

Racing the Blue Monarch

A Near-Future Solar Race Car Thriller

by

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Chapter One Demo Model

*Field Operations to Kruger (eyes only):
Agent 6 failed. Butterfly still headed south.*

"The world is burning." The fat guy stopped pacing and faced the class. All eyes were on his earring that flashed jazzy disco colors. Of course, nobody would ask about it.

"Only technologies like this can save us." With a trembling hand, he placed a box on the table. He held a light over it. Musical notes plinked, stumbling out 'You Are My Sunshine'.

Jeesh, where does Mr. Todd find them? Professor Solar, he called himself. He wore a sun symbol t-shirt that stretched so tight over his belly it looked about to supernova! He rummaged through his box of solar gadgets again. They were cool, really, but we were doing the high school thing. I mean, tenth graders just do not get excited about solar music boxes, okay?

That car, however... It was the size of a Tonka toy with a shape right out of Star Wars.

Every inch was blue, a blue so deep it looked black. Solar cells, but that wasn't what intrigued me. There was something about it, maybe the precision of construction, that gave me the eerie feeling the car was a miniaturization of a real thing, like in a sci-fi movie.

Instead of paying attention, I sketched it. Later, I'd email my drawing to Eddie. I was always collecting things like that to send him. Always hoping something would make him answer a text or phone call.

"...my final demonstration."

Final? Oh, boy, wonder what I missed? Sure hope there's no quiz!

He held up a radiometer, so shaky I thought he'd drop it. Everyone recognized the clear glass bulb with the black and white vanes inside from fifth grade science. With visible effort, he steadied his trembling hand, then set it down safely. The vanes spun, making a faint flutter against the thin needle shaft.

"Lovely...like butterfly wings," he said. "Who knows what it does?"

"Nothing," George said. "It's a toy."

"Would you believe---," he paused, giving us a challenging eye, "I can run a car with this...toy?"

Silence and glances. How were we supposed to take this guy? Kook? Genius? Mr. Todd looked taken aback and nervous. Kook.

The guy smiled. "Not *this* radiometer. The essence of it. The idea of it. Each element perfected on the nanoscale. Atoms, you understand, not chunks of metal or silicon or wire. Replicated in the billions. I call them Helic Turbines---sun generators."

He picked up the car. At last! I've been dying to see what that thing can do.

"This beauty is the Blue Monarch. I need a volunteer." His eye caught mine. "You?"

Maybe I'd straightened up or something.

"All right, Scooter!" someone said.

"Mr. Cochran, assist." Mr. Todd sealed my fate.

From afar, the earring dazzled, but as I got up front, his eyes seized me: pale blue, glittering with vitality and something like recognition...of *me*? Unnerved, I looked away at the car. Its surface wasn't smooth, but covered with millions of tiny bumps. Could they really be tiny radiometers?

He handed me a searchlight with a pistol grip, like from a police cruiser. "Aim only at the car or you might blind someone."

Mr. Todd stirred. "Careful."

Nodding, I squeezed the trigger. A flash of light, the scream of an electric motor, squeal of tires, then---flick---the car was embedded in the wall. I stood there with my mouth hanging open like a moron. The whole class was stunned. You could hear the rain pattering on the roof. I'd swear it came off the mark at 80 mph! A burned rubber smell hit my nose. Smoked tires. It reminded me of race tracks...karts...Eddie...

Someone found their voice. "Awesome!"

"That's dangerous!"

"Did it bust?"

He wiggled the car free. Gypsum board fell away, leaving a big hole. There wasn't a mark on the...well, I couldn't call it a toy anymore. He set the Blue Monarch down, aimed at a fresh wall.

"Oh, do it again, Scooter!" That was Lana. I'd do it a million times for her.

"Ah," Mr. Todd jumped in. "Once is sufficient."

With a shrug, the guy reached for the car. Too slow. I squeezed the trigger. Flash---scream---whap!

A sharp word from Mr. Todd killed the uproar. "For that little stunt, Mr. Cochran, you can help our guest pack, then clean up here.

Class dismissed."

Mr. Todd went, too, leaving us alone. The fat guy wiped the car on his t-shirt, leaving a big white smudge across the sun. Bumps on the underside, too. Where the sun don't shine. Weird.

"Cochran?" His vibrant stare made me think: mad scientist. "Two years ago, midget league racing champ, right?"

I shook my head. "Eddie, my older brother."

"Of course. You were the pit crew. Grown some since then." Soft grunts punctuated the sentences as he bent to pack. The Blue Monarch went into its own padded case, with a lock. "Where's Eddie now?"

Innocent enough question, but it hurt to answer. "Daytona."

"Gone NASCAR, huh? How's he doing?"

"Ah...great. He's with the Petty team." To avoid more questions, I grabbed the gadget box and headed for the door. It wasn't a complete lie. Last time we heard from him, Eddie was with the Petty team working the grease pit. That was a year ago. He must be a driver by now. I had to believe that. I couldn't stand it if he'd left me behind for nothing.

Chapter Two An Invitation

Consortium to Kruger: Transmitting final offer.

The door opened onto the parking lot. The rain had stopped. The glittering world smelled brand new. Wisps of mist rose from the blacktop. Solar driven evaporation. Guess I paid more attention than I realized. School was out. Kids hustled to their cars. The air filled with roar and stink.

"Fuel for the fire." Mister solar guy's nose wrinkled in disgust.

"What do you expect? They'd toss their keys because of a music box?" *Ohmygod*, I said that out loud! My rudeness shocked me. Eddie stuff, spilling out. Too many reminders today.

"Did I do that badly?" He grabbed my arm. Spun me around. I'm dead. He's got a hundred pounds on me. But he wasn't angry, just anxious.

"Well, I...um...the Heli-thing is cool. And the car, I love it, but there will never be a real car like that."

"Pure gasket head, aren't you?" It sounded

like an insult. "There already *are* cars like that. Not as beautiful. And not solar---yet. The GM EV1 could smoke a Corvette."

"Never heard of it."

"You were in diapers." He waved away my ignorance. "But it's a fact. How? Motor torque. 300 percent rated power at zero rpm."

Huh, the opposite power curve of a gas engine.

"Without understanding electric motors and torque, you can't imagine what's possible." He brushed past me. We came to a neat three-wheeled buggy, tear drop shaped and buzzing like a hive of bees.

"Hey! You left the motor running!" After all that preaching to us, too.

"Nope." He tapped a disc shaped housing underneath the seat. "Flywheel."

Flywheel. Spinning mass. Stored energy. It smoothed out piston pulses in a IC engine, but how did it work in this? I knelt to take a closer look. When I touched the casing, vibrations tickled my hand. The framework was aluminum, with welds as smooth as frosting. "You build this?"

"Every bolt and bend."

"That's a real nice weld." Made me wistful. I

hadn't worked on anything except my scooter since Eddie left.

He squinted at me. In the bright sun, the earring blinked dully. "You into mechanics?"

"Eddie can't even change a spark plug," I laughed. "I made our carts sing. I loved to tear them down. Figure how they ticked and find ways to make..." I was yammering like a fool. I shut my mouth, but he smiled. This guy understood my kind of passion!

"Karl Henson." He offered his left hand, the one with the lesser tremble.

"Scooter." We shook awkwardly.

"I don't weld anymore," Henson said. "You've noticed my affliction. A minor stroke. My intellect is unaffected. My dexterity, however... Scooter, I need---"

He checked himself. "Are you busy this afternoon?"

I pretended to consider, watching as friends rushed toward important stuff to do after school. Used to be me, too, scrambling to ready a kart for the weekend races. But in the two years since Eddie left, nothing could keep me busy enough to make up for him being gone.

"Nah," I said.

"Got wheels?" I pointed to my scooter.

"Good. Sensible."

He thought I rode it to help save the world from global warming. Truth was, I couldn't afford anything else. Eddie always brought in the bucks.

He lived in a junk yard. Not garbage. Vehicles. Machines. Everywhere. With a huge Quonset hut at the center. Moss covered its rusty roof. A windmill stood beside it, the tower studded with solar panels. It looked out of place, like an alien spaceship. We entered a small room in the hut, white as a milk-house. He took a spotless lab coat off a peg. Beside it hung grease-stained coveralls.

"Set those on the table."

Something else was there. It looked like a fancy molecular model, but turned out to be a stack of hundreds of empty Chinese take-out boxes, dried sauce stuck to them. "Whoa! Don't you ever cook?"

"No time." Henson tugged off the earring. He saw me watching. "Want it?"

I did, sort of.

"For that young lady? Here." He handed it to me. "Twist on or off. When it dies, set it in the sun. See, on the back---"

"Let me guess--a solar cell." And there was, a tiny blue chip able to turn sunlight into electricity to charge the things battery.

"Not much point in chasing girls, though, if things don't change. Your kids will live in misery."

Cheery guy and way ahead of even *my* fevered fantasies about Lana. I pocketed the earring.

"Behold...hope!" Still the showman, he swung open the inner door, revealing a combination laboratory and car shop. Perfect as the inside of an oyster, the workshop contained a pearl: a life-size Blue Monarch. The polished finish gleamed like a window into space. I could feel the cells sucking up the light---sucking me toward the car.

"Don't touch!" I jerked my hand back. "Security field. Twenty-thousands volts."

Whoa! I took a step back. That sounded deadly. Why did he need it?

He took a remote from a pocket. Keyed in a code. "Safe now."

The canopy slid back. I expected spaceship complexity, but the cockpit was simple. It held a big surprise---a regulation crash seat. "This is a *race car*?"

"Indeed it is," he said. "Have a seat?"

Eddie didn't often let me behind the wheel. Never in a race. When you're fifteen, he always promised. Then came the fight with Dad. Eddie left home. Left them. Left me.

Henson's cell rang. He listened. Frowned. "Kruger, you were never to call---"

Sounded personal. "I'll wait out there."

"No no." He muffled the phone. "Stay. Listen. You are my witness."