

Dark Matters

By Jeremy Gadberry

Dark Matters
Copyright 2010
Jeremy Gadberry
All rights reserved
Printed online publication at
daileyswanpublishing.com

Written by Jeremy Gadberry

Published by Dailey Swan Publishing, Inc

No part of this book may be copied or duplicated without the written prior permission of the author or the publisher. Small excerpts may be taken for review purposes with proper credit given.

Dailey Swan Publishing, Inc
2644 Appian Way #101
Pinole Ca 94564
www.daileyswanpublishing.com

November, 2098

Twenty-three years, Alexander thought, twenty-three years of unpaid overtime, missed vacations, and nights like this, And for what? A two-bedroom apartment downtown and a forty-one year old Chevy that would have been illegal if he wasn't a cop. No family, no real friends, and he was only halfway to retirement. Maybe it was for the best. He wasn't the family type. He liked his freedom. Sometimes it would have been nice, though, to get a little recognition. There wasn't anyone else on the force with his dedication. But was it really dedication or was it just that he didn't have anything better to do? He smiled grimly at the answer.

Alexander glanced at his watch. It was almost midnight. His shift was supposed to end at eight. Nothing unusual there. He gazed out the window of his '57 Chevy pod. The landing lights on the roof of the Madison Parking Structure were barely visible in the downpour. The faint green beacons blinked against the fog, outlining the section of rubberized blacktop designated for landings. His pod circled silently, waiting for clearance. The building's computer must have been confused by the rain. There wasn't anyone else flying within a mile. He should have been cleared before he even got there.

The roof was a lake, but it was nothing the pod couldn't handle. It was designed to fly in any weather, and land on almost any terrain. It could make thousands of adjustments per second, guaranteeing an always comfortable landing. Alexander had hardly even touched the controls in years, except to negotiate the occasional uncommon destination. Even that would have been unnecessary in a more modern vehicle, but Alexander liked the pod he had. He liked the retro-styling and the comfort of familiarity. He also liked the fact that it was cheap. He owned it outright. It was better to spend a few credits on maintenance here and there than it was to have a weekly payment on a new

pod. Getting by on a detective's pay was hard enough without adding another bill.

As the craft settled on the roof, a guard appeared next to the landing pad. The LED lights inside his umbrella cast a white glow on his face, and the light sparkled against the raindrops on his parka. He waited as the door lifted vertically and the exit steps slid down to the ground, then he leaned in. "Mr. Steele?" Alexander realized that the man was in fact a city cop. Sergeant Becker, it said on his badge. Alexander held out his left hand, and the sergeant scanned it. He felt a slight warming in his palm as the nanochip responded to radio waves, confirming his identity. "Thank you, sir. Please follow me."

They waded across the lot and entered the tenth-story crosswalk. Alexander cringed as he heard his antique vehicle maneuver itself into the parking structure behind him. It was a convenient luxury, the fact that pods could park themselves, but there was a problem with it. Alexander's pod no longer responded to the controls in his wristwatch. When he was ready to leave, he'd have to walk through every level of the parking garage to find the damned thing.

The clear acrylic dome over the crosswalk allowed him a good look at the storm pounding on the city. The streets were rivers, reflecting broken images of the skyscrapers around them. A handful of unfortunate pedestrians who couldn't afford their own pods were trolling up and down the street with umbrellas and shopping bags in hand. They were pools of light floating across the surface of a broken mirror. Alexander suddenly felt grateful for his meager lifestyle. At least he had a job and a few credits to spend. He had an old pod to get him around the city, and an apartment to keep the rain off his head. Some people didn't even have that.

At the end of the crosswalk, they took the elevator down

to street level. As they stepped out, Alexander saw the Church of Eternal Triumph looming before him. It was an inspiring piece of architecture based on a Gothic cathedral from the early 1100's. Candlelight flickered behind stained glass, setting a stark contrast to the neon and light-emitting-diodes that surrounded him. "This way, sir," said Sergeant Becker. "The body is near the altar."

Becker opened the door and Alexander followed him into the cathedral. It was every bit as impressive on the inside. The faith's patrons numbered in the millions, and they were generous with their donations. Chandeliers suspended by brass chains from four-story arched ceilings cast a luminous glow about the place. Stone walls were all but concealed by silken tapestries and gilded paintings of the Virgin and the Christ. Hand carved stone statues lined the pews.

Then, he saw the body. The pool of blood, now dark and sticky, was vivid against the white marble floors. The man lay face down, his body a shadow in the flickering light. There was no sign of a struggle, just a body lying there in front of the altar. Alexander pulled a flashlight from his pocket, and stepped closer.

"His name was Peter Brown," Becker said. He handed over the man's wallet, and Alexander shuffled through it. He found nothing useful, of course. Becker and ten other people had probably already been through it, along with anything else that resembled evidence. Alexander examined the ID card. Peter Brown was a scientist, a founding member of the Space Exploration Program. He was retired now... *had been* retired, before his unfortunate demise. He was seventy years old and single. His listed address was on Telegraph Hill. "Have you contacted anyone yet?"

"We informed his next of kin," Becker said. "A daughter up in Seattle. That's it."

Alexander took a cautious step into the blood, and knelt

down to examine the victim closer. The back of his head was bashed in. Bits of bone and congealed blood were scattered across his back. A chunk of skull was missing entirely, leaving part of his brain exposed. He had been hit hard, repeatedly, and Mr. Brown had been terrified when he died. His eyes were wide, his face frozen in a grimace.

Alexander scanned the area, hoping for a strand of hair or piece of fiber, but there was nothing. Even the man's nails were clean. "The murder weapon?" he asked.

"Downtown," said Becker. "No prints. It was a candle holder, brass or something. Maybe gold."

Sometimes it seemed like they didn't want him to solve these crimes. After ten or twelve rookies stomped across the scene, they scooped up the only piece of real evidence and took it to the lab. By the time he got there, he might as well have been looking at a holoscan. What was he supposed to do, read the guy's palms? Alexander grunted, and started back towards the exit, his bloody soles squeaking against the marble as he walked.

"Is that it?" said Becker. "You ain't gonna do anything else?"

"No."

It was almost one A.M. when Alexander got back to the office. He manually parked the pod near the entrance on the roof, so it wouldn't take off on him again. It had taken twenty minutes to find it at the church. Fortunately, it was late enough now that no one would give him a hard time about his illegal parking. The night shift was a skeleton crew and they all worked downstairs. Pencil pushing detectives got offices on the roof. It was one of the few perks his seniority had earned. Alexander waved his hand over the scanner, and the doors unlocked and opened. Shelley, the Android receptionist, powered up as the lights came on. "Good

Evening, Alexander. You're here quite late. Business or pleasure?"

"I'll take some of each," Alexander joked. Once, such jokes would have been lawsuit fodder, but with the invention of androids, they were back in style. Everyone flirted with droids. After all, they may not have been human but they looked human. In fact, most of them looked better than human. It was like the world of customer service had been taken over by supermodels. Alexander knew that some people even had sex with them, but he'd never been that lonely. Even when flirting with her, he couldn't forget that Shelley was just a robot filled with hydraulic cylinders and nanochips. Nothing sexy about that.

"Whiskey and cola?" she said with a wink.

"Thanks, doll."

Alexander settled down at his desk and placed his hand on the scanner. The computer fired up. It was damn near impossible to do anything without using that ID chip. In the last couple of decades, hospitals had begun inserting them into children at birth. It was ironic that they were so ubiquitous because the technology really wasn't that reliable. Alexander personally knew five people in the bay area alone who could reproduce an identity chip and replace it, or even create an entirely new identity. And they could do it in about two hours. It took two days to replicate a fingerprint with living tissue, two weeks with a retina, but for some reason the Feds decided chips were better than fingerprints and eyeballs. Alexander didn't know what was worse... the lack of logic in their decision or the eager manner in which the public accepted it. But what did he know? He was just a cop.

He started by running a search on Peter Brown. There was plenty to read. Newspaper and magazine articles, press releases... the man had earned more than his share of awards. After designing the first light-speed satellite, he'd figured out how to apply the technology to manned probes. (Of course they were

technically *near-light* speed. Humans would never be able to pass that barrier.) Without Brown's work, mankind never would have made it to Mars and back, much less started the colonization. He had also engineered several breakthroughs in planetary engineering. That was the stuff that turned dead planets into inhabitable ones. The process started with nuclear bombs, which warmed the atmosphere and melted the ice. Then a process known as x-fusion altered the atomic structure of toxic elements, reducing them to oxygen, carbon dioxide, and other building blocks necessary to life. As weather patterns conformed, radiation-depleting bacteria were introduced, followed by batches of life-enriching organisms and nutrient boosters. With the foundations of life in place, flora and fauna were gradually introduced over a period of two or three decades. So far there were three planets at stage three. The first was expected to have animals introduced by the year 2100.

Brown's great successes were tempered with a few failures. His one hundred-billion credit wormhole generator was a useless pile of titanium and ion accelerators that now hovered in space somewhere near the dark side of the moon. And his first try at gene-perfecting nanobots had cost ten people their lives. That was the low point of his career. He'd almost gone into retirement then, except that the President herself had asked him to continue his work.

As interesting as it all was, none of that was really helpful. Alexander didn't need to know what Brown had done in the past. He needed to know what Brown had been doing tonight. He shut down the computer and gave Shelley a wink on his way out. A few minutes later he was back in the air, speeding over the arches of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was then that he realized someone was following him.

He didn't even consciously notice at first. Alexander was

accustomed to the late hours that came with his job, and on most nights he found himself practically alone on his trips across the city. The few pods he passed this late were usually freighters, or the odd teenager who was probably up to no good. The pod that was following him kept a safe distance, about two miles, but he was sure it had been there since he'd left the office. When he realized it was there, he spun his seat around and touched the control panel. It responded instantly.

“Good evening, Alexander. Where would you like to go today?”

“There’s a pod following me,” he said. “Scan it.”

It took a few seconds for the computer to reply. “2095 Mercedes,” it said. “Color black, ID number 676J4321. Registered owner Jenny Cleveland. Would you like her address?”

“No. The pod’s not stolen?”

“Negative. There have been no reports filed against this vehicle since its creation in Hong Kong on June 12, 2095. If you like...”

Alexander tapped the control panel and shut off the computer interface. Whoever had thought it was a good idea to give voices to computers needed to be slapped. And then tazered. He set a course to land on the bridge and ignored the computer’s warning that the maneuver was illegal. As his pod set down, Alexander watched his pursuer anxiously. The vehicle left its flight course and followed him, but then at the last moment, turned aside instead of landing. It rocketed east across the bay and disappeared over Alcatraz. It was going well over the speed limit. That meant the car had been modified. Naturally, that meant the ID was also a forgery. He didn’t bother calling it in.

Alexander reprogrammed his destination into the control panel, forcing the pod to take the asphalt streets. This was illegal since roads were now designated for pedestrian traffic only, but

Alexander had the credentials to make his pod go anywhere he wanted it to. He was a cop. He suspected that the black Mercedes probably could have followed, and that irked him.

It was nearly one A.M. when Alexander arrived at Peter Brown's condo overlooking the bay. It was nice enough, but not what Alexander had expected. A man like Peter Brown must have had half a billion credits. Why would he live in a condo? Then again, why would he live in the city at all? Most people would retire to the wine country up north if they could. Alexander couldn't help but wonder if that meant that Peter had still been working. He placed his hand in front of the door scanner and then reached for the handle. Nothing happened.

Alexander stood back for a moment, staring curiously at the door. When was the last time a door hadn't opened for him? Police academy, 2075. That was the year he'd graduated and joined the force. Since then, he'd had access to almost every door in the state of Northern California. It stumped him, and set off alarms inside his head. A man like Peter Brown would be able to modify a door scanner, of course, even to disconnect it from the Network, but what would be his motivation? Who was Peter trying to keep out? And what other lengths had he taken to keep them out? It suddenly occurred to Alexander that there could be a bomb on the other side. He wasn't ready to push his luck. He took a few steps down the catwalk, and then used his flashlight to break a window.

The condo was a mess. Books and papers covered every bare surface, and lay in stacks on the floor three feet high. He had to wade through them like snowdrifts. Peter's computer was in the living room, sitting on an industrial-sized desk, and it too, was buried in paperwork. Alexander shouldn't have been surprised to see that all of Peter's notes were written in Chinese. He also shouldn't have been surprised to find that Peter's computer didn't

respond when he placed his hand on the scanner.

After a quick search revealed nothing of value, Alexander scooped up a couple armloads of Peter's files and the note-book sized computer case and took them to the pod. His computer at the office would be able to interpret the papers, but he had to stop by the lab to drop off Peter's computer. Alexander wasn't going to risk opening the case and having a booby trap erase the memory.

Two hours later, Alexander had a lead. Actually, he had two. The first was a name that appeared on several of Peter's documents. Gravy Jones. For real. The guy was a Berkeley grad with degrees in physics and astronom and was obviously the latest in several generations of hippies. Alexander's second lead was a title. Dark Science. What it meant, he had no idea, but he knew that it was something Peter had been working on with Gravy. And he had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with Peter's death. Perhaps the two of them had come up with some new invention that was going to take the world by storm. Perhaps Gravy wanted to keep it to himself. It was pretty thin, the Gravy theory, but it was all he had for the moment. Gravy was his only suspect.

According to the database, Gravy didn't have a home. However, he did send a weekly stipend to the owner of a warehouse in the Marina District. That seemed like a good place to start. On the way there Alexander got a call from the lab. It was the night technician, George Valenzuela. "What have you got?"

"Not much. Unfortunately there was an algorithm hidden in the boot sector that started a deep format as soon as I powered up the system. But I did manage to stop it about halfway through."

"Okay, I'll pretend I understand that. So what have you got?"

George chuckled. “Well, most of this stuff is pretty technical. It’s all about matter and density, and something about electromagnetism. There’s a lot of stuff in here that’s not supposed to be possible.”

“Sounds about right. This guy did a lot of that stuff.”

“I know, he was a genius. Did you know he won a Nobel? Anyway, to sum it all up, it seems to be about dark matter. It’s an old scientific theory that was pretty much disproved about thirty years ago. I guess your scientist still believed in it. Looks like he had a lot of research and calculations stored on his computer, but most of it has been destroyed.”

“Why would he do that? Why would he set all these booby traps?”

“You got me. You’re the detective.”

“Okay,” said Alexander, “you said this theory was *pretty much* disproved. Care to elaborate?”

“Well, it’s not too hard to disprove a theory that was always unpopular. In the scientific community there’s a tendency to kind of flock around popular ideas and push unpopular ones aside. So when somebody found a flaw in the calculations, they decided the theory didn’t work anymore. They replaced it with the theory of gravitational anomaly.”

“So you think there’s something to this dark matter theory? You think that’s what he was working on?”

Ricardo shook his head. “How the hell do I know? I’m a tech, not a scientist.”

“Thanks.”

Alexander disconnected the call and searched the computer database for the dark matter theory. After sorting through the articles, he found a description that was more or less in layman’s terms. Dark matter was devised as an explanation for unusual stellar activity. Apparently, sometimes things in space

moved in ways that they weren't supposed to, as if they were acted upon by gravitational fields that weren't supposed to be there. According to the theory, there were large amounts of matter in the universe that were unobservable through current technology. However, in large enough amounts, this invisible *dark matter* could actually have an observable effect on regular matter. Like making a planet wobble, or distorting its orbit. That seemed reasonable enough. It certainly didn't sound like anything that would get a person killed. Alexander decided he would need to research the subject later. Now, he was at the marina.

The district was a sea of fog and Alexander couldn't see two yards. In another hour, the entire city would be covered. The pod settled down in front of a long concrete warehouse and then idled up to a parking spot. There were two other pods in the lot. One was an abandoned and stripped vehicle with a homeless person sleeping in the back seat; the other was a brand new Cinder sports pod. Alexander shook his head. Pods like that were twice as expensive as a regular pod, and yet had the same speed limiters. Not to mention the fact that they only had enough room for two occupants, and no luggage. Apparently this Gravy character wasn't doing too bad financially, but he didn't seem to be all that smart.

The front wall of the warehouse was lined with windows at roof level and Alexander headed for the section with the lights on. He scanned his palm at the door, and for the second time that night, nothing happened. Alexander clenched his jaw and knocked. He heard shuffling inside, and the sound of drawers being slammed shut. Gravy was trying to hide something. A moment later, the door opened and Gravy appeared. He was a middle-aged man with balding, gray hair, but that didn't stop him from growing it long. The greasy strands were swept straight back, and hung halfway down his back. He was dressed in a polo shirt and khakis, and wore a pair of new white loafers. He was the epitome

of business casual. Alexander pushed past him, and Gravy cried out in protest. “Dude you can’t just barge in here! Who the hell are you?”

The interior of the warehouse looked a lot like Peter Brown’s condo. There were several desks and tables scattered around the area, all littered with papers and books, mostly in Chinese. There was a long chalkboard on the wall that was covered with obscure mathematical equations. A few computers hummed on the desks, broadcasting holograms of their manufacturer’s logos.

“I’m a cop,” Alexander said impatiently. “And I’m getting tired of doors that don’t open. Did you know you can do five years for that?”

Gravy’s attitude changed abruptly. Suddenly he looked very worried. “Sorry, man, I didn’t realize you were the law. What’s going on? Is there some kind of trouble?”

“No trouble just yet,” said Alexander. “I just have a few questions, and I’m guessing you’re the man who can answer them.”

“Okay.”

“Tell me about Dark Science.”

Gravy’s knees went wobbly. He leaned back against a desk and ran a hand over his greasy hair. “Who told you about that?”

“Peter Brown.”

Gravy thought that over. “I guess you’re okay then. Peter wouldn’t tell you if you were one of them. What do you know about dark matter?”

“I’ve done a little reading.”

“Okay, here’s the deal. Dark matter is real, and then some. Turns out that the government has known about it all this years, but they kept a lid on it. They were afraid of the repercussions.”

“What repercussions?”

“Think about it, man! There’s a whole world of stuff out

there, a whole new dimension. Entire worlds that we never even realized were right next to us! Think what that does to our society. Think about our financial systems, our real estate markets... think about religion!”

“Wait a minute... are you saying that there is actually life made up of dark matter?”

“There ya go, bro! Now you get it. Plants, animals, people.... monsters, man! There are monsters out there....” Gravy was cut short by the sound of a click. They both spun towards the door, and Alexander drew his laser pistol. There was no one there. “Somebody followed you!” Gravy shouted. He ran over to one of the desks and started jamming papers and memory cards into a satchel. “You freakin’ idiot, they’re gonna kill us!”

“They?” Alexander echoed. He walked up to the door and peered out into the empty lot. “Who are *they*? You mean the people who killed Peter?”

Gravy stopped. “Peter’s dead? Oh shit, man! You didn’t say that!” He glanced wildly around the room. “We gotta get outta here, man!”

Alexander heard another clicking sound, coming from over his head. He stepped back and glanced up towards the windows. “Get down!” He fired a laser blast as an arachnid-shaped droid burst through the window. Shattered glass rained down on him. Alexander stepped back, shielding his head with his arms. When he was safe, he lowered his arms and saw the spider halfway down the wall. He squeezed off a few more shots. All missed. Where in the hell had the thing come from? It wasn’t made by a hacker, he knew that for sure. He had seen one before. They were military machines. They were assassins.

The droid had eight legs and its body was about sixteen inches across. An array of sophisticated sensors allowed it to differentiate living matter from obstacles, and to locate a specific

target. It had a laser barrel sticking out of its body. It scurried across the wall, taking rapid shots in Gravy's direction. He crawled under one of the desks and continued jamming papers into that satchel as if they could save him.

Alexander knew the thin sheet metal of the desk wasn't enough to stop a direct laser blast. If the droid was equipped with infravision, Gravy was going to die. Alexander did the only the he could. He kept shooting. Unfortunately, the spider was a hard target. It scurried across the wall impossibly fast, and it moved erratically, as if intentionally making it hard to draw a bead. Alexander grunted and hit a switch on the pistol grip, activating his laser sight. Generally speaking, the laser was considered a rookie's tool, because it could home in on a moving target. Alexander was reluctant to use it even at a time like this. He'd never realized he'd become so proud in his old age.

He knocked off a leg with the next shot. The one after that was a dead hit. The droid lost its footing, and fell to the floor. It landed upside down, with its legs kicking in the air, and a wisp of smoke came out of the laser barrel. Then a light on its belly started beeping. "Bomb!" Alexander shouted. "Get out of here!"

They crashed through the door in unison. As they dove under Gravy's pod the building exploded behind them. Chunks of concrete rained down, and fire shot out of the warehouse roof. Thick black smoke churned into the sky. "I hope the anti-grav holds," Alexander said, staring up at the smooth bottom of the pod. The Cinder may have been a small sports pod, but it still weighed over two thousand pounds. The last thing Alexander wanted was a ton of aluminum and Kevlar crashing down on him.

"It'll hold," Gravy said. "You couldn't break the gravity unit if you tried."

"You're coming with me," Alexander said. "You'll be safe

at my office.”

“Sure, whatever you say.” They rolled out from under the pod, and made a run for Alexander’s Chevy. As they passed the abandoned pod, the homeless man stuck his head out and said, “You guys feel an earthquake?”

“No,” Alexander said flatly.

Once they were in the air, Alexander started running scans. His sensors didn’t pick up any unusual activity. There were no pedestrians in the area, except for the homeless man, and there were no irregular vehicles. Whoever programmed the droid must have dropped it off and left.

“Proceeding to precinct 23,” said the pod. Alexander furrowed his eyebrows.

“I didn’t give that instruction.”

“Our orders are to report to precinct 23,” the vehicle said.

“Oh shit,” said Gravy. “They know about you. They’re gonna arrest you and then kill you! They’re gonna kill us both!”

Alexander rolled his eyes. “They don’t do that,” he said. “It’s just some misunderstanding.” He hit a few buttons on the control panel. “They’ve taken control of the pod. All we can do is wait.”

Gravy shook his head wildly. “No way, man! I’m not going with you. You don’t understand, they’re everywhere. They’re gonna kill us!”

“Would you shut up?” Alexander shouted. He called the precinct. A female droid directed his call, ironically, to Sergeant Becker. “Evening, Sergeant,” Alexander said as Becker’s hologram appeared on the dash. “Is there some sort of problem?”

“Not anymore,” said Becker. “Just come in without a fight so we can end this. We don’t want any more deaths on your hands.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about, Mr. Steele. Peter

Brown, Gravy Jones. We're not going to let you kill anyone else."

"That's crazy! You were there when I saw Peter Brown. He was dead four hours before I got there! And Gravy is right here!"

"I see," said Becker. "Just relax, we'll get this all cleared up when you get here." Alexander swallowed hard as he disconnected the call.

"See, I told ya!" said Gravy. "They're going to kill us!"

Alexander looked him over as he tried to sort it out. He'd walked right into a setup, and Becker was involved. There had to be more of them. Quite a few more. There'd been a dozen cops at the church. They all had to be involved. Alexander could hardly believe he'd stumbled into a conspiracy of that magnitude. It defied logic. He'd worked for the department for more than twenty years. *Twenty-three years*, he thought.

"I told you, they're everywhere," Gravy said as if reading his thoughts. "There's been a whole revolution, and nobody even saw it happening."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The shadow-world man! They're taking over! They've been gradually taking control since the nineteen-hundreds. They've got spies and plants *everywhere*. Governments, corporations, they run it all. It's over man, we're gonna die."

"Do you know how to say anything else? Look, remember how you disconnected your door lock from the Network? Can you do that with my pod?"

Gravy's eyes clicked back and forth as his mind raced. "Maybe... maybe, but I need a soldering iron. Wait, give me your laser!" Alexander handed it over, and Gravy started pulling panels off the wall. "The commands are written into soft memory. The bacteria that hold the bios programming can be bypassed... but you'll have to fly manually. Can you do that?"

“I’m not an idiot.”

Gravy pulled the battery pack out of the laser pistol and arced it across a couple wires. There was a spark, and the pod jerked. Alexander leapt to the controls as the pod started to spin. “I don’t have controls!” he shouted.

“Hang on, I almost got it!” Gravy was pulling wires out of the wall now, and Alexander muttered a prayer. The pod hovered at altitude, but it was spinning quickly out of control, like a top in the wind.

“They’re not gonna have to kill us,” Alexander shouted. “You’re gonna do it first!” The G-forces were building fast. He closed his eyes and gripped the armrests of his seat.

“Okay, try it now.”

Alexander touched the panel again, and the controls came to life. He breathed a sigh of relief as the vehicle responded to his commands. The spinning slowed, and within seconds he had the vehicle back under control. He set a course to the north, across the bay. “You’re sure they can’t get control again?”

“Hell, no. As far as they’re concerned, we just crashed. This pod no longer has an ID. Fortunately, it’s old enough that I could separate it from the Network without damaging the computer. If we’d been flying in my pod, it’d be all over. They fixed that workaround a few generations ago.”

“What about radar? Can they track us?”

“The laser canopy is at a thousand feet, and radar can track you as low as five hundred. They shouldn’t be tracking us yet, but stay low. And go fast.”

Alexander didn’t need to be told twice. He gunned it, pushing the vehicle to maximum power. Within a minute they were doing three hundred miles per hour. “Okay, he said. Now where do we go?”

“I need to get somewhere that these files will be safe.”

“How about if we upload them?”

“To the Network? Are you crazy? They’d delete the files and find us in minutes.”

“You’re telling me they know everything that happens on the Net? I thought that was the best way to get information out.”

Gravy sighed. “Man, I have been trying to tell you that. The shadow-people control everything. They’ve bought off, recruited, or cloned just about everyone in a position of power. Corporations, police departments, government agencies. They practically run the world already. They’re wired into everything. And the real bad news... There’s a lot more of them than there are of us.”

“That’s crazy. Why would they do that? Why would they want to control us like that?”

“It’s the oldest game in history, bro. What happens when a country gets powerful? It takes more land, more resources. It secures its power by increasing holdings and by decreasing the powers of potential enemies. What happened when Europeans discovered the Americas?”

“Okay, I get it. Its all about money and power...”

“Isn’t everything?”

Alexander saw a glint of light in the corner of his eye and he glanced around just as a heat seeking missile plowed into his pod. He had a fraction of a second to see the military ion pulse-jet pull back and disappear in the fog, and to hear Gravy’s scream as the explosion tore their bodies apart. Then, in an instant, there was nothing. Charred bits of Kevlar and melted aluminum rained down over a vineyard somewhere in Marin County, and a cloud of smoke drifted into the fog.

William Busby had insomnia again. He’d had it since the war, but it seemed to be worse now that he was getting older. He

supposed they all had problems like that, but he'd never really talked about it with his fellow veterans. They liked to go out for drinks once or twice a month, and to relive the good old days. They talked about how much they hated their wives and how much they hated the government, but they never talked about their real problems.

They all hated China, which had taken control of the American financial system in '40's, and they hated the Network for the way it controlled their lives and monitored everything they did. Sometimes they toyed with the idea of waging a small war of their own, bringing a little sanity back to the world. They may have been in their sixties, but they could still do a lot of damage. William was good with explosives and Andrew was a technical wizard. He could do anything with computers. He'd removed their palm ID's once, but then put them back in when they weren't able to buy groceries. Their wives had been furious. William's wife said it was the dumbest thing he'd ever done. Then he reminded her about the moonshine incident.

The other guys could do stuff, too. William was pretty sure, if they were careful, they could change the course of history. They could take down the Network, or at least a big chunk of it. But all that was fantasy. He'd given up the illusion of being a hero a long time ago. Now he was focused on securing his finances so that his grandchildren could keep the farm. He had a mortgage to pay down and he wanted to start savings accounts so that the kids could get into college. Those were the important things in life. He only had fifteen years until retirement, so it was time to start getting serious about those things.

William had been watching the news while he sat up late with insomnia. He had seen the report about the police detective gone homicidal. It was depressing, so he went for a walk. He enjoyed walking in the early morning hours, when it was always

foggy and quiet. Sometimes he'd walk all the way into town and back without seeing a single pod. It was five miles total, and by the time he got back, he'd be ready for bed. Only this time, something happened.

William heard the pod coming before he saw it. The vehicle plowed across the sky, with the engines wound so tight they were screaming. It was unusually close to the ground, so close that its belly was scraping tree branches. And then he saw the pulse-jet drop out of the clouds a half mile away, and fire a missile. It all happened so fast, that William couldn't believe what he was seeing. Then the explosion came and the remains of the pod started landing on his grapes. He blinked, trying to clear the brilliant white flash that was burned into his retinas. The night around him was still and silent as if nothing had happened.

It didn't take long for William to find the satchel. It was an old-fashioned thing, made from leather. He didn't even know it was still possible to get things made from leather. The killing of animals had been banned for nearly three decades. When he opened it up, William recognized the materials within as items of some importance. His Chinese was rusty, so he could only make out a few words here and there, but it didn't take long for him to realize he was in trouble. He'd just seen a pod shout out of the sky by a military aircraft. It didn't take a genius to realize it had something to do with all the notebooks and memory cards in that satchel.

He glanced around, making sure that he was still alone. He saw only fog and grapevines. The explosion had been bright, but not terribly loud. If it woke anyone, they probably thought it was thunder. William gathered up the satchel and then took a tree branch and removed his tracks from the dirt. By the time the government agents arrived, there'd be no sign that he'd been there.

When he got home, William cleaned the dirt out of his

boots, and then hid the satchel under the loose floorboard in the pantry. If anybody came to question him, he could assure them that he'd heard some thunder, but that was it. He'd rolled over and gone back to sleep. And would they care for a cup of java?

William crawled under the blankets and snuggled up with his wife of thirty years, his mind racing with the possibilities. He had some reading to do. And he had some calls to make... No, it wouldn't be safe to call the guys. He'd wait until Friday, when they went out for drinks. Then he'd tell them. Of course, the stuff in that satchel might be all it would take to push them over the edge. They'd been looking for a reason to blow things up for years. He couldn't decide if that was a bad thing or not. The real trick was going to be keeping their wives from finding out.

The End.