

Titanium Mike Saves the Day

by David D. Levine

A trip to David Levine's Website (www.spiritone.com/~dlevine/sf/) reveals that in the three years since we last published his work, he has published stories in Asimov's, Albedo One, Realms of Fantasy and a variety of anthologies. One of those stories, "Tk'Tk'Tk'," won a 2006 Hugo Award. His latest tale is a charming look at a legend.

V. An emergency radiation shelter near the asteroid Chiron, December 2144

* * * *

"Gramma, I'm scared."

The poor girl wasn't just scared, she was terrified. Behind a faceplate fogged with rapid breaths, her skin was pale and clammy and her sapphire-blue eyes twitched like small frightened animals.

Helen wasn't exactly calm herself. "Don't fret, Sophie," she said, but her own voice trembled. She muted her helmet mike and took a deep breath before continuing. "We'll be safe here." For a while, anyway, she added silently.

In all Helen Buchanan's seventy-eight years she'd never seen a solar flare so strong come on so fast. They'd had barely enough warning to reach this abandoned mining module before a storm of protons moving at near-light-speed began to scour this sector of the Belt. And her lightweight two-seater jump bug offered almost no shielding against the radiation, so they were trapped here until the storm passed. Which might be hours, or days, or weeks.

"Now, you just try to keep calm," she told Sophie, "while I see what we have in the way of supplies." But the module's cupboards contained only dust. Its oxy tanks were still welded to the wall, but when she put her helmet against each one and tapped it with her hand light, all she heard was the dim *tink* of metal in vacuum.

That wasn't good. Not good at all.

She took another calming breath, then checked the oxy meter on her wrist: twenty-one hours at the current rate of consumption. She tweaked the mixture a little leaner; it might give her headaches, but that beat the alternative. "All right now, sugar, let me check your tanks." Helen turned Sophie around, stopping the rotation with a practiced tap on the shoulder as she bent to peer at the girl's tank-mounted meter. And gasped.

Only six hours left.

"W-what's wrong, Gramma?"

She considered her response while thinning Sophie's mix. Panic would drive

the child's oxy consumption up, but she'd know if she was being lied to. She turned Sophie to face her and looked her straight in the eye. "Well, kiddo, we're a little light on the oxy. Now, most flares only last a few hours, but this one's a real whopper—no telling how long it'll go on." She reached behind herself and began unshipping her #3 tank. "So I'm going to give you some of mine. Hold still."

The emergency connector hose was too short, the light was giving out, and Helen hadn't done this kind of detail work with gloves on in years. But eventually she got everything connected together and bungeed the extra tank to the child's pack.

Sophie's meter now read ten hours.

Only four hours more? That tank would have kept Helen going for seven! The poor frightened child was gulping down the oxy like nobody's business.

This had to stop.

Standard practice was to use sleeping pills, but Sophie's bubblegum-pink suit lacked such grown-up supplies. She'd have to find another way.

Helen thought back to her days raising Sophie's mother, but no situation this worrisome had ever come up then. Then she thought back a little further....

And she had just the thing.

"Sweetie, do you know about Titanium Mike?"

Sophie didn't reply, just shook her head slowly inside her helmet.

"Well then, looks like I need to fill in a few holes in your education." She drew Sophie to herself, chestplate against chestplate, so the girl could feel her voice in her bones, not just hear it filtered through radio. "Titanium Mike is ... well, he's more a force of nature than a man, really. They say his father was Gravity and his mother was Vacuum."

"Is he going to come and help us?"

Helen considered the question for a moment. "Well, he might—you never can tell where old Mike might show up. When Cassandra Station was coming apart, he stuck the two halves back together with spit. And he's the one who stopped Ceres from spinning."

"Ceres doesn't spin. Everyone knows that."

"Not anymore! But back in the old days she rolled like a stuck gyro and it wasn't safe to get near. Mike lassoed her with a bungee cord and straightened her out."

Sophie looked mighty dubious at that. But dubious didn't use nearly as much

oxy as panicked.

“No, really, it’s true. If you don’t believe me, you can ask Mike yourself the next time you see him. He’s done all sorts of things. Why, when he was just a kid, he put rockets in his pockets and scrubbers in his rubbers and walked all the way around the Sun just to see where he’d come from.”

At that, Sophie actually managed a weak little smile.

Helen smiled back at her. As she warmed to her subject, she found her own mood changing—the stories took her back to the early days of the Aurora Mining Company, when a certain amount of privation and danger was just a part of the job.

“Mike was born on Earth, but he never fit in there. He was a big man and always kept hitting his head on things, or tripping over his own big feet. One day he said to himself ‘Why can’t I just float around and avoid all this bother?’ So he decided to go to space, where he could do just that.

“But he realized he’d need something to breathe when he got there, so he took an old pickle jar, stuck some seaweed on the bottom, and screwed it onto the neck of his suit, and that was the beginning of hydroponics. Then he found some old thrusters that were lying around, but he was too big for just one thruster to lift so he stacked up a few of them on top of each other, and that was the beginning of the multi-stage lifter.

“When he got to space all the people were just drifting around with nothing to do. So he took some old foil food wrappers and spun them together into a big shiny dish to concentrate the sunlight, and then he went down to Luna and started throwing rocks into the hot spot, and that was the beginning of solar smelting.

“Mike took the smelted ore and started making cans and spikes and bubbles and donkeys and all kinds of other things that no one had ever seen before, but they didn’t know how to use them. So Mike started to teach them....”

And so it went, the end of each tale sparking the beginning of the next, and pretty soon Sophie started asking questions, and it wasn’t long before she was contributing her own outlandish details. Then Helen’s voice grew tired and they both slept for a while, and when Sophie woke up she asked for another Mike story.

When the all-clear sounded, somehow it had gotten to be twelve hours later. And Sophie still had more than an hour left in her tank.

* * * *

IV. A mining facility near the asteroid Vesta, October 2088

“Don’t give me that bull!”

Orchekowski brought his massive fist down on the metal table with a resounding blow that knocked a squeeze-bulb of coffee loose from its grip-pad, but

nobody at the table noticed the bulb as it tumbled away—they were all busy shouting at each other.

Javon Carter, floating near the door, snagged the bulb from the air with one long brown hand. He stared at it a moment, then stuck it to the wall beside him with a sigh. The canteen was the largest space they had, and it still wasn't big enough to contain the tension between the two groups of miners—as thick and foul as the air that puffed from the helmet rings of their well-worn suits with every vehement gesture.

“Listen to me!” Orchekowski was yelling over and over. The muscular sapper had enough lung power to overtop the others. “We need to take what we can and get out!”

“No way!” Enriquez shouted back, veins standing out on his forehead. “We've all worked too hard to give up now!”

Orchekowski spread his hands. “Face it—Aurora's over.”

“Aurora is *not* over!” That was Buchanan, a feisty red-headed kid who emphasized her words with a finger in Orchekowski's face. “We've pulled out of worse situations than this.”

The big man ignored the intruding finger. “Maybe,” he said, “but we didn't have an alternative before.” He glared at Buchanan, who stared back, her sapphire-blue eyes defiant. “We'd be insane to pass up this offer.”

Enriquez made a rude noise. “Pennies on the dollar.”

Griswold, the gray-haired accountant, rolled his eyes at that. “It's the best we're going to get!” Orchekowski nodded vigorously as Griswold continued. “Hardcastle is the only other company in a position to exploit our claims. No one else would even touch us!”

A half-dozen voices exploded at that, and Carter shook his head. This argument was going nowhere—running in circles and feeding on itself. If it wasn't settled soon, and decisively, it would tear the group apart.

Carter was just an engineer, but someone had to do something about this situation, and it looked like it had to be him. He thought back to his first job in space, and his favorite boss ... how would Ray Chen have handled it?

“That's exactly why we have to stay independent!” Buchanan shouted over the others, gaining the floor for a moment. “Hardcastle has already bought out every other molybdenum miner in the Belt. If they get us too....”

Griswold waved his hands. “They've just proved they're the only ones who can make moly pay.”

“We can—” began Buchanan, and “Exactly!” screamed Orchekowski, and “Bull!” said Enriquez, and ten other voices were all raised at once...

...and Carter pressed his thumb over the relief port on his airpack and goosed the nitro valve. The escaping gas shrilled into the tumult with a screaming whistle that brought the argument to a sudden halt.

Everyone looked at Carter. ““Scuse me,” he said, with a hand on his stomach as though he’d just burped, and a few people chuckled at that. The rest simply waited for him to speak. His forty years in the Belt had earned him a certain amount of respect.

“I know you’re all kind of upset,” he said at last, “but I was just reminded of a little story that might help to put this situation into perspective. It’s a Titanium Mike story.”

“What the...?” snarled Orchekowski, but several people shushed him. Others just looked baffled.

“For those of you who don’t know him,” Carter said, “Titanium Mike was nothing less than the greatest Belter who ever scratched his helmet on a rock. They say his father was the Sun and his mother was the Moon. And a long time ago, when everything in the System flew about every which way and no one could ever find their way from one place to another, Mike decided he ought to do something about it.”

Carter noticed Griswold nodding thoughtfully—he’d recognized the story. Bingo.

“Mike went to the Sun,” Carter continued, “and said, ‘Old Sol, it sure would be easier on everyone if things had some kind of predictable orbits.’ And the Sun said, ‘You’re right, Mike, and you know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.’ So the Sun puffed and grunted and sent out flares and winds and magnetic fields and jostled all the planets and asteroids into orbit around himself. Mike thanked him kindly, and the Sun was satisfied because now he was in the center of everything.

“But now that everything was going around the Sun, things were crossing each other’s orbits and crashing into each other all the time, and...” Carter paused and gnawed on his lower lip for a bit. “...and you know, I’m having a little trouble remembering what comes next. Griswold, can you help me out here?”

Griswold gave Carter a look that said *you sly old dog, I know exactly what you’re doing*, but what he said was “I do believe I can.”

The gray-haired accountant took a pull from his coffee bulb and said, “Now that all that stuff was going around the Sun, everything was crashing into everything else all the time. So Mike went to Jupiter and said, ‘Old Jove, it sure would be easier on everyone if things didn’t cross each other up like that.’ And Jupiter said, ‘You’re

right, Mike, and you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you.' So Jupiter threw his weight around and tugged and pulled until all the planets and asteroids were orbiting clockwise in the plane of the ecliptic. Mike thanked him kindly, and Jupiter was satisfied because now he didn't have all kinds of planetesimals and things bumping into him.

"But now that everything was spread across a big plane instead of going around in a tight little knot in the middle, it took a lifetime and a half just to walk from Venus to Mars." Then he pulled a fresh bulb of coffee from the dispenser on the table and tossed it to Enriquez. "Enriquez, you know this one, don't you?"

The dark-skinned little pilot caught the bulb. "Yeah," he said as he pulled the tab. "Mike went to Ceres and said, 'Old Cere, it sure would be easier on everyone if there were a quicker way to get from one place to another.' And Ceres said, 'You're right, Mike, and you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you.' So Ceres called all her sisters together, and they hustled and bustled and fiddled and twiddled until there were orbital paths all over the System, with Hohmann transfer ellipses and slingshot maneuvers and all the other things that make the trip go a little faster. Mike thanked her kindly, and Ceres was satisfied because now people would have to visit her and her sisters all the time if they wanted yttrium to keep their fusion drives going and carbos to eat on the trip.

"And Mike looked out on the System ... and realized he'd made a mess of everything. Because now, even though you could be sure where your destination was and which way it was going, it took years to get there even with the best orbital path and a full tank of hydro. But he couldn't go back to his friends and ask them to undo what they'd worked so hard to do at his request." He paused and sipped his coffee, then cocked an eyebrow at Orchekowski. "You know how it ends, don't you?"

Orchekowski just glared back at him.

"C'mon," Buchanan said. "Didn't you grow up on Titanium Mike stories, just like the rest of us?"

"I know you did," said Carter. "I've heard you telling 'em to your kids over the radio."

The big sapper looked at the expectant faces all around him, then let out a sigh. "Oh, all right," he said.

"Mike went to Pluto," he said—and he said it in his best storytelling voice, a voice as big and rough and full of vinegar as Mike himself—"crotchety old Pluto, who was so cold and distant and independent that he didn't exactly orbit the Sun and didn't exactly stay in the plane of the ecliptic and wasn't exactly easy to get to even after everything else had changed, but he always was a hard-headed practical sort and full of good advice. And Mike said to Pluto, 'Old Plute, it sure would be easier on everyone if things were the way they'd been before.'

“And Pluto said, ‘You’re right, Mike, and you know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you ... but I’m just a tired old planet, and this is all I have to offer.’ And he handed Mike a thing that looked like a little shiny pebble. ‘What’s this?’ said Mike. ‘It’s a little thing called Persistence,’ said Pluto.

“So Mike thanked Pluto kindly, and dogged down his helmet and set to work. And ever since then, whenever people have wanted things to be better they’ve had to work them out for themselves. It’s a hard job, but with Persistence all things are possible.”

Several people applauded Orcekowski’s performance, and he made a little bow in the air. Then he told another story, the one about how Mike climbed from LEO to L5 on a cosmic string, which reminded Enriquez of the bawdy one about how Titanium Mike and Satellite Sal made Venus spin backward ... and Carter just floated there in the corner, sipped his coffee, and smiled.

Quite a while later, someone remembered why they’d gathered, and called for a vote. It was nineteen to zero to reject Hardcastle’s offer.

* * * *

III. A rented office at Chaffee Station in Low Earth Orbit, July 2052

“It certainly is an ... interesting proposal.”

Raymond Chen forced himself to smile broadly at that, just as though he hadn’t heard the same reaction from five other venture capitalists this month, and just as though all five of them hadn’t eventually said no. “Glad you like it,” he said, and busied himself shutting down the projector. Orbital diagrams and financial projections faded from the air like unfunded dreams.

Valerie Itsui, principal of Itsui Investments, sat with fingers steepled and a stiff unreadable expression on her face.

“Well...” said Jan, at the same time Kellie said, “Well then...” The twins shared a momentary glance, then Kellie continued, “...why don’t we adjourn to the outer office? I believe lunch is ready.” Ray swallowed; the Griffin sisters almost never stepped on each other’s lines. That they would do so now showed just how nervous they were.

As the twins and Ms. Itsui moved toward the door, the fourth and newest member of the fledgling Asteroid Metals Extraction Corporation touched Raymond’s hand. “Might as well start packing up now,” Javon muttered low. “I was watching her the whole time you were talking and I swear her face never moved once.”

“You just leave her to me,” Ray replied, and clapped Javon on the shoulder. But after Javon turned and followed the other three, Ray pursed his lips and sighed.

Money was getting tight, for the industry as a whole as much as for AMEC.

The nearby Moon and the resource-rich satellites of Saturn and Jupiter had been snapped up years ago, and after the recent series of space development bankruptcies some people were saying the scattered rocks of the Asteroid Belt could never be successfully exploited. But Ray was convinced that the twins' novel refinery technology could make mining the asteroids for molybdenum possible, young Javon's engineering talents could make it practical, and his own money skills could make it profitable. First, though, he had to sell that concept to the people with the money, and so far he'd failed.

What was he doing wrong? The technology would work, he was sure of it. The financials were rock-solid. He'd put every bit of supporting data he could into his presentation. So why weren't the big fish biting?

Ray drummed his fingers on the table. Maybe ... maybe he was using the wrong bait.

Venture capitalists like Valerie Itsui spent their days in meetings like this one, looking at charts full of optimistic projections. What made the difference between the one that caught her attention and the many that didn't?

Not data. Dreams.

He had to make her *believe in the dream*. He had to make her feel the same excitement he felt for AMEC's plan.

The same excitement that had driven him into space development in the first place.

Ray nodded to himself, tucked the folded projector into a pocket, and stepped into the outer office.

He made his selections from the tray of sushi laid out on the reception desk, then sat next to Ms. Itsui. "So," he said, "what made you decide to invest in space development in the first place?"

She wiped her lips with a precisely folded napkin before replying. "Profit, Mr. Chen. There's more upside potential in space than anywhere on Earth, even now."

"It wasn't the money for me," Ray said. The twins looked at each other in surprise. "Oh, sure, I got my MBA, because I didn't have the head for science or the guts for zero-gee construction. But ever since I was a teenager I wanted to go to space." He leaned forward in his chair. "Because of the stories."

They were all looking at him now, giving him their complete attention in a way he'd never managed with any number of rosy financial projections. Ms. Itsui cocked her head in consideration of his words; the others were flat astonished. This was a side of himself he'd never revealed before.

"What stories, Mr. Chen?"

“Tales of exploration and adventure and derring-do, Ms. Itsui. Do you know the name Titanium Mike?”

“I can’t say that I do.”

Ray settled back in his chair. “Well, most folks say Mike is just a myth. But the fact is that he’s been kicking around the System since Branson Station was just a loose mess of bolts and girders. His father was a thruster and his mother was an asteroid, and he’s the one who figured out how to spin a station for gravity without making everyone inside dizzy.”

“I hadn’t been aware of that being a problem.” It wasn’t, of course, but a twinkle of interest had appeared in her eyes.

“Mike’s responsible for a lot of things that people take for granted today. For instance, he’s the one who cleared the Cassini Gap.”

Ms. Itsui set down her chopsticks. “And how did he manage that?”

“Well, it all started one day when Mike got a call from a friend of his on Titan. ‘We’re in a bad way,’ he said. Now Mike wasn’t the kind of guy to just sit around when a friend was in trouble, so he grabbed a pony-can and threw it in the direction of Saturn, then he climbed in real quick before it got away, and it carried him off to Titan as neat as you please.”

Javon was gaping like a trout now, and Kellie was giving Ray an I-hope-you-know-what-you’re-doing look. But Jan got it.

“When he got there,” Ray continued, “his friend said, ‘Thank goodness you’re here, Mike; we’ve got plenty of atmosphere here, but there’s nothing to eat and we’re plum miserable.’ Well, there’s nothing that matters more to an old space-hog like Mike than a good hot meal. He snagged a nickel-iron asteroid that happened to be drifting by, and he took his trusty ore hammer and he pounded it into a skillet—eighteen meters across and with a handle twenty-two meters long. Then he pulled out his hand thruster, which was ten meters wide and pushed a million and three centigees, and headed off to look for something to put in that skillet.

“He looked at Iapetus, but there wasn’t anything there but ice. And he looked at Dione, but there wasn’t anything there but rocks. He looked at every one of Saturn’s moons and moonlets, but there wasn’t anything there to eat at all. So he dug in his heels to kill his orbital velocity, dropped right down to Saturn himself, and took a big bite out of the old man’s atmosphere. But it was cold and smelly, and none too filling besides, so he just spat it out.”

At that Ms. Itsui actually smiled. Ray kept going.

“But there was one more place he hadn’t tried, and that was the rings. Now, in those days people thought Saturn’s rings were nothing but ice and rocks, but Mike

had an idea that might not be the case. So he grabbed the rescue handle on the back of his suit and lifted himself up to the rings. The first ring was nothing but ice; the second one was nothing but rocks. But the third one wasn't ice, or rocks ... it was all made up of carbo-nubs and jerkie-bits and other tasty things. He pulled out his skillet and filled it up, then took it back to Titan and cooked it up over one of the volcanoes there, and the people ate it all up and asked for seconds. So he went back and got another skilletful, and then another and another. Pretty soon that tasty ring was all gone, and the place it used to be is what we call the Cassini Gap. But Mike was always a little sloppy, and while he was scooping all that stuff out he scattered bits and pieces all over the place. So people have been extracting carbohydrates from Saturn's rings ever since."

There was a long pause then, with Ray and Javon and the twins all waiting for Ms. Itsui to speak. "I can see that this means a lot to you, Mr. Chen," she said at last.

"It means a lot to all of us, Ms. Itsui."

She set her plate aside and pulled out her datapad. "I'd like to take a closer look at some of your numbers."

"Of course."

There was still a lot of work to do. But that was the moment that Ray knew she was hooked.

* * * *

II. A corporate cubicle in Cocoa, Florida, April 2041

"Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete."

Tony Ramirez was pruning ideas. His desk was crowded with icons, each one representing an idea he'd invested five minutes or a day or a week on.

None of them were any good. He needed a fresh start.

He paused with his finger on the icon labeled "Embrace Space!" He was still fond of that slogan—the rhythm and rhyme were compelling, and the text treatment the graphic artists had come up with had a lot of snap. But the client thought it was "too pedestrian."

"Delete." The icon dissolved beneath his fingertip in a puff of pixels.

Damn the client, anyway. Damn all clients everywhere.

Tony stood and stretched. The clock in one corner of his desk read four o'clock ... one more hour and it would be the weekend. Maybe he should knock off early, get in a little surfing.

He touched a control on his desk and the window blinds rotated, letting in the

sun and the view. Just a few miles away, across the Indian River, one of the client's boosters stood idle—a slim white cigar crammed with construction supplies for Virgin LLC's growing Branson Station, pinned to the launch pad by lawsuits over noise.

There was the problem in a nutshell: the thunder of rocket engines had changed from a triumph to an annoyance. Noise lawsuits, problems hiring and retaining qualified people, stagnant stock price—all of these were symptoms of the public image problem that Virgin had hired Tony's firm to solve. If this launch hiatus went on much longer they might pull out of Florida. They might even give up on space altogether.

Tony paced behind his desk, the surf momentarily forgotten. How the heck was he supposed to make space exciting? He'd interviewed dozens of people—space workers as well as the general public—and not one of them thought of it as much more than just another place to work. Sure, there was some danger to it. But driving to work was dangerous right here on Earth.

He scrolled through the interview folder on his desk, looking for inspiration, and paused at the image of an eighty-year-old anglo who still remembered the California redwoods and the space race with the Russians. "When I was a kid," he'd said, "astronauts were heroes, not people. You only ever saw them in black and white, on teevee or in the papers. These days they're everywhere, in living color. But they're just like all the rest of my neighbors—boring!" And he'd laughed, showing perfect white reconstructed teeth.

Tony had written off that guy at the time as just another disaffected boomer. But now he wondered if people like him might find it easier to get excited about space if it was smaller and farther away again—squished down to fit into a tiny black and white teevee screen.

No, that wasn't quite it. But there was something there he could use.

Black and white, yes. Plain. Simplistic. A plain and simple hero. Something people could believe in. Something *real*.

Tony was starting to get excited about this one. "New file." A window opened on his desk, the blinking cursor awaiting his words.

An astronaut, like in the space race? No ... too old-fashioned, too militaristic for today's audience. It had to be some kind of space worker.

He scrolled back through the interview folder until he found an orbital welder named Sara he'd cornered for an hour in a bar on Merritt Island, and touched Play. "There was this guy called Mike," the welder's image said. "I'll never forget him. We called him Titanium-Belly Mike—he'd drink *anything*."

Tony's lip quirked. That wasn't the right image at all. But the name....

And then the whole thing snapped together in his head.

“This is the story of Titanium Mike,” he said, and the words appeared silently on the screen. “His father was a shuttle pilot and his mother was a welder. He was born wearing a space suit, and when he was nine days old he built himself a rocket and took off for orbit. Then, when his rocket ran low on fuel, he lassoed a satellite with a length of high-tensile cable and pulled himself up the rest of the way on that. He was so tough that radiation just bounced off him....”

It was crazy and nonsensical and childish, and it desperately needed editing, but something about it really resonated. Tony stayed at his desk until well after midnight, the tale growing and embellishing itself as though it were passing through him from somewhere else rather than him making it up.

He mocked it up over the weekend and showed it to his boss first thing Monday morning. They presented it to the client on Thursday and it went national the following month.

Twelve-year-old Ray Chen and millions of other kids took Titanium Mike into their hearts.

Later, they took him with them into space.

* * * *

I. A bar in Port Canaveral, Florida, January 2023

Sara Perez rolled her beer bottle around and around in the little sticky puddle on the bar, resting her chin on her fist. She really ought to go back to her room and pack up. Tomorrow was going to be a very long day.

“Well if it isn’t my best girl Sara! Why so glum?”

Sara didn’t even have to look up. She’d know that rough, alcohol-soaked voice anywhere. Especially here. “I’m through with space, Mike.” The words caught in her throat—it was the first time she’d spoken the truth out loud. “I’m heading home tomorrow.”

Mike plopped his gray-stubbled chin down on the bar next to hers. His breath was flammable. “And why would Polara want to get rid of a fine young welder like you?”

“They don’t.” And then the whole story came pouring out in a rush—how she’d run away from home at fifteen, made her way to Florida, worked her way up from waitress to welder, and now, when she was just about to launch on her first orbital gig, her family had finally tracked her down. “They’ll be here tomorrow morning to drag me back to that same safe suburban deep-freeze I escaped from two years ago.”

“So don’t be here.”

Sara raised her head and met Mike's bloodshot eyes with her own. "No point running again—they've already made sure every cop in Florida knows who I am."

"Hmm." Mike scratched his wiry chin with work-hardened fingers. "I guess you'll just have to go somewhere else, then. Somewhere without cops." He jerked a thumb skyward.

"Yeah, right." She put her forehead on the edge of the bar, stared down into her lap. "Like I can afford that." If she could have held on until next Monday, when her contract started, Polara would have paid her boost fees.

A tapping sound caught her attention. She rolled her head to one side to see what it was.

Mike was tapping a gold-edged transparent card on the bar. When he saw she'd seen it, he let it fall into the beer puddle. "Now you can."

Sara jerked herself upright, snatched up the card. "Where did you get *this*?"

"Let me tell you a little something about myself," Mike said, and suddenly he didn't seem drunk at all. "My father was a bank teller, and my mother was a CPA. Nothing special, but they were good people and they taught me the value of a dollar. I might enjoy a good stiff drink, but I know my limits and I know to pay myself first, and I know that the real value of a dollar is in what you can do with it when a friend's in trouble." He pointed to the card with one grimy finger. "There's enough there to get you on tonight's LEO booster and pay for your air until your contract starts. Now get going."

The card was cold and stiff between her fingers. "I can't possibly pay you back."

"Live well, fly high, and kick ass. That's all the payment I need." He waved her away. "Now shoo."

She shoo'd. But she gave him a big hug first.