

From Chapter 2, **Thunder Moon Tussle**, by Torn MacAlester

“Wh...” He heard Miller’s drowsy voice from the rear of the crawler.

“Milt, I—” Nils tried looking for his earpiece, realizing that Miller heard everything. He could not find the little device.

“Look, I have got very little time.” Milton’s voice sounded impatient.

“Sure, give me a second.” Nils still tried in vain to cut off the speaker and use the earpiece.

“Nils, I need you to go up to *Hab 18*.”

“What the hell for?” Nils asked, still annoyed that he did not know where the earpiece had gone. But Milton’s request further disturbed him. *Hab 18* was an automated habitat for the north lunar highlands roadway that Nils and Milton had set up twenty years prior. Before completion of the road, the parent company Amalgamated had gone bankrupt, forcing Milton and Nils to return home. *Hab 18* was nearly the last station along the road linking Mare Frigoris with a point near the Lunar North Pole. Going to *Hab 18* seemed stupid.

“Look, Nils,” Milton answered. “I need you to get up there.”

“What for?” Nils asked, trying to understand the unusual request. They abandoned the lunar construction company, selling the assets to an unknown buyer for pennies on the dollar. The hope was that the buyer would hire them back and operate the road. Nils and Milton had returned to Earth, hoping for a fresh opportunity. Returning to the Moon a few years later, Nils exhausted the legal opportunities.

Milton grumbled, sounding annoyed. “I left a data pad up there.”

“—a data pad? When?”

“I need you to get it for me. I’m heading down to Tycho tomorrow, and I’ll be there for over a month.”

“Milt, I—” Nils sighed, knowing that Miller was listening to every word.

“I’ll cover your costs,” said Milton as he continued to pitch the job.

“Milt—” Nils tried once again to over-speak the fast-talking Milton.

“Plus, thirty thousand.”

“Uh,” Nils felt he could not refuse.

“But I need you to have it for me by the time I return,” Milton stated. “Can you do it?”

“Sure,” Nils answered, realizing he had guaranteed Miller a payday. He felt that there was no way to convince her otherwise. She would get her ten percent. He would never find a way of preventing it.

“Great, talk to you soon,” Milton finished.

Nils heard the connection break, then asked Miller. “You heard?”

“Interesting,” he heard Miller’s remark.

“Yup,” Nils answered in a sarcastic tone. “Looks like your favor will have to wait.”

“Perfect,” she answered. “I can go with you, and we’ll discuss the favor.”

Nils grimaced. “Look deputy, I know you want your cut. I can even give you a bonus, but I don’t want to take you up there.”

“I don’t think you have a choice,” Miller answered. “Since you had agreed to do a favor for me, you are working for me. Your new-job is part of that agreement.”

“Wait–Miller–shit.” Nils grumbled, then rolled his eyes. “How much this time?”