

KID NITRO

And the Sinister Slorp



In Memory of
Doug Miers
1967-2005

Edited By:
Cathy Sherrill

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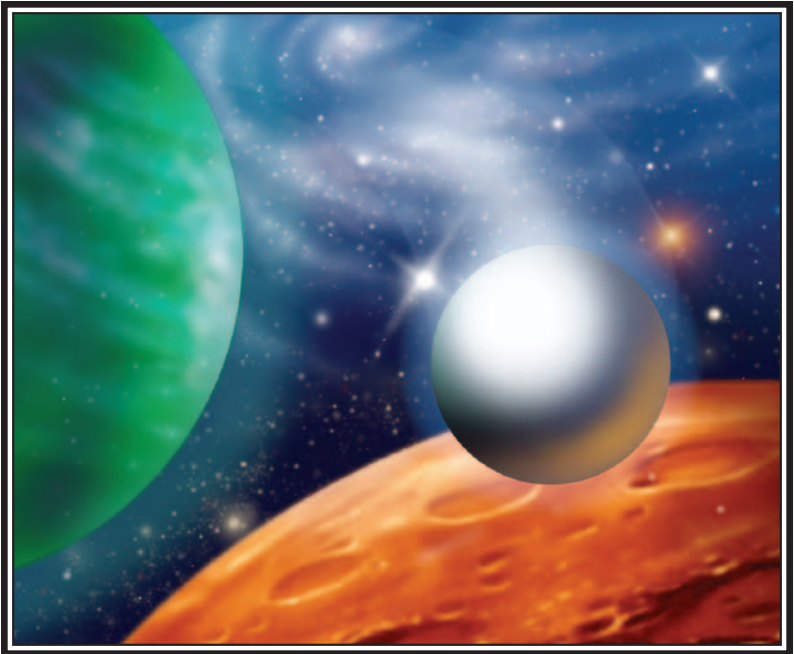
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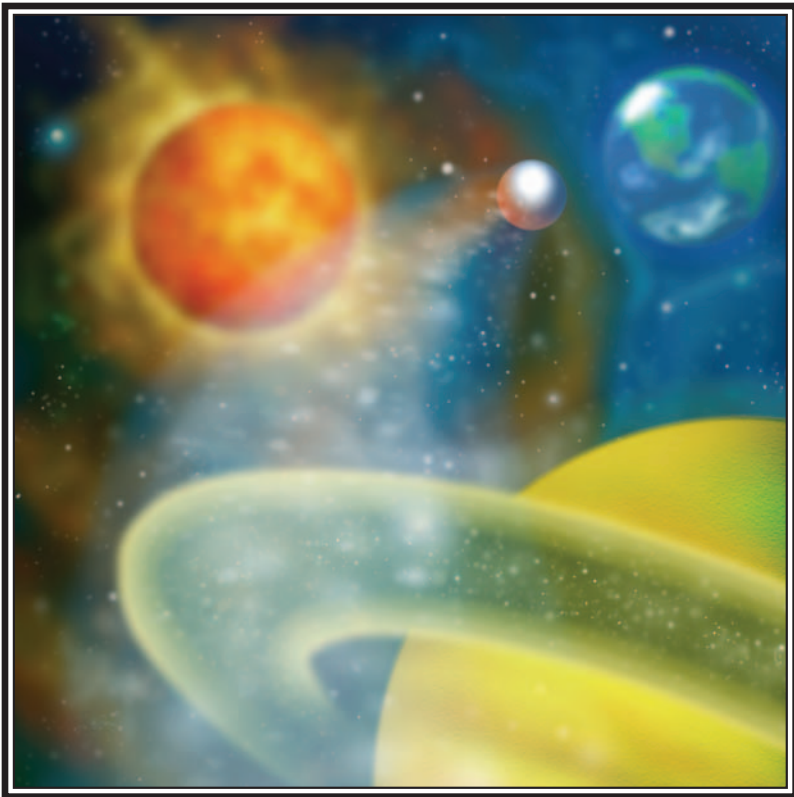
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PRELUDE

Long ago and far away, deep in the space between stars, a small metallic sphere hurtled through the emptiness. Fueled by cosmic rays, the sphere traveled for time beyond measure. The sphere passed pulsars and novas, skirted black holes, and flew through spectacular nebulae glowing with every color of the spectrum. The sphere stayed its course, seemingly oblivious to these and many other wonders of the universe. Though the sphere was a living, sentient being, its consciousness remained dormant, sleeping through its long journey among the stars, traveling towards an awakening.



Microwave and radio transmissions carried voices from a small blue planet deep into space, and eventually the small metallic sphere came across one of these signals. A screening program separated the signals from all the background noise, and identified the patterns within the signal as being sufficiently complex to indicate intelligent life. A second signal confirmed the first, and automated subroutines powered up the primary systems of the sphere, long since dormant. A consciousness fluttered to life deep within the seed, and the sphere altered its course.



The sphere moved towards Earth, extending sensor arrays to absorb as many signals as possible. Earth was a plethora of broadcast information. Wave after wave of data poured in: newscasts, TV shows, internet feeds, musical arrangements, even private cell phone calls... all were monitored and processed by the alien consciousness. Its intelligence evolved rapidly as it consumed the massive streams of information.

And then it hit Earth's atmosphere, and all systems diverted to siphoning off the extreme heat generated by air friction. The outer shell of the sphere became red hot, but internal processors remained cool as the heat was converted to energy and stored in the sphere's power cells.

It would need all this energy and more when it began building.



CHAPTER 1

STRANGE ENCOUNTER

The ants scrambled furiously back and forth, bumping heads and waving antennae. The colony was under attack. Soldiers poured forth from the warrens, mandibles clacking, looking for a foe to swarm.

A giant shadow passed overhead, and a solid beam of light tore a swath through the milling horde of ants. Wherever the light ray touched, wisps of smoke filled the air, and soldier ants writhed in pain.

“Your armies are helpless against my superior technology,” Kid Nitro announced, refocusing his magnifying glass on the anthill. “Surrender now or be destroyed!”



The weather on this summer morning was bright and sunny. Not a single cloud softened the ocean blue sky. So Kid Nitro was surprised when a crack of thunder rumbled through the air. He looked up and saw a point of light streaking across the heavens, leaving a white ribbon of steam in its wake. He'd seen jet airplanes leave similar white trails across the sky, but this was clearly no airplane. It was too close, and moving much too fast.

In a twinkling, the point of light streaked overhead and disappeared behind the trees. A terrific explosion ensued, which Kid Nitro felt as much as heard. The ground quaked and a hot wind ruffled his hair.

Kid Nitro watched in awe for a few seconds as a mushroom cloud of dust and steam rose over the tree line. He leaned back and gaped at the plume. Suddenly his foot was on fire, and looking down he realized he was standing on the anthill. He jumped and hopped and brushed off as many ants as he could find. But his eyes were still riveted on the dissipating cloud. The impact site couldn't be more than a few blocks away.

Kid Nitro grabbed his walkie-talkie and spoke breathlessly into it. "We have a UFO sighting on Hillcrest Lane, near the old Murphy place. I'm proceeding to the site to make first contact." Kid Nitro holstered his walkie-talkie without waiting for a reply. He knew no one was on the other end. The companion walkie-talkie was in his toy box at home. He

wasn't sure he'd seen a spaceship, but a UFO is simply an Unidentified Flying Object, and whether this one was a meteor or a misplaced USAF cruise missile or even an intergalactic dictionary salesman, Kid Nitro would be the first on the scene to identify it.

He stumbled along in one shoe and one sock as he knocked the rest of the ants out of his other shoe, all the while moving towards the plume of dust and steam hanging over the trees. He was wearing his homemade *Kid Nitro* spacesuit, comprised of tattered blue jeans, a long-sleeve blue shirt, and a black t-shirt over that, cut away to resemble a 'V'. On his hands he wore his mom's yellow rubber cleaning gloves, and he had oversize goggles strapped tightly about his head. A yellow 'KN' was crudely painted on his chest, over his heart.

He cut through Mrs. Benson's yard, climbed over the fence to the Andersons' patio, ran through their side yard, and came out onto the vacant lot next to the old Murphy place. Dust still hung thick in the air. "Initiating fart mask protection," Kid Nitro said as he pulled the front of his shirt collar up over his nose.

Kid Nitro saw a humanoid figure through the haze. "This must be it — my first alien encounter!" His heart thumping quickly, Kid Nitro forced himself to remain calm as he walked slowly forward to greet the strange alien, hoping it was not visiting Earth in search of a kid-sized snack. As he drew closer to the hunched figure, his worst fears were real-

ized. This monster was fouler, more despicable, and far more dangerous than any space alien Kid Nitro could imagine. It was Catherine Terwillager, the little girl from down the street, along with her dog Baxter. She stood with her hands on her knees, leaning forward to look into the large smoking impact crater in the ground.

“Catherine Terwillager, what are you doing here? This is *my* alien encounter.”

Catherine put her fists on her hips. “Rusty — would you get a life? It was obviously a meteor.”

Kid Nitro stepped between her and the smoking crater. “Well it’s my meteor, so go home and play with your stupid dog.”

“Baxter is not stupid!” Catherine protested. “He’s smarter than you!” The small black terrier growled at Kid Nitro as if to emphasize her point, punctuating the growl with a high-pitched “yip.”

Catherine gave Kid Nitro a little shove to remind him that she wasn’t afraid of him, a point she never tired of making. He was standing on the edge of the crater, and tumbled back into the hole, windmilling his arms in a frantic, and ultimately hopeless, attempt to regain his balance.

Kid Nitro wondered how far he would fall into the depths of the crater before hitting the bottom, or even worse, the molten magma under the earth’s crust, should the crater go so deep. But his feet had barely left the ground when his butt

crashed back into the dirt. The crater was only a few feet deep.

Catherine looked anxiously into the hole. “Oh no! Rusty, are you okay?”

“Yip ... yip yip yip,” Baxter echoed.

“Shut up, blabbermouth — you’ll compromise my secret identity!” Kid Nitro replied irritably. “My field name is Kid Nitro!”

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. He was just fine.

A thick haze of smoke and steam still covered the bottom of the crater, so thick it was almost liquid. As Kid Nitro stood up, he couldn’t even see his own feet through the haze. But he saw something else moving through the smoke, a glint of light and a ripple in the smoke that surged forward, cresting as it came directly at him. Catherine saw it too and screamed “Look out!” but Kid Nitro was already scrambling away.

He crouched and prepared to dodge again, but it was not pursuing him. The pulse of rippling smoke washed through the spot where he’d been standing and kept going straight toward the edge of the crater. Catherine and Baxter skirted to the side, and they all watched in slack-jawed wonder as a metal sphere rolled up out of the smoke-filled crater and onto the grass. It was about the size of a volleyball, perfectly round, completely featureless, glowing with a dull metallic hue in the mid-day sun.

The sphere kept rolling. “What is it?” gasped Catherine. She and Kid Nitro crept forward, following the rolling sphere, but keeping a respectful distance. Baxter was not so timid. “Yip-yip-yip-yip-yip-yip-yip!” he barked ferociously, running circles around the sphere, lunging at it then pulling back and circling some more.

“Baxter – heel!” Catherine shouted, and the well-trained terrier obeyed, moving behind Catherine with a final defiant “yip!” at the sphere.

“I think it’s an intelligent space hamster in a space hamster ball,” Kid Nitro decided. “It runs around the smooth interior of the sphere, propelling it forward. Sometimes it runs really fast and ramps off mountains to reach outer space.”

Catherine rolled her eyes and shook her head. “That has got to be the lamest theory I have ever heard,” she said heavily. “If it’s a space hamster ball, how does the hamster get in and out?”

“It obviously has phase transporter technology!” Kid Nitro beamed.

“It’s not a space hamster,” Catherine said with finality. “It’s an enigma.”

“Enigma?! That’s a stupid name for a hamster.”

“It’s not a hamster, and ‘enigma’ is not a name, dork face. An enigma is a mystery, something inexplicable.”

Kid Nitro belched. “I’m naming it Ralph.”

“Ralph? What kind of name is that for a metal ball?”

“I was looking at you when I named it, and your face makes me want to ralph.”

Catherine frowned. “That’s disgusting!”

Kid Nitro smiled graciously. “Thank you, thank you, always a pleasure.”

The metal sphere swerved left onto Woodhaven Street, picking up speed as it rolled along the sidewalk. Kid Nitro cut directly across the yard, running as fast as he could to get in front of it. “What are you doing?” Catherine yelled frantically.

“Watch and learn,” he replied. He jumped out onto the sidewalk, just ahead of the rolling ball, and held his ground. He was nervous, but he sure wasn’t going to let Catherine see that. He didn’t flinch as the metal sphere rolled right up to him ... and stopped. Kid Nitro looked at it closely, and saw lights flashing across its surface, little colored lights that flashed and were gone.

“Are you crazy?” Catherine shrieked. “That thing might be radioactive!”

“So if it’s radioactive, that just means it’ll give me super powers,” Kid Nitro answered cheerfully.

“No, you mushroom-headed numbskull — if it’s radioactive, you’ll get cancer and die.”

Abruptly the ball started rolling again. It rolled around him and continued on its way. Emboldened, Kid Nitro skipped ahead and stopped in front of it again. It did not hes-

itate this time before adjusting its course to avoid him, but Kid Nitro reacted quickly and kept moving in front of it. No matter which way it rolled, he blocked it. The sphere paused, and then said “Excuse me” in a hollow metallic voice.

Kid Nitro stood still, stunned and amazed, as the metal sphere rolled around him once more and proceeded on down the sidewalk.

“It — It spoke to me,” Kid Nitro said in dawning realization. He turned to Catherine, who was still standing more than 20 feet away. “Did you here that? It spoke to me!”

“The radioactivity must be rotting your brain,” Catherine scoffed. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“No, really, it did! Listen...” Kid Nitro impulsively ran and grabbed the rolling sphere right off the ground. It was much lighter than he might have expected. He carried it over to Catherine, who screamed and ran for cover. “Keep that thing away from me!” she shrieked.

“Cool!” Kid Nitro crowed. He forgot about getting the sphere to talk and started chasing Catherine around with it. “I’m gonna give you space cooties,” Kid Nitro chanted, “space cooties, space cooties!” Baxter went crazy, barking and trying to run every direction at once. Kid Nitro paused when he saw tears in Catherine’s eyes. “This isn’t funny, Rusty,” she sniveled. “That thing could be very dangerous. We have to show it to some adults. Maybe we should call 911.”

Kid Nitro lowered the sphere, wishing it were small enough to slip into his pocket. “Tell you what,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “My dad is a nuclear scientist. I’ll take this home and let him run some tests, and I’ll let you know what we find out.”

Catherine shook her head and stomped her foot. “Your father is an auto mechanic down at BossCo, you liar.”

“That’s just his cover,” Kid Nitro objected. “He actually designs hovercraft and plasma rays for the government in his spare time.”

Catherine looked at him hotly. “Are you delusional or what?”

“What?” Kid Nitro grinned.

“Are you going to notify the authorities about this space ball, or do I have to do it?” she asked pointedly.

“Here, you do it.” Kid Nitro held the sphere out to her, figuring his best defense was a strong offence. His strategy paid off. When he offered Catherine the sphere, she turned and ran, followed by Baxter.

Kid Nitro walked through the front door. “Hi Mom, I’m home!”

The monster in the playpen began wailing immediately. It was his baby sister, Madeline, waking up from a nap. Upstairs somewhere, Kid Nitro could hear the vacuum cleaner running. That would be his mother, obsessively cleaning as

always. Hopefully she hadn't found the peanut butter and mold sandwich growing under his bed.

Kid Nitro ran to his room and tossed the metallic sphere through his open door. "Wait here, Ralph, while I run some interference with the maternal unit." As soon as the sphere hit the ground, it began rolling back towards the door, contrary to its momentum. Kid Nitro tried to shut his door, but a clutter of dirty laundry and toys prevented it from closing. The sphere rolled up to the heap, lost its traction, and tumbled back into the room. Kid Nitro smiled with satisfaction. The advantages of a messy room clearly outweighed the disadvantages, despite what his mother may think. "Ha!" He couldn't help but laugh out loud.

The steady drone of the vacuum from his parents' bedroom stopped abruptly. "Rusty, is that you?" his mother's voice called out. The door across the hallway began to open. In a panic, Kid Nitro grabbed a shirt from the laundry pile and threw it over the sphere, which wiggled and moved under the shirt like a living creature.

"Where have you been all morning?" His mother's voice was right behind him.

Kid Nitro spun around and flashed a big toothy smile. "Sorry Mom, Kid Nitro had important business to take care of." He kept smiling and studied the floral wallpaper on a nearby wall. He wasn't about to look her in the eyes.

"Well Kid Nitro wasn't cleared to leave the house until

his room was clean, and he darn well knew it.” Irene Palmer was a short and apparently frail woman, but she had an inner strength and confidence that radiated in every move she made and every word she spoke. “Look at me when I’m talking to you,” she snapped in a tone that would put a Marine drill sergeant to shame. Kid Nitro looked at her, and immediately rolled his eyes to the other side.

“What are you up to?”

“Nothing...” He was careful to keep himself positioned between his mother and the metal sphere.

“Don’t ‘nothing’ me, I know you better than that.” She drilled at him with that stare he knew so well, the expression that would not be denied. When she did that, he knew there was no way out. Kid Nitro silently cursed her unerring intuition. She could give the FBI and CIA tips on interrogation technique.

He looked her in the eyes and started talking. It was his only hope. “Mutant brain-eaters from the planet Ploog are after me for my delicious oversized brain. They want to mix it in a blender with my eyeballs and make headcheese. Oh yeah, I also found a living volleyball from outer space. Its name is Ralph. I brought it home so I can program it to do tricks.”

She tilted her head slightly and studied him. “You have such a vivid imagination,” she mused. She grinned and ruffled his hair, then grabbed his ear somewhat sharply. “But

I've warned you about that thin line between using your imagination and telling outright lies. Be sure you stay on the right side of that line."

"Which side is that?" Kid Nitro conjured his most innocent doe-eyed expression.

"You know the answer. Okay Kid Nitro, clean up your room and you're off the hook."

"Yes Ma'am," he saluted.

As soon as she was gone, Kid Nitro kicked the biggest pile of stuff under his bed, tossed a few pieces of trash out the window since his trashcan was already overflowing, and grabbed the leftover toys and laundry and threw them in his toy box. He looked around to see if he'd forgotten anything. The room was clean. But ... he couldn't help feeling something was missing. Then he realized with a shock that the sphere was gone.

He tore all the clutter from under his bed and rifled through it. He emptied his toy box and even dug through his closet. Nothing — it wasn't there. And now his room was even messier than when he'd started cleaning.

Kid Nitro ran out into the hallway and down the stairs, almost tripping over the sphere as he rounded the corner of the stairwell. The sphere had grown two mechanical legs, each sprouting from its center at a right angle, each single-jointed with a small wheel at the bottom. It was precariously making its way down the steps. The wheels seemed to work against

its balance in this one instance as it unsteadily tried to negotiate the stairs.

“Ralph, what are you doing?!” Kid Nitro whispered, grabbing the sphere. It immediately retracted its wheels, legs telescoping inwards. Little plates slid over the hatches and became seamless. The sphere was perfectly round once more. “Excuse me,” the sphere said quietly with a sparkle of lights across its surface. *“DispÈnseme ... M’excuser ... Entschuldigen Sie bitte ...”*

Kid Nitro took the sphere back in his room and put it in his closet, closing the door. “Let’s see you get out of there,” he said.

He went back downstairs and picked up the phone, quickly dialing seven digits from memory. “Yo, is B4U,” a voice said on the other end of the line. “Whassup wit’ you?”

“B4U, this is Kid Nitro. CQD...I need you over here PDQ.”

“Sorry Kid Nitro, my momma said no, I can’t go till I mow the yard, yo.”

Kid Nitro heard a crumble and thump behind him. His baby sister woke up and began to scream again. Kid Nitro hung up the phone and turned around. A slight haze of dust settled in the air. A perfectly round hole the size of a volleyball had appeared in the living room ceiling, which Kid Nitro figured was directly below the spot where his closet was located upstairs. The edges of the hole were perfect, as if cut by a

laser. The metallic sphere now rested quietly in the playpen, directly below the hole, barely a foot away from his baby sister, Madeline. She looked at it with wide eyes, screaming as loudly and quickly as she could draw breath.

Kid Nitro picked her up and set her down just inside the kitchen. “Play in here where it’s safe,” he told her. She toddled off, still sniffing and trying to catch her breath.

Kid Nitro ran back to the playpen, but the sphere was already gone. A perfect hole had been cut through the floor of the playpen, and continued on through the floor directly beneath. Kid Nitro peered over the edge and down the hole. It went directly down into darkness, as far as he could see, through the foundation and possibly deep into the earth beneath. He groaned and threw one of his sister’s blankets over the hole.

Irene came downstairs to see what the ruckus was all about. The living room was empty — even the baby was gone from her playpen. “Rusty?” she called. “Have you seen your sister?” She walked into the kitchen and found the toddler trying to open a drawer full of knives and cutlery.

“Maddie, no, don’t touch that!” she said urgently, pulling the baby away from the drawer. She turned and yelled “RUSTY!” so loudly even the neighbors could hear. The baby started crying again. Rusty, halfway down the block, heard his mother’s yell and stopped running. He turned back towards home. He knew he was in serious trouble. Might as well get it over with.

That night, Kid Nitro sat facing his parents in the living room. For a long time, they didn't say a word, they just sat and looked at him as he fidgeted. Ray Palmer, a large man with grease-stained hands, looked very tired. He rubbed his eyes slowly, and finally spoke. "Rusty," he said, "your mother tells me you left Maddie unattended in the kitchen."

Kid Nitro looked up at the hole in the ceiling. Miraculously, neither of his parents had looked up and noticed it. He wanted to call their attention to it, but until he had a plausible explanation, he wasn't quite sure how to bring it up. And then there was the hole in the floor, hidden below the playpen.

"Did you know the kitchen is the most dangerous room in the house?"

"Yes sir."

"I want you to go straight to your room and think about what you've done. And just be glad that your sister is okay."

"Yes sir."

"And don't come back down until your room is clean," his mother added.

"Yes Ma'am."

Kid Nitro went straight to bed, but he lay awake for a long time, worrying about the strange metallic sphere that had fallen from the sky, and the holes it had already made in his life.