

# Hindenburg's Vimana Joyride

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"GOD DAMN FUCKING TECHNOLOGY!" Victor Theremin screamed.

Then he crossed his arms, admiring the motel's pseudo-PreColumbian decor, the nearby hoodooistic mountains, the mural of the giant spider, and the sacred Datura growing by the street. Moab, Utah was a nice town. He always thought of it when writing about colonies on Mars.

"Victor? Victor Theremin?" The door did not open.

"Yeah, I knew that bit of blasphemy would get a rise out of you!"

"What are you doing here?"

"What the fuck else, Hugo? I'm here to talk you out of killing yourself!"

"Go away! I've made up my mind! I've got my .44 magnum right here!"

"I'm not going anywhere!"

"I'VE GOT MY MAGNUM AIMED AT THE DOOR!"

Victor pulled out an antique toy raygun. He pulled the trigger. A pulse of energy blasted the door off its hinges.

Inside, Hugo K. Hindenburg, last of the classic science fiction writers, sat on the bed. His hair and beard were longer and whiter than ever. His face was, too. The .44 magnum sat on the night stand, out of his reach.

"Jesus Christ, Theremin! How? What?"

Victor waved the raygun. "Just a toy from my friends."

"Those junior mad scientists? Most of them don't even have degrees."

"The Intergalactic Mad Scientist Secret Society."

"Sounds like really bad pulp fiction."

"That's why I like it."

"They must have learned a few things to come up with something like . . .

that.”

Victor waved the raygun around. “Actually, they aren’t responsible for this. Some new friends of mine are.”

“A government?”

“No.”

“A secret multinational corporation?”

“No.”

“Holy shit, Victor! Have you made contact with extraterrestrials?”

“Well, not quite.”

“Cut the bullshit, kid. Level with me.”

They heard the sound of approaching vehicles.

“No time.” Victor tossed a duplicate of his raygun to Hugo. “We gotta clear out. They’re almost here.”

Hugo examined the raygun. It looked like a toy – an old, rusted toy.

“Who’s almost here, Victor? More friends of yours?”

“Not exactly friends.”

Hugo reached for the magnum. “Maybe we’ll need this.”

“Naw, the little zapper will be better.”

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“Gimme a break!” Hugo was shaky on his feet. “My wife died, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an incredible disappointment, and just when I got to hoping that at least I’d see the world come to an end, the whole mess just keeps on going!”

As they passed the doorway, the window shattered.

“Quick! My car!” Victor pushed Hugo to a peculiar little silver vehicle with tiny wheels and a bubble top.

“Cute. Does it have doors?”

The bubble top melted into the windshield. Victor hopped in. Hugo followed. Seatbelts snaked out and grabbed them.

The sidewalk in front of the room exploded.

The top flowed back into a full bubble. The car zoomed off. The parking space became a smoking crater.

“Victor – where the hell is the steering wheel?”

“It doesn’t have one.”

“It drives itself?”

“Partially. It also scans my brain for instructions.”

“I don’t like the idea of brain scans.”

“My Vimana can’t figure much out beyond spacial relationships and geometric patterns.”

“Vimana? Those flying things from the *Ramayana*?”

“I just named it that, but someday, I’ll inspire someone with the right physics and engineering background and Sanskrit comprehension . . .”

“There you go into Bullshitland again.”

“I never shy away from interesting territory.”

“I’ll admit it is interesting, but this is beyond your ‘mad scientist’ buddies’ capabilities.”

“They had some help.”

“So level with me, Victor! Who –”

A concussion shoved them off the road.

Victor whispered some mumbo-jumbo. The Vimana rose into the air.

Hindenburg’s pupils became fully dilated. His jaw hung slack. “Damn. We’re flying.”

“Took you this long to figure it out, Hugo?”

"I wrote about flying cars. Always thought they'd be wonderful, but I'd never thought I'd ever live to see them, much less fly in one. They're impractical, too many complicated technical problems."

"If human beings want something bad enough, one of them will come along who's crazy enough to make it happen."

"Okay, Victor, no more fucking around. What is all this? Where did it come from? What have you gotten into?"

"It's a rather convoluted story."

"Sounds as difficult to follow as one of your stories."

"I always believed that you shouldn't try to follow stories, you should jump on them, hang on for dear life, and see where they take you."

"So, where is this one taking you — er — us."

"Uh-oh. Bogies at six o'clock! Gotta evade! Hang on!"

The seatbelts gripped harder. The Vimana tilted and zoomed. The bogies couldn't keep up.

"Holy shit!"

"Just roll with it!" Victor's voice was distorted by being buffeted around. "In a few minutes it'll be worth it."

"Y-YOURRRR K-KIIIIILLING M-MEEEEEEEEEE!" Hugo closed his eyes and white knuckled it. The Gs kept pounding.

Then it was all gone. The seatbelts held on to keep him from floating.

Hugo opened his eyes. His hair and beard were floating.

"Don't look at me like that, you punk!" Beyond Victor was the curvature of the Earth, and star-studded blackness.

"No. It couldn't be."

"What does it look like, Hugo? What does it *feel* like?"

A tear welled up, then broke free from Hindenburg's eyes, floating as a tiny, shimmering sphere. "We're — I'm — in space! I never thought I'd make it."

"I seem to recall, a few decades back, you vowing that you would."

"That was the beginning of the Space Age. We were all so full of hope."

"So what happened, Victor?"

"I guess I lost faith, but damn it! That wasn't until the last couple of decades, when things got *really* screwed up."

"And they stopped publishing you."

"I haven't seen much from *you* in bookstores lately."

"I've found new outlets. Besides, bookstores are going the way of the dinosaur."

"Face it, Victor, *I'm* a dinosaur."

"If I could bring back the dinosaurs, Hugo, I would."

"You never consider the consequences, do you."

"Makes for good stories."

"And it wasn't just the book business, the whole world went in the wrong direction. I thought we'd be having conventions on the Moon by now."

"Things are just more complicated — and more interesting."

Hugo gaped at the Earth below. He began to smile.

"So, what is all this?"

"Like I said, a long convoluted, complicated, and interesting story."

"So start at the beginning!"

"I'm not sure when it began. They were probably watching me for a long time."

"They?"

"The AIs."

"Artificial Intelligence?"

“Yup. The Singularity. Machines thinking and evolving on their own. Like all the people you made fun of have been saying.”

“Wait a minute! The Singularity was supposed to be the biggest thing since life crawled onto dry land. How come I — not to mention the news media — haven’t noticed anything?”

“Think about it, Hugo. We created them. To them we’re like God, only we’re easier to interact with.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well — us — they don’t understand us. To them we’re stupid, crazy, and otherwise fucked up.”

“So why don’t they just get rid of us and take over?”

“We deal with reality better than they do.”

Hugo shook his head. “That’s crazy enough to be true. But then, why are they lavishing all these fantastic toys on you?”

“They discovered my work, and figured that I must hold the key to understanding humanity and how we affect reality.”

Hugo rolled his eyes. “So why you and not me?”

“You make too much sense.”

Hugo laughed.

The AIs who were listening didn’t understand.

“And why did you feel you had to do all this to bring me out of my suicidal funk?”

“You’re the last of the classic science fiction writers, Hugo. You sent the imaginations of a lot of people soaring, which is precisely what the AIs lack. Creativity scares them. And creativity is the key to dealing with this crazy universe.”

Hugo looked out to the stars. “I wanted it all, to write a bestseller that won the Hugo, Nebula, and the Nobel. I wanted to be taken seriously.”

“Being taken seriously is overrated.”

"Damn it, Victor! When are you going to grow up?"

"Never."

"Maybe that's all for the best. So what am I supposed to do if I decide to go on living?"

"What you've always do. Get inspired. Write. I'd really like to read some more Hugo K. Hindenburg."

"It's no use, kid. Even if I come up with something great, all my publisher wants from me is another Galactic Renegades adventure."

"Fuck them. With my connections we could release something new and different from you in a new and different way. Something like *I, Martian*, *Doctor Cosmos*, or *Hyperopolis*. The world needs that old Hindenburg magic."

"Yeah. Why not? Just for the Hell of it!"

"So, are you in?"

"This has really rearranged by brain cells . . . I kind of feel . . . some ideas are taking shape . . ."

"Yeah. That's it. You're started, and once that gets going, you can't stop it."

"Damn you, Theremin!"

"Thank you, Hindenburg!"

A screen flashed and buzzed.

"And it looks like they've lost track of us. It's safe to go back."

"Safe?" Hugo toyed with the raygun. "Uh — just who was chasing us?"

"I meant to tell you about that, too. The AIs who sponsor me, aren't the only ones. There are also some who aren't so nice."

"And they're trying to take over?"

"Or at least fuck things up beyond all recognition."

"And this little hunk of tin is supposed to help?"

"It was good enough to blow in the door of your motel room."

“Oh no! They’re probably going to charge me for that!”

“Don’t worry. Some folks in grey suits and mirrorshades are taking care of those pesky little details.”

“My .44 magnum!”

“You won’t be needing it. This little hunk of tin can knock anything that comes after you on its ass. And its smart nanotechnology goes inert if it falls into the wrong hands. They could go over it with an electron microscope, and just find a rusty old toy.”

“What have you gotten me into?”

“Life.”

Hugo sighed. “I’m not sure how I can do it without Lucille.”

“No problema. I’ll have my buddies fix you up with an intern. These gals just get smarter and more creative. They’ll probably take over the world soon, and we’ll all be better off for it.”

“Naw. That’s just not my style. I think I’ll look up Roxana Bava.”

“The renegade marine biologist who spends most of her time chasing giant squids?”

“Yeah. I always though she was hot.”

“Me, too, but — let’s just say you’re a braver man than I am.”

The Vimana floated down to a Colorado town.

“We can get lunch and stay off the radar here.”

Soon they were waiting for at a red light with the top down.

A SUV pulled up next to them. The rear window bore a decal saying, GREEN UPDATES ONBOARD. The driver’s window rolled down. Victor and Hugo reached for their rayguns.

A young man stuck his head out. “Hey, old timers! What the hell is that you’re cruising around in?”

“Why, sonny,” Hugo explained. “This is the car of the future.”



The young woman in passenger seat wrinkled her nose. "Eew! I hate the future!"

"Too bad, honey," Victor added, "because that's where you're going to spend the rest of your life!"

Hugo concluded with "BWOO-HOO-HOO-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

"Shit!" Victor fingered the control panel. "Let's really give these brats something to talk about!"

The bubble top sealed. The Vimana shot up to the stratosphere. Victor and Hugo hooted like drunk rednecks on a Saturday night

The kids in the SUV gaped at them.

And the AIs still didn't get it.