the front and goes out straight, and then rubs up against the side of the old satellite. The AirBike's jets work a bit to keep us in place—again, I feel the saddle vibrations through my butt—and after a while, the spinning slows, and slows, and then comes to a halt. I retract the memory wire and squirt a few more times, and when I get close enough, I'm able to snap on two biners and cable to handles and struts on the rough surface and officially capture the darn thing.

"Okay, Joe," I say. "She's mine."

"Then get to work and show me what you got."

"Affirm on that," I say. This is my last escorted job before I'm certified by the Company to go solo, and I want today's shift to go smoothly indeed.

I unbuckle my harness and release myself from the saddle, and with just a push or two from my fingers, I rise up, giving me a terrific view of the AirBike, which looks like a mess of struts, fuel tanks and cargo binds. My HUD is still flickering, and I switch it off. No time for distractions. I'm tethered to the AirBike, of course—it would be another year of EVA training and sims before I'd ever be allowed to go anywhere untethered—but I don't mind, for it's not a goal I'm interested in achieving any time soon.

I work nice and slow, moving to the rear cargo module. I slip it open and remove a round package, about the size of a large, white hockey puck—as if most folks on Hilton-to-the-Stars have ever seen a hockey puck—and I move over to the satellite. I don't know what it was made for or how long it's been up here, or even who it once belonged to. It doesn't matter. All that matters is what's inside.

I bring up my left arm and check my output screen, which has a schematic for this piece of orbital debris. Matching the schematic with my own Mark I eyeballs, I slap the puck down on the side of the satellite, depress a center switch, and gently move back, unsnapping the biners and mooring cables, releasing the darn thing from my AirBike. I watch again, entranced, for I never tire of seeing just how smart the Company's well-paid engineers can be when they put their minds to it. A few seconds pass, and nothing much seems to happen. Then the puck seems to expand. And expand some more. And some more. Somehow the LEO engineers up here have devised a collapsible memory foam with the ablative material that—when activated—will open up and cover whatever object it's attached to. In just a minute or two, it's spinning itself out and around the old piece of space gear, like a spider making a web (something else no one at Hilton has ever seen).

But instead of a web, the puck has just spun an ablative heat shield all over the dead satellite, giving now a smooth, white surface, when just a few minutes ago, it had been dented and scraped old metal.

Nice work, but my job's just beginning.

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Back to the cargo module again—which is jam-packed full of stuff today—and back to the dull white satellite I go. Joe is hanging motionless above me, and he just says, "Looks good from up here."

"Oh, yeah," I say. "We are so copacetic down here."

A laugh from Joe, which makes me sad, just for a moment, before I remember what's ahead of me.

I take out a support frame that has five quick-release, round-shaped objects dangling from underneath, and then back on the AirBike I go. With the tiniest squirts from the reaction jets, I go around the white object, and, following the schematic—which is giving me a live feed from a penetrating radar system on the AirBike—I remove and gently apply the five objects to the old satellite. Four of them are one-shot reaction jets, with enough brains and power to work in sync and nudge this old bird into a reentry program. On the satellite's top, I place a larger, slightly more bulky object which contains a transponder and a drag chute. The chute isn't enough to really bring her down to a soft landing; nope, it's only purpose is to slow her down so that the satellite doesn't break into hundreds of worthless pieces when it lands somewhere down there on the Great Plains states.

My throat thickens up, and my eyes moisten, but I stay focused. I run a systems check and tell Joe, "All right, this mamma's ready to go back home."

"Good job, Amy," he says. "One more to go and then it's back to the ranch."

I slowly move away from the egg-shaped and white satellite, with the new little protrusions sticking from the new smooth surface. In a while, according to plan, the reaction jets would fire in their preprogrammed phase; the satellite would descend and reenter the Earth's atmosphere; and then come to a not-so-soft landing, whereupon the transponder will sound loud and clear for a Company recover team to snap it up, and from there take it someplace where the gold, platinum, silver, copper and anything else of value would be salvaged. Like jewels falling from the sky.

A long, long time ago, the Company faced lots of lawsuits and opposition for their salvage work, but since the Company could prove that most of the firms and countries that sent these babies up no longer existed—along with their insurance companies—then it was the typical finders keepers, losers keep their mouths shut after lawyers from the Company paid them off.

The AirBike vibrates some more as we head off to our third and last target of our shift, and I spare one more glance back at Hilton, one more glance before it all goes wrong.

* * *

Our target is a spot of light that grows larger, and I'm looking at my wrist pad and the screen on my AirBike's dashboard, when Joe's voice, tight and strained, fills my ears. "Amy, I got a situation here."

"Joe, go," I say.

"My suit's losing pressurization. It's already down a half-pound. Sorry, but we're going to abort."

I check my own suit readouts from the feed to the AirBike computer. "What do you mean, 'we,' young man? I'm fine here."

Joe says, "This is your last check mission. You need to come back to Hilton."

"Nope," I say. "Joe, next time out, I'd be going out by my lonesome. So what if we accelerate my certification?"

"Amy, don't be so stubborn."

"Too bad," I say. "It's part of my genetic makeup, and—"

Traffic cuts us off. "Salvage Beta, what's your status?"

Joe goes into formal mode, reading out what's what with his suit, informing Traffic that we're aborting, and I pipe in and cheerfully say, gosh darn it, I'm almost on top of target three, I could get her done and be back by the time Joe's suit gets stripped off him and goes through diagnostic checks.

Traffic says, "Salvage Beta One, Salvage Beta Two . . . hold, please."

So I hold. My own breathing is increasing, almost drowning out the sounds of my suit fans and pumps. I wait, wait, keeping eyes focused, right forward, where the dead satellite is slowly coming into form and shape. I think I can hear Joe breathing as well.

Traffic snaps in. "Salvage Beta One, confirm your abort. Salvage Beta Two . . . proceed. We need that satellite to meet quota."

Of course, I think, relaxing. The Company's accountants can never be fully fed, no matter how hard we work, no matter how many corners get cut.

Joe sounds pissed. “All right, Amy. She’s all yours. See you back home.”

“Affirm on that,” I say.

“Good luck . . . you know, it’s hard to believe you’ve only been here two years. You’ve sure come a long way.”

I can’t help it. I look down at Earth, slow-moving and magnificent and gorgeous Earth. All I see are clouds and ocean—the Pacific, perhaps?—but I know that down there is where I came from.

I look up, blink away the tears, get back to work.

* * *

It was hot the day it happened, just west of an abandoned town called Norton, in the northwestern part of the state of Kansas. It was always hot, night and day. Fifteen-year-old Amy Thunder Smith sat on the driver’s side of a very old and very modified Jeep Wrangler, parked on the side of a crumbling state road. All excess metal had been blowtorched away, and there were balloon tires attached to the Wrangler that allowed them to spin across the dry acreage here that used to be farming lands with little chance of getting stuck. A long and wide—and empty for the moment—trailer was attached to the rear of the Wrangler. It also had balloon tires.

Next to her was her second cousin, Henry, who was two years older, tall with dark skin and black hair and black eyes. He had on a dirty white T-shirt and blue jeans, and a Lakota phrase was tattooed on his upper left arm. For the past several months Amy realized that she had a crush on her second cousin, and was always happy when the two of them were assigned on a snatch together.

A handheld radio stuck between the seats crackled into life. “Hey, kids,” came the old voice of Uncle Stoney. “We got increased chatter overhead. Looks like there might be a drop coming in. Stay loose.”

Amy had on dusty khaki shorts, a University of Kansas T-shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat to protect her head from the overhead sun. The sky was a hazy yellow. Most days it was always a hazy yellow. Over the top of the Wrangler was a flapping stretch of white canvas that was supposedly used as a sail for a boat that slipped around a lake in South Dakota. Amy had a hard time believing that. Most lakes were muddy wide holes that you could walk across and not get water above your knees, if you were in a mind to do something nutty like that.

And speaking of knees, Henry gently touched hers. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.”

“Feel like going someplace this weekend?”

“With who?” she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

“With me,” he said. “I’m thinking of—”

“Break, break,” Uncle Stoney said over the radio. “Got a live one. Incoming. Head 340 degrees, north by northwest.”

Henry picked up the handheld. “Uncle, this is Amy and Henry. Got it. Three-forty degrees, north by northwest.”

Other voices from their family and neighbors started chiming in over the radio, but Amy ignored them. She started up the Wrangler—powered by ethanol, of course—and pulled out onto the empty road. The canvas overhead started flapping. “Where to?” she yelled over the rushing wind. Henry was a good nav guy, one of the best in the business, and looking at his tablet, he said, “Take your first right . . . go about a klick, and then it’s all open country.”

Amy grinned. “Yeah, baby, that’s what I like!”

Henry grabbed onto a seat strut with his free hand and swore, and said, “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Amy sped up, the wind flowing around, threatening to take off her sun hat, the trailer back there banging and rattling. The landscape around here was flat and burnt ground. She spotted the paved road off to the right, took it, checked her odometer. Old telephone poles canted at all angles flipped by her as she kept on driving—an occasional fenceline sped past as well. Decades ago, this had been one of the richest farmlands in the country, until the collapse of

the Ogala aquifer.

“Now!” Henry shouted. “Break left . . .”

She spun the wheel as the Wrangler did just that, bouncing off the road and onto flat and rough ground. She whooped in glee as Henry kept his mouth shut, holding the handheld up to his ear. She loved this, loved being free, loved driving across these flat empty plains. This was home, and she would never, ever leave. Amy wished she could keep on driving without ***worrying about fuel or food . . . just keep on going and going to the far horizon. With Henry, of course . . . and there was a warm tingle in the center of her chest, trying to think of what he was considering. A date! Finally!

In the distance were a pile of lumber and timbers that marked the end of some farmer’s dreams, but so what? She and Henry and others in her community were still here and making a go of it, thanks to those treasures falling out of the sky and into their laps.

The steering wheel shimmied in her hands as she peered through the dirty windshield, looking up at the yellow sky. “Don’t see anything!”

“You will!” Henry shouted back. “Uncle Stoney says she’s a big one . . . it’ll be hard to miss.”

She nodded, kept on looking up at the sky. Back home in their unofficial village, Uncle Stoney and her other cousins had put together a pretty good radar and tracking set from surplus Russian and Iraqi gear, such that they had a good lock on whenever the jerks overhead decided to drop a package in their backyard. Sometimes it was close, sometimes it was far, but no matter what, Amy loved the chase.

“Got it!” Henry called out. “Off to the left, up about 75 degrees!”

If Henry ever had a concern about being driven around by his younger cousin, he always kept it to himself. But still, her cuz had amazing eyes and besides being a good nav, was the best spotter as well.

There. Just like Henry had said. Another tingle inside her chest. Up in the sky was a streak of orange, meaning the chute had deployed, was slowing down this particular treasure chest, or—as Uncle Stoney liked to say—these jewels from the sky. A big one. That sounded promising.

Hell, the damn thing was now a shape. She could see it coming down! This was going to be an easy pickup.

“Amy.”

She turned some, the Wrangler hitting a particularly bumpy piece of dirt, her head nearly striking the overhead canvas.

“Amy.”

More of the object was coming into view. Damn it, this was going to be quick.

“Amy, for Christ’s sake!”

She slowed, turned to Henry. “What?”

He pointed. “That fenceline. Up ahead.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Company land. Stolen right after the drought.”

“Oh.”

But still she kept driving.

Driving until she reached the fence, and she stopped, keeping the engine on, not bothering to put it in park. The fence was in piss-poor shape. The usual welcoming signs from the Company with warnings and threats and skull-and-crossbones had been torn away, no doubt residing in some boy’s bedroom somewhere out here. The fence wires had been pulled free, some of the fenceposts had been torn away.

“Crappy fence,” she said.

“Fence maintenance is pricey,” Henry said.

She looked to the left and to the right. Two little plumes of dust, marking other of her folks coming here to lend a hand.

And before her, coming down and landing hard, with a big plume of dust rising up like chimney smoke, was a nice fat jewel from the sky. Gold, platinum, silver, wiring, maybe even

some science stuff that the Smithsonian back east might want to pay good money for. Hell, she could make it out easily with no spotting glasses necessary.

She grinned at her cousin. "In and out. Piece of cake."

He smiled back, warming her insides even more. "Go for it."

Amy pounded the accelerator hard, and in seconds, they were trespassing on Company property.

And one more quick glance behind her showed her that the two other recovery crews were following right behind her.

Damn, this was turning out to be a *good* day.

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She finally slowed as she came up to the egg-shaped object, its bottom two-thirds scorched from reentry. The drogue chute had slipped away and from years of experience, Amy knew that the transponder on top of the salvaged satellite was busily chirping its position to whatever Company retrieval assets—ground or air—in the area.

Amy got out of the Wrangler, stretched her legs. Henry came around and joined her, put a hand over his eyes, squinted. "Big sucker. Think we can get it on the trailer?"

"Yeah, if the rest of the crew show up."

The whisper sounds of engines came to her. She glanced over her shoulder. Two big plumes. "Here comes the crew now."

Henry looked up at the yellow sky. "We'll want to move quick. The Company goons might show up at any second."

"We'll be fine, Henry. Honest."

The other vehicles skidded to a halt on the dead pastureland, and four more people tumbled out: two males, two females, none older than eighteen, all part of the same outfit. Randy, Kimmy, Tom, Jenny. They came up to the egg-shaped object, Randy whooping with joy. "Damn, look at the size of that sucker! Auntie Polly will be spending a whole month taking her apart."

"Maybe so," Amy said. "Let's give it a good look-see."

"No," Henry quietly said.

"What?" Amy said.

"No," he said firmly. "Amy, sorry, I don't like it. We should get the hell out of here. It's giving me the creeps. Don't know why, but it just does."

Some of the other family members spoke up, but Amy's voice was louder. "Henry, what's up with you?"

"I . . . I don't know." He moved around in a full circle, looking up at the sky and at the horizon. "I just don't like it. And we're trespassing. Better if we just bail out now."

Randy spoke up, a checked bandana around his head. "What's the matter, Cuz? Okay, we're trespassin', but we get movin', we'll be out of before the goons show up. And look at the size of that bitch. Think of all the goodies inside."

All were quiet. Amy looked up again at the sky, at the far horizon.

Nothing.

"Randy's right," she said. "We grab and go, and we're not trespassing any more. Get the packing straps, the hydraulics, airbags. Henry, back up the trailer and—"

A crackling noise made all of them look at the object. A large crack appeared at the top, worked its way down, widening and opening and—

"Run!" Amy yelled. "Get the hell out of here!"

She turned, and there was a larger *crack!* She got about two feet before she was grabbed, wrapped and toppled to the ground.

* * *

Part of her mouth was free. She spoke as loud as she dared. "Don't fight it, try to relax, it's a web-tie. It's a web-tie."

Some moans and words she couldn't make out. A web-tie, used in riots or any other type of disorder and disturbances. Object flew out from a center dispenser, aimed to the center of the nearest warm mass, popped open and wrapped the target with plastic sticky web, like it had

been squirted from a spider the size of a barn. The more you struggled, the tighter it squeezed.

She eased her breathing, which was hard, for the web-tie was cutting off her circulation.

“Henry?” she called out. “Can you hear me?”

No answer. Amy said, “I screwed up. My fault. I should have listened to you.”

Still no reply. The day moved on, very slowly.

* * *

The engine noise appeared hard and fast, and Amy tried to move her head. For the past long minutes, all she had been looking at was a scrap of dirt, with not even a blade of grass or an ant in her field of vision. The web-tie grabbed her neck and hauled her back down to the ground. Engine noise lessened. Voices came nearer, and something cold started to spray on her. Amy closed her eyes, held her breath. The spray was a solvent, dissolving the web-tie. Strong hands picked her up.

Amy coughed, choked and stood, weaving. An armed Company security officer in a black uniform and mirrored-facemask/helmet combination held her left arm. She blinked, cleared her eyes. Henry, Randy, Kimmy, Tom, and Jenny were all standing in a line, each one with a Company security officer holding onto them. She moved to join them and the officer—a woman!—said, “Stay put. Someone wants to see you.”

Two old Osprey vehicles in the latest color combination of the Company were some distance away, engines idling, props turning, dust and dirt being kicked up in clouds behind the two vehicles.

“Hey, look, we weren’t doing anything, we were just taking a look and—”

A squeeze to her arm. “Shut up.”

A sonic boom rattled her ears, followed quickly by another one. Amy looked up at the sky, spotted a tiny object falling free, getting closer and closer, until she made out a triangular shape. Holy shit. The object got bigger and one of her crew said, “Damn, look at that, a shuttle . . . must be from the Hilton.”

It tilted, rotated, tilted, and then it flew to the horizon, and then—much lower in altitude—it came back to the group. Landing struts leaped out from the belly, maneuvering jets braked it to a hover, and it landed near the Ospreys, tossing up another cloud of dirt.

Amy coughed again. “What’s going on?”

Her personal officer said, “You’ll find out soon enough.”

A ramp at the rear of the shuttle lowered, and three shapes came out: Two security officers, dressed like their Earthbound comrades, but these two had powered exoskeletons to help them carry their heavy weapons and armor from Hilton-to-the-Stars. But the man they were flanking was walking free and clear, and Amy swallowed, and her legs started trembling. This man was old, had leathery skin, and moved with purpose, heading right to her, showing he was tough and hard enough that he didn’t need to use a weaponized exo-skeleton to help him in full gee. He had on a black, zippered jumpsuit with the logo of the Company over his left chest. Amy didn’t much care about the logo; the Company changed its name and home country status about once a year, depending upon elections and tax laws. What she did care about was the look in the man’s face.

It was the look of discipline and experience. He was bald, with bushy white eyebrows, and large ears. He came right up to Amy and said in a surprisingly soft voice, “I’m known as the colonel. I’m head of security up in Hilton.”

“What’s your full name?” Amy asked, legs still trembling. It took a lot of power to bring a shuttle down from orbit and a hell of a lot more to bring it back up. That fact alone scared the shit out of her.

A cock of the head. “At some point you may be privileged to know my last name. But you’ll never know my first name, girl. But I know *you*, Amy T. Smith. I’ve been listening and watching you for months. I know where you live, where you were home-schooled, and how you’ve been stealing from my employer for the past two years.”

She raised her voice so her crew could hear her. “You have no right to hold us. None! So you better let us go.”

He cocked his head the other way. "I don't think so. Your state police sends a cruiser through this county perhaps once a month. The governor of this state is so weak that he's called the Mayor of Topeka. This state and others have returned to Wild West status. No real law, just thieves and outlaws. Like yourself."

Amy laughed. "Look, I've learned about the Company and if you want to talk about thieves and outlaws—"

He held up his hand. "This is what is going to happen. You, and only you, are going to accompany me back up to the Hilton. You're going up on your own accord. And we're leaving in less than one minute. Do we have an agreement?"

Amy waited, and burst out laughing. "For real? What the hell is this? A joke?"

"Not a joke," he said. "We want you. You're young, intelligent, energetic, and willing to do almost anything to get the job done. A talented girl like you will go far up at the Hilton. Very far indeed . . . and truthfully, we need specialized immigrants to maintain our excellence and diversity."

She laughed again. "So . . . I get a bit older and you want me to marry some Company flunky and give you some zero-gee babies? For real? Go to hell, colonel whoever-you-are." Amy broke her arm free from the security woman. "There's nothing you can say or do that will get me into that shuttle."

He nodded. "An expected response." Still looking at her calmly, the man raised his soft voice: "Captain Pinkerton, if you please."

She turned, just in time to see one of the security men push Kimmy to the ground and shoot her in the back of her head. Her body jackknifed forward and was still. Randy and Jenny started crying. Tom lowered his head, staring down at the ground. Henry set his face calm and hard, looking over at her and the colonel.

When Amy could finally speak, she whispered "I'm yours."

"Grand."

* * *

At the base of the shuttle's ramp, she turned when she heard loud voices behind her and another sharp report. Her feet no longer could move her. Tom was dead. She was stock-still. Another shot. Randy was dead. Yet another shot was fired. Jenny cried out, tumbled to the ground. Only Henry was still alive, and he stared at her and the colonel, kneeling and arms bound behind him. He started singing, a slow-moving tune that was near to a chant.

"What are you doing?" she sobbed, trying to run back, one of the guards in an exoskeleton holding fast to her with a metal and plastic grasp. "Stop it! We were only stealing! You can't kill us for stealing!"

One more shot. Henry slowly moved forward, collapsing on the dirt. A foot trembled. The colonel stood next to her. "You were embarrassing the Company. That's a capital offense."

He shoved her in, the ramp came up, and after she was fastened into an acceleration couch, it was like the weight of the world sank on her chest.

* * *

The target satellite slowly comes into focus. It's a goddamn mess. It used to have two solar panels; one is gone after all the years in orbit, and the second one is a tangled mess on the opposite side.

Damn it to hell. This is going to screw up my schedule.

I take a deep breath, a flood of memories coming back to me: the confused first weeks up at Hilton, throwing up a lot. Going on a hunger strike. Ignored until I gave up, and then I was billed for my medical care. Realized quickly that I was in debt up to the top of my head, paying for food, power, light, and my cube. A few more strikes, none of them ending well. Learning about what it took to be a LEO salvage operator. SIMS over and over again. Fending off creepy advances from my supervisors and coworkers. And learning . . . hating to admit it, even now, but reveling in the knowledge available to me. Learning anything and everything I could figure out and puzzle about Hilton and the other salvage stations up here in orbit. More and more learning, right up to this day, a year after I officially learned the colonel's last name: Hutchinson.

My breathing is loud in my helmet. I slow the satellite down as before, hook up, and take a cutting tool from one of the cargo modules in the rear of the AirBike. I extend the cutting tool, and a sudden voice nearly causes me to shriek. "Hey, Amy, how's it going on over there?"

I swallow and then move my head to take a sip of tepid water from a nearby tube. "Joe, doing okay. You?"

"Almost home. Sorry I left you in the lurch back there."

Another swallow of water, and my throat is still dry. "Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry, too." I pause, and say, "Joe, I've got to get back to the job."

A *click-click* from his mic. I say nothing and get to work with the cutting tool.

* * *

I don't know if fortune favors the bold or teenage girls, but the cutting goes better than expected, and with a gentle nudge from my right hand, I set the twisted and damaged solar array loose, where it will probably drift and go lower and eventually burn up in the atmosphere, its atoms and molecules going back to the land of its birth. I like the sound of that.

I check the time. Getting there. I put the ablative package on the side of the satellite, watch it do its work, and I slap on the transponder and the four reaction jets. Sweet little pieces, the jets are, able to fire in a deliberate and synchronized method to bring this bad boy to where it belongs.

Within a couple of minutes, my gear is stored and I gently back away the AirBike and myself from the smooth white shape before me. I look down at Earth, still majestically rolling along. Lots more water. As one smart-ass had said to me during my schooling, "If there was any justice in this Universe, the place down there should be called Ocean, not Earth."

Justice. What an idea. I toggle my microphone. "Traffic, this is Salvage Beta Two."

Hissing from the foam-encased earpieces around my ears. Another toggle. "Traffic, this is Salvage Beta Two."

No answer. Damn, this wasn't supposed to happen like this.

The speakers crackle into life. "Sorry about that, Beta Two. Had some work going on with Salvage Gamma. What's your status?"

Excellent question. "Traffic, this is Salvage Beta Two. I need to talk to Colonel Hutchinson. Soonest."

Traffic sounds both amused and ticked-off. "Say again, Beta Two? Why do you want to talk to the colonel?"

"Because he's going to want to hear what I say."

"And what's that?"

"I quit," I say.

"You what?"

"I quit, I'm leaving, I'm departing the employ of the Company. *Adiós, muchachos*, I'm outta here."

A slight hiss for a couple of seconds. "Hold on, Beta Two."

* * *

So I orient myself, check my consumables, check everything else one more time, and I know I should be scared shitless, but I'm feeling pretty good.

The Colonel's voice comes alive in my helmet, and it's a nice feeling, hearing him and knowing he's some distance away, where he can't touch me.

"Amy," he says. "What's this nonsense?"

"Oh, I've decided to strike out on my own," I say. "I don't particularly like being here, and I don't particularly like you."

He chuckles. "Another strike, is that it? You're going to find it pretty cold and lonely out there in a while."

"Nah, I don't think so," I say. "I think I'm going out for a little trip, depending on my mood. I might head over to Bigelow. Or Roscosmos. Or JAXA. Hell, even the Indians might welcome me. You see, I got something hidden in my shorts: a couple of thumbnail drives that have as

much financial, technological, and personnel information about the Company as I could steal during the past two years. That's what happens when you snatch a country farm girl and give her so much knowledge."

"Amy . . ." His voice is heavy with a threatening tone. "Do you think you're the only person who's ever threatened to do this? Don't you think we would have prepared for a circumstance like this? You turn around and head right back to Hilton. You have sixty seconds to get that AirBike moving in the right direction."

"Or what?" I reply. "You'll trigger that hidden explosive charge in the AirBike's mainframe that most people know about . . . or the very well-hidden explosive charge in the saddle where my butt is currently sitting?"

I think I've gotten his attention. "I also got enough fuel and supplies smuggled aboard to get me to where I'm going . . . and where I'm going, Colonel, there's eventually going to be dirt under my feet and a sky over my head."

"You can't do this," the Colonel says. "I know you, I picked you, I trained you. Amy, you can't do this."

I check my instrumentation again. Everything's in the zone. Just for the hell of it, I switch on my HUD again, to see what happens. It flickers into life.

"Colonel," I say, stretching out my words. "You know *nothing* about me. My full name is Amy Thunder Smith. My ancestors killed Custer and his troops. One of their grandsons fought with the Marines at Belleau Woods in 1917. Another ancestor was in the first wave at Omaha Beach. My great-grandfather was an Air Force pilot and a guest of the North Vietnamese people for seven years. My grandfather was in the Thunder Run to Baghdad. And my dad and mom . . . they both fought and died ten years back on the March on Topeka."

The HUD in my helmet seems to stabilize. I go on. "Like I said, you don't know me at all. And you should have thought of that before you killed my family members and kidnapped me. My great-grandfather, the Air Force pilot? Like me, he spent years at a place called Hilton. He never broke . . . and his blood is in me."

"We'll hunt you down, Amy," the Colonel says slowly, with menace. "The Company has resources you cannot even imagine. No matter where you go, we'll find you."

I check my HUD one more time. It's no longer flickering. My, this is turning into a *good* day. I also check the time. Bingo.

"Maybe so, Leslie," I say, stretching out the syllables of his taboo first name. "But the Company's gonna be kinda busy in about sixty seconds. Check out the Hilton's anticollision radar and maneuvering jets. They've all gone off line, Leslie."

I'm sure I hear the colonel stammer in surprise and anger, and I speak quickly, wanting to get one more last thing in.

"And just to add to the fun, Leslie, you've got three salvaged satellites, on the move, heading straight for you. This is Amy Thunder Smith, signing off."

I spare one more glance at the Earth again, seeing nothing but clouds. But Oklahoma and South Dakota and Kansas are underneath those swirls of white and gray down there. Home is down there.

Home.