

Source

by Matthew S Williams
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Introduction/Dedications

This story is dedicated to Chris A Jackson, James K Bowers, and all the members of the Herscher Project. Were it not for their inspiration, critiques, and constant support, this story would never have been possible. Thanks are also due to numerous friends and colleagues who, as usual, contributed their time and energy to help me with this work. To my parents as well, who at an early age instilled in me an appreciation for the environment and this planet we call Earth. Thanks are due to many people for many different reasons, so some explanation needs to be made as to how this story was inspired, who helped, and in what capacity.

Originally, all chapters in this volume were created as sequels to one original short story. Together, they represent the culmination of an idea that grew from a single project, commissioned by Mr. Bowers at the Herscher Project, to have writers create visions of a dystopian future. As a starting point, all interested parties were told to consult a short story by Mr. Jackson, known as “A Flash In The Pan”. Mr. Jackson, it should be noted, is an established fantasy writer with many titles to his credit, which include the “Zellohar”, “Deathmask”, “A Soul for Tsing”, “Weapon of Flesh”, “Scimitar Moon”, and the hilarious sci-fi spoof “Cheese Runners”. In this particular short story, Jackson explored the possibility of humanity’s future, discerning twelve different scenarios, arranged from worst to best. In one particular scenario, the human race continued to face the challenge of population threatening to outstrip its natural resources. After limitless expansion, it could no longer deny that it was reaching the limits of its growth, and would have to face severe decline. It was from this particular scenario that I decided to write my contribution which I had already named “Source”.

Since I first heard about the project, it was my hope to do a story based on the very real possibility that the human race will someday run out of drinking water. This possibility, should it ever come true, will not only mean environmental catastrophe, it will also have immense social and political consequences. One can imagine without much difficulty how terrible death tolls, international incidents, a global war, government crackdowns, and the rise of totalitarian regimes could result. It therefore seemed like a perfect idea to base a dystopian story on. In addition to that, I also feel it is an environmental issue deserving of attention.

Much like the problem of petroleum and global warming, discussion on this issue has typically been reserved to environmental and academic circles. It is only within the past few years that this issue has graduated from this arena and started to occupy an important position in political discourse. With the very real threat of diminishing supplies of crude oil, climbing energy prices and environmental changes that threaten human lives, it is little wonder why the people and politicians of the world would start to take notice. Unfortunately, this graduation has yet to produce any true results. On the one hand, the issue has been mired by the insistence of some that it is still a mere theory, rather than scientifically proven fact. On the other, it appears that entrenched economic interests are dead set against any initiatives that would discourage the consumption of their product. Nevertheless, in spite of these attempts to block legislation, clearly much progress has been made in terms of promoting general awareness. The mere fact that there is a debate should be considered as a good sign. However, as of yet, little discussion has been dedicated to the problem of diminishing water supplies around the world. It is unfortunate that such a problem would need to be considered imminent before it was considered worthy of our attention. It would also be unfortunate if this problem were left for too long, for as we are learning, global warming may not be helped in time to prevent a severe loss of life from happening in the next century.

In any case, Source was inspired by this combination of factors. Once I had finished with it, I had no doubt that I was pleased with the product. My colleagues were equally happy, but still found room for improvement. I took their suggestions very seriously, and in the end produced Source as it appears in its entirety. It contained many characters and moved quickly between perspectives and time periods in order to establish a sense of uncertainty and impending crisis. Shortly thereafter, the moderators at Elfwood Lysator read it over and were impressed enough to give it a Moderator's Choice award. Several comments followed, many of which suggested I correct the unfortunate cliffhanger ending by writing a sequel. Almost immediately I caved in to their suggestions, and began working on part II of the story, known as "Shortfall". Whereas the first story dealt with crisis, selfishness, and sacrifice, the second volume was almost exclusively concerned with death, loss, and terrible purpose. By the time it was finished, I believed I had more material to work with, enough to fill the pages of a full-length novel.

After completing the shorts named "Deliverance", "Galilee" and "Reclamation", I finally felt I had written the story through to its completion. All parts now appear in their entirety in this volume, not as separate short stories, but as a single, ongoing story. I sincerely hope that people enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. I also hope that its message, that the planet is our responsibility, and every action has consequences, will not go unnoticed. All too often, it appears that the responsibility for conveying important social messages is relegated to authors and intellectuals, and that they rarely manage to have an impact on anyone outside of intellectual circles. But I think it is clear at this juncture in our history that we can no longer speculate about our problems, and that everyone is capable of being informed. We can no longer stand to be silent, and we must deal with the problems facing our world responsibly, and immediately.

Part I: Source

Phobos Mining Camp

The Martian soil. A cloud of frozen vapour passed in front of his eyes as a small gust of wind blew from the far horizon. The deep blues and indigos of the night sky shone in the scattered pools that cut through the red sand dunes. It was the magic hour, when the far sun was beginning to recede and sink into the earth. Terra hung in the distance, its orbitals twinkled like rings of silver lace and its lit-up side emitting pale shades of blue and green.

Delphus knelt down in front of the nearest pool. He scooped up the night sky and watched the stars slip between his fingers. Where it landed, a thousand sighs echoed in his ears. Distant Earth grew brighter, its oceans shining a brighter blue and rings of clouds forming in its skies. He felt a cool wave rush over him. Another gust of wind blew in, carrying the soft hints of a voice in it.

The sound was unmistakable, and it was beginning to grow in intensity. He turned to look in its direction and saw a dancing whirl of sand forming in front of him. The sand began to collect and take form, the voice becoming louder and identifiable as it did. The sand form became his second, and he had news.

“We’ve tapped the Virgin source, sir.”

“Is it good? Is it as good as we hoped?”

“It’s everywhere, sir. More than we can imagine. More than we could drink in our lifetimes, sir! Everything we could ever want, sir. It’s here! IT’S HERE!”

“Thank God.”

He knelt in the sand. The pools began to overflow and form into spouts. Water, crystals and starry eyes merged before him, washing over him and casting him adrift in the night. He was floating in a great sea of burning embers, ferried to somewhere far off.

The voice called again, this time it was much more distant.

“Boss?”

He ignored the voice. It was unwelcome. Why was it unwelcome? Did it not hear the news? The voice called again, so close that it was in his ear now.

“BOSS!”

His eyes snapped open. The ceiling of the cavern appeared before him. Closing his eyes tightly, he cursed his luck. He was awake, and back on Phobos. Somehow, he knew it was too good to be true. The operations centre and its bleeping consoles roused him to full wakefulness, as unwelcome to him as the voice that had been shouting in his ear. Looking over to his right, he saw the source of it, sitting there and staring at him impatiently.

“What’s the time?” he asked aloud.

“Fifteen minutes to the hour,” Milner replied, checking his chrono. “Which is exactly thirty minutes since the last time you asked.”

“Have I been out that long?”

“Just about. You were making funny noises. I thought I’d wake you.”

“I was dreaming,” he said mystically, the words emptying from his mouth like a gentle breeze.

“Really?” Milner asked, looking at him sideways. “What about?”

Delphus felt the vague recollection of something pleasant, of fields full of shimmering crystals, a sky full of stars. He remembered the feeling of having found something, feeling truly blessed to be where he was and beholding something great. But it was fast slipping away. What little he could hold on to was the memory of looking at himself in a small pool that he carried in his hands. Too soon, the pool had drained away, the reflection gone, his empty hands staring him starkly in the face. Was that what had happened, or was it the awakening that made him think of that? He couldn't tell.

He shook his head and avoided the question.

"Any word from the mining teams?"

"Not since their last scheduled report. Still no sign of any aquifers."

"Not even a trickle?"

"Nope," Milner shook his head, his eyes now back on the display console. With nothing better to do, he had taken to watching some vids being broadcast out of Demos. It looked like another lacrosse game, the loud percussions of drive-sticks making contact with the ball and sending it zipping along in the low gravity environment.

"How can you just sit there?" Delphus asked.

"What else can I do?" Milner replied. "Worrying about it isn't going to make a find that much more likely. Besides, the Ministry said it's here, so I'll assume that we'll find something eventually."

Delphus grunted and pushed himself to his feet. Even in the low gravity environment, he could feel his joints straining under the effort of standing up. The intense cold and monotony were beginning to wear on more than just his patience. He needed to get mobile again, to get the blood moving and his mind off the interminable seconds that fell between. Milner, on the other hand, had let his extremities turn numb a long time ago and huddled himself into his seat, hoping to keep his internal organs warm at least. The report was now three hours overdue, and each passing hour made things that much more strained. In the grand scheme of things, they had wasted for more time on this mission, a mere drop in the bucket for their team's long history of service. But everyone knew what hinged on this latest find; their jobs, their futures, and perhaps the future of the Mining Corps. They needed a find, and a good one at that. He knew worrying about it now wouldn't hasten the mining team or change the outcome of their excavation. But, as he'd realized some hours ago, there was nothing better to do...

The loud hum heard through the protection of his helmet finally stopped. Oleg ordered the ear caps removed so he could let some outside noise in. The din of the drill slowly cooling down was there, in the background, beneath the voices cackling through his intercom. The driver had reported a breakthrough. The long depths of stone had finally given way, but the signs were not altogether good. Getting out of his seat inside the tunnel crawler, he worked his way forward into the drilled shaft in the direction of the drill unit. He passed a few surveyors on the way, their reports already filing into his headset. Flipping down his helmet's visor and setting it to surveyor mode, he noted the wall patterns that the surveyor was pointing out.

"Sandstone sir, thick and dry. There's evidence here of leaching, but it looks like its been dry for some time."

"Not a great indication," Oleg said, flipping his visor back up. "Still, that doesn't mean there isn't a source up ahead. I'm going to have a look."

"Be careful, sir," the surveyor called to his back. Oleg dismissed his concern with a wave of the hand. He had been a shaft foreman long enough to know how to step right and

where not to venture. Years of working inside tunnels with sonic boosters also had given him a sixth sense for knowing when a cave-in was about to happen. All his instincts were in the green today. Although they were under the gun and the job was a high-profile one, everything was going smoothly and safely. He only hoped the other teams were fairing equally well. Though given how many, the law of averages stated that at least one or two teams were having troubles, if they weren't already dead and buried.

The Ministry had certainly spared no expense in this particular operation, even pulling teams in from as far away as Triton and Pluto. When that proved insufficient, they even contracted out to private mining concerns, and Oleg was thankful he didn't have any of them close at hand. Private miners were good at guarding the bottom line, but safety wasn't always foremost on their minds. Ministry types, on the other hand, might take longer, but the endless amount of red tape ensured that nothing got done if it meant endangering people unnecessarily. At least that was how he saw it. And he would be damned if any private boys had found their cache before he did.

Making his way to the drill unit, he turned himself sideways to squeeze past a wall of smooth rock on one side and the drill chassis on the other. His suit registered amplified thermal readings as he brushed the rock, the stone still hot from its run-in with the diamond-headed bit. The driver greeted him once he reached the front, touching his helmet in mock salute.

"How's the pressure today?" Oleg asked.

"More than I can take," the driller joked. "Lucky for me I just drives her."

"Right."

The tip still glowed red hot from the pressure and friction. Oleg gave it a pat as he walked by it, throwing his suits alarms into overdrive. Mentally, he told them to relax; he did not intend to be making prolong contact with it. It was simple tradition, one always showed respect for the gear that did the hard stuff and chose not to break down in the process. One also thanked them for when they turned up the desired caches the rest of them just happened to be drilling for.

With that in mind, Oleg stepped past the drill to the precipice to look over the edge into the newly opened cavern. Overall, it was not too impressive a sight. The far wall of the cavern could not have been more than a fifty metres away, best guess. The fact that drill's own headlights were able to pick out the different colour pigments in the sandstone were a good indication. His visor's own estimate confirmed this.

Snapping on his head light, he peered down the edge past the far wall to see how deep the cavern could be. He could only hope it made up for its lack of width in depth. He was surprised to see that when he came to the limit of his helmet's reach, he was still wasn't able to see the floor. Leaning over just as much as he dared, he caught sight of a few more metres, but still no floor. Oleg took a deep breath and did something he always told his miners never to do, he stepped out onto the ledge to get a better look. Craning to see down and not compromise his already precarious footing, he finally saw what appeared to be bottom. Unfortunately, the cavern didn't end there. At the bottom, in a sloping, slide-like fashion, the cavern turned into a tunnel and extended deeper into the rock, beyond his line of sight.

"Driver!" he yelled back. "Hey Ed!"

"What is it boss?" he asked from his side a second later.

"Get back to the crawler, fetch me the portable light and tell the Lilly to come with me. We got some exploring to do."

"No sign of water?"

“Not yet, just do that please.”

A moment or two later and he was joined by Lilly, his second and their team’s seismologist. Behind her, Ed carried the portable light fixture, it fitted to his shoulder like some kind of archaic missile launcher.

“Well, Lil’, seems our sonic readings were incorrect. The cavern is actually a long tunnel extending a lot deeper.”

“Ah,” Lilly said, nodding inside her helmet. “Tunnels can play havoc with sonar readings, it’s no wonder it looked fuzzy before.”

“But didn’t the Ministry say that this was a sure find? Didn’t they say it the presence of liquid H²O that was throwing off our readings?”

“The Ministry says a lot of things boss. Especially when they’re desperate to be right.”

“So what do we do now?” It was Ed asking this from their rear, already looking uncomfortable under the weight of the light. As the one bearing the burden, he was clearly not happy standing around and wanted some orders.

“Well, we came here to find a source and if the only way to do that is to spelunk a little, then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll never get the drill down there as it is, too steep. Tell the others to report back to the crawler and take a break, we’ll go on ahead. And have one of them bring us the tow cables and climbing gear. Looks like we’ll get to do some recreational climbing after all.”

Lilly cringed. She and some of the others had been lured on this outing with the promise that when they were finished, they would be getting some paid time off to flit around Mars. She and a few others had already talked about seeing Olympus Mons, maybe doing some rock climbing when they had the time. Somehow, the foreman had overheard them and it now a bunt of a bad joke. If this was all the climbing Oleg was promising them... well, suffice it to say, that stunk to high hell. But then again, no one was counting on the promises that had been made anyway on this mission.

“Crew reports they’re settled and waiting,” Lilly said after conveying Oleg’s orders and receiving their replies. “Shall we contact Phobos too?”

“No need, we’ll call them when we’ve got something more tangible to report.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ed. “Let ‘em wait it out, I’m sure they’re plenty comfortable sitting up there, not like us down here.”

“What could be taking them so long?” Delphus asked abruptly. “Our best estimates said they should have hit something by now. It can’t take this long to find a source.”

“Boss, relax,” Milner muttered.

“How can you stay so calm?!” Delphus shouted back at him. “Especially now! We are under the gun and if we screw up, you know what the Ministry will do to us!”

“Yes, I know all that. But losing your cool won’t make things better.”

“What do you suggest I do then?”

“Maybe you could start working on your résumé.”

Delphus stared at him for a few seconds. Not knowing how else to react, he softened and allowed himself a small chuckle. Milner laughed too, betraying some of the tension he’d kept well hidden until now. He nodded as well, as if trying to drive the point home.

Yes, it was funny, if for no other reason than because it was true. But the moment passed and they went right back into silence. A moment later, and Delphus was pacing again, wearing a new stripe into the metal flooring.

Rising from his seat, Milner walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Sir,” he said, “there are bound to be some unforeseen delays. We can’t expect the crews to maintain their rigorous schedule under all of the conditions we’ve imposed on them. It’s not humanly possible.”

“Tell that to the Ministry,” Delphus said without meeting his gaze. “If those miners think I’m pressuring them they should try talking to the folks back home. We haven’t been paid in weeks, and my wife keeps telling me about all the bills that keep piling up. Sorry, I just can’t be stoic right about now.”

“I understand, sir. But we still need to stay calm here. Besides, we really may want to assess our options here. It might not hurt to start thinking about...”

Milner’s words were interrupted by the crackling coming from the main comm channel. Looking at each other, the two men then dashed to the comm panel to hit the receiver button. Delphus was there first. Milner almost tripped over himself. As the report came through, he stood back up and tried to recover what dignity he had lost in that hurried little shuffle. So much for calm, he thought. The report was both blaringly loud and full of static. Nevertheless, they were able to get the gist of it.

“Mining base, this is foreman Oleg from mining team Omega, reporting from base thirteen. This is our survey report for potential source find...”

Both men crossed their fingers and waited for the good news.

“Nothing,” the voice said with undeniable finality. “The source is dry. There’s nothing, sir, and from the looks of it, there hasn’t been for centuries.”

There was a long pause on their end. Delphus pulled himself away from the console. He looked like someone who had just been told his dog had been run over. He just stood there shaking his head. Meanwhile, the mining captain needed a reply.

“We’re finished here, sir. Permission to return to the surface?”

Delphus reluctantly pushed the transmitter button.

“Permission granted, Captain.”

The intercom crackled and died. A long silence followed in the control room. Milner waited anxiously for his boss to say something. Given the news, he wasn’t sure if he could think of anything positive to say. Again, he said what he could.

“Maybe some of the other miners did better.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Delphus came back.

“There’s got to be some sources left in this system.”

“Huh!”

That was all he could say to that. Delphus shook his head a little longer, then finally said what was already obvious: “The Ministry is going to eat us alive. This is the third time we’ve had to tell them we couldn’t deliver.”

Nodding, Milner said: “Maybe we should start putting together our report.”

“Right, can’t keep them waiting,” Delphus said sarcastically. “In the meantime, tell the engineers to start closing down the facility. Might as well get a head start on it all.”

“You really think they’ll shut us down here?” Milner asked.

“There’s no reason to stay here any longer. This place is dry as a bone.”

Sheila drummed her fingernails against the top of her desk as she stared out her window into space. Unfortunately, this provided little stimulation, as the view had become boring many months back. There was nothing but an endless ocean of stars out there, and beneath them, a limited view of a planet that had died a long time ago. At first, she had welcomed her promotion and the release it provided from her former office environment. Her new position at the Ministry of Supply meant privacy when she wanted it, a personal assistant, and a new office with a window. It also gave her some space to reflect on the recent upsets that had happened in her life.

Tim was gone; their relationship had dried up long ago. Somehow, her home domicile felt just a little too empty without someone else to be there. At least she still had David, a co-worker from her old position, to keep her company. That was another perk of her promotion; she got to choose whom she wanted for the position of her personal assistant. He was the natural choice and could always make her laugh. Nevertheless, that did not change the basic nature of the work they performed at the Ministry. Things gravitated between long periods of tedium and quick flashes of panic. For much of the year, there was little to do except process minor reports. The rest of the time, they were being pressured to produce major ones.

Clearly, this day fell into the former category. David was out trying to get his hands on one such report. Her bloody superiors insisted they send it by courier, rather than trust in the extremely efficient Terran-Orbital Network, or T-Net for short. This errand took him away and left her with only two options to pass the time: play a solo game of low-gravity ball, or stare out her window. Bouncing a ball against the wall in the low-gravity environment could only occupy her interest for so long. Just how long could watching a ball drift slowly through the air stay interesting? Sheila had it timed to about twenty-one minutes. That only left the unpleasing view of Earth, with all its vast poisoned oceans and dried up landmasses. One could only imagine what it looked like eons ago when it still supported so many lives.

In time, David returned to her office with a metal tube in hand. He was almost breathless when he blew quickly through her door. Dropping it on her desk, he motioned at her to open it.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Huh! Yeah!” he puffed, trying to regain his breath. “They said it was very important, look at it!”

Hesitantly, Sheila picked up the tube and eyed it carefully. It was from the Central Ministry, and even had the Seal of the Executive on it. This was important news! It was little wonder why they had chosen to send it by courier instead of over the open T-Net.

Using her personal key, which was something every manager was entrusted with, Sheila quickly unlocked the tube. Sheila untwisted the vacuum seal and popped the end off. It gave off a loud cracking noise as the unpressurized contents were exposed to atmosphere. Turning it up on one end, Sheila was rewarded with a small piece of crystal paper. The razor thin sheet landed on her desk, and slowly, reacting with the oxygen atmosphere, some phosphorescent letters began to light up on the sheet. The message was short and very direct:

Emergency Meeting. Central Ministry. 0800 HOURS, April 15th. U-V Classified.

“My God!” Sheila said.

“Whooh! Yeah,” David said.

“David!” Sheila said as she looked up suddenly. In her haste, she forgot to tell him to leave the room. Sensing her thoughts, he drew back sheepishly.

“Oooohh, sorry,” he said.

“Well, I guess the damage is done,” she replied. “I suppose I’ll have to kill you now.”

“That’ll be better than you taking me with you!” David came back.

They shared a nervous laugh. David was right, she realized. Compared to the prospect of an ultra-violet level meeting, death probably seemed like the better option. Suddenly, she was regretting her promotion. Whatever this was all about, she was sure someone else should be handling it.

A few shuttle rides later and Sheila found herself at the Central Ministry. The exterior was a cold gunmetal grey, glass and steel being the only materials involved in the construction. The interior was much the same. Nowhere were there any synthetic wood surfaces, which if nothing else, were aesthetically pleasing. There were no smooth surfaces either, only angular edges. The halls appeared relatively deserted. Nowhere was there anyone running errands, passing through departments. She guessed she was one of the last to arrive. The other employees must have been told to lay low, probably for security reasons.

When she finally came to the right area and found the meeting room, she walked in as quietly as she could. The lights were low and the windows were drawn. Still, she thought she could discern a long oval table, and the silhouettes of several people seated at it. For a moment she just stood there and looked around for some sign of an empty seat, or an indication that she was in the correct room. Finally, someone called to her.

“Ministry of Supply? Are you from Supply?” the voice said.

“Yes,” she replied.

“You’re just in time, take a seat.”

Sheila shuffled around to the other side of the room, stubbing her feet a few times in the dark. Finally, she came to an open seat that someone pulled out for her and sat down. Spreading her things out on the table, removing her transcription pad from its case, she prepared for what was sure to be an interesting meeting. Already there was a kind of nervous energy in the air, discernable through the quiet but frantic whispers that went back and forth. Naturally people were asking each other if they knew or had heard anything about this was all for.

A few seconds later, a tall prominent figure stepped to the door and made their way in. In the dark, there was little more than a hulking silhouette to be seen. Sensing the arrival of someone important, everyone in the room went quiet.

When the silhouette made its way around to the front of the room, he tapped some buttons on a small panel that made the lights come on. With the help of some artificial illumination, they could finally discern the presence of a Ministerial Director. This was certainly a surprise. The Central Ministry had not sent a spokesman, but a Director to talk to them. Ordinarily they preferred to let professional speakers handle bad news. This time they sent one of their own. Placing a few items down on the table in front of him, he looked up at his audience and began to speak.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “I would like to thank you all for coming, as this meeting is of the utmost importance. But before I speak, I would like to say that this is highly-classified, ultra-violet level, so if anyone is caught sharing this information, they can be expected to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

There was no response from the table. Everyone knew the drill by now and the message had been plainly labelled. The Director continued.

“Good. Having said all that, I will get right to the point. To break this information down succinctly, the human race has just a few years of potable water left to its name.”

There was a quiet gasp from the table, and everyone’s attention became much more focused on The Director, who went on to explain.

“Our latest missions to Triton, Europa, the Martian Soils, and the outer rings, all ended in utter failure. The more gloomy projections that were filed here, within the Ministry of Supply, appeared to be correct. We are running out of water, and we have exhausted all available sources.”

The quiet turned to some angry murmurs as people began to turn to each other to see if they had heard right. Their anger was certainly understandable, Sheila reckoned. As if to give voice to it, someone raised their hands and said aloud:

“We were told that the Virgin Martian Soils would yield some impressive caches of water in the next year. That was what you told us when we published our annual report for the people to read.”

“That was based on some better projections,” he said unapologetically. “We suspected that at least one source would prove plentiful. But unfortunately, we were wrong.”

“You were wrong?!” the same person yelled out. The angry murmurs turned into loud exchanges directed every which way. The Director looked on, his face undisturbed by what clearly was an attack on his and his government’s competence.

“Well what are we supposed to do now?” another asked. “What do we tell the people?”

“For now,” he said coolly. “We don’t tell them anything. We don’t want a riot on our hands. The Executive and the Cabinet believe that the best thing for us to do right now is rework our projections and begin to come up with an implementation policy.”

“Implementation for what?” Sheila interjected. “What are we being called on to implement here?”

The Director turned his cold, steely eyes on her.

“An emergency rationing policy for when our supplies begin to run out. We need to compute distribution, shipment, and everything in between, down to the very millilitre.”

The angry voices suddenly went quiet. The full weight of today’s meeting appeared to be bearing down on them. Far from being just a whopping load of bad news, this meeting was also about delegating a whopping load of responsibility. Naturally someone thought to ask:

“Well, what can we expect then? What does the Cabinet think we’ll be dealing with, and how soon, more importantly?”

Coolly, the Director began to explain;

“First, there will be a three to five year period where the existing rationing and recycling program can be expected to cover basic consumption. People will have to limit themselves to twenty litres a days for general use, and one litre a day strictly for drinking. Then,” his voice turned slightly graver, “we can expect shortages to start. People will have to cut back on washing, and we can expect some degree of health problems to occur as a result. Nothing too drastic, as long as proper measures are taken. After that... we can expect serious shortages to occur.”

The room turned quiet as everyone pondered what that meant. After a second, someone thought to ask the obvious question.

“What kinds of scenarios are we to expect?”

The Director took a deep breath, folded his arms over and began to run through the most likely ones.

“We can expect riots in the first year, beginning with the Earth Orbit colonies then gradually spreading outward to the edge of the system. They will probably last for a few days, growing in size and intensity and it will be directed squarely at government buildings, as well as any outward symbol of government authority. Security measures will have to remain in effect to

protect us in that time. After a few days, the population is then likely to turn on each other, and we need to be prepared for a prolonged period of riots and civil disorder. Then, we can expect severe dehydration to set in. When calm returns, we can begin rebuilding and instituting emergency procedures to make sure that our reserves are distributed evenly to ensure maximum survival. This will all take at least a year to put in effect and we can hope that by that time, the people will have calmed down sufficiently and will accept government control again. Unfortunately..."

His voice began to trail off again in that characteristic way of his. But of course, everyone already knew what he was trying to say. That didn't stop Sheila from finishing the sentence for him.

"We won't have enough water for everyone who will be left once it's up and running, will we?"

"No," the Director said flatly.

There was a grumble and some muted objections that came from the long table. Suddenly everyone regretted coming to work that day. With one meeting, they had gone from being the caretakers of their race to the arbiters of its fate. And there didn't appear to be a single upside to the news. Finally, someone broke the tension.

"How many people are going to die?" they yelled. "Does the government have a projection for that?"

"We can expect several billion deaths during the initial fighting, then at least ten more during the cooling off period. Once the emergency rationing takes effect, we can expect the death toll to drop substantially, but unfortunately, and your right in this," he said, pointing at Sheila, "we won't be able to stop it altogether, but at least we'll be able to reduce it to a trickle."

"How many deaths in total?" someone asked finally.

"All told," he said with a pause, "anywhere between twenty and thirty billion people."

"Dear God!" the room erupted with cries of horror and disgust. Looking to each other, everyone in the room cursed and wailed and just generally vented their emotions. Throughout it all, the Director maintained a stoic calm, and appeared disquieted by the fact that the others were not doing the same. For a moment, Sheila eyed him and tried to find some measure of humanity in his cold stare. But, she imagined, after years of anticipating situations like this one and trying to find solutions, he had been bled dry. It was no longer a question of whether or not some people would die, not to him. Now it was only a question of who would be left. Upset by their outbursts, he yelled for calm to be restored.

"The central government simply does not have the resources to sustain one-hundred billion lives indefinitely people! We need to start thinking about what is to be done here, implementation and how we are going to deal with the aftermath of this crisis once it passes! We need to prepare the entire civil service for when the shortage hits and the people go berserk. We need to prepare for the waves of violence that will be directed at us, move the shelters to higher ground, if you will. If we are to get through this, we have to ensure that something of this government survives to clean up the mess afterwards, otherwise no one will be left when it's all over!"

That managed to quiet the room down a little. But here and there, there were still moans from servants who were overburdened by their new responsibilities. In between angry faces and teary eyes, one person stood up and asked a pointed question:

"One more thing, sir, which is something we haven't covered yet. What's going to happen after the crisis passes and we get these emergency procedures underway? How are we all

supposed to live, and for how long? Even with reserves and recycling at full use we can't be expected to live forever. So what then?"

With everything else that had been said, no one appeared to be listening closely to this last question. There was very little reaction from around the room. Sheila had all but missed it too. She had David's head cradled in her arms and was trying to console him, poor lad. But strangely, the Director looked like he had been caught off guard by it, since he answered it in a rather rounded fashion.

"We are still working on that," he said, his eyes cast downward. "Right now we need to stay focused on the next five years. One way or another, everything is going to hit the fan in that amount of time, and we need to be prepared for that first."

The one who had asked the question nodded sheepishly and sat back down. There was another pause as the Director looked around one last time with that same cold glare. Deciding that he was done answering questions, he issued his directives to all of them to start implementing preparations as they came in from the capitol. Finally, he issued one last reminder:

"I can assume that I don't need to remind everyone that this meeting is a secret. Nothing that was said here today is to leave this building. We don't want a riot on our hands now do we?"

In the upper living section known as Sargasso Mansions, the night time cycle was beginning to set in. As their section on the outer ring slowly turned away from the Sun, the windows that admitted sunlight during daytime hours began to slide shut. In perfect synchronicity, the streetlights that dotted the artificial landscape began to come on. Through her kitchen window, Indira watched as the eerie light poured into their domicile and bathed the walls in a cool blue-white. Rohit was now an hour late from his job at the Aerospace company, and she was beginning to worry. What worried her more was the strange letter that had arrived for her from the Central Ministry. No one was in the habit of receiving snail mail these days, especially from the government. Worst of all was the cryptic instructions written on it.

To: Mrs. Indira Balasubramanian. From: The Executive of the Central Ministry.

For your eyes only, not to be opened in the vicinity of others.

There was no similar letter delivered for Rohit. Perhaps there was a delay or something. Whatever this was, she would feel better if she knew it was something she could share with her husband. And what was keeping him? He hadn't mentioned anything about a meeting, and would have called if he and his associates were planning something for after work. Rohit was pretty good that way. Given her schedule, it was usually her who got home late and he who was forced to wait. Tonight's change of pace, in addition to the receipt of this letter, made her nervous.

Finally, at ten minutes past the hour, Rohit's hovercar appeared at the end of their street. Indira breathed a sigh of relief, but then began to worry about the obligatory conversation she would need to have with him. She did her best to put on a brave face, and when the door to their domicile opened, she put on her brightest smile.

"Rohit!" she said, a little too loudly. "How was work?"

"Uh, a little weird actually, at least in our section." he said back, putting his kitbag down beside the door and taking off his overcoat. "The boss was passing some strange requests across our desks this morning, then he convened us after work to discuss some new contracts we might be getting."

“Ah,” she said, having only heard half of what he said.

“Yes,” he said, loosening his tie and walking over to kiss her. “He said something about a new government project. They’re asking us to design a new type of space-faring vessel, something radically advanced. They said it would be for some kind of deep-space exploration, but the specifications were for something way beyond what *we’re* used to.”

“Really,” Indira said, her interest suddenly being perked.

“Yep, and that’s not even the most interesting part.” Rohit walked towards the kitchen as he continued to talk. “I also heard from some of the office gossips that our firm is just one of many that are getting asked to do this sort of thing. One of the guys in our section even has a friend over at a sister firm, and he said they’re being contracted to develop some kind of new sub-light engine.” Rohit opened the fridge, pulled out a bottle of Soy beverage, uncapped it and continued. “The funny thing is, the specs they were given were also for something that would have to be massive, something similar to what we were given.”

For a moment Indira almost forgot about the letter. It appeared Rohit had some curiosities of his own, and she wondered if they were somehow linked. Noticing that she hadn’t said anything for a moment or so, he called over to her to get her attention.

“Patnii! Did you hear what I said?” he asked.

“Hmm! Yes, I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I’m just a little distracted. Something came for me today.”

“What?” he asked, putting the bottle down. Indira chose to take a roundabout course to broach it with him.

“Tell me, did anybody at work say anything about getting a strange letter in the mail, from the government?”

Rohit’s face scrunched up in that curious way of his. He thought for a moment, and then nodded.

“Yes, I heard someone from our R&D division saying something about that. He said it was sealed and confidential and everything, but he had to shut about it because he didn’t want to get in trouble.”

Indira suddenly became worried. So, other people were getting these too. And Rohit wasn’t. Even though she had no idea what the contents were, she knew enough to be afraid.

“What going on?” he asked, inching his way towards her and taking her hands in his.

“I received one too!” she confessed. “It’s on the table.”

Rohit turned to look at their dining room table. Sure enough, a large sealed package was there, the front covered with seals and insignia’s that indicated its authenticity. He was worried now too, although not as much as she was. It was not so much for her own sake, but for his. Had the situation been reversed, it would be him that needed to be consoled. Looking to her, he said gently:

“I’m sure it’s nothing bad. Why don’t you open it?”

Taking a deep breath, and throwing aside the warnings that were printed on it, she looked her husband in the eyes and said gently:

“I want to open it together.”

Sheila had been staring at the contents of her cup for almost an hour. There were only three drops left in it, and for some reason, she could not bring herself to drink them. Against the far wall, the dispenser sat quietly in its basin; dry as a bone and emitting no noise whatsoever.

The slightest drop would have sent her running over to it, trying to tighten the knobs to prevent the loss of any precious liquid. Everything that had happened within the last few months had created some sort of panicky vigilance in her. Everywhere in the known universe, the most precious resource was drying up from under their very noses, and aside from a select bunch of government workers, no one knew about it. She wondered how long they could possibly keep it a secret from the masses, before all the pieces concerning the construction program and the lottery suddenly clicked into place for them. So far, the Ministries had been a model of secrecy, and in spite of some idle gossip, no one seemed to know what was happening. The elaborate cover story, about a new era of exploration and discovery, appeared to be keeping them preoccupied. The current rationing regimen also appeared to be going over relatively well. Given how most people had become accustomed to rationing programs in one form or another, no one suspected that this new one was any different.

It's so unfair. She thought as she rotated the cup around on her table. Next to it, the two packages she had received that morning lay unopened. She knew exactly what they were about, so there was no need to look inside them. In one, her ticket for the Phoenix project, with instructions of where to go when the time came, had been placed. In the other was her special rationing permit, in case she decided to forgo participation in the former. Both needed to be opened, and one needed to be signed and returned. As usual, David had been the one to deliver them to her. And, like before, she had to keep them a secret, seeing as how he wasn't entitled to either. While he would be expected to stay behind and probably die like so many others, she had been given two choices:

One: to show up at Canaveral Spaceport in four years time, board a new exploration craft, and travel to Proxima Centauri where she would take part in a new colonization effort using select members of the human species to seed a new world.

Two: to stay behind and be entitled to her fair share of water rations so that she could live through the coming draught and chaos and become a member of the new Terran government once it took power.

Either option was a guarantee, and because someone somewhere in the upper levels of government decided she was useful, she was free to choose between them. David received no such consideration, and for that matter, neither had her old flame, Tim. Relying on a former associate, and using a little of her clout, she had managed to sneak a peak at the Ministry of Supply's master list. She thought she had it hard, trying to make this choice. But for others at the Ministry, making up the list of who would be allowed to survive and who wouldn't was much worse. Most of them didn't even have the option of taking part in Phoenix. They were expected to stay behind, be the data punchers and paper-pushers in the new government. And for those who couldn't even take part in that, they were being kept busy with the implementation plans, and were being kept in the dark about the rest. The Central Ministry was making preparations for everything that needed to be done, taking just about everything into consideration. The one thing they weren't making any provisions for was the incredible feeling of guilt that was setting in. Some people were literally writing up lists that did not include their own family members. There were rumours that some people were cracking, and were subsequently being disappeared. The secret had to be preserved, at any cost.

The water in her glass had all but evaporated by now. It was silly, not drinking it. One way or another, it would disappear. It was not as if she could will it into someone else once it was already poured. But somehow, drinking it felt wrong. Pushing the glass away, Sheila took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. She was dangerously close to cracking herself. And

there was still work to be done, and an important decision to be made. There was simply no point in avoiding it forever. Forever was a luxury, a myth, that nobody had anymore. Grabbing at one of the packages, she unsealed it and readied her pen to sign it.

Who knew? Maybe some of that old clout could be used again to ensure that David retained his position when she became part of the new government. Maybe not. In either case, she would not cut and run. Someone needed to stay behind, to see to it that those who could survive did.

Rohit peered over the edge of his cubicle to see if there was anyone within earshot. He spotted a group of people congregating around the dispenser, swapping stories of the latest over hot mugs of coffee. He didn't need to near them to know what they were talking about: the letters from the Ministry. Scarcely anyone in his section didn't know someone who hadn't received one. But strangely, very few people had received them themselves. It was just a few days ago that Indira had received hers, and when they opened it together, it only serve to deepen their confusion. A single sheet of crystal paper, carrying rather specific instructions, was all that was housed within.

The bearer of this bond must report to the nearest Ministry outlet to receive their new status card. Please consult your T-Net to find the outlet nearest you. Neither this bond nor your status card are transferable.

The significance of the message was something they debated for many hours afterward. *The bearer of this bond?* And more importantly, what status card? Last time they checked, neither Rohit nor Indira were entitled to any special status under Ministry law. There had read about pockets of early settlers on Mars, Ganymede and Europa who enjoyed that kind of status, the original colonists of the early settlement period who were all but overrun and supplanted when the main dispersal took place centuries later. These people were confined to small pockets in and around the main settlements on all these worlds, and were still required to carry cards to identify themselves. Beyond that, neither could think of a single reason why the Ministry was issuing new cards, or why they needed to show up at some outlet to receive them. And most importantly, why had Indira received one and not he? Was she in some kind of trouble, or was he?

The letter also contained explicit instructions that the contents were of a sensitive nature, but how could anyone stay silent on this? And why exactly were they meant to stay silent when there was clearly nothing to talk about? All most people could do was speculate endlessly. For those working with Rohit, the speculation didn't end there. Rumours also abounded about the project they were working on. Could the two be related, they wondered. Many theories were put forward: one person suggested that the ship they were working on was part of some new colonizing effort, and that the people receiving cards were being selected to be part of it. Another believed that the ship was a emissary ship for some intelligent species, and that the people with passes were to be frozen and put aboard for the sake of study once they reached the alien homeworld. Yet another suggested that the ship meant to find intelligent life and bring it back to Earth. The pass cards were part of some new caste system that would simplify human culture to the point that they might be able to understand us. Or perhaps the aliens' social structure was already known, and this was an attempt to emulate so humanity would have something in common with them, a cultural bridge if you will. The last person he had heard

from went so far as to suggest offering these people as breeding stock for the sake of some alien-human hybrid.

Not comfortable to sit around and listen to these increasingly morbid ideas, Rohit had finally decided to do some snoop work. Taking a second to make sure no one was looking, he slipped away from his desk and made his way to the nearest lift. Several floors below, in the archives section, a friend and associate was waiting for him. He had told her he would be there by 1100 hours. Checking his chrono, he now hoped she hadn't taken that estimate too literally.

The lift deposited him in the archives level a moment later. Rohit stepped off into the dimly lit corridor, making his way along the floor grating to where Miriam had her office. Along the way, he kept an eye out for anything out of the ordinary, which in this section, didn't include much. Down here, where the air was dank and the insects proliferated, the only thing that could ever be considered as odd would be the presence of people. This, though, he kept a careful watch on. Since the project had been delivered to their company, security had been tightened exponentially. Foreign contractors were even brought in to ensure that non-essential personnel did not make it into the building, or even in from another section. And then there those new confidentiality agreements they were all forced to sign, limiting the amount of contact employees from different sections were allowed to have with each other. That was certainly not effective, seeing as how different sections were responsible for designing different areas of the projected ship. How were they to successfully design a space-worthy vessel if they couldn't even confer with each other simple matters like stress requirements, weight tolerances, or even basic measurements? This duty was being handled by the executives, who routinely took in the mock-ups of the different sections, put them together, then resubmitted them to the workers with specified corrections. That only made the project longer and more cumbersome, since each section would then make changes, resubmit, and have to contend with new incongruities. It made no sense!

Yes, life was getting weird for their little firm. Not to mention a few others Rohit knew about. Their rivals over at Titan Dynamics, for example, who were responsible for designing the engine (at least according to rumour). How were they to know what their engine was to be capable of unless they could speak directly to the designers of the ship's fuselage?

But that was why he was down here.

He came at last to Miriam's office, an improvised booth tucked into a corner beneath an assembly of duct work and water pipes. From the floor, a number of optic cables fed through the grating, leading to and from a few processors that sat around the confines. These cables ran deep into the foundation, where they were linked to a company data storage vault that had only recently been installed. The extra capacity was needed, apparently, though they would not say why. But anyone knew it was because of the government contract.

Miriam looked up at him suddenly, turning angry when she saw him. "You're late."

"I know," Rohit said, hands raised and extended. "Sorry."

"Well get in here, security is bound to another sweep in the next while."

"You got the passcode?"

"Yes," she said, holding up a small strip of crystal paper.

"Alright, I'll be brief."

Miriam moved away from her computer and let him settle in next to it. She slipped him the small sheet and sat back while he typed away furiously at her console. While he waited for the requested information to come up, he thought to ask her something patently obvious. Even if she was in charge of archiving all the information on the project, she still had to contend with the

ciphers the company had put in place. None, except for the Directors, had full access to the blueprints or the specifications.

“So how did you get that code anyway?”

Miriam rolled her eyes. “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Rohit nodded. That was probably best. Everyone knew that she was dangerously under stimulated down here. It was only logical to assume she would eventually dedicate them to doing something subversive.

The computer complied a second later. Several blueprints, documents and files came up. The entire compendium, all there before him, with the corporate logo in the upper corner: Kronos Unlimited. The general specifications, the necessary tolerances; everything except a statement of purpose. Nowhere in the file was that stated, as far as he could see. But at least he was finally getting a clear picture at what their project was supposed to look like. The outlines only covered the ship’s general design, what their company would be responsible for. But this was enough, at least for the purposes of identifying what it might be for.

He began scanning over the breakdown of ship’s sections. This was the info that was confounding them especially. His eyes zeroed in on a section in the documents called “Hab Module”. He looked carefully at the blueprint mock-ups, noticing the thousands of power couplings that ran into the area. That was odd, to be sure. Unless they were intending to equip this thing with tons of outlets, there was simply no reason to be running so many power conduits into this area. He could only assume that crew quarters were to be placed in this area, but for the most part, the section was open, no walls or enclosures, just support beams bristling with electrical sources. Adding to the mystery, there was also another area designated for habitation. It was connected to the navigational section, presumably for housing the pilots and crew.

“This is weird,” he said aloud.

“Hmmm?” Miriam replied.

Rohit let her move in next to him and pointed to the screen. “We were thinking this ship is equipped for deep space travel, but it also looks like its meant to house thousands of people for extended periods of time.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, just look at this storage facility,” he said, pointing to another series of mock-ups. “It’s got specifications here for more power conduits, same as the ones in the hab module. The same power requirements for each one too, which is to say, a low level of consistent current, with lots of redundancies built in.”

“So?”

“So, that means more cryounits in this storage bay. Ships don’t carry frozen food, its just not practical when you can freeze dry it. So these have to be to house living organisms of some kind. And then there’s these massive lockers, which means they expected to be carrying lots of food.”

“Okay, Rohit. Time’s up, you gotta leave.” Miriam stood and began to pull Rohit away. Rohit continued to talk, Miriam obsessively checking her watch.

“But look, there’s also a section labelled ‘Research’, why would they have a science module in this thing? Obviously, because they’re looking to run studies once they get to where they are going. This isn’t just some exploration thing, its clearly meant for terraforming or something.”

“Rohit!” Miriam grabbed him by the shoulders. “Our agreement was you get to see the blueprints for a few minutes, that’s all. You’re off script now, so you gotta leave.”

Rohit was about to object, but was turned around and shoved out the door of her office a second later. Damn, she was strong when she needed to be! He wanted to stay, to demand that she acknowledge his conclusions. But Miriam had already returned to her computer and blanked everything he had been looking at. She also made sure to hack into the system and erase any mention of their entry, making the archive conveniently “forget” that someone had accessed them. As far as anyone was concerned, the last few minutes had not happened. Rohit shook his head. Subversive. Patting the wall nearest him, he said his goodbyes and turned to leave.

“Thanks, Miriam. I owe you one.”

“You’re damn right you do!”

Director Behrens looked over the figures one more time. The grave assessment was not getting any better, no matter how many times he looked at it. With all the preparations they had been making, emphasizing worst-case-scenarios, he simply did not expect that they were being liberal in their estimates. But the data appeared to say otherwise. He scanned the room next, noting all the faces of the Deputy Ministers, assistants, and additional personnel from the Ministries of Supply and Residence. Everyone who made up the Contingency Council, as it was now called, a select group of individuals who now reported directly to Behrens and had executive privilege (not the least of which was the right to know exactly what was going on). All them looked on, some morbidly, others firmly. No one appeared particularly happy with the subject of today’s meeting.

He looked next to the other side of the table, closest to him. There, clad in their special green and black business uniforms, were the three individuals he had not yet bothered to introduce. None of the Ministry people knew who these people were, and it showed in their faces whenever they glanced in their direction. Behrens didn’t mind. He would be sure to let everyone know who they were when the time was right. In the meantime, they would hear all he heard and adjust their own plans accordingly.

“So we’ll have to recalculate for an even greater casualty rate,” he said finally. Across the table, one of the members nodded to him.

“Yes, sir. Approximately ten percent over and above what we initially thought.”

“How is this possible?”

Another member from the Ministry fielded that one. “The rationing program has encountered some difficulty in recent months, sir. Several of the recycling plants have suffered setbacks thanks to mechanical breakdown. They can be repaired, but the time loss will mean inevitable deaths.”

Behrens nodded stoically. “Well, not a significant change, considering the overall loss,” he said.

He saw a head near the end of the table look up at him. The woman he recognized from before, the outspoken one. He anticipated another verbal lashing. But this time, however; she said nothing. Perhaps she was tired of beaten down by practical realities. He looked on and decided to wrap up the point.

“I shall alert the Central Ministry to make the necessary adjustments to our plans. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, sir. The matter of the lottery.”

It was one of the people from Residence saying this. Reaching over to one of her aides, she was handed a crystal sheet which she began to read from.

“So far, we have a eighty-five percent rate of receipt. All the notifications have gone out, but fifteen percent have failed to register a response.”

“Reason?” Behrens asked.

“Several possible reasons,” the lady said. “Notifications could have been disposed of, lost, or people may just be afraid to acknowledge them.”

“Rumours are abounding about what they might mean, sir.” One of the unknown guests to his right said this. Behrens shot him a sharp look that told him to be quiet. He looked back to the representative from Residence and nodding at her to continue.

“In any case, we need to conduct a diligence investigation, make sure that these people have been properly notified and agree with the terms of the selection process. Otherwise, we will have to begin mailing out notifications to the alternates.”

“Yes, I see.” Behrens slid all the crystal sheets in front of him together into a single pile and closed the file folder around him. Everyone interpreted this as an indication that the meeting was over and began to do the same. Behrens sat quietly as they left, his remaining guests remaining behind to be with him. Few people thought to take this into account and left quickly, happy that their business was done for the day. When the last of them was gone, Behrens turned towards them and began to speak.

“So what does Exigencies have for me today?”

Jenkins, the head representative of their new and special section, a recent addition to Contingencies, was the one to answer. “Well sir, we too have some news regarding the lottery.”

Behrens reclined in his seat and swung around to face them fully. “This should be good.”

Jenkins smiled and produced two documents that he passed over to Behrens. “These individuals, Rohit Balasubramanian, and Miriam Blanchette. These two people are suspects in a recent breach of security.”

Behrens ran his hands over the documents, noting their pictures and the relevant info.

“I see that only one of them is a lottery selectee.”

“Yes, sir,” Jenkins replied. “Mr. Balasubramanian is however married to Mrs. Indira Balasubramanian, who is a *selectee*. His company was contracted with designing certain features of Deliverance. The Kronos Corporation.”

“Ah, yes,” Behrens said. “The ones who were entrusted to design the fuselage.”

“Yes, sir. Which puts Rohit in a key position to know certain facts, about Deliverance *and* the Lottery.”

Behrens slapped himself on the forehead. “How the hell did we mix that up?”

“Unclear, sir,” said Alia, to Jenkins left. “Clearly some wires got crossed between Supply and Residence.”

“Recent behaviour has also suggested he might be investigating both matters.”

“What kind of behaviour?”

“This work report,” Jenkins said, producing another document. “His supervisors have noted a recent and very sudden change in his work habits. As you know, it was the intent of the Central Ministry to ensure that the project was divided up into pieces, thus ensuring that no one had a complete picture of what they were working on, and that it would not be completed ahead of schedule.”

“I remember,” Behrens said. It was agreed that a completed vessel of this kind would generate a lot of questions and controversy if it were to be finished too soon. Something that big and that complicated, gathering dust in a bunker somewhere. Sooner or later, someone would

notice. Discretion through inefficiency seemed safest. But now, clearly, someone had poked a hole in that scenario.

“So what do we think he did?”

“We think he might have breached his confidentiality agreement with the company and communicated with an outside party. His section’s completion of their assigned duties, ahead of schedule, leads us to conclude that he arranged to get access to classified information on Deliverance.”

Behrens looked at Miriam’s dossier. “This woman?”

“The only one with access that he has a known relationship to,” Watkins, the third and final representative of Exigencies, replied. “She’s responsible for archiving information for the Kronos Corporation.”

“She’s in charge of cataloguing confidential information for the company. We can’t prove she shared anything with him, but...”

Jenkins didn’t need to say it. The very purpose of Exigencies was to plan for the worst and take appropriate action. Proof was not nearly as important as unintended consequences. And it was clear that involving multiple Ministries in the work of preparing for the coming crisis was not working very well.

“I assume you are recommending that these individuals be taken care of?”

“Confirmed, sir,” Jenkins said. “We feel their disappearance would seal the matter, as well as discourage anyone else in the company from sharing information.”

Behrens looked them all over and sighed. He knew they were right. It was neither fair nor just that these individuals would have to suffer for the incompetence of the Ministries, but there was far more at stake here than the lives of two people. Though there was still the matter of his wife to consider. Naturally, he thought to address this next.

“And what of his wife? Am I to approve of his removal as well?”

Jenkins looked at the others. “That might be necessary, sir. Again, we cannot be sure of what passed between husband and wife, but we would need special permission to pick up anyone who is a lottery selectee.”

“We wouldn’t want to step on anyone’s toes,” Alia added.

Behrens tried not to scoff. Somehow, the same theme kept coming up over and over again at all Ministerial meetings. He was growing quite sick of it. “So it’s the lives of a few in exchange for the lives of the many?”

“No, sir,” Jenkins said. “Just three, at the most.”

“Three,” Behrens said with a sigh. “Alright. Consider this your confirmation.”

The massive hull gleamed white and blue under the hangar bay’s industrial lights. On all sides, tubes and pipes were connected to its massive frame, pumping essential gasses and liquids into its tremendous stores. From one end to the other, the ship measured three thousand metres in length, and stood about seven hundred metres tall at its highest point. Shaking his head, the Behrens took it all in and recounted just how much the damn thing had cost the Terran people! And yet, seeing it before him, he wondered if it would all be worth it. Due to time constraints, and the immense cost of constructing just one of these things, there was simply no way to test it. All of their simulations said the sub-light engines would work, that the navigational instruments were perfectly tuned, and that the cryo-stasis modules were sure to keep the passengers in a perfect state of suspended animation until they reached Proxima Centauri. Nevertheless, there was simply no way to be sure.

“Well, sir?” the chief engineer asked as he stood next to him. “How did we do?”

“Outstanding,” Behrens replied, “I just hope that’s enough.”

“It is without a doubt the most ambitious program we’ve ever undertaken sir. We should be proud.”

“I just wish it could have been under better circumstances,” Behrens said gravely.

“Well, yes sir,” the engineer agreed. “But as they say, ‘necessity is the mother of invention’.”

Behrens turned, looked at the chief engineer and all of the scientists that had assembled for the unveiling. Huddled together in their white lab coats, they all looked so proud of their accomplishment. He wondered if any one of them was being forced to leave someone behind. As some of the keenest minds in the solar system, all of them had been given a free pass on their own ship. Their families had been included as well, if for no other reason than because they must be good breeding stock. But he still wondered if there were not friends or extended family that had to be sacrificed.

“So,” the engineer continued, “I trust the Central Ministry is satisfied?”

“All specifications have been met,” Behrens replied. “There’s nothing more to worry about here.”

The engineer nodded while Behrens turned to look back at the ship.

“Shall we break out the bubbly, sir?” he asked next.

“Do what you like, I can’t stay,” Behrens replied.

Looking over to his colleagues, the engineer shared a common look of confusion with them. His distant manner led them to believe that they had done something wrong. But it appeared the Central Ministry was giving them the stamp of the approval without question. The engineer couldn’t understand why his mood was not lighter. With this one move, they had assured the survival of their race. Some sort of celebration was certainly in order.

“Sir,” he said gently, “we have preordered some bottles of champagne for the occasion. We were hoping the Executive and his Cabinet would be here to celebrate with us. But since they’re not, would you like to stay here and christen the hull with us?”

“No thanks,” Behrens said flatly. “I need to return to the Ministry immediately. We have some pressing engagements to attend to.”

“But sir—” the engineer began. Behrens cut him off.

“I wouldn’t expect you to know this, sir, but since you’ve been holed up in this place, a number of things have begun. I need to get back, and make sure the situation is secure, and that all our ‘guests’ on this little voyage are still accounted for.”

“What’s happening sir?” the engineer said naively.

“The riots have begun,” Behrens replied. “The rationing program ran out sooner than we expected. The Phoenix subjects are locked away, and we need to make sure we keep them and every other piece of government property safe.”

“My God!” the engineer moaned. “Is there any danger?”

“Not likely,” Behrens replied. “The rioters are attacking police and government buildings more than anything else. No one, save us, knows where the lottery winners are being held.”

“Our families!” the engineer yelled. “Are they safe?”

“There’s no reason to assume they’re not. They are the lucky ones after all, safely tucked away until the big day. But I’d still like to get home and make sure mine are safe.”

“They’re not with the others, in the secure area?” the engineer asked.

“No, they wanted to spent there last few days at home,” he replied.

The others behind him began to turn to each other, and shared some looks of concern mixed with some mild relief.

“Enjoy your celebration ladies and gentlemen,” Behrens said before turning to leave. “You’ve earned it.”

Without another look, Behrens left them in the hangar bay and made his way to the shuttle that would take him back home. As he walked down the hall away from them he thought he could hear the sound of some corks popping. There was no laughter or cheers to be heard, but at least they were doing something positive with this moment that they had worked so hard for.

In the darkness of his den with only a single light turned on over his desk, Director Andrew Behrens picked up his pen and began to write on a stack of crystal paper. His wife and kids had gone to bed hours ago, and he was all alone to finish this letter. He had tried penning it for weeks now, but every time he started he could not bring himself to finish it. Worse yet, he feared it would be found before the right time. Now, with the lights out, and only a few hours before all members of the Phoenix project were supposed to report to the Canaveral Spaceport, he finally found the nerve to write it.

Dear Sandra,

By the time you read this, it will be morning, and time for you to take the children to Canaveral. Be sure to stick to the route I outlined for us to take. It’s the safest route out of the city. I regret to inform you that I have been lying to you these past few months. The Central Ministry provided you and I with passes, as well as our two girls. Unfortunately, they were unable to process little Billy. According to the Ministry’s guidelines, no one suffering from a mental illness or disability was to be processed. This was not due to something fundamentally lacking in the Ministry’s humanity. Recent events have simply forced all people to think in terms of their survival.

I feel horrible Sandra. Not for lying to you, that was essential to my plan, but for something far worse. I feel horrible for the deeper vagaries of my own nature. When news of this impending crisis first reached my ears, I was soothed by the notion that at least my family would not be claimed by it. And in turn, I used this same reasoning to ensure the cooperation of those beneath me. We at the Central Ministry ensured the cooperation of all who were needed by promising them that they would be spared. And almost to a person, it worked. Somehow, the thought of billions of people dying paled in comparison to the notion that we, as individuals, would survive. As I write this, billions upon billions of people are struggling to ensure this very thing. Our selfishness and our unconcern for the survival of others, proved to be our salvation. This is horribly ironic considering that it was this very thing is what led us this to this point in our history. It is man against man out there, Sandra, with no provisions being made for the sick, the weak, and the helpless. I have to wonder about the thinking of our ancestors, why they chose not to heed the warnings when they first became clear. How long did they think we could continue to grow without restriction? Why did they continuously decide to defer this problem to future generations? Did they honestly think we would be any wiser, or find a solution where they had failed?

But I cannot judge our ancestors too harshly. There sin is our sin, and it was my sin. I chose not to care about others, only us. But these feelings were invariably cut short when it became clear to me that our son would not be spared with the rest of us. No amount of consolation or realism, as preached to me by the Executive or my equals, could convince me that

this was in any way correct. My selfishness ended the day I realized my own kin could and would be affected. This I could not stomach, and because of it, I have been given the chance to accomplish something unselfish at last.

Here are my instructions: the passes are non-transferable, but no one will put up a fuss once you arrive at the Spaceport. Hand them all over to the Pass officers, and if anyone tries to give you trouble, show them this letter. As my last wish, no one will deny our son a spot on the transport. I know you will take care of him, and our girls, and I hope beyond hope that you will all be able to make some kind of life for yourselves on a new world. I wish I could be with you, but in a way, I always will.

Reaching into the desk drawer, he produced a small pistol he had bought from an antique dealer many years ago. His wife had repeatedly questioned the logic of keeping an old firearm in the house, what with the kids around and all. Nevertheless, he managed to convince her that it was worth keeping given its value, and promised it would never be loaded. It had been very difficult, but he managed to secure a single round for it about a month ago. Seeing as how the room was soundproof, no one would be disturbed by the noise. No one would find until morning, and by then, it would be too late for her to do anything except comply with his last wishes. Placing his pen to the crystal paper one last time, he penned one final thought.

I love you Sandra. Please, do not shed any tears for me. Take the children, all of the children, and never look back. Love Forever, Andrew.

Andrew finished the letter with a quick signature. It was a bureaucratic habit he had fallen into, always signing his name to a document whether it needed it or not. He was sure she'd find it amusing someday. Without another thought, he placed the pen down, picked up the pistol, put it to his temple, and pulled the trigger.

Part II: Shortfall

Kalum watched the monitor as the images from the previous day's events played across the screen. Although somewhat blurred by all the interference, the essentials came through loud and clear. The bright fires and curls of black smoke were unmistakable against the background of raging bodies. The noises were equally telling: unintelligible, loud, and violent. These were the unmistakable signs of a population gone mad. It was like listening to the crazed noises of caged animals. On the surface, it might have seemed to most like anger was what drove them on. But in his experience, Kalum knew that the prime motivation had to be fear. Anger, although potent, could never move people to act this way. These were a people driven to the brink of insanity by the knowledge that very soon, they were going to die.

Denial was also a very potent motivator. No matter how inevitable the reality of their death was to them, something in the human psyches seemed to be telling them that by turning on each other, they could somehow stave off death for themselves. And into this mess, Kalum and his unit had to be sent.

Taking his position next to the oversized monitor, their chief resumed his briefing and let his words keep pace with the flow of the images.

"We estimate the death toll to be about two-hundred thousand already. As the Ministry anticipated, the mobs appear to be attacking any and all government buildings, be they federal or local. However, the violence for the most part dissipated around civil buildings when the local militia began firing on them. Now, the violence appears to be making its way into the cores of all major urban centres. The people are looking for anything and everything that could contain even trace amounts of water. Our orders are to redeploy to sector 8 where we will be responsible for cordoning off the area and making sure the violence doesn't spread back towards ministry or municipal buildings again."

The recording ended when a stray object thrown from the crowd took out the camera that was watching them. The monitor went black, and the chief keyed a button that shut down the monitor. The room lights came on, revealing a room of musky, unwashed men and women, their suits having gone days without a wash. Looking around, the chief asked for questions, and immediately some hands went up.

"What's our level of authorization, sir?" one of them asked.

"We have been authorized to take whatever actions are necessary," the chief answered. "We need to contain the populace and make sure they do not threaten any government assets, which includes buildings and infrastructure. On the protection list are office buildings, desalination and recycling plants, electronic grids, manufacturing centres, and the rest. We need to protect them by any means necessary."

"Have any other units reported losses, sir?" another asked.

"Yes, some have. But our estimates say they're pretty minor."

"Have we been charged with protecting any civilian property, sir?" a third queried.

"No," the chief replied plainly. "Our primary concern is protecting Ministry buildings and anything else deemed necessary for dealing with the situation after this phase passes. Keeping those intact is our primary concern."

There was a moment of silence from the room. All the immediate questions had been asked, insofar as their obligations and powers were concerned. The chief looked around for another few seconds, waiting for any other questions. Before he could dismiss them, Kalum decided to raise his hand and ask the one thing no else thought to.

“So is this strictly a crowd control mission, sir?”

The chief looked somewhat confused by the question. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, sir, it doesn’t sound like we’re there to protect property unless its government, and from what I can tell we’re not going to be distributing water either. Are we just expected to hold the in line in our sector and let the people kill each other?”

The chief looked around the room as he absorbed the question. Others began to look in his direction warily. Kalum always did have a knack for asking the inappropriate questions, even if they were all thinking the same thing. Licking his lips, the chief looked back in his direction to respond.

“Do you see any excess water packs around here, son?” he asked irritably. “What exactly would we have to give?”

“Those people are just looking for a glass of water, sir. And the Force has enough for all of its officers. Couldn’t we spare some?”

“And exactly who do we give it to, Kalum? They’re billions of thirsty people out there, and we give water to one of them, the rest are going to want some. What do we do then? Besides, we’ve got enough for the people we have and not a drop to spare, and if you doubt that, wait til you see how you feel after a few hours out there. By then, you’ll be happy you’ve been given a water pack at all and you won’t be in the mood to share it. That goes for all of you. Stick to the orders you’ve been given and do not try to intervene in the crowds.”

“Yes, sir,” Kalum replied meekly.

“Good, now are there any other questions?”

Kalum kept his eyes to the floor for the remainder of the briefing. Even as they were dismissed, he thought it better to examine his shoes and not look up at anyone. He’d brought up a perfectly humane question, and it was shot down completely by cold logic. Somehow that only made the frustration worse. No one liked what they had to do. No one liked the cold logic of it. But worse was the knowledge that there was no choice in the matter. This was one of those rare situations they had taught about in the academy, where kindness was tantamount to cruelty. The order of the day was to let nature take its course, cold, ruthless, unforgiving nature.

Minutes later, they were in the locker room getting their stuff together. The stink was all the more potent there, where every article of clothing was kept between their sweaty, sweaty shifts. Aside from the smell, Kalum noticed that there was a certain tension that he had never felt before. Him and his unit had performed crowd control missions before, but this time things were much, much different. Today, the general population was the enemy. Kalum couldn’t say for sure, but he felt they were in agreement with him in that none of them knew exactly how to feel about it. No one was talking about it, that was for sure, which was proof enough that they didn’t like it one bit.

There was always that feeling of wickedness when it came to controlling people who had legitimate grievances. But this time, it was so much worse.

When news of this first hit, it was like a bombshell. For obvious reasons, it was kept secret for as long as possible. Since then, in spite of the fact that there really wasn’t time for serious reflection, everyone had found their own way of dealing with it. But somehow Kalum, who had always felt himself to be just a little more sensitive than most, couldn’t find a way to deal with it. It was as if what they were doing was so bad, yet so necessary, that it was better not to feel anything at all. That appeared to be the only solution, blocking out the feelings instead of

trying to make sense of them. Word had it that if you tried to make sense out of something this bad, it would drive you nuts.

After strapping on his flak vest, grabbing his helmet and holstering his sidearm, Kalum made a quick assessment of his most important piece of equipment: his water pack. It was filled to the brim, as per regulations, and airtight. He had been told repeatedly to inspect it, to make absolute sure there was not even the slightest hint of a breach in the casing or the inner seal. Any unwanted loss could mean death down the road. Their water rations had been calculated based on absolute necessity, with only minor losses taken into account. Once they were all set, the unit huddled up in the centre aisle of the locker room to wait for the Lieutenant. The LT, an officer by the name of Michael Cole, was quick to arrive on the scene. Leaning in close with them, he quickly went over the items that the chief had deliberately left out of their briefing. The most delicate information was always best when shared privately, from a more trusted source. Naturally, it fell to the unit commanders to make sure their troops understood exactly what they had to do once they were out there.

“From where we’re stationed, our most immediate concern is keeping the mobs from spreading beyond the inner city. We can expect that they will leave us alone, but just in case they don’t, be sure to remember what the Ministry told us. If we do get into a firefight, remember to conserve ammunition as much as possible. We’ve got a limited number of bullets so don’t shoot unless you have to, and if that you have to, shoot only as much as you need to. Do not fire on the crowd until I authorize you to do so, and make sure to aim for the leaders in the group and not anybody who looks like they might be having second thoughts. The hotheads are the ones you need to worry about. The nervous ones will disperse if you give them an excuse. Target men first, avoid women if you can, and avoid children altogether. The chief says that none were spotted in the crowds, but in my experience, you’re better off taking that with a grain of salt. If you do see ‘em, don’t touch them. It’s bad enough we may have to shoot their parents, don’t want to have shoot them too.”

Cole took a deep breath before delivering what he felt was the worst part of it. It was certainly the hardest part for him to say.

“Keep in mind that the bullets you have are armour-piercing specials and they’re likely to go through more than one person. If you must shoot, try to make sure someone else is behind them. Hit them once, and then pick another target. With luck, they’ll disperse with a few shots and we won’t have to worry about them anymore. They’ll turn around, head back to the inner city, and then... we hold our positions and wait for the fire to burn itself out.

“One last thing,” he said, getting to a cheerier note. “Make sure your ration pack is on your back tight, and make sure they don’t get at it. If the crowd gets their hands on you, that’s the first thing they’ll go for. If they happen to grab it, unstrap it and let them have it, it’s not worth getting pummelled over. Last, but not least, if we do get overrun, we fall back to the APV,” he took one more breath and uttered the last of it, “and let the machine-gunner do his job. Everybody understand?”

The unit nodded somberly. By this point, there was not a man or woman amongst them who did not fully understand what they were about to do. Without another word, they unholstered their weapons, checked their ammo, and headed for the APV.

“Whatever happens, stay close together, and if you find you’re having problems, try to think of these things as cordwood.”

“Cordwood?” one of the volunteers asked.

“It’s an old saying, don’t really know what it means,” the foreman replied. “But trust me, it helps.”

The volunteers all nodded, even though no really understood. Any help someone could offer with this task of theirs was certainly welcome. The municipality was doing its best to assemble volunteers for clean-up duty, and including David; they had succeeded in getting two hundred people from his sector alone. It was surprising, but then again, David was surprised they were that many people left in his section. Now, not more than a day later, David and six other volunteers were riding in the back of a military vehicle waiting to be dropped in their particular clean up zone. On command the volunteers all snapped on their protective gloves and breathing masks as their transport rumbled its way down the street. Several times they hit a bump in the road and the people in back were thrown a little out of their seats. Eventually they got the bright idea to strap on their safety harnesses. Soon, the rumbling of the engine died down as the vehicle pulled in to a stop. The driver’s voice then sounded over the intercom.

“We’re here!” it boomed.

Two soldiers stationed at the back grabbed a hold of the doors and gave them a hard push with their shoulders. The doors creaked open and let the harsh light of day in. They then jumped to the ground and ordered everyone else to hop out.

“Go!” the foreman yelled from behind them.

Two by two, their feet began to hit the ground. David was one of the last to leave, and as he disembarked, the light momentarily blinded him. After being in the backseat of an all-terrain vehicle with no lights, it was hard stepping out into the light of day. Or at least, what passed for light of day anywhere on Terran-Orbit One. Nevertheless, he did not need to see immediately to get a sense of where they were. The ground was hard and gravel-like beneath his feet, which told him they must have come to a stop on a major road. The smells also told him that something bad must have happened here not long ago. Fires and acrid smoke were not far away, and something else he could not identify.

When his eyes finally adjusted to the light, he was horrified to see how that his senses were right. Everywhere, bodies were strewn about. Those immediately in front of him were intact but punched full of holes. Not too far away, there was a pile that looked like they had been ripped to pieces. Their were charred remains here and there, and spots on the ground where it looked like fires had once been, but had since burned themselves out. But by far, the most overpowering sight was the endless mass of bodies that lay across the road. He could only guess what had happened here. A tangled mob of protesters, and a clash with armed militiamen. The pile was apparently all they had thought to do with some of those they had killed; the rest lay where they had feel after they had been shot. Standing near the pile, the foreman yelled at them to get over there and start moving them first.

There was a loud honk as another vehicle pulled in beside him. David’s head was a dizzy mess; he realized the driver was honking at him to get out of the way. It was a large box-like truck, with thin slit windows and a big metal frame. He could only surmise that this must be the cargo vehicle, where they were expected to haul the bodies once they’d rounded them up. Two men jumped from this vehicle, and one began to shout at him. He had a hard time discerning the words, but he guessed he was urging him to do his job. David nodded, and took another look in the direction of the terrible mess.

The others were up ahead, doing as they were told. Putting aside his delirium, David put one foot in front of the other and walked over to the pile. As he neared it, the smell grew worse. The acrid smell of smoke suddenly had something putrid to it, dead flesh decaying in the sun.

“Cordwood...” David said to himself, “cordwood.”

Slowly, David put his hands on the nearest limb he could find. It was an arm, a bloodied, bruised arm. There were many people piled on top of it. He simply chose this one for some reason. It was in front of him. To his side, a disgusted volunteer was pulling a carcass off the top. It loosened the pile a little and made his grip on the arm a little easier. David gave it a tug. He felt rewarded when it slid easily towards him, but at the shoulder joint, it was stuck again. For a moment, he pulled it in different directions, trying to loosen it somehow. Repeatedly he said to himself: “*Cordwood, cordwood. Just things. These are just things. Relax.*”

David found himself rewarded again when the limb came loose and was pulled all the way out. After the shoulder, it suddenly ended. What looked like exposed bone and flesh hung there, but there was nothing else beyond it. Somewhere in the pile, the rest of the body remained, and wanted its arm.

David dropped the arm and leapt back. His breath became frantic and his head swam again. He could no longer stand, and sunk down to one knee. The foreman saw him and yelled over to him to get past it, to stand back up and try and think of something else. The words were a blur and everything moved in slow motion. His stomach churned and suddenly wretched up everything he had put in it over the last few days. There he lingered for a few moments while he waited for someone to come and console him, but no one came. Everyone else just carried on, and the foreman started yelling at him.

He wasn't cut out for this. That was what every bone in his body was telling him at this moment. He had no business being a lucky survivor. He had no business being born in this terrible time. The preselected outlived others, and those that lived had to clear their remains away. He couldn't stand it. He wished it were him in that pile. They were the lucky ones, in his estimation.

David sat huddled under the showerhead, trying to get every last drop to where it could do some good. In almost no time at all, the shower ended and a loud buzzer sounded, signalling him to clear out and make room for the next person. He didn't want to leave. He wasn't nearly clean enough yet. The smell was still in his nostrils, and the filth was still on his skin. The memory of touching those things, and the long ride back with all those unclean people, made him feel horribly dirty. It was as if it went to his bones, and no amount of washing or scrubbing seemed to make it better. Even a clean change of clothes didn't improve his mood, although the thought of the others being incinerated seemed to agree with him.

When he was finished and in the front hall of the municipal building, waiting for Sheila to pick him up, he finally began to feel a little better. The memories of the day's activities were not far from his mind, he just learned not to think about them as much. For hours, he had been struggling, trying to find some way to feel better about what he saw. Eventually, he found it was better just to not think about it at all. Instead, he tried to look forward to seeing his good friend again. Sheila said they would take it easy once the day was done and they were finished with their volunteer work. Whereas David had been stuck with cleanup, Sheila had been slightly luckier, scoring a job at the mortuary. Neither would be in a good mood once they were done, she predicted. But she claimed they would find something to take their minds off of it. She also let on that she had some liquor stashed in her old desk drawer. No doubt that was her way of dealing with the drudgery of office management. That would certainly come in handy now. Given the situation, regulations strictly forbid the consumption of diuretics. But right now, getting wasted together felt extremely appropriate. He wondered if she had any smokes stashed

away too. Even though neither of them partook of that habit before this mess hit them, he imagined neither of them would be getting through this without a little help from some friendly narcotics.

Sitting impatiently at her desk, Executive Tanya Blair sat and tried to absorb the sad and sober news her advisors had to share with her. Standing around her in a horseshoe pattern, they appeared to be saying the exact same thing. The figures, estimates, and official tallies were all in from the first few days of the emergency rationing program, and not one of them was the slightest bit optimistic. As usual, it seemed the Ministry of Supply had fudged their official estimates. It was a rule that was never broken. Whenever it came time to figure out a budget, they guessed too low. But when they were asked to estimate how long the essentials would last, they guessed too high. Human planners appeared to have a built-in need to hope for the best. Why they let that influence their planning was beyond her though. At a time like this, realism would have been appreciated. But such thoughts were secondary right now. If they all lived through this crisis, there would be plenty of time to lay blame.

“So what now?” she asked her advisors. “What are our fallback options?”

“Madame Executive,” the tall one nearest her replied, “we have no fallback plans for this kind of situation. All our plans were based on selective rationing. Now that we know that supplies won’t last as long as they need to, we need to cut back, plain and simple.”

“How is that simple?” she demanded. “Are we to go into people’s homes and tell them *‘sorry, but your ration card is no longer any good’*? Or should I send in the troops, have them take away their cards by force? We all know there’s no way people will surrender those willingly.”

“Madame,” another to her left interjected, “the sooner we do this, the better. Your right in guessing that they’re will be resistance, which is why we should move as soon as possible. And the militia should be noted since they are probably going to have to be called in as soon as possible to handle this.”

In a flurry, Tanya ran her hands over her messed-up, oily hair. The heat and anger only made her feel dirtier. In that moment, she looked over to Dr. Gowles, who had yet to say anything at all during the briefing. As a special advisor from the Ministry of Supply, he was supposed to be providing insights into the particulars of their rationing program. But so far, he had kept his mouth shut, and she was beginning to doubt if he was of any use at all. During the entire course of the meeting, he sat against the arm of her office divan looking pensive. It was his department that had produced this monumental failure, so it only made sense that they should be doing something about it. A little needling in his general direction felt in order right about now.

“Alright, so its really just a question of who then, isn’t it?” she said in his direction. “So that means we need to decide who to cut off and how we expect to deal with them once we do. But this time, I suggest we make sure our estimates are realistic. No more happy projections designed to please people.”

The horseshoe of advisors all nodded humbly. Gowles did not appear to hear her. She raised her voice a little and made she sure she projected it better.

“I also suggest we take another look at the estimates on how much water we think we can safely produce and recycle for the immediate future, and I want negative projections here again. I think it’s fair to say we need some pessimism there too.”

There were some more nods, but no suggestions or challenges. Again, Gowles had nothing to offer, and in her mind, Tanya wrote him off as a lost cause. Nodding to herself, she resigned herself to what had to be done. They had to quickly and quietly decide who was going to die, once again. As if sensing her thoughts, Mr. Ortega, her deputy Executive, tried to offer some words of consolation.

“Madame, we’ve managed to keep this government safe by appealing to people on the grounds that this was for the good of the race. I think we can do that again. And as long as we’re successful in the long run, we can rest assured that history will judge us fairly. I think we can all assume that future generations might even thank us someday for every hard decision we’ve made these last few months.”

“I’m not concerned about the judgements of history, Ortega. I’m more concerned about what our troops are going to have to deal with when they go door to door and try to take ration cards away from people. That is what they’ll have to do because there’s no way someone is going to surrender their card willingly. And what’s going to happen when they go from house to house to collect them? Do you think anyone is going to allow our troops to take cards away from someone’s wife, husband, father, mother, or child? Of course not, which means our troops are going to have to put more people down, and this time it’s likely to be entire families! You can play the hindsight card all you like, Antonio! We can all try to defer the morality of this decision and let history judge, but the fact is, if we do this, we’re monsters. What good is it to survive if you don’t even deserve to live?”

“Madame – ” he tried again before being cut off.

“Shut up!” she ordered, and everyone went dead silent. Nobody dared speak for the next few minutes. Finally, as if something finally set his mind in order, Gowles appeared to mutter something to himself.

“Do you have something to say, Doctor Gowles?” Ortega demanded.

“I was just thinking of what you said,” he replied coolly. “It seems to me we have quite a problem on our hands here. Right now, we have a situation where over half the population is raging blindly while the rest try to control them. People are dying by the millions, while at the same time, the survivors are consuming faster than we can supply them.”

“Yes,” Tanya said in an obvious tone. “In a nutshell.”

“Well, Madame Executive, every problem has a solution.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our plans for supplying water are limited because our only options are to recycle what we have, putting it through endless processes of filtration and desalination, or to manufacture sources of water. Sooner or later, that our recycled stocks will run low because of the simple reality that there are too many pollutants out there. As they accumulate in the water, whatever has already been recycled will become slowly poisoned and inconsumable. The other option, chemically manufacturing it, depends on us being able to bond oxygen gas and hydrogen indefinitely. Here too, we are limited because this requires a steady supply of basic elements, which are also in dwindling supply. The only thing that appears to be in steady supply these days, is dead bodies.”

“What are you talking about?” Antonio asked him.

“I was just thinking,” he said, turning his attention to the deputy for just a moment, “that perhaps a common solution is available here. We just haven’t taken notice of it yet.”

Around the room, every advisor began to look at her for to see if she understood. Tanya, for her part, just sat there, caught somewhere between confusion and disbelief. For some reason,

her skin began to crawl, and suddenly she felt like she understood the true reason for Mr. Gowles' presence that morning.

"Every problem has a solution, Madame Executive," he said, "every problem."

"After weeks of crackdowns, shortages and mass riots, the situation appears to have finally settled here in T-O One. Although authorities still report sporadic disturbances in the Martian and outer colonies, the Central Ministry has declared the system-wide shortage of water to be over. No official explanation has been given for the sudden upturn in water supplies, but sources have indicated that these new supplies are expected to last almost indefinitely. Executive Tanya Blair is expected to make a statement in the coming weeks, but for now, the Ministry remains closed for comment. Rationing is expected to continue, but the pass system has been declared null for the time being..."

"Notice how they don't mention the body count," Joel Francis said over a tall glass of ice water. Running a rag over the counter, the server, a Mr. Joe Barber, agreed with him.

"Half of reporting the news in knowing what to leave out," he said, coiling up the wet rag and twisting the moisture out of it. "I doubt they'll tell us before they're good and ready."

"They've got to give us some kind of idea," Joel answered. "I mean, its not like they killed every single person who died out there. Most of them killed each other or died of exhaustion in the streets."

"General public's not likely to see it that way," Joe came back.

"Yeah, your right," Joel said, and went back to his drink. He finished it with one last sip and set it down in front of him. Pushing it a few inches away, he placed his hand on the top and began to study the sides. Condensed droplets had formed all around it, which for some reason seemed utterly fascinating to him. Once the drought was declared over, he figured he'd be guzzling this stuff down like there was no tomorrow. But as he sat there in Joe's bar with an abundance of water at his disposal, he couldn't bring himself to do anything but nurse it. Every sip felt like a blessing, every droplet a life-giving elixir. As a citizen who had the privilege of being a manager of an inner city manufacturing facility, he had been fortunate enough to get a pass. His wife Sarah did clerical work, which also worked in their favour. Between the two of them, the Ministry had all the reason in the world to make sure that they and their family survived the crisis. Unfortunately, very little could be done to protect them when the riots first hit. The first few days had been particularly hard, but they had managed to pull through. Almost everyone in their neighbourhood had to watch as their water was turned off, and any and all means of procuring any were taken away. The supply was cut off, and all around their domicile, the race for survival was on. He and his family were pre-designated winners, surrounded by an infinite number of losers.

That was only the first day. After that, the looters and angry fools took to the streets, taking matters into their own hands and preying on others in the hopes that it might bring them some relief. They gathered in the streets, looking for whatever they could take, and invading whatever places they thought had something worth taking. Hour after hour, Joel and his family sat huddled in their domicile trying to stay calm amidst all the yelling and pounding. Most of it came from the streets with occasional stray objects coming through the windows. Every time one hit their place, it brought screams from the children. Joel and Sarah tried hard to keep them calm. Any screams would only indicate to those roaming the halls that there were people at home, frightened people, and they knew that would draw looters like moths to a flame. When the noise started to come from the other side of their door, that was when things really got

desperate. The children could stay calm no longer, and fled to their rooms to hide under their beds. Joel barricaded the door as best he could, and more than once, he had to hold it shut with his body to keep people from breaking in. With all that was going on, who knew what they'd do if they found people inside with passes?

Luckily, the carnage lasted for only a day before gunfire from far off sent the mob in all directions. For about twenty-four hours calm had been restored, with only sporadic violence taking place in the streets. It was only a day after that that the Ministry suddenly declared the drought over and volunteers began coming in to clean up the mess. They were followed by government vehicles who came in, passing out free jugs of water to all those who would accept them. Quickly they ran out, but they were back the very next day with more. Day after day since, they showed up, hauling jugs of water. It all seemed like a miracle, or a very convenient turn of events.

Now, it was little more than a week after the first people took to the streets. Everything appeared to be returning to something approaching a state of normalcy, if one could call millions dead and many more missing normalcy. And now that it was all over and he felt safe enough leaving Sarah alone in their domicile, he decided he would drop in on Joe and see how his business was doing. Somehow it had avoided any major damage. The front window had been smashed, but there was no fire damage to speak of. The rioters who had broken in were looking to do more than just inflict damage. They were looking for a cool, out of the way place to hide. They were also looking for a place that was stocked with things they could drink. Wisely, they had left the liquor bottles intact and instead raided the fridges for bottles of water and soda. From the look of things, it appeared that they had made the place their home for a little while, but when news of the firing squads reached them, they quickly abandoned the place and moved on.

"I heard that those spooks the government sent in never even bothered to come into any of the neighbourhoods. Can you believe that?"

"Yeah, heard that too," Joe said, having finished his cleaning and coming over to talk now. "I heard they never left their spots around the office buildings or the plants."

"So they let the people just kill each other. I can't believe that. And they really added a lot of bodies to the mess too."

"Yep. Anybody who got too close to what they were protecting paid the price."

"I can't believe they did that."

"Well, they did manage to get things under control after all. And they did show up with relief workers and plenty of water when the time was right."

"Yeah, funny thing that."

The two shared a mutual nod while Joel fiddled with his empty glass some more. Joe eyed him and the empty glass patiently. It had been several minutes now, and he still hadn't ordered another one. He was one of the few people he had seen who wasn't gorging themselves as much as possible now that the ban on drinking water had been lifted. But he had to respect that. After all, who knew how long this mysterious new supply would last? Conservation was still wise, and he had to admire Joel's restraint.

"Suppose they'll ever tell us exactly how many people died out there?" Joel asked next.

"Probably," Joe came back. "I imagine they'll have to, seeing as how everyone wants to know if anybody who died was someone they knew."

"Yeah. I guess your right."

“Take me,” Joe said, throwing the rag over his shoulder. “I got a mother who lives in Sector Thirteen.”

“Thirteen?” Joel said with some concern. Joe certainly knew why.

“Yeah, I heard they got hit pretty hard over there too,” he said. “So many people without passes crammed in with a few people who had, and the soldiers didn’t do much at all in that area. Wasn’t much there worth protecting. I gotta think people like me are gonna’ get some kind of heads up.”

“What if you don’t?” Joel said.

“They have to,” Joe replied simply. “I’m not gonna’ rest til’ I know she’s alright.”

“Have you tried the T-Net?”

“It’s still down,” Joe replied heavily. “But I know it’s just a matter of time before someone starts coming around from the government offering us some information. They already sent in the troopers and the workers, and the water carriers. I figure they got just one thing left to do before they can pretend like this is all over and done with.”

Passing the glass back to him finally for a refill, Joel asked him:

“Have you ever wondered where all this water came from?”

“What do you mean?” Joe asked.

“Well, we all got told that the supplies had run out all across the system and there just wouldn’t be enough for everybody anymore. Now, suddenly, the trucks start showing up, giving it away for free. We scarcely need our passes anymore, even though I won’t be throwing mine away anytime soon. It’s just think it’s weird, and the fact that there’s no explanation.”

Thinking it over, Joe eventually shrugged and went back to arranging his glasses in a neat and tidy fashion. As a bartender, very little surprised or confused him.

“Who knows? Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe they tapped a new source right after they told they couldn’t find one. Maybe they found some new way to make it, or clean the stuff we already use. Maybe all of the above. I imagine they’ll explain that at about the same time they decide to tell us exactly how many people died out there because of them.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

The crates had been arriving for well over forty-eight hours. By now, all personnel were pulling triple overtime. Even those who had been given leave had to be recalled, and they were none too happy about it. But the pace and the constant flow of goods into the warehouses demanded that somebody be there to unload and inventory them. Having earned a ten-minute break, Tran found himself a quiet spot near one of the empty loading docks and sat his exhausted body down. Against a small stack of tightly bound cardboard boxes and a makeshift stool, the guys had fashioned a perfect spot to relax. At the moment, he couldn’t possibly fall asleep, but some rest was just as good. Pulling a stashed cigarette from his ear, he placed the tip in his mouth with trembling fingers and reached for his burner. After all the heavy lifting, his arms had taken on some tremors. He found he needed two hands just to get the burner steady long enough to light the bloody thing.

When this was all over, he could expect plenty of incentive for all his hard work and overtime. But explanations would probably be slower in coming. The water crates had become a regular arrival, but now there were plenty more shipments, of a different and confusing nature. First came the sealed crates of protein feed, then the supplies of elemental carbon, phosphorous, calcium, oxygen, and nitrates. Rumour also had it that one warehouse in another sector was receiving cold storage cases, with biohazard written on them. Special teams were called in to

handle those, people who were experienced handling medical and biological waste. No one had time for speculation, but everyone had questions on their minds, and the bosses sure weren't explaining everything. Mr. Francis could always be trusted to be give his employees a straight answer, but all he had to say was "Get back to work, we're backlogged with shipments as it is!"

No one seemed to know anything. Or at least they weren't letting on that they knew anything. And as for the rest, they were too tired to ask anymore. Sitting there, Joel let the smooth acrid smoke fill his lungs and absorb into his blood. The moments began to fade away. Too tired to think, but too worked up to sleep, he lay there, dragging at his ciggy, and waited for his time to expire. After what felt like a lifetime, another worker came to him and relieved him. Time to get back to it. There was simply too much to do, and not enough hours in which to do it.

"How is the operation running?" Ortega asked from his spot up on the catwalk.

"Perfectly," Gowles answered. "We have all systems honed to near-perfect efficiency and we are still only scratching the surface in terms of supply."

Ortega scoffed, "Why don't you call it what it is, bodies," he said.

"Very well, bodies," Gowles corrected himself. "In any case, we are producing millions of dekalitres a week, and every body provides us with numerous trace chemicals and elements as well."

"And what about protein?" Ortega asked indignantly. "I heard your technicians were processing bodies for food supplies as well."

"Yes, that is true," Gowles replied. "We are looking ahead to the next possible crisis. The supply of bodies has been useful in that respect as well."

"That was never part of your proposal, neither was using bodies to extract mineral resources!"

Gowles drew back slightly from Ortega. The tour of their new facility was clearly wearing on the man's nerves and his conscience. It was little wonder why he had come instead of his boss, poor thing. No one liked the idea of it, but none could doubt its necessity.

"As I said, Mr. Deputy, we are thinking ahead here. We are already processing these subjects for their base materials, no sense letting any of it go to waste. It may be necessary someday soon. Besides, its not as if its not going to good use. Our water engineers have been complaining about the shortages of new supplies of carbon and oxygen for manufacturing water, now they have all they'll need for the foreseeable future."

Ortega took a deep breath and nodded. His knuckles were turning white against the support bar in front of him. His stomach was turning. Gowles could see it. He'd seen it many times before, especially in the last few days. All of his personnel had to go through the stomach hardening process. After days of performing their lucrative work, they were finally getting to the point where they were no longer losing their lunch. He had almost forgotten how hard it was for some people to get used to it.

Looking down below, he watched with Ortega as technicians, dressed in full sanitation gear, loaded the cold, pale bodies of the dead into the extraction tanks where every cell of their bodies would be drained of their natural water. When this process was complete, the desiccated remains of the bodies were then removed and placed into the ovens here the remains were broken down into protein powder. Next, came the molecular processing, where the protein was again broken down, and trace elements were extracted. Last, there were the sorting machines that separated the protein from the elements, and distributed them all into respective sealed

containers. The operation stretched across the entire facility floor, in many places walls had to be removed to accommodate all the machinery.

“In addition,” he continued, “the techniques employed here could go a long way in helping us to update our recycling techniques. We have already learned so much about improving filtration and extraction processes, as well as the removal of microscopic organisms. This has been good for research and development, as well as supply and demand. Out of all of this, we can expect that this will prolong our supply and recycling methods well into the foreseeable future.”

“Good for us,” Ortega muttered. “I’m having hard time seeing the silver lining in this doctor.”

“Then do what I do,” he replied. “Look upon every day that we give to our people as a blessing. See this entire crisis as a hard lesson, but one that has been learned. God has been gracious to us, he has withheld the apocalypse for another day. We should be thankful.”

“Please doctor! God didn’t do this to us, we did, and how many people paid the price?”

“Some must be sacrificed so the rest of us may live, Mr. Deputy. It’s a rule as old as the universe itself. Survival demands death, and the chief cause of death is life itself.”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it,” Ortega said, taking another look at all the processing units and workers that lay beneath him. “Does it work?”

“Yes, as long as you take it seriously. To think any other way, I’ve found, is to admit that our race doesn’t deserve to survive. In spite of its faults, humanity is just too precious a creation to just roll over and die.”

Ortega gave the bar a shake, looked over at Gowles with a strange smile on his face.

“Where did they find you doctor?” he asked. “Where did the ministry dig up someone as... clever, as you?”

Gowles was not entirely flattered. The way he said the word made it seem as if there were something truly ambivalent about it. Still, he shrugged off the semantics and answered honestly.

“I was in tucked away in a research department until my predecessor was selected for the Survivor ship. Apparently, someone felt my thinking process would be of better use in an executive role. At least, they began to think that way when they realized this crisis would hit.”

The hairs on the back of Ortega’s neck stood up. He could read between the lines. Gowles thinking process, the sudden promotion, the all too prompt suggestion he made back in the Executive’s office. It all clicked in that instant.

“This idea of yours, it’s not a new one is it?” he asked pointedly.

“No,” Gowles answered plainly. “I may have suggested some such thing in the past. Not for immediate use, of course, but rather as a stopgap measure in case a problem should emerge.”

“Jeezus,” Ortega muttered.

“The truth is, this crisis is nothing new either, Mr. Deputy. There were many people, at many different levels in the whole of the Ministry, who knew that this would come someday. Recommendations were made, but little was ever done about it because apparently the bureaucracy thought it better to trust in the idea of a limitless resource base, and deferred questions of limits to specific think tanks. I once had the honour of sitting in on some of them and between us, we decided that the human race had perhaps a few centuries left before extinction.”

“And that was when you recommended this?” Ortega asked, waving his hand at all that was beneath them.

“Yes, among other things. Many of my colleagues made similar recommendations, such as developing a vessel that could carry survivors to nearby star systems, planting the seed of humanity elsewhere in the galaxy to ensure that no single fate could claim us all.”

“I take it you also came up with designs for these machines you have now?” Ortega asked, pointing to them once again.

“Yes, we did recommended that the appropriate machinery be developed to accommodate our ideas, but again, the Ministry left it to us to produce them. It was easy enough, it was really just a matter of adapting existing units to work on human bodies and finding people willing to do the labour. But of course, all this information was filed away somewhere or stocked in some warehouse. It was not until my predecessor was told that the last viable source of water in this system was exhausted that all our reports and findings were pulled and put to use. Interestingly enough, we also found ourselves being promoted, as you no doubt noticed in my case.”

Ortega shook his head. Again, he could feel that terribly uncomfortable feeling rising in his stomach. Think tanks, deeply laid plans, extinction, and all that conspiracy crap. All of the terrible sights and revelations he had witnessed that day was enough to make anyone lose their composure. And he was no exception. The nausea was becoming too much, he needed to find a way out of there.

“Excuse me,” he stammered as he ran to the nearest door he could find. On the other side was an electrical room with transformers and readouts everywhere. He tried in vain to find a bucket, but there was nothing. Finally he gave up and keeled over.

Gowles stepped into the room behind him, turned and ordered the few people who had gathered behind them to leave. Slowly, he shut the door, and placed a hand on Ortega’s back. A few more heaves, and it finally appeared to be over.

“There, there,” he said gently. “It’s alright. There’s been plenty of that around here lately.”

Ortega coughed as he cleaned the last of the vomit from his mouth and tried to regain what was left of his dignity. It was several minutes before he could straighten up again, or think of something to say. Alas, there was nothing he could do to shake what he was feeling. The horrid spectre of the Ministry of Supply’s new operation was in his face full-force. He felt horribly powerless, a Deputy Executive, and completely powerless. No longer was his office in control of things. Everything had passed to the hands of this man and his horrid ideas. How did he stand doing what he did, with only a few kindly justifications to ease his mind? What kind of ghoul was he? Or was he being too hard on him? Could this man really be just a dedicated soul doing what had to be done for the good of the race?

“I take it your still wrestling with the morality of this thing?” Gowles said, accurately guessing his thoughts. “Well, if you find you still can’t stomach this after some time, perhaps you can console yourself with the knowledge that we may have saved our race from extinction. It cost us was a few billion lives, but through that, the survival of the vast majority may very well be ensured. I think you will see that as a bargain.”

“What about tomorrow? What about the next time? What then?” Ortega asked, finding the strength at last to issue a challenge to his twisted logic.

“We’ll have to deal with it when the time comes, but that’s the beauty of it. We have the luxury of looking ahead now. We have the freedom to live and meet that challenge when the time comes. Perhaps our race will finally learn from this, perhaps not, but every day we live from now on is a gift. The people who died are heroes, not victims. And someday people will view them as such.”

“You mean, when they learn the truth?” Ortega ventured.

“Heaven forbid it will be in our time, but even if it is, I’m sure they’ll understand why it had to be done. None of them will be able to doubt for long that they and their loved ones are alive because of what we did this day. We are alive, Mr. Ortega. Revel in this time, because it may be all we have.”

“Have one, you look like you could use it,” Tanya said, passing her deputy a tall glass. Slumping on her divan, he lifted his head up just long enough to take a look at it, then promptly let it slump again.

“I can’t touch it. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to again.”

“You have to drink sometime,” Tanya said, pushing the glass closer.

Ortega’s body produced a noticeable squirm, but couldn’t bring itself to stand up and take the glass from her. His little visit to one of Gowles facilities had taken a severe toll. At least two aides had confirmed that he had thrown up inside the facility, and then again on the way back to the capitol. The display certainly hadn’t done much good for the image of their office, but at least he managed to keep his suit clean.

Finally, Ortega pulled his head up again and looked long and hard at the water-filled glass. It looked so clean, so pure, no horribly untainted. It possessed absolutely none of the immoral taint that he was sure it would. Nowhere in it were the signs of death, sacrifice, and cold rationalism that had created it. As hard as he tried, he could not see the bullets, the billion plus bodies that were piled in the streets, one on top of the other, or the machines that sucked every bit of bodily water from a no-longer living body. He couldn’t see all that, just the beautiful, clear sign of pure water. And his stomach earned for it, to feel its cool rejuvenating calm settling into his belly.

“I can’t,” he persisted, “not as long as I know where it came from.”

Tanya cringed at the sound of his voice. It was so rough and scratchy. He never sounded this bad, or this morose. Now she was feeling it was even worse that she let him volunteer to check the place out. Withdrawing the glass, she decided to let him be for the time being. When he was ready, he would drink it, like they all would.

“You know what’s funny about all this?” he said suddenly. “It feels kind of familiar, you know?”

Tanya looked closer at him, but didn’t say a word. Ortega went on:

“When I was nine years old, my father took me to this park enclosure on Luna where they had these huge, indoor lakes and trees. It actually looked like the kinds of forest you see in old datafiles, or in the vids, except for the domed ceilings that looked out into space, of course. But it was still a park, and you could actually catch real fish there. My dad took me fishing one day, and we caught something. My father said we ought to cut it up and fry it. The only problem, for me anyway, was that we had to kill it first. I thought he would, but my father said that I should do it. He figured I needed to learn where food really came from, that this would help to build my character. So, I did it, I picked up the rock just like he showed me, and I got ready to smack the thing’s head. I was pretty scared; I mean, I never killed anything before. But I didn’t want to disappoint him, so I hit the thing again and again, until its eyes went glassy and he told me to stop. Then, he cut it up, fried it for us, and we had that fish with some beans and rice by the fire, just the two of us. I remember thinking how good it tasted, until suddenly I remembered that this was the same fish which hours earlier, I had killed. I started remembering how I saw fear in its big, fishy eye while it squirmed on our deck, choking for breath. Then I remembered how its

eyes went dead and cloudy after I bashed it with the rock. And I remembered how a couple of times, it would convulse in the boat on the way back. A nervous twitch, even though it was dead. Then I found it harder to eat.”

“What did you go?” Tanya asked half-interestedly.

“I stopped thinking about it. It made it harder to enjoy, so I just kept eating and tried to forget about where it came from.”

“I see. Well, maybe that’s what you need to do here.”

“Yeah, it worked once, ah?” he said ironically. He took a deep breath, and again began to ramble on philosophically. “I wonder if anybody will even care when they find out,” he said. “If it’s anything like how we take what we eat for granted, I doubt they even think twice about it unless it’s right in their face, staring them dead in the eye. Why does that worry me so much?”

“Because it means we don’t bother to consider obvious questions as long as we don’t have to,” Tanya replied. “Because it means nobody’s a saint, and there are simply no moral absolutes in the universe. The only absolute right now, Ortega, is that if you don’t drink this, you will absolutely die.”

Ortega took another look at the glass. Again, he saw no trace of the things he needed to see there. And Tanya was right of course, about everything. These things, these little life lessons, they bothered him. But if he hadn’t learned them by now, then somehow the whole point of this crisis had slipped past him. There simply were no rules that applied with absolute precision. Those who led were no better off than those who lived and worked beneath them. None of them could be counted on to do what was right and correct, or even what was in their long-term interests. They simply did the best they could, one challenge at a time, all the while with no real idea of what lay ahead of them. Such was life, a lesson he first experienced as a young boy and for some reason, had to learn again. All the important things – right and wrong, the sacredness of life – seemed to fall by the wayside when it came right down to it. All that really mattered in the end was staying alive.

Summoning all the strength he could, Ortega pulled himself to his feet and walked over to her desk. Placing his hand around the cool glass, he lifted to his lips, and drank it down as fast as he could.

“How is he doing?” the chief asked the doctor as they walked together down the crowded hallway.

“He’s responding well to the medication, unfortunately, the delusions have not subsided. The experience was apparently so bad that the images have lodged themselves in his mind.”

The chief gave a troubled nod and took another look around him at all the people who had been crowded into the tight halls. Like all government run clinics, the place had been flooded by people in dire need of psychiatric help. It was another terrible aspect of the crisis’ aftermath, something else that the Ministry had not adequately planned for. Alongside the victims who had witnessed terrible acts, there were also those who had committed them that needed help dealing with it. Alas, it was his own that he was concerned about that morning, one in particular.

“Do you expect him to make a recovery, doctor?” he asked.

“Recovery?” the doctor replied. “Do you mean a total and permanent recovery, or a partial one?”

“What’s the difference,” the chief asked after a moment of thought.

“Sir, I think the best we can hope for right now is that we might be able to bring him back to reality. With prolonged medication and counselling, we can bring these psychotic episodes under control and he will be able to lead a relatively normal life again. But we’ll never be able to put him behind a gun again, that’s for sure. We can’t save the police officer, but we might be able to save the man.”

“I hope so,” the chief muttered.

The two made their way past several more patients, and finally came to their destination near the end of the corridor. In one of the many rooms, behind a sealed door with a window, the one the chief was most concerned about sat. His arms and legs were bound, his body rocking back and forth in place against the chair. His face looked like it had picked up some bruises. His lips were trembling too; apparently he had picked up a nervous twitch. As the chief looked closer, he realized he was wrong. He was saying something! Something he could not hear through the sealed door.

“Is there a way to hear what he’s saying?” he asked the doctor.

Without hesitation, the doctor pressed the small intercom button next to the door. Amidst the loud pops and hisses, he could hear Kalum’s panicked, stricken voice coming through a speaker.

“They’re dead! They’re dead! But they keep coming back! I keep killing them, but they keep coming back! They won’t die! They won’t die!”

The doctor released the button on the intercom and turned to face the chief. The dire look on his face told him exactly what he thought about his chances of getting better.

“The episodes have decreased in intensity, but he remains convinced that the people who he was responsible for killing are coming to get him. But I assure you, we’re doing all we can.”

“Are they all this way, doctor?” he asked next, turning away from the window.

“I’m afraid so. Post-traumatic stress, combined with intense feelings of guilt, it’s a deadly combination. I doubt any of them will ever be able to resume active duty again. We can only continue with the treatments and hope for the best.”

The chief did not answer. For the remainder of their walk down the long corridors of the clinic, the doctor did most of the talking.

“I, of course, understand your concern for the lad,” he said at one point. “He alone appears to be unable to come to grips with what happened to him out there. He’s absolutely consumed by guilt and fear, and as long as he holds onto his fear, we won’t be able to address his troubled conscience. As long as the patient feels threatened by the consequences of their actions, they cannot take responsibility for them and begin to heal.”

He went on like this for some time, outlining the obstacles to Kalum’s recovery, never thinking that what he was saying might be destroying whatever false hope he had built up in his head. Finally, when he had seen all those he came to see, he decided to leave the doctor with a little something.

“We all lost a part of ourselves out there doctor, some of us more than others. If you have a problem getting one or any of my people better, let me know now and I’ll find someone who can do it. ”

He then left before the doctor could reply. He was taken aback, and looked ready to swear on some stack of books that what he was saying was scientifically valid. But the chief had heard all he could of science and psyches for one day. Much like his officers, the chief had some guilt of his own to deal with. It was bad enough he had sent men and women out to shoot people whose only crime was wanting to live. To know that those same men and women would forever

be scarred by it was completely unacceptable. If there were any justice in the world, it would have been him who was forced to sit in one of those cells. Better yet, it would have been the people at the Ministry and the Executive herself who had been forced to die in the streets, coldly and pitilessly, for the good of the race. At least that way, those who had a reason to feel guilty would have been the ones to suffer, and not countless innocents.

The cockpit instruments went quiet one after the other as the pilots shut down all the non-essential systems to the passenger bays and recreation pods. The engines and retro rockets fired one last time to initiate a last minute course correction, and the ship settled into a slow cruise as it edged its way out of the system. The crew of the *Deliverance* had finished the first leg of their long journey to Proxima Centauri. Soon, everyone would be laid down for a long, cryogenic nap, just as soon as everything was prepped and the new sub-light engines were brought online. The pilots busied themselves making the final preparations while the XO took one last opportunity to check over the instruments, punching in the reports on her datapad. Standing in the aft section of the bridge, she finished by checking the external cameras before they too would have to be shut down for the long journey.

“Bring cameras three and four around to one-nine-five, elevation fifteen degrees.” She ordered. “I want to take one last look.”

One of the pilots obliged and rotated two of the cameras aft. On the screen, the speckled black of deep space gave way to the glow of rings and crescents of far away worlds. And strangely, they were all there, every one of them. Sitting prominently amongst them was the pale-yellowed face of Earth, with its mottled yellow and blue surface and the glimmer of its rings. It was as if providence itself had conspired to arrange them so the crew could take one last look at them before leaving them behind forever. Drinking them in through the two computerized screens, Rebecca bid them all farewell. But upon seeing the faint and dull glow of Earth and its rings one last time, she became vocal.

“Goodbye you precious jewel,” she said with just a touch of irony. Overhearing her from his seat, the pilot nearest her scoffed in reply.

“More like good riddance.”

Rebecca turned to look at him; she hadn’t realized she had been overheard.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“Are you kidding? I thought you’d be glad to be leaving it behind.”

“It’s our home.”

“It’s a dead ball,” he replied angrily, “the place where countless mistakes and terrible crimes were committed. I’m just glad we didn’t all get sucked down with it.”

“Is that why you signed on for this mission?” she asked him.

“Sure, I thought we all did.”

“Some of us didn’t volunteer, Lieutenant. We just accepted the offer when it was came to us.”

The pilot didn’t answer. In the past, he had been faulted many times by those who knew him for being too opinionated. This time, it looked like he had mouthed off to the wrong person, a superior officer. Busying himself again with his controls, he tried not to say anything more. Lucky for him, Rebecca also didn’t feel like getting into an argument. It was enough to accept that opinions aboard the ship differed. Some of the people they had aboard were happy to leave; others were just going because they had to. But ultimately, the two sides were united in that they wanted to see their race survive. And that was the only point of the voyage. Forgetting the

disturbance, she looked back at the monitors. The planets had moved visibly and were beginning to pass into darkness. The planets hadn't actually moved, it was just the course of the ship that made it appear so. Relativity was a funny thing. It could make one think that the planets were actually saying goodnight to *The Deliverance*.

Turning the monitors off and ordering the pilot to retract the external cameras, she punched in the last entry on her datapad and set it down in its specialized slot in the bulkhead. The pilots did a final check on all the cryo units, then shut down the last of the non-essential systems and set the sub light engine on automated standby. The Captain and crew had already reported to their units, which left only the three of them. With everything set, they left their posts behind, and began making their way aft to where their freezers were waiting for them. There was no talk along the way. Like the rest of the crew, before they settled into their quiet little containers, they were unsure and full of anxiety. No one knew for sure what awaited them on the other end of the long voyage. It would take them over three years to bridge that distance, although it would seem like no time at all. Then they would be faced with a new world, infinite challenges, and no guarantees. Who knew if any of them would even live long enough to rebuild their civilization? And if they did manage to survive, would they come looking for the passengers of their ship someday?

These, and many things besides preoccupied Rebecca's mind as she and her fellow crewmembers made their way into the stasis section where they would take their nap. Around them were two-dozen other units, all belonging to the ships crew who were already fast asleep. The passenger pods were located further aft, hundreds upon hundreds of them, filled with the best and brightest the human race had to offer. She had heard though that one or two people had smuggled someone aboard who was not registered for the trip. But given the haste with which their mission was mounted, no one bothered too much with one or two additional passengers. As long as there were enough cryo units, it really didn't matter anyway. The hard part was getting them to let their children go long enough to get them settled into their own cryo units. According to rumour, one mother had brought aboard a severely handicapped boy, and the two were inseparable. She had put up a terrible fuss in getting him aboard, and an even greater fuzz when they told her that she would have to let him go so they could seal him into his own pod. Each pod was built for a single occupant, but she was insistent he be sealed in with her. Eventually, she gave ground after countless assurances that her little boy would be just fine, as well as an assurance that he would right next to her, so she would be the first thing he saw when he woke up.

Dressing down, they came at last to the three units that were still unoccupied. The soft blue lights that lined the inside of their units shone brightly as they crawled into place inside them, faces aimed upwards at the sloping metal ceiling. Three years they would sleep. The longest sleep any human had ever taken. Short of dying, it was the longest sleep any human could ever take. She settled her head into place as the doors to their units slowly shut, tubes and breathing masks descending into place around their mouths to attend to their needs. The last of the crew were now accounted for. Looking around as much as she could in the tight environment, Rebecca took a last look at her crewmates before closing her eyes and descending into cryo-stasis. They all looked so peaceful, tucked away in their tiny spaces, the temperature slowly dropping. Who knew what they were dreaming about? Their families, their homes; all the things they would never see again? Or were they dreaming of all the horrors they had witnessed in those last few days, of people dying, of their entire civilization crumbling under the spectre of thirst? She would be finding out soon enough.

Setting her eyes straight ahead, Rebecca bid all the occupants of the ship a quiet goodnight as the door sealed shut and cool air began to pour in. She tried her best to push all conscious thought from her mind, knowing that it would only keep her awake. There was so much to worry about, but she knew there was nothing to be gained by worrying now. No one knew what to expect, but then again, when did they ever? There were no guarantees in life, not anymore. From this point onward, there was only life, and they were lucky enough to have that. Wherever they ended up, she hoped no one would ever take it for granted again. This thought alone set her at ease as the lights winked out and her unit began to slowly drop in temperature. Before she knew it, she had drifted off and the sleep had taken her completely. When three years finally passed, and a new world lay before them, humanity would be a second chance. Hopefully, this time they would get it right.

Part III: Deliverance

Light from the distant binary flowed from the corners of the great satellite, painting the edges of the small moon. Emerging from the long night, Galilee drifted out from behind its giant cousins to begin another long season in the Centauri suns. All over the dusty globe, clouds gave way to open land, parched and desolate from over a year of perpetual darkness, waiting to team life again. The sand hermits dug themselves out of their holes, the rock crabs withdrew from their caves, and the water serpents poked their heads out from the depths to feel the warmth of the light again. Lichens began to form and spread again, reedy grasses began to root on pillars and anchor in soils. And in one corner of the planet, tall stalks of green and purple began to sprout, feeding energy and biomass to other life forms that lived beneath the soil.

As the many creatures moved about in the new dawn, a streak of light flashed across the heavens, and moments later, a loud thunderclap followed. When the sound faded, those creatures that were close to the source of the disturbance noticed something else about their environment that had changed. Sitting atop one of the sand dunes, a large metal beast had landed on its many retractable feet. Nowhere in the long history of their planet had they witnessed anything like this. Never before had their planet received visitors. But in time, the creatures moved on, having neither the intellectual nor the instinctual capacity to appreciate what they were seeing. Their world would carry on, much as it always had. And these new visitors, whoever they were, would either learn to move with its rhythms, or die off in the attempt. Only time would tell.

Even through the binoculars, Captain Greeley could barely see to the horizon. The thick, nitric vapours, coupled with the dense clouds of carbon dioxide, made everything hazy under the alien sky. Next to him, in the driver seat of the ATV, one of the crew's marine complement sat and waited for him to finish his survey. To his naked eyes, which stared through the visor of his pressure helmet, the view was even worse. While the scientists promised that the atmospheric conditions on this dust ball were ideal for terraforming, getting around appeared to be an absolute nightmare. And this didn't apply to the surface. The upper atmosphere was similarly hostile, an absolute torrent of violent winds and tiny particles that wreaked havoc with any ship that tried to pass through it. Days earlier, when the Deliverance had first attempted a landing, they very nearly bit the dust. The ships stabilizers and electrical systems nearly shorted out on two occasions before they had found a suitable place to land, although land was a bit of stretch, it was more like a controlled crash. Luckily, the stubborn ship held together long enough for them to smash down, struts first, into the cold, biting sand. In their haste to find a suitable planet, the scientists and stellar cartographers back home had clearly skipped over some of the finer details of the mission. Luckily, the Deliverance had lived up to its name, but just what it had delivered them into remained a mystery.

"It's a dune wasteland," the Captain said through his intercom to the driver. "I don't see any signs of useful life, or open water."

"At least there's nothing hostile out here sir," he replied.

"Except the environment," the Captain came back.

Switching channels on his comm unit, the Captain key the frequency for one of the other patrol teams. Not more than a hundred clicks away, on the other side of the massive sand patch that they had landed on, his XO and another driver were out patrolling.

"Echo one to Echo two. Mulligan, do you copy?"

“Read--- three b--- three, Captain!” came a static reply.

“Damn!” the Captain said, slapping the side of his helmet.

“Need some higher ground, sir?” the grunt said, pointing to a higher dune not more than fifty metres away. Placing the binocs to his visor again, the Captain checked it out for himself. Sure enough, it looked like a good spot to send a transmission.

“Good eyes, marine! Bring us around and get us up there!”

“Yes, sir!” he replied, and quickly brought the ATV around ninety degrees and hit the accelerator. The Captain was almost thrown back in his seat, and soon they were atop the sandy dune, with an only slightly better view. The Captain hit the comm button on his helmet and tried once more.

“Echo two, this Echo one, do you copy?”

There was a hiss of static on the line, then the sound of Mulligan’s voice.

“Still three by three, Captain -- can hear you with some inference.”

“Just finished our check of the perimeter, what’s your status?”

“Just finished ours too, we haven’t found anything. How about you?”

“Nothing,” the Captain said flatly. “There’s nothing out here to see. I suggest we head back to the barn for now.”

“Roger that, bringing it in!”

“Okay marine,” the Captain said to his driver, “take us home, but be careful when you bring us around this time. I almost lost my head last time.”

“Yes sir,” the marine replied, and brought them around just as hard as before. Slamming on the accelerator, the ATV shot back in the direction of the ship. For one day at least, the patrol schedule was over. Maybe tomorrow would bring better weather, although they had no way of knowing for sure.

“What’s the manifest say about meteorologists?” the Captain asked as one of the crewmen studied the official register. Scrolling down through the long list of names and occupations, he noted a few who would be of immediate use and began to highlight them.

“There are at least three weather experts, plus a host of botanists, biologists, and geologists. We’re going to need all of them up and running if we want to start growing our own food.”

“And drilling for water,” another added.

“Right, and speaking of which, how’s do the mining trucks look?”

“They were undamaged by the crash, as was most of the hydroponic gear,” Mulligan reported. “They can be fuelled up and made ready any time now.”

The Captain nodded, and looking over to the ensign he’d put in charge of supplies, he asked: “How are our supplies holding up?”

“We’ve got enough stored food to last us and the marine crew for a good eighteen months. The water reclamators and recyclers are working at near perfect efficiency, so we don’t need to worry about that anytime soon. But, as you said, if we’re going to start growing operations, we need additional water supplies. And, of course, once we wake the necessary people from their cryo-stasis, our supply situation changes. Assuming we wake all the botanists and biologists, plus the geology and mining crews, we’ve got an additional two-dozen mouths to feed. That will cut the supplies down to half, nine months worth at the outside limit.”

“Well then, lets just stick to brining the miners out for now. Once we have a sure-fire source of water we can use, we can start thinking about getting the hydroponics going.”

The crew nodded. The Captain looked next to one of the pilots. Lieutenant Krishna, who had been entrusted with figuring out the local cartography. “Just what have we come up with in terms of the local geography here?” he asked.

The Lieutenant produced the composite image he had generated with the help of the ship’s computer, and slid it across the table. A patch of grid work, with the small icon of the ship at the centre, denoted their immediate surroundings. On one side, there was a long, bumpy formation that indicated the ridge Mulligan and her patrol had discovered days ago.

“The desert stretches at least two hundred kilometres in every direction around the ship,” the Lieutenant said. “We’ve run our patrols to the absolute limit of wireless range, but we’ve been unable to find the edge of it. Even with the marines doing relay for each other, they just can’t find the end of it. They even went as far as to say that there isn’t one, that it stretches right across the whole planet.”

“We’ve mapped out barely a fraction of this planet,” the Captain replied. “I think that’s a premature estimate. I also take it that the weather is still playing havoc with our transmissions?”

“Yes sir,” Mulligan replied. “Our wireless gear just wasn’t designed for these kinds of conditions.”

“God, what I wouldn’t do for a comm satellite right now,” the Captain said bitterly. “Hell, if we had some satellites, we could have mapped this whole dust ball out by now.”

“We could always file a complaint,” one of the pilots said. “Assuming we could get a descent transmission in the air, it would only take about six years before they could get back to us.”

“That’s a long time to wait just to be told to go get stuffed,” another answered.

“You think we’re going anywhere?” Mulligan asked them both. They promptly shut up. Nodding his thanks to her, the Captain got back to the matter at hand.

“Alright, so basically all we know right now is that this ridge is the only place where we’ve been able to find solid rock. So for the time being, it’s the best place to start drilling?”

There were several nods from around the table. Everyone appeared to be in agreement.

“Alright then, it’s settled. We wake up the mining crews and start bringing out their equipment first. Before we do that though, I’d like to get a geologist and a meteorologist on hand, help us find the best place to start drilling and see if we can make some sense out of this weather. In the meantime, let’s schedule a few more patrols to the ridge and see if we can’t find out anything more about it.”

“Like what?” Krishna asked.

“Like if there’s anything down there that might get in the way of our operations. I don’t want any nasty surprises, and the eggheads back home did say that we should be on the lookout for any indigenous species. Who knows what kind of nasty things might be out there?”

PFC Santiago and Private Jenkins gradually made their way down the steps of the rocky face. Their superior, a gunnery sergeant by the name of Wilson, performed the easy job of waiting back at the ATV and keeping in wireless contact with the ship. According to the Captain, mining duty was to begin in just a few days, which meant that the entire region needed to be inspected and cleared of what the Captain called “any possible hazards”.

“Just what are we looking for?” Jenkins called to Santiago over the comm line, voicing the obvious.

“Anything out of the ordinary,” Santiago replied.

“What the hell does that mean? Everything on this bloody planet is out of the ordinary! We oughta’ be looking for something that looks familiar, now that would be out of the ordinary!”

“Just keep your eyes open for anything that looks threatening. Loose rocks, caves, or anything that moves.”

“There’s not enough life on this dust ball to fill a Petrie dish! This is a total waste of time!”

“Will you shut up so we can get this done?!”

“Fine! Fine! Just saying, is all.”

After that, Jenkins finally left Santiago alone and continued to follow behind him. For the next hour, they weaved through the craggy surface, rifles pointed at the ground. Their patrol took them around in a three hundred-sixty degree circle around the spot the mining crew were expected to start their drilling. When they finally came to the last point on their route, Santiago called for a break.

“Take five and rehydrate,” he ordered. Placing his weapon against a large rock face, Jenkins happily obliged and sat himself down. Santiago found a spot for himself too, a large stand-alone rock that sat at the edge of their patrol zone. There, against the rough, sandy looking stone, he sat and began to suck from the tip of the water dispenser that was located in his helmet. After a few hard tugs from his lips, the cool, brackish tasting electrolyte fluid began to pour down his throat. After a few mouthfuls, he was sure he had enough to sustain his muscles for the trip back. It was another few seconds before Jenkins decided to get on the comm and start bugging him again.

“Why have we stopped here anyway? We can’t see a damned thing, what with those clouds hanging low here.”

“It’s a depression Private, there’s bound to be clouds here.”

“A whaa?” Jenkins asked.

“A depression,” Santiago repeated, “a natural lowland formation. Clouds of gas like these hug the ground, so they go where it goes.”

“I thought gases were supposed to rise!”

“Not when they’re denser than the air, stupid! And if you were listening during the briefings, you’d know that the air here is a mix of many different things. You got see-oh-two, nitrogen and oxygen gas all mingled together. The clouds are the heavier ones, and that’s what makes them clouds in the first place!”

“Whatever, who cares, all I’m saying is it’s a waste!”

Santiago waved his hand at the private, dismissing his idiocy and ignorance. But, he guessed, that was why he was a Private First Class while Jenkins was still a lowly Private. And in any case, he noticed that Jenkins was wrong when up ahead, he noticed some of the clouds clearing.

“Private!” he yelled, pointing to the spot up ahead where the bare rocks of the ravine were suddenly becoming clear. Jenkins began to run over to meet him to get a better view. A few seconds later, more of the clouds cleared and things other than rocks began to come into view.

“What the hell is that?” Jenkins asked, bringing his weapon a little higher.

“I don’t know. It looks like... plants, or something.”

That really was the best description for it. Scanning the area back and forth with their eyes, the two eyed what appeared to be a vast field of moss and tiny trees. The mosses were

patchy, weaving their way in and around the rocky ground. Here and there, the plant-like things stood prominently, tall stocks of green and violet. Although they could hear nothing through their sealed helmets, Santiago and Jenkins suddenly felt as though the wind that was coming through the ravine had stopped. For a moment they stood there, motionless against rocks, mouths hung open.

“You got your camera?” Jenkins said to Santiago.

“What?”

“The Captain’s gonna’ want some pictures of this,” he explained. “We should let them know exactly what we saw out here.”

“Yeah,” Santiago said, taking a deep breath. “Yeah, good thinking.”

Pulling the apparatus from his carry-all, Santiago set the large camera up against a the rock he had been leaning on and aimed it at the centre of the field. Selecting a panoramic view to embrace the full length of it, he snapped off a shot. Zooming in closer, he snapped off a second. For the third shot, he zeroed tightly on one of the plants and took a detailed picture of it. He noticed on closer inspection with the camera that the plants actually appeared to be changing colour in the light. At one moment, they were green and violet, but as the light danced across them, they appeared to be crimson, orange and blue as well. It was a curious display for the eyes, and at the ends of each plant, there appeared to be buds as well. Santiago took a few more, just to be thorough, and the two then took off in the direction of their vehicle as fast as they possibly could.

“So what your saying is I need to wake up the biologists before we even have the hydroponics up and running, because your men uncovered these... things?”

The Marine Lieutenant, Martin Francisco, replied: “Well sir, I can’t think of anybody else who could make sense of these things. We were told to keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary, after all.”

“I know,” the Captain replied. “I guess I’m just upset that they actually found something.”

Captain Greeley set the photos down on the table, began to pace around the tight confines of the bridge’s briefing room. Lieutenant Commander Mulligan and Krishna were also there, listening to what the marine commander had to say and hoping to offer their opinion.

“Does this put our plans in jeopardy?” Krishna asked.

“Don’t know, I can’t tell for sure. That’s the problem with something extra-terrestrial like this, you just don’t know. But, if I were to hazard a guess, I’d say these things shouldn’t be messed with.”

“Then it would probably be best to let the bio people you’ve got on board handle it,” the Lieutenant concluded. Greeley looked just a little offended by the suggestion.

“Lieutenant, do you really think those guys are going to be able to tell me anything that will help us here? None of them have ever seen an extra-terrestrial life form either; no one has, so they’ve got no more expertise than any of us.”

“They would probably want to get up close to the things, inspect them for themselves,” Krishna guessed.

“That’s the other problem. They’ll probably want to bring samples of the things on board, which means we’ll have to open the ships labs for use, and start diverting power from the main generator. We’re tapped as it is because the solar panels can barely get a joule from these

damned cloudy skies. And in any case, I'll be damned if I allow them to start bringing outside organics inside this ship. I don't want run the risk of contamination this soon into the mission."

"It might be enough to let them do some field research," Mulligan said. "If we were to let them get a close-up look, confine all of their work to the area itself, and just let them bring back some sealed samples, we could keep what they brought back in the freezer and not have to worry about contamination."

"We have the facilities, Captain. I see no need to worry about letting the eggheads poke around a little," Krishna added.

"Besides," Francisco added, "my men have scoped out at least three other possible mining sites. Give us a chance to look them over a last time and I'm sure we can start drilling in any one of them by the end of the week."

Thinking it over, the Captain finally nodded. "Alright, it's agreed. Krishna, you get to work on thawing our biologists, Mulligan, you get our research facility up and running. In the meantime, I'm gonna go have a talk with our meteorologists, see if I can get some kind of prediction as to when these bloody clouds will start shifting away from us."

"Here, this looks like a three person job."

The Captain jumped forward and put his hands around the end of the girder while the other two men struggled to hoist it up on their end. Looking to them both, the engineering chief nodded his head, counted to three, and the three lifted the metal into place above them. Taking one hand away from it for just a second, the chief grabbed the two self-sealing bolts from his belt and slid them into place. The girder was screwed into place on one end, and the three of them then moved to secure the other. Slowly, and with some help from the crew, the engineers were building what would someday be the first hydroponics dome to ever be deployed on the planet.

"Okay, now we need another buttress against this wall, and then another covering plate for the top there," the chief said, pointing to different spots in the half-finished structure, then nodding to the Captain. "Thanks sir, but we can handle it from here I think."

"Holler if you need me," he replied.

Captain Greeley took a few steps away from the dome site and began to walk back towards the ship. The clouds still hung heavily over them, blowing endlessly across the dune landscape. For a moment, he wondered if any of them would ever be privilege enough to see a clear patch of sky before the inevitable happened and they were forced to die on this god-forsaken rock. Not far in the distance, he saw another temporary structure being set up by one of the other engineering crews. Mulligan was over there, seeing to it that their temporary weather station went up without incident. With all the other demands they were forced to accommodate, the resident meteorologist had requested that a research site be set up for him as well. This was to be a place where he could measure the wind speed, air temperature, density, etc. and compare them with the results from the ships on-board sensors. That too was a headache, retooling the ships sensors to detect weather patterns instead of stellar phenomena. But given the local conditions, and the demands the Captain was placing on him to find a break in this storm, he stressed that it was absolutely necessary. One could not walk blindly into an alien atmosphere, he claimed, and hope to simply be accommodated.

The Captain looked down at the coarse sand under his feet and kicked a big clump of it up in the air. With nothing better to do, he took out his anger over their bad luck on the one piece of the planet he could get at. How was it that they had managed to land on the worst part of this rock? Or worse, what if the rest of the planet were equally inhospitable? What did that say about their luck? With everything that happened back home, all the people who were dead

or dying, and all that was still to come, was it too much to ask that the few hundred survivors could catch a break? For all they knew, everyone in the solar system could be dead by now. Could God not find it in his infinite mercy to save a few hundred specimens, or was it true what they said: One man sins, God punishes all? Greeley had never been much of a spiritual man, but now, stuck on this world with the fate of humanity in his and a few others hands, he suddenly felt strangely religious. Perhaps that saying was true as well: In a crisis, everyone converts.

No sooner had his backside had touched the sand did Greeley notice a silhouette running in his direction, waving his arm. The pale outline of a figure came closer, moving at a pretty quick pace, until he could vaguely see features. Judging by his size and the way he moved, he guessed that it was none other than their resident meteorologist, his right arm still waving in the air. In the other, he held a metal binder with papers billowing out of it. As he closed in, he realized who it had to be.

“Doctor Nara, I presume?” he said over the comlink. Coming to within a few steps from him, the Doctor keeled over to take a few quick breaths, then keyed his own comlink to reply.

“Captain! I’ve been looking for you!” he said between huffs.

“Yeah, well, I was busy supervising the construction of your research centre. What can I do for you?”

“I have some data which I’ve compiled. I have to show it to you!”

“Slow down!” the Captain ordered. “Catch your breath, then tell me what you’ve got.”

Nara took a few more deep breaths, but went right on huffing between utterances.

“I’ve discovered (hoo!) a break (ha!) in the storm!”

“What!” the Captain replied.

“Yes, sir. I’ve detected a break in this weather pattern a few hundred kilometres to the northeast, and it appears to be moving in our direction!”

The Captain moved in and grabbed the doctor with both arms. Pulling him close so that they visors were almost touching, he peered into his eyes and demanded explanations.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t be able to make any accurate predictions until all your equipment was set up. How have you made this determination? What’s changed?”

“Respectfully, sir. My earlier request was based on the assumption that this weather pattern was something more widespread. But thanks to the ships scanners, I have been able to determine that this storm covers a wide area, but it appears to be subject to shifts. I can only conclude that it is this way over much of the surface area of the planet, and that—”

“Save it for the next briefing, doctor. All I need to know is it’s clearing up right now!” the Captain said, pulling Nara close and giving him a big bear hug. Tossing him aside, he keyed his comlink again to contact Mulligan.

“Lieutenant! This is the Captain. Order the crews to cease work on the domes!”

“Say again, sir!” Mulligan came back over the line.

“I said cease work on the domes, our good meteorologist has just told me we have a break in the storm! Order all hands to return to the ship immediately!”

“But Captain,” the chief engineer’s voice buzzed in over the same line, “what about the hydroponics, sir? We need to get those set up if we’re going to establish a settlement.”

“Chief, if what the doctor tells me is correct, we’ll be able to start scoping out new sites for settlement shortly. No sense building our homes on sand if we don’t have to. Take down the structures immediately and start bringing them in! We resume patrols as soon as the weather clears!”

“That’s affirmative, sir,” Mulligan cut in again, “Bringing it in.”

Turning around again to face Nara, Greeley slapped his suit on the back and gave him a friendly shake. “Doctor,” he said, pulling him close again, “as soon as we find a real place to put down, I’m pinning a medal to your chest.”

“Why, thank you, sir,” Nara said, betraying his obvious discomfort at being manhandled so much. “Just doing my job.”

“Yeah, well, so are we all, but your news is the first good news I’ve heard since we landed. Let’s just hope our lucks stays this good for the time being.”

“As I was saying to the Captain,” Nara said, addressing the crowded briefing room, “it appears that the cloud formations that have been covering this area for the past few weeks are part of a planet wide weather pattern. The dense clouds of nitrous oxide form into large masses that apparently move to and fro, covering several regions of the planet at any given time. They move periodically, and then settle into other regions. I can only surmise that the planets rotation and shifting wind patterns determine when these shifts take place. This is just an inference at this time, based on some basic principles and the limited range of our scanners, but I think —”

“Doctor,” one of the pilots interrupted, “get to the part where the weather gets better for us!”

“Yes, yes, I was getting to that. Uh, I think we can expect that the clouds will begin to dissipate in our region in three days time. The clear skies pattern appears to be moving in from the northeast, and should clear all the way to the ridge within a week. Then we can expect the clouds to shift further south, away from the desert region altogether—”

“Which means,” Greeley interrupted, “that our patrols will finally be able to scout beyond the limits of the desert. Is that right, doctor?”

“Well, yes, sir,” the doctor replied. “If in fact the dense clouds is what was effecting our transmitters, which is perfectly logical, then we should be able to extend our patrols further, and visibility would be vastly improved.”

“Thank you, doctor. Good news people, I think we should thank doctor Nara for his efforts in bringing it to our attention.”

The crew began to clap their hands; just a few at first, but soon everyone was applauding the doctor. Humbly, the thin, dark man smiled and thanked them for their needless appreciation, still committed to the notion that he was simply doing his job. Giving him another pat on the back, gentler than the one he had given him out on the dunes, the Captain dismissed the crew and ordered them back to their stations. When they were finally gone, he had a few more questions to ask.

“Doctor, there’s one last thing I need you to do for me,” he said, leaning in close. “If you could stay on the sensor scans for the next few days, while we’re waiting for the storms to clear. I’d like you, if you can, to try and tell me which direction we should be looking.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“The thing is, doctor, we’ll soon have the luxury of looking for a better place to settle, but right now we have no idea where we should be looking. Even with clear skies, we could be chasing desert and rocks for weeks, even months, and with all the people we have awake and on the rations, we’d be out of food by then.”

“Ah ha! I see!” Nara said excitedly. “You want me to ascertain where fertile lands would be located, based on the sensor readings I’m running?”

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” Greeley said, impressed and annoyed by his quick grasp of things. “Is that possible?”

“Oh, well!” Nara came back, pursing his lips and thinking it over. “I could make some educated guesses if I were able to extend our scanning range a little and take some air samples in the field. That would give me a clearer picture, because if this planets meteorology works anything like it did back home we could ascertain where the wetter climates are based on the air density and humidity in the wind patterns. All I’d need to do –”

“I’ll be sure pass that along,” he said, raising his hand. “I just need to need to know that it can be done. Once we know where to point our nose, then we can be sure we’re doing our jobs right. So,” Greeley clapped his hands together. “I’ll go talk to the pilot and see if we can get the scanners working for you by the end of today. Be sure to let him know if there’s anything else you need him to do them.”

Nara nodded, and before the Captain could leave the room, he called to him one last time.

“Captain! When you said I would be decorated for this, were you being serious?”

Turning around, Greeley answered as honestly as he could. It seemed silly even to ask. “Doctor, if you help us find a place where we can set down permanently, people will be naming their babies after you. A medal will be the least of your honours.”

“Oh, thank you sir! I was just curious, is all.”

“Yes sir, babies carrying your name, quite an honour.” Turning to leave, the Captain muttered to himself on the way out. “Let’s just hope there really will be some babies to name.

One by one, the vehicles began to line up in a horizontal row that reached across the sands. Each one carried a marine driver, and all the equipment that could be loaded into them, thus freeing the ship of as much weight as possible. Each driver signalled to Mulligan consecutively with a thumbs up, revving their engines and waiting for her signal. Checking her chrono, and listening to the shrill noise of the ventral jets as they hummed so loud it cut through the thick layers of her helmet, she waited for the Captain. As soon as everyone inside signalled the all-ready, the ATV’s would head out in formation into the clearing skies and rendezvous with them at the proper coordinates. The ship, hovering slowly across the dune sea, would meanwhile ferry the crew and all that could not be taken out and packed into a vehicle. Rebecca wasn’t sure why they couldn’t just let them go on ahead, something wanting to minimize the chances of being separated. Even with the clearing skies and their scanners working at full strength, Captain Mulligan wasn’t in the mood to take chances. She could understand that. She could tell that with all the stress he’d been under, he didn’t want to waste what little luck they had.

It was almost time. The minutes on her chrono ticked away, inching towards ignition. In her helmet, she heard the Captain’s voice buzzing through her comlink.

“Read for pre-ignition sequence. Signal the convoy, engines up and running, ready to go in one minute!”

Rebecca raised the little red flag she was holding in her right hand, giving it a quick shake. The convoy’s engines revved louder, and the ship’s engines hummed to full power.

“Ready!” the Captain’s voice boomed in her helmet again. “Launch sequence initiated! Convoy has a go! I repeat; convoy has a go!”

Rebecca dropped the red flag, and the marines were off, kicking up dust and sand in their wake, driving off into the clear blue skies that were their deliverance. Ducking inside the ship, she pulled the hatch closed behind her and sealed it for take off.

“Captain!” an angry voice boomed from the rear of the cockpit. Having been so preoccupied with the launch sequence, Greeley hadn’t noticed it the first few times it had called

to him. Or maybe he was just ignoring it, considering who it was. Turning around, he looked into the hard, bewildered face of Doctor Pensacola.

“What is it doctor?”

“Captain, I must protest!” he cried. “I have been trying to reach you for days, but you’ve refused to acknowledge my messages!”

“I’ve been a little busy, doctor. In fact, we all have, so why don’t you just go back into the passenger compartment and strap yourself in like the rest of the crew?”

“That’s just it, Captain! I’ve been trying to talk to you, but you’ve been avoiding me for days now! This is the first time I’ve been able to pin you down long enough to say anything to you, and now, it seems, it’s too late!”

“That’s right, doctor! We are about to take off, so unless you’ve forgotten something out there, I suggest you do as I say and get your butt aft where it belongs!”

“I haven’t forgotten something, Captain! You have!”

“Excuse me!” Mulligan said, popping in the aft door of the cockpit, almost knocking the doctor over. In her haste, she hadn’t seem the small greying biologist blocking the door. Not wasting any time on asking why he was there, she moved into her seat next to the Captain and strapped herself in.

“Oh! Sorry, Lieutenant!” he muttered at her, “I was just –”

“Now’s really not the time, doctor!” the Captain repeated. “My XO is here and I need her to help me get this bird off the ground.”

“Everything’s green!” she said to him, checking over the ship’s systems on her console. Greeley gave her a quick nod and turned back towards his instruments.

“Captain, I need to talk to you regarding my research!” the doctor insisted. Over the growing sound coming from the engines, he had to yell louder to be heard. “It seems I’ve been forgotten in the midst of all this! I was just about to start my analysis of the plant samples we took when suddenly the marines ordered us all to stop what we were doing and report back to the ship. They took all our equipment, and when I get back here, they tell me that you said we were moving, and that all my work had to stop. Then I find out you had my samples taken away because of some bio-matter regulation you passed, and I still can’t get an answer as to where you put them. I’ve been leaving messages, but I can’t get a straight answer from anyone!”

“You want a straight answer, doctor? Fine, what you want to know first? What I did with your plant matter? I ordered the marines to jettison it. Then I ordered them to place anything that came into contact with it in deep storage and had your files placed in the archives, and that was the end of it.”

“You what?!” he gasped. “Captain, we’re dealing with an alien life form here, we can’t just leave it behind!”

“Yes we can, and we have, doctor! I didn’t invent the bio-matter regs, they’ve existed since the beginning of time! Now grad onto something, because we are about to lift off!”

“Captain!” the doctor yelled over the sound of the ventral engines firing. No one heard him, not even he could hear the sound of his own voice. Giving up, the doctor grabbed hold of the nearest bulkhead and hung on for dear life as the ship lifted itself into the air. Outside, the horizon began to drift beneath them, the clear blue of sky shining in on them as they made their way further and further away from the sands.

“Firing main engine, ultra-low burst!” a pilot yelled. The ship lurched forward and everyone and everything aboard was thrown backwards. The doctor was thrown back so hard he fell to the ground and nearly rolled out of the cockpit. Had it not been for Mulligan reaching out

to grab him, he would have landed hard against the aft wall. After a few seconds, she let him go and yelled at him to get to the rear. Looking up from the ground, his hair a mess and his head pounding from the fall, the doctor nodded obediently and slowly crawled out of the cockpit. Once he was gone, and the noise level died down enough, the Captain let out a great big bellow to the rest of them.

“Whoop! Spacious skies and greener pastures! Here we come!”

Part IV: Galilee

Jim struggled to put the test tube he held back in its tray. His head was still pounding from the night before, the New Year's celebrations that marked the first full year on this new world. The festivities that took place in the central dome were toasted with far too much moonshine. The engineers who had improvised the still had been heroes the night before, but today they were quite unpopular, and for good reason. Half of Jim's staff was down with severe hangovers, and the rest walked around like zombies with rotted out stomachs. It made their work for the new year all the more difficult.

With all their stores used up, the people of Galilee were now wholly dependant on their growing operations. The hydroponics were already stretched to the limit as it was growing plants, beans, and fruit. Now they needed to start producing more, protein rich plants, and maybe even animals. The problem was, the Deliverance's stores were not built to house animals, only animal embryos and sperm. That meant fertilization and breeding that would have to done from scratch. And in order to circumvent the usual growth process, they would have to introduce the growth hormones into the mix. Thinking about it all made his head ache all the more. But then again, why should he surprised? Since they had arrived on this new world exactly one year ago, they had been met with nothing but challenges. Their very survival seemed to hinge on the successful resolution of each, but with each victory came another one, and another. But that was the nature of life on the Centauri world, unforgiving, inhospitable, and unrelenting.

Jim's eyes snapped back open when the test tube he was holding nearly slipped and crashed on the floor. He managed to catch it just before its contents spilled everywhere. He then turned to see all his colleagues who were there staring at him.

"I'm awake!" he yelled over his comm line. He heard muffled laughter come from his earpiece in response. A few deep breaths were needed to calm his heart and ease the fresh pounding in his skull, and he noticed the fog his breath was making on the faceplate of his envirosuit. Finally, he slid tube into place on the rack and decided to take a quick break.

"I'm going to get some wake-up juice, don't anybody try to stop me!"

There was some applause from the others as he slid past them and out of the sealed room. After a quick trip through the decontamination chamber, Jim peeled off his sticky envirosuit and found himself a seat in the doctor's lounge. Grabbing himself a glass of ginseng tea, he lamented that they had no means to make coffee yet on this planet. Many a day he woke up and wished he could get his hands on a big cup of espresso. But unfortunately, none of the scientists back home had thought to include some of those precious beans in their large stores of growing seeds. As he sat down, a lady in a lab coat came by and began to talk to him.

"How's it going, Pensacola?" it was Marsha Bremmer, a fellow scientist who asked as she sat next to him.

"Not too good," he replied, leaning his aching head back against the thin cushion of his metal seat. "I've been looking over the schedule for fertilization set by the Captain and it does not look doable without us all pulling double shifts for the next few months. How about you?"

"Can't complain," she said, taking a sip from her own cup of tea. "Has the Council at least told you when they'll have an enclosure set up for those critters they're asking us to breed?"

"Not yet," he said. "They've been too busy with all this gubernorial business to talk to a lowly research scientist right now. From what I've heard, they've finally found themselves a candidate."

"Really? Who?"

“Don’t you listen to office gossip?” Jim asked. “They say it’s that Grigerii fellow who works in urban planning and development.”

“That might be good for us,” Marsha replied. “If he’s a planner, he might be willing to expand our facilities for us.”

“Hope so. They say he’s pretty pro-research, and has even said he’d set aside resources to start some terraforming projects.”

“That would be interesting. It would be about time too.”

“Yeah,” Jim said sarcastically, “if you don’t mind all the added work it’s going to mean. It’s not enough that they’re adding animals to the breeding program, now we’ve got to start thinking about breeding new strains of trees and plants that can adapt to the local conditions. Real mess of work that’s going to be!”

“Well, at least you won’t be taking orders from the Captain anymore. I know you don’t like the military types too much.”

“Does it make a difference? One tyrannical boss replaces another?”

Finishing up her tea, Marsha set her cup down and pat Jim on the leg. “So long grumpy!” she said, getting up and heading back to where their envirosuits were stashed.

“How did you manage to stay so chipper after a night like last night?” he hollered at her.

“Because I didn’t drink any of that rot gut you guys were so fond of!”

“Oh yeah,” Jim said, letting his head rest against the meagre cushion again. Marsha laughed at him as she slipped her suit back on, and then ducked back through the decontamination chamber and back into the lab.

With some time to himself, he decided to let his thoughts wander a little. Anything was preferable to thinking about his throbbing headache. That, and their work schedule for the next year were things he would very much like to forget. He began looking for something to think about, something that would remind him of what it felt like to be happy. At last, something wonderful came to mind, and it took him by surprise. Trees. If Grigerii won this election and they started the terraforming program, they would be breeding trees. He had never seen any except the ones that existed in the indoor parks on TO-One or Luna. But if this worked, they could be seeing lush forests growing everywhere soon. They already knew how the nitrogen rich soil and carbon compounds would cause them to proliferate, if ever they started planting them. And, as expected, they would help in the terraforming process, producing oxygen and making the planet liveable, much as tiny bacteria strains had done the same for Terra billions of years ago.

But more important than compounds and chemicals was the fact that they could actually grow real forests here. To think of how that would look, to be able to live outside without the need for enviro suits and pressure domes. It almost made him feel happy he’d come on this mission. But of course, he had little back home anyway.

And with that thought, the headache came rushing back. Grabbing his temples, he wished the damn thing would pass so he get back to the usual headaches that came with this place.

Chief Bristol checked over the connections one last time. Everything was green. The transmitter dish was up and running, and from what his instruments told him, the solar batteries had collected just enough juice to power the signal for their broadcast. Across from him, a desperate looking fellow and a woman looked over and waited in anticipation.

“Well, are we close?” she asked her spot in the middle of the broadcasting room.

Bristol gave them both the thumbs up. “Close as we’re gonna’ get. I’m flipping the switch in five, four, three...”

The young man cleared his throat and adjusted his headset, pulling the microphone closer to his mouth and making sure the earpiece was securely in place. Although no one listening would be able to see him, he began to fuss with his clothes too. There was no way around the nerves, not with his level of inexperience. As one of only two broadcast journalists who had been brought aboard the survivor ship to this new world, David was entrusted with the job of broadcasting the news. To his senior, Amanda, who was infinitely more experienced, the more important job of collecting the stories fell. She had given him all the advice he could handle, but still his hands shook and he spoke too fast.

“Just relax,” she said to him again. “Keep your voice and tone even and try not to speak too fast. Ready?”

David nodded, cleared his throat one more time, and took a few deep breaths.

“How many people do you think will be listening in?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “everyone?”

“Oh boy!”

“Relax, that’s how many – three hundred people? And if you make a mistake, they’ll only remember it forever.”

“Not helping!” David pleaded. Amanda laughed.

“Relax! You’re ready. Just do it like you did it last night, when you spent all of it practicing instead of getting to sleep.”

“How’d you know?” he asked.

“Experience,” she said.

“Alright you two,” Bristol interrupted, “powers on, and we’re ready to go!”

Within seconds of Bristol’s words, the transmitter room hummed to life as the power began to flow in. The service lights on the switchboard blinked on, and next to David, Amanda pointed straight at him. Without skipping a beat, he began to speak.

“Hello and welcome to the first broadcast of the Galilee Wireless Network. As part of our efforts to establish Terran settlement on this new planet, we are committed to bringing you the latest in politics, entertainment, and opinion polls as they become available. As the first news broadcasting system to be established since Deliverance, we are committed in bringing people truth and accuracy in reporting, free of taint and bias, as much as possible. I’m David Burke, your host, and here are the top stories from Galilee.

“Our first story deals, of course, with the gubernatorial elections. As of last week, candidates Grigerii, Anderson, and Marlowe all weighed in with their announcements that they would run in next month’s election. So far, none of the candidates have established a clear lead over the others, although Grigerii’s proposed terraforming initiatives have produced a bit of a stir and have prompted both Anderson and Marlowe to commit to counter-platforms. Both candidates at this time appear to agree that such initiatives would be a misappropriation of resources that would be better spent closer to home. Anderson, an ardent psychologist and member of the Galilean Psychic Health Organization, or GPHO, has proposed creating new recreational facilities and counsel services to address the growing problem of psychic distress and boredom that he says have become a problem here in Galilee city. Marlowe, on the other hand, has recommended the expansion of our existing pressure domes to accommodate more population growth. As part of the Engineering Union, he has been outspoken about the need to

expand Galilee's resource base, increasing our reliance on local minerals and raw materials for continued construction."

"Meanwhile, the economic indicators prepared by the Galilean People's Council..."

It was an hour or so later when David finally reached the end of his stories. Having covered politics, important messages from Captain Greeley, and some social gossip, it was finally time to wrap things up.

"That's all for now, folks. I'd like to thank everyone who tuned in and rest assured, we will be back with more of the news soon. Depending on the power situation, we can either expect to have another broadcast for you tomorrow, or later in the week. As you all know, the Captain has stressed conservation as we are still reliant on solar cells for power, and the weather around here is unpredictable at best. Nevertheless, we hope that we will be able to give comprehensive coverage during the course of the gubernatorial campaign in the coming days and weeks so that the electorate can stay informed. Thank you all for listening, we hope to be with you again soon. I'm David Burke, good day Galilee!"

The transmitter's hum died down as the lights slowly blinked off and the signal died. As soon as everything had powered down, Chief Bristol dusted his hands off and nodded to them. Amanda then looked over at David approvingly.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Like I'm going to throw up," he replied.

"Good, that's the right feeling. And you did good."

"Hoo! Yeah?" he asked, taking a deep breath.

"Sure! You even got a catch phrase. 'Good night Galilee'. I like it!"

"But does it get any easier?"

"Oh yes!" Amanda replied obviously. "With luck, you might even become a household name someday."

"Shouldn't be hard, I'm the only other broadcaster on this planet. And you don't do any of the talking!" he said, pointing his finger at her.

"You should be happy then. You've got the market cornered."

"On behalf of the crew of the Deliverance and the people of Galilee, I hereby transfer all sovereign authority over the people of this new world to the honourable governor-elect, Doctor Anton Grigerii."

Captain Greeley held all the official documents in his left hand, signed and ready to pass over. His other hand he stretched out to Doctor Grigerii, who took it with both hands and shook it firmly. A few journalists, including Mr. Burke, and some cameramen buzzed around and snapped pictures just a few feet away.

"Thank you, Captain Greeley," the Doctor reciprocated. Turning to face the cameras, he added: "With this one gesture, we now see authority pass from the hands of the armed forces to the civilian branch. I am both honoured and flattered that the people of this new world have chosen me to act as their first governor. This is a momentous occasion for us all, and I shall dedicate myself to the furtherance of settlement and development on this new world."

The cameras snapped several more vids of the two men standing together with their hands joined. With their statements complete, the questions began to fly. Grigerii availed himself to answer them, while Greeley quietly withdrew to the back. Standing there, Lieutenant Mulligan, up until now, the second in command of the Galilee settlement stood and whispered to him.

“How do you feel about this?” she asked.

“What do you mean,” he looked and muttered at her out the side of his mouth.

“You know,” she said, trying not to move too much either and attract one of the cameras. “Handing things over like this. Did you ever think you’d regret handing things over to someone else?”

“Why should I?” Greeley replied.

“Because I know you,” Mulligan came back. “I know when you’re pissed about something, because you never say anything about it.”

Greeley’s face reddened a little. He almost turned to say something, but didn’t at the last second. With all the attention and journalists in the room, it would be rude to do anything that could cause a scene right now. But she was right. After all the time their crew had spent together, they had come to learn a thing or two about each other. In the course of a year, most people come to learn a lot about those they work with. But after the year they had been through, everyone in his crew had come to know each other the way most people know their families. What could he tell her except the truth?

“Maybe a little,” he said quietly. “Never thought I’d miss the job, but yeah, I think I’m a little sad to know that it’s over for me. You happy now?”

Mulligan smiled, and the smile quickly faded. “Not really. I’m sad too.”

“Really?” he asked. Mulligan nodded. “Well, look at this way. At least now we get to let a civilian handle all the reporters and press statements. Don’t know about you, but those were never my thing. And now that we’re becoming a real colony, there’s likely to be a lot more of that.”

“Guess your right,” Mulligan said with a quiet chuckle.

“Yep, hard parts’ over, now we can get take it easy for awhile. Anyway, I’m sure they’ll find something for us to do soon enough.”

“Grigerii went on to answer questions regarding the timetable the scientific community has placed on the growth of animal farms. Said he, ‘we should be cutting into home-grown steaks and mutton joints within a years time’. Critics however, have stated that his plan for accelerating the growth of human settlement on Galilee is unrealistic, and will put undo strain on our limited resources. Grigerii responded to these criticisms by saying that the people are with him, and that his promise for expanding settlement is what earned him the position of governor in the first place.

“In other news, we have learned today that Governor Grigerii has created a new position in his cabinet and asked Captain Greeley’s to fill it. The Secretary of Armed Services, as the position is to be called, will act as a military advisor to the Governor and be charged with the responsibility of keeping Galilean citizens and territory safe. This announcement came shortly after a report filed by Lieutenant Francisco, the commander of the Deliverance’s Marine unit, that his marines have sighted another strange plant formation in the vicinity of Galilee. These plants, which they have dubbed ‘Devil’s Weed’, were spotted fifteen kilometres outside of the colony’s outermost marker. The last time they were sighted, some weeks ago, the plants had not yet reached their current location. It now appears that they may be expanding into this area and safety precautions may need to be taken. There has been no word yet from the scientific community regarding the nature of this strange species, aside from a report filed by Doctor James Pensacola, which states that a similar finding was made over a year ago near the Deliverance Ridge. Doctor Pensacola further states that as the ranking scientist in the field, he

was responsible for conducting research on the species, but that his work was cut short by the relocation of the Deliverance and the colonists to Galilee. The reason for the termination of his field studies he does not dispute, he claims. However, Pensacola went on to say that the Captain also chose to dispose of all samples related to his work. This, he claims, was a mistake.

“Captain Greeley, when consulted, declined to comment on whether or not this indigenous life form might pose a threat to the new settlement. At this time, he claims, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that this species will in any way be dangerous, but urges colonists who are traveling in the outside environment not to take any risks by exposing themselves to it. When asked why further research was not conducted into the species, and why he chose to destroy all material related to the study of this life form, the Captain commented as follows:

‘The health and safety of my crew and the colonists were of greater priority to me and at the time, I did not want to run the risk of contamination. Bringing our people to a safe location where we could begin the business of establishing a true colony seemed more important than the research of one scientist.’

“Well, that’s all for today. As the power situation has continued to be in our favour, I would like to invite all our listeners to join us again tomorrow at the same time. Thanks for tuning in. For all of us here at GWN, I’m David Burke. Good night Galilee!”

In their envirosuits, Cole and Anjay could hear virtually nothing around them. About the only thing they could sense was the crunch of their boots as they marched along the rocky face. The wind whistling against the outer shell of the protective gear also told them they weren’t in Galilee anymore.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” Anjay said from behind him.

“The doc says he needs some new vids of these things if he wants to get an analysis,” Cole replied.

“Yeah, but he said the marines were going to handle it!”

“Yes, but if you remember, he was complaining about it, saying it would be forever until they came out this way again. Remember?”

Anjay threw her hands up in frustration. “Whatever! All I’m saying is, we should’ve checked with him first before we did this.”

“Ah, he’ll be happy as hell when he sees us coming back with some fresh new pics for him. Besides, nobody’s going to know we’re gone. Practically everybody’s at that inauguration party anyway. Just trust me.”

Anjay felt a cold shiver come over her. Maybe it was the wind, or maybe it was how she always felt whenever Cole said something like that. “Anyway, its just over here,” he said, pointing over the next ridge.

A few dozen paces more, and they had to the top of the rock formation. The exact spot where the Devil’s Weed was supposed to have reached, according to the last patrol. Cole and Anjay stood and watched for a moment, trying to see through the dense clouds to where the ground was supposed to be.

“Come on! Where are ya?” Cole yelled after awhile. Anjay rolled her eyes.

“Do you honestly think that yelling at the weather is going to make it cooperate?”

Cole ignored her and continued to plead with the clouds to part. He even began motioning with his hands, sweeping them apart in front of his chest.

“Cole, maybe we should just go home, yes?”

“What’s the matter with you today?” he asked. “Usually it’s you telling me to get over myself and do stuff.”

“Yeah, maybe in the lab where it’s safe, but we’re out here. Who knows what goes on out here when we’re not watching?”

“That’s what makes it so exciting!” Cole tried to usher the clouds one last time, and then got tired of it. “Forget this! Let’s just go down there!”

Without waiting, he ran on ahead. Anjay hesitated for a second, but could not let him go on ahead without an escort. Somebody had to keep an eye on him. Setting off behind him, Anjay set her eyes to the ground and tried to watch her footfalls. After a few metres the clouds began to obscure her feet. When she looked up, was startled when she quickly realized she couldn’t see him anymore. The clouds were just too dense. Remembering her comlink, she keyed it to the preset frequency and called out.

“Cole! Where are you?”

She was greeted with a quick reply. “What do you mean? I’m right here?”

“Where is that?”

“What! I –” there was a pause as Cole realized he lost her in the cloud. “Oh! Sorry! Hang on, I’ll find you. Where are you now?”

Looking around in vain, Anjay shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know!”

“Did you walk into the cloud in a straight path?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so,” she came back.

“Well good, come forward a few paces. Just start walking.”

“Okay,” Anjay said, “I’m going to count my paces, okay? Did you count yours when you went into the fog?”

“Uh, no,” Cole answered.

“You’re supposed to, Cole! The Lieutenant said, if you get lost, remember how many steps you took and check your compass to retrace your path!”

“Sorry! Must have forgotten! Are you coming?”

“Yes!” she said. “I’m five paces in, six, seven, eight...”

“Good, keep coming!”

Anjay continued to step carefully, now barely able to see her feet. She kept her eyes on the ground though, heard the crunch of the stones beneath her. She kept counting. “...twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...”

The colour on the ground appeared to get darker. At first she thought she saw shadowy patterns there, but realized it something on the rock itself. Feeling around with her foot, she touched the black surfaces and noticed they felt soft. For a moment, the biologist in her took over.

“Cole, what are these things on the ground here? Lichens?” There was no reply. Anjay looked up quickly. “Cole! Are you there?”

Still there was no reply. Anjay started to look around frantically. He was nowhere to be seen, and meanwhile she was stuck in an impenetrable fog with no idea of which way to turn. There was nothing but the heavy mist everywhere. A pale light shined through in from the Centauri suns, giving it an intense glow. But nowhere could she see any shadows, any bend of light that might be a trace of something.

“Cole! Answer me!” she called one last time. Nothing. Unable to contain herself anymore, she began to breathe frantically. Her eyes darted in every direction, trying to lock onto something, anything with the slightest shape or outline.

And there it was, just ahead of her. In her panic, she must have come a few metres forward, because she could see the outline of a tall plant. Cole was nowhere to be seen, but there in front of her, was a full-grown stalk of Devil's Weed.

Anjay's breathing slowed, and involuntarily she found herself walking towards it. The hazy shape improved as she came closer to it. She could see what looked like petals at the top, deep crimson leaves that clumped together and looked up towards the suns. The stalk was long and green, with more crimson leaves branching off at several points. In between there looked to be thorns of some kind. As she drew to within a few metres of it, she noticed the orangey-yellow antennas at the top that looked up at the sky. Taking it all in, she shook her head as she realized what a terrible name the marines had given to the plant.

"'Devils Weed'!" she scoffed. Something like 'Giant Rose', or 'Centaur's Rose' would have been much better. Watching it sway slightly under the sun, she couldn't imagine why anyone who had seen it could have thought it to be an ugly thing. Although they were tough and hardy looking, it was hardly a horrid species. Perhaps it took a biologist to appreciate it, but it had a rugged beauty. She would have to make a point to put in a request for the name change when she got back to the colony. Without thinking, she reached down for the camera, and realized Cole had been the one who brought it.

"Dammit!" she yelled, forgetting for a second that he was still lost. Scanning the nearby rocks again, she noticed there were several more of the stalks in the distance, and the moss was everywhere. Who knew where Cole had got off to? Keying her comlink one last time, she called for him.

"Cole, where are you? Cole? COLE!" Again there was only silence.

She yelled many times, each time hearing nothing in response. She pounded at her legs in anger, when a sound near her foot caught her attention. She could hear the faintest noise, almost like a voice.

"Cole!" she called down to it. The clouds were still a little thick by the ground, but she thought she saw the a glint of light against metal. "Cole!" she yelled again. She heard the sound of the voice again, and she could see the outlines of a helmet.

"Cole! I'm coming!" she yelled, and dashed over to it. Kneeling down by the shape, she realized whose voice it was she was hearing. The helmet was empty. There was no trace of Cole, or the rest of his suit. Inside his helmet, Cole's comlink buzzed with static and sound of the person who was desperately trying to reach him. Anjay's eyes welled up with tears. Even if Cole was nearby and she managed to find him, there was no chance he was alive. It had been several minutes since she lost, and there was no one could withstand the atmosphere for that long.

Quickly Anjay shot the plant another glance. What could have happened here? Were these things capable of attacking? Was the name Devil's Weed somehow appropriate? Tucking the helmet under her arm, Anjay decided she not to stick around long to find out. Checking her compass, she began to slowly step backwards, back the way she came into the fog.

A sudden shake at the top of the stalk caught her attention. She froze. The crimson petals parted back, revealing more of the orange-yellow antennas. They glowed with a strange energy, and suddenly the petals arched further back and the antennae released a burst of thick yellow particles into the air. Anjay just stood there, until she saw some of the particles coming for her. Without consulting her compass, she ran as fast as she could away from the stalk. She tripped and nearly fell over many times before she made her way out of the cloud, and her heart was pounding so hard she could hear it in her ears. Turning around, Anjay gave the foggy area

one last glance before taking off again. Somehow, she had managed to come back to where she'd started, and Cole's helmet was still under her arm. She thanked her lucky stars she had gotten away with at least this much, but it would be some time before she could forgive herself for losing the rest of him.

"Good night, Galilee!" Bristol said as he raised his cup in the air, hoping to get another laugh out of the crowd. The Burke imitation had been a hit about an hour ago when the party started, but for some reason the crowd was beginning to tire of it. That didn't stop a heavily inebriated Bristol from trying though. Finally, Amanda thought she'd say something and spare both David and the crowd from the chief's bad sense of humour.

"It's not funny anymore, Andy," she said, and adding to the crowd: "But at least he makes a good cup of hooch."

That drew applause from almost everyone and Bristol was quick to accept their praise. Together, they all raised their cups in the air and took a long haul. Most who did so were quick to regret it. Only the chief's engineers who were used to it seemed to be able to stomach it without trouble. But then again, they'd been known to drink it quite regularly seeing as how the chief kept his still in their equipment shed.

But regardless of people's profession, they were once again happy to have someone supplying the booze as they celebrated for the second time in as many months. A new year had come around, and a new government. For the second time since Deliverance, as they were all calling it now, there were reasons to celebrate. They had come a long way since their day of arrival, and it looked like this little experiment of theirs – planting the seed of humanity on another world – might actually succeed. One person who certainly felt this way was the Captain who, to everyone's surprise, had actually shown up for the party.

"I'd like to say something," he said over the noise. Very quickly, every voice went quiet and every ear in the room bent towards him. When he was sure he had complete quiet, he began. "To our first government and to our first colony. May they both live long and happy lives and serve their people well. May everything we set out to accomplish come true. And, if possible, may the children of this new world someday meet the children of the old."

There was silence for a second while everybody absorbed the profound words.

"Well said," Lieutenant Mulligan replied after a moment. Next to her, Francisco added: "Hear! Hear!"

The party room became engulfed in applause. Greeley, never one for speeches, smiled and blushed a little from all the sudden attention. In hindsight, he was really glad he had avoided the political spotlight. Try as he might, he was just no good at this sort of thing. The company of a few trusted colleagues was all the attention he needed.

Without warning, the general alarm sounded. The sirens started to blare, and was followed by a buzz at the intercom.

"All personnel to quarantine areas! This is not a drill! Captain Greeley and Lieutenant Francisco report to the governor's office immediately! This is not a drill!"

"What happened?" Greeley asked as he came through the door to Grigerii's office. Jim was standing there next to the governor, along with a few other cabinet members and some scientists.

"We're not sure," the governor said sadly. "All we know for sure is, one of our survey teams went out this afternoon, and one of them didn't come back."

“Who authorized this?” Francisco asked. “I was told that all survey’s would have to go through the Captain from now on!”

“They are,” Jim replied. “This team went out without permission. According to the one who made it back, they had timed this little escapade of theirs to coincide with the festivities.”

Greeley’s face turned red. He looked like he wanted to hurl expletives at the doctor, but he wasn’t even sure if he was at all responsible. In the end, he had to be satisfied to ask the obvious: “Who were they?”

“Doctors Cole Feore and Anjella Dupree,” the doctor replied. “People of mine, junior scientists who wanted to get some fresh vids of the plants for research. Apparently, they thought they were doing me a favour.”

Greeley’s eyes came to focus on the doctor again. Suddenly he got the feeling he could blame this on him after all. “Did you tell them to do this?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Jim said calmly. “But I may have uttered some comments that might have encouraged them.”

“You son of a –” Greeley uttered. The timely intervention of the governor prevented him from completing his sentence.

“Now is not the time to be laying blame, Captain. Keep in mind it was one of the doctor’s people who died. I’m sure he feels responsible as it is.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that!” Greeley came back. “He’s been whining pretty loudly for over a year now. You were just looking for an opportunity to get your hands on some of that plant matter again, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but I swear I left my subordinates with standing orders to leave them alone until the Lieutenant or you gave us the go-ahead,” he said, motioning towards Francisco who stood behind the Captain.

“It’s true,” another scientist, a woman said from his side.

“Who are you?” the Captain asked her.

“Doctor Marsha Bremmer, I am Doctor Pensacola’s colleague at the laboratory dome. We both made it clear to everyone that the armed forces would be in charge of further research. As a scientist, I can assure you we are all very cognisant of the dangers of contamination. As such, we would never risk sending any of our own people out there without proper authorization.”

“Well, looks like some of your people are more concerned with helping out your friend here than the safety of the colony.”

“That’s enough,” Grigerii intervened again. “What’s done is done, and now we need to decide how we are going to proceed.”

“Where is the other scientist now?” Francisco asked.

“In quarantine,” Marsha answered. “She was exposed to some kind of micro-organism. Her envirosuit appears to have shielded her from exposure, but we need to make sure none got into her system.”

“How would that be possible?” Greeley asked. “Aren’t those suits supposed to be hermetically sealed?”

“Well, yes,” Jim replied. “But the organism appeared to have infiltrated Cole’s suit. From what we can tell, the organism is capable of burrowing its way through the suits environmental sensors and micro-filters.”

“How the hell do you know that?” Greeley demanded. Jim hesitated and looked at Marsha. Both of them appeared at a loss to explain. Finally, Grigerii answered for them.

“Well... the surviving scientist managed to retrieve the other’s helmet. She, uh, brought it back with her.”

“She brought a contaminated object back with her? What is trying to do, kill us all?!”

“Captain,” Marsha interrupted, “its alright. The helmet is quarantined as well, and we’ve got some of our best people looking over it. In fact, she might have done the right thing bringing it back. We’re learning an incredible amount about this organism as a result.”

“Yes,” Jim added. “I would like to take you both to the laboratory, if you’re willing. You should really see the results for yourself.”

It was ten minutes later that Greeley and Francisco found themselves in an observation lounge with doctors Jim and Marsha. Together, the four of them were overlooking the quarantine area. In one room, the female survivor sat in a surgical gown and waited as a doctor in full enviro-gear ran some tests on her. In another, two people were picking apart the helmet, retrieving tiny samples of bio-matter from the filters, and placing them into Petrie dishes for analysis. Between these rooms, there was a large chamber where at least five people in suits were scanning the woman’s envirosuit and looking for any trace of bio-contamination. Altogether, Greeley was impressed. It was a full operation and it looked like they had clamped down on the problem before it could have spread. Taking a deep breath to calm his temper, he turned to the two doctors and tried to ask some civilized questions.

“Alright, you said you’ve been able to learn some things. So, what have you learned?”

“Well, for one thing we’ve learned that the Devil’s Weed is a very dangerous species,” Jim replied. “From what the survivor there has told us, it looks and acts like a common flower, but with deadly consequences.”

“The bio-matter she was sprayed with appear to be some kind of pollen,” Marsha added. “The ‘pollen’,” she said with deliberate emphasis, “appears to be the plants spawn. It’s particularly aggressive, and seems to be drawn to any organisms in the area. Maybe this is how it germinates, or maybe it just reacts badly with carbon-based life forms, we’re not sure.”

“All we know right now is that it was this pollen that killed doctor Cole,” Jim said next. “According to doctor Dupree, the plant released the bio-matter when she came close to it. We can only surmise that it did the same when doctor Cole tried to approach it, and the organisms infiltrated his helmet and infected his respiratory system.”

Greeley thought it over, and came to the same conclusion they had. “He took his own helmet off?”

“We think so,” Jim nodded. “The invasion of his system by an unknown organism must have been horrendous. He probably just did it out of instinct, thinking it would get the organism out of his lungs, but instead it only hastened his death.”

“The way a diver rips of their mask if they choke?” Greeley asked. Jim nodded.

“Damn,” Francisco muttered from the side. “I’m sure glad none of my marines got close to one of those things before. I’d hate to see this happening to one of them, no offence.”

“But there’s more,” Marsha said. “Doctor Dupree’s report indicated that the stalks she saw measured two meters tall. Does that coincide with what your men reported last year, Lieutenant?”

Francisco thought it over quickly and shook his head. “No, no, it doesn’t. The ones my men spotted couldn’t have been more than a metre in height, based on what they told me. Does that mean these things are growing?”

“Who knows? Who can say what the life cycle of Centauri plants are?” Jim answered. “But it does raise some potential conclusions.”

“Like what?” Greeley asked.

“Like maybe the plants were just getting into their growing season when we first spotted them. It could take them years to germinate and grow to full maturity for all we know. What we’re seeing now could be the plants starting to come into full bloom, and we all know that when a plant blossoms fully, it starts reproducing.”

“Layman’s terms, doctor?” Greeley requested.

“What he means, Captain, is that these things could open up and start spraying pollen into the air, contaminating everything in sight,” Marsha said.

“And don’t forget they’re spreading in our direction,” Jim added.

“Oh my God!” Francisco said. Greeley said nothing. Suddenly his world had come crashing down. After all they’d been through, all the hard times they had endured to make a life for themselves here. And now this, a hostile organism that could put an end to any hope they had left. Looking at Jim, he was intrigued by the change that had come over the man. A year ago he took him for just another egghead, a self-interested lab rat whose concerns he could easily dismiss. Now, he saw him for the capable man that he was, someone who could have been right all along.

“What do we do?” he asked.

“I could order my marines to start slashing and burning,” Francisco said. “We’ve got the burner units and plenty of ammunition. They’ve been just gathering dust up until now. Do you think that would help?”

“To stop the spread? Yes,” Jim replied. “But the basic problem remains.”

“We’re dealing with a hostile organism, gentlemen,” Marsha explained. “But this one organism is just part of a larger ecosystem that wasn’t designed for human settlement. We may be fighting a losing battle here. The planet decides what species live and which one’s die.”

“Visitors don’t exactly have the home advantage,” Greeley surmised.

“No, they don’t,” Marsha replied. Summing it all up for them, Doctor Pensacola said, in layman’s terms so they could understand:

“If we’re going to survive here, we need to get real creative, real fast.”

The twin Centauri suns were beginning to crest the far horizon. Grabbing his burner unit and strapping it to his back, Santiago looked over to Jenkins and knocked him on the shoulder.

“Come on, it’s time!”

“Alright, coming,” Jenkins said without complaint. Like most of the marines, he was happy to be bringing out the hardware at last, even if it was just for a little weeding. Grabbing his own unit and his portable scanner, he jumped out of the land rover and followed Santiago down to where the designated spot. After a short walk down a slope to another depression – the plants always grew in the low-lying areas – they took one look around and activated their burners.

“This looks like as good a place as any to start,” Santiago said.

“Let’s burn, baby!” Jenkins shouted.

“Hold on!” Santiago yelled. “What the hell’s that?!”

He pointed directly out in front of them, out to where a couple of plants were surrounding something else. The colours looked familiar, green, crimson and orange, the funny glint of colours as they shined in the sun. But this thing was different. It was moving.

“What the hell is that?” Jenkins repeated.

“You think we should investigate?” Santiago asked.

“Why you asking me, you’re the ranking officer. I just do what I’m told.”

“I’ll radio back to base. I need to get some directions on this one.”

Santiago keyed his comlink to the lieutenant’s frequency and issued his name and location. The Lieutenant was quick to respond.

“Read you five-by-five Private, what’s your status?”

“Sir, we have encountered an plant form in our sector that does not conform to the specification provided by the research scientists. Requesting additional instructions, should we engage – ?”

“Sir!” Jenkins yelled over the comlink. Looking over, Santiago saw him waving his hands in the air and pointing in the direction of the thing again.

“What is it?” he asked, putting his conversation with the lieutenant on hold.

“Look!”

Santiago turned his eyes back to where he had seen it earlier. It was gone. Looking left to right, he spotted it again. It was indeed moving, walking in fact. Its torso was hunched forward, and it looked like it walked on four legs. Santiago looked harder and realized they weren’t all legs. In fact, the way it was hunched over made it look almost like it was crawling on its hands and knees. When it stuck its head up, it stood just about a metre shorter than the tallest stalks around it. He couldn’t believe it, but the shape of it looked almost –

“Santiago!” His comlink buzzed. “What’s your situation, over?”

“Sir, this is Pfc. Santiago in sector Tango niner nine, requesting additional instructions. We have encountered a life form that appears to be humanoid in shape. Do we engage?”

“Did you say humanoid?” the lieutenant asked incredulously.

“Yes, sir. I can see from where I stand, and I think it’s trying to get away.”

There was a long pause as the two marines waited for instructions. As they stood there and watched, the creature came around. They weren’t sure, but it was almost as if it were looking at them. It came around again, and began to walk back the way it came. When it came around the plants, it stopped and began mingling around them.

“What’s it doing?” Jenkins asked. “Is that thing talking to those stalks?”

“How should I know?” Santiago replied. His words were cut short when his comlink buzzed again with the voice of the lieutenant.

“Private, this is Captain Greeley of the Galilean authority. This is a code-one priority order. You are to move into your designated area right now and retrieve that specimen. You are to bring it back to the laboratory, alive and unharmed. Do you understand?”

It was Santiago’s turn to pause. The sight of that roaming creature, whatever it was, made his spine tingle and his skin crawl. He couldn’t imagine going near it, let alone touching it.

“Are you crazy, sir?” he finally said into his comlink. “That thing could be dangerous, and – ”

“Private! This is not a request! This order comes directly from the governor and myself! Get that creature, put it in your land rover, and bring it back to base! Get it done or I’ll find someone else who can! That’s an order!”

“Yes, sir,” Santiago replied, after a moment’s hesitation. Turning his comlink off, he unstrapped his burner unit and ordered Jenkins to follow him in.

“What do I do?” Jenkins asked.

“Just get your rifle handy and cover me. No telling what this thing might do.”

The long, rough frame of the creature lay stretched out on the table beneath them. From the observation lounge, Jim looked down while Marsha watched from just outside the sealed chamber room. Behind her, Greeley and Mulligan watched too, hoping for some answers from their respected physicians. But looking on what had become of the poor fellow, they couldn't imagine there was anything positive to share. His skin had turned into a tough, colourful bark. Through the thick layers that had grown around his face, Doctor Marsha could barely see the eyes of the man who used to be Cole Feore. Everything about him appeared to have been altered, and oh so rapidly! His "capture", as the governor was calling it, had taken place only a few days ago. Now he was barely recognizable, and they still weren't sure if his condition could ever be reversed.

"Can you communicate with him?" Greeley asked.

"We have been trying for sometime. Unfortunately, he does not appear to be responding to auditory or visual stimulus. We're not even sure if he can understand us."

"How is he even alive?" Mulligan asked, standing next to them.

"Our tests confirm that his entire physical structure has changed. He cannot function in an oxygen environment anymore. He breathes nitrogen gas and carbon dioxide now, consistent with the planet's atmosphere, and his bodily tissues resemble the plants themselves. Even his neurological patterns appear to have changed."

"Could he have suffered some brain-damage?" Greeley asked.

"Ordinarily, that would be the case. But here, we aren't seeing any indication of neurological damage. His brainwaves are simply... different."

"Can we talk to him?" Mulligan asked.

Keying the comm button, Marsha nodded to him.

"Mr. Feore? Can you hear me? This is Captain Greeley. Do you know where you are?"

The body stirred on the table, but did not respond.

"His vocal apparatus doesn't look anything like a normal human's gentlemen. Don't expect a verbal response."

"Doctor Feore, this is Captain Greeley," he said again. "I was the commander of the Deliverance. Do you remember the ship, the Deliverance?"

The body moved again, same as before. Greeley tried something else. "You were aboard that ship, son. You left your family behind on Terra, most of us did. We had a mission, son, a mission to save our ace. Do you remember Terra, Cole? It was dying, and had to leave."

The body moved more, and the head rolled over and looked in their direction.

"Your family's probably dead now, Cole, same with me. Our world is dead, and even if it isn't, we'll never see it again. Do you remember?"

Cole's head began rolling back and forth. A strange noise began to come from the inside of the chamber.

"What's happening?" the Captain asked.

"You've upset him!" Mulligan said. "Sir, why did you say those things?"

"Best way to jog his memory," Greeley replied. "Remind him exactly where he is and what's at stake."

"Wait, he's looking at us again!" Marsha shouted, interrupting them. Cole's eyes looked the three of them over, first at Grigerii and the Captain, and then at her. His eyes settled on her, and for a second, she thought she could see some trace of the man that was still there. In them

she saw pain and fear, as if they were desperately trying to tell her something. She thought she could even hear him, not his voice, but him.

“What’s happening?” the governor asked.

“I... he’s...” Marsha stammered. The voice was growing stronger.

Greeley and Mulligan jumped when suddenly, Marsha screamed and grabbed at her temples. Both began to yell for help, bringing other doctors running from the other rooms. Jim was one of the first to arrive, with two other doctors following with a hypo spray and a cushion.

“Stand back!” he ordered. The doctors placed the cushion under her head while Jim pulled her sleeve back and exposed an artery. He was about to administer the spray when suddenly she stopped. Her eyes opened, and looked up at everyone standing above her.

“What happened?” Jim asked

“He...” she said, still in a bit of pain. “He reached out to me.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“He spoke to me. He puts images in my head. I could hear what he was thinking.”

“How do you know?” Jim asked.

“I’m not sure, I just do.”

Greeley and Mulligan ran over and helped get her to her feet. “What did he show you?” he asked. “Did he explain what happened to him?”

“I think so,” she said breathlessly. “He said they don’t want to hurt us, but they can’t stop what’s coming.”

“Who?” Greeley asked. “Who doesn’t want to hurt us?”

“They, them – ” she said helplessly. “The weeds, the plants, they’re not simple plant matter, they’re intelligent. Or at least, their part of an organism that is intelligent.”

“What are you talking about?” Greeley demanded.

“The pollen, that’s how they spread. They spread over the land this way, and any creatures that are not part of the system are absorbed. They’ve done it before; they’ve absorbed countless species across this planet for eons now. They know we’re here, and now they’re coming for us.”

“Oh my God,” Jim gasped, letting go of her arm.

“Doctor! Marsha! What do you mean?” the Captain demanded. “Do you mean to tell me these plants are some kind of weapon? Is there somebody else controlling them? What?”

“I – I – ” she stammered.

“She’s talking about a super organism!” Jim interrupted. “A type of massive life-form made up of smaller interconnected life-forms. We’ve heard of something like this before, but I never – ”

There was silence as both scientists dwelt on what this all meant. Greeley was no closer to understanding, neither was Mulligan or anyone else in the room. All that was really clear was that their worst nightmare had been confirmed.

“Jim, this changes everything,” Marsha said. “We thought we were dealing with a single species. But we’re dealing with a real intelligence.”

“And it wants to assimilate us, just like everything else on this world. My God, Marsha, what do we do now?”

“Simple,” Greeley replied. Although he still had no idea what they were dealing with, he did have an answer to that question. Looking around, he realized he had the attention of everyone in the room. Since it was his second speech in recent memory, he spoke with as much confidence as he could muster. This one had to count. “We do whatever we have to. We deal

with this problem just like we've dealt with all the others. We came to this planet to survive, and nothing's going to stop that. Not the elements, not shortages, and not some big, hungry organism that wants us gone. We're in this for the entire race, people. From here on in, we're playing for keeps."

Part V: Reclamation

The school clock struck fifteen hundred hours and the bell chimed to signal the end of the lesson period. As was her ritual, Mrs. Barker concluded her lesson with the two most relevant questions regarding citizenship.

“Tell me children,” she asked the ten students sitting before her. “What is the first duty of every citizen of The Colonies?”

“To preserve the careful balance of the planetary system,” they answered automatically.

“And what is the last?”

“To return to the system by being reclaimed.”

“Very good,” she said in a pleased tone. “This week we will be concluding our social studies segment. There will be a full exam; questions will deal with everything we covered this semester on geography, population and the resource bases of the Sol system and all its colonies.”

“All of them?” one of the children asked.

“Yes, all,” the teacher repeated unapologetically. “I trust everyone will be ready and will have studied hard because I don’t want any excuses.”

The children nodded and groaned a little, causing their educator to flash them a scornful glare. Quietly the children lowered their heads to their desk consoles and began their quiet study period. From his seat in the back, little Adnan opened activated his desk, called up his social studies file and began to leaf through it. From what the teacher had said, there was much to cover and he would need to get started.

“Access geography,” he said to his console. The computerized desk beeped and buzzed and brought up a lovely relief image of the planet Earth. Around it, crossing it at various angles and glittering like razor wire, were the rings of the Orbital colonies.

“Begin,” he commanded. The display zoomed out to display the entire planetary system and cued up an accompanying audio track.

“Sol system, planetary system containing all known locations of Terran settlement.” A number of lists began to appear on the screen cataloguing the colonies and their respective populations. “Inner solar territories include: Hermes, Aphrodite, Earth Terran-Orbital One, Terran-Orbital Two, Luna One, Luna Two, Phobos, Deimos, Ares One, and Ares Two. Outer colonies: Ganymede, Europa, Chiron, Titan, Miranda, and Farpoint Pluto. Total Population, ten billion, two hundred and thirty million, five-hundred thousand, twenty-three thousand, sixty-two.”

Well, that certainly is accurate, Adnan thought. It seemed unlikely to him that they could know for sure, down to the very last individual. But the teacher had told him that the Census was just that accurate. From birth until death, there was little that they didn’t know about every citizen of the Terran Colonies. And luckily for him and the other students, the numbers did not change much or very rapidly.

“Proximate star systems: Proxima Centauri, Alpha/Beta Centauri, Sirius, Vega, Procyon, Castor/Pollux...” Adnan waited impatiently as the computer listed off every single star within ten light-years of the Solar System. After the stars that had names that actually meant something, it began listing off the not-so-creatively named ones. “Bernard’s star, Ross 128, Wolf 359, Epsilon Eridani, Alpha/Beta Cygni, Alpha/Beta Luyten...” Finally, the list ended. Then, as if to truncate everything it had just said, the machine blurted: “Exploration and settlement ongoing. No relevant information on file.”

That's what it said yesterday, Adnan thought. And, for that matter, the day before, and every other time he cracked his astronomy and social studies texts. Deciding to do something about it at last, Adnan raised his hand and summoned the teacher over.

"Mrs. Barker? Will we ever be doing anything on the outer systems?"

The teacher looked confused, as if the answer to the question was patently obvious. In a demagogic tone, she turned the question back on him.

"Is there any information listed on the curriculum about settlements outside the Solar system, Adnan?"

Looking back at his screen, Adnan tried to reconcile the mixed messages the machine was sending him in his head. Technically, there was nothing listed, but he knew something was there. And people did talk about those places, the new colonies that did not follow Solar law. Why weren't they discussing these places if they existed?

"Well," he said hesitantly, "there isn't, but..."

"Then there won't. Concern yourself with the relevant facts, Adnan, and not the tertiary information."

Her words were said with careful diplomacy. Still, Adnan knew he had been impertinent, and simply nodded and turned back to his desk. As Mrs. Barker went off to answer more relevant questions, Adnan ordered his desk console to give him a detailed breakdown of each colony and its constituent populations. For each, tidbits of the colony's history, punctuated with important names and dates were also given. Here too there were things Adnan had noticed before, grey areas where dates and figures seemed to disappear and the explanations became vague and hazy. Quickly, he forced himself to contain his curiosity and stick to the material that was before him. He didn't want to be singled out in front of the others, again. As father had told him many times before, it was better to do one's duty and not attract the wrong kind of attention unto oneself.

Arayus paced back and forth as he finished dictating his speech to the desk-mounted recorder. It was important to get the conclusion just right, every word in its proper place, every sentence ordered to ensure maximum effect at the very end. When he thought it finished, he placed his empty cup underneath the wall dispenser and requested another ration of water.

"Read that back to me please," he ordered.

The recorder beeped an acknowledgement and projected his image into the centre of the office, overlaying his words with proper amplification and gestures to illustrate. After a few years of speeches and orations, it had enough of his movements and recorded to extrapolate how it would reasonably look. As he watched, he quickly downed the water provided by the Ministry's recycling system, cleansing and rejuvenating his throat.

"...further expenditures and ventures into outer system comets, as characterized by the former administration, is not in keeping with the sacred traditions laid down by our forebears. We exist today not as an expanding organism, but as a stable human commonwealth dedicated to preservation and balance on a scale that is unprecedented in history. We will not repeat mistakes of the past, regardless of the short term consequences..."

A knock at the door caught his attention just as he was nodding approvingly at the recording. Without bothering to shut down the projection, he told them to enter. It was Qin and Tareen, his ministers of finance and conservation who entered, followed in tow by Aaronson, his minister of population. Together, they walked through his projected image as they came to his desk, carrying compads and small stacks of crystal sheets in their hands.

Qin was the first to speak, giving only passing attention to his speech. It was Tareen who gave it her attention, noting his stubborn refusal to continue the Reclamation program.

“Mister Executive. We’ve retrieved the reports you asked for, and have some predictions for the coming year.”

“Good, good,” he said, shutting down the machine at last. “What are we looking at, in real terms here?”

“Shortages, minor, and manageable, with some losses in some sectors,” Tareen said, citing from her compad.

“Any loss of life, or will the population figures hold for the coming year?”

“They will hold,” she asserted confidently.

“Although there will be some degree of deprivation,” Qin added. “Regardless of how manageable, the decision to shut down the flow of minerals and ice from the comet system will ensure that more people in the outer fringes will experience some hardship in the coming year,”

Arayus nodded and quickly decided on the most notable course of action; in other words, the one with the least amount of political consequences. It was little more than a repetition of standard practice really: Whenever the Colonies were faced with deprivation or abundance, they suffered or thrived together.

“As a promise to the Terran people,” he said, laying it out for them, “we should ensure that the shortages are felt all around, rather than concentrated to the outer colonies. Will that ensure our position for the coming year?”

Qin and Tareen nodded. “That would ensure we maintain our commitment to fiscal balance, sir.”

“And that we maintain a sustainable hold on our system’s resources.”

“And ensure further drain on our population, sir.”

Arayus looked to Aaronson, who had chosen to speak for the first time since entering the room.

“Would you care to elaborate, sir?” he asked Aaronson.

“I was just wondering if anyone has considered how this will effect the population balance in the outer system, sir. A shortage will surely result in further waves of émigrés to the non-aligned systems outside of Sol, where our jurisdiction does not reach.”

“A trickle at best,” Tareen replied flippantly.

“For now, perhaps, but even a trickle can fill a cistern before too long. It has been the policy of the Colonies to not bother with the non-aligned systems, and allow our people to do as they will, should they choose to leave.”

“Well of course,” Qin retorted with Tareen and Arayus nodded their agreement. “If there are people who want to abandon our system and our way of life, so much the better. It ensures less of a drain on resources, after all.”

“Humans are a resource too, Mr. Executive, and a temperamental one at that. And we should consider what will happen if adjacent systems continue to grow at our expense. Sooner or later, we are going to have to deal with them, and we should think about that before ratifying policies that cause people to leave Sol for other worlds.”

This last point forced Arayus’ other Ministers to stop and think. Although unconvinced, they were all impressed by Aaronson’s point. But as far as policy was concerned, the die had been cast on the Reclamation program, and his argument would not change that.

“That’s all fine and well, Mr. Minister, but I’m afraid it doesn’t change my decision,” Arayus finalized. “It is the opinion of this administration that Sol has the resources it needs

within its own sphere and does not need to be mounting costly missions to mine comets that could be useful should emergency shortages set in someday. What concerns us here is the survival of the species, not political relations with other systems. You would do well to consider that and stick to census data for the time being.”

“Of course sir,” Aaronson replied. “Just keep in mind, beyond our borders, the human germ is still growing unabated. We would *all* do well to consider that.”

The sublight engines shut down and the slicer ship came into a smooth cruise towards the planetary body ahead. The blue-white sheen of the upper atmosphere burned bright under the light of the giant white disc at the centre of the system. As the engines cooled and their manifolds closed and retracted into the hull, the automated systems began alerting the crew of the *Lathraia* that it was time to awake from cryosleep. They were still several days from planetary orbit, and in that time, much needed to be done before making their “delivery”.

Zelena was the first to awaken, along with the navigation’s officer, Tulloch. Procedure demanded that before the remainder of the crew was up and about, the pilot and co-pilot get themselves up and to the bridge to ensure they were where they were supposed to be. Without the benefits of open trade between Sol and the outer colonies, instruments had a way of deteriorating, sometimes to the point of becoming completely unreliable. There were stories of how some Slicer ships had wound up on the other side of the quadrant because they had allowed their machines to go too long without proper maintenance. In one case, a ship had even wound up in the middle of a star, or so the story ran. As such, Zelena counted herself lucky that maintenance was even an option for them anymore.

Once on the bridge, Zelena pulled herself into her chair with the grace of a drunken spacer. Cryosleep had a way of slowing everything down – movement, reflexes, even thought. The small dose of ship’s coffee she carried in her cup certainly wasn’t helping much either. Coming in slowly behind her, Tulloch plopped himself down in his seat to her rear and switched on his own terminal. Before jacking himself into the ship’s navigational computer, he produced a small vial from his vest pocket and popped it open.

“Thought you quit doing those, Tully,” Zelena said after hearing the cap pop off. Tulloch crunched a few of the pills in his mouth before responding.

“Need to stay sharp, pilot, you know that. The work of a navigator requires a clear mind. Besides, there’ll be plenty of time for clean living when I’m dead.”

“Any excuse huh?” she said. “Ah well, maybe you’ll be in a mood to talk to the landing authority then.”

“Not likely. They like to hear from a chipper, female voice. Even the chicks like talking to you better than me.”

Zelena suppressed a smile and pulled the interface terminal close to her as she began punching in commands on the old-fashioned keys. Tulloch meanwhile put his nav display gear on his head and activated the link to his embedded neural circuits. Together, they began running over all the routine data - telemetry, velocity, and necessary course changes for optimum orbit. Zelena let out multiple groans before she was done, trying to shake what was left of the cryo-induced fog from her mind.

“What have we got on the traffic screen today, Tully?” she asked, turning slightly to look back at him. With his nav goggles on, he looked more like a crazed rendition of a frontiersman, eyes covered to protect him from biting winds and debris. What little she could see of his face

under the goggles appeared to be quivering as the ship's computer relayed navigational information directly into his brain.

"Traffic is light on orbital pylon C. All other venues look full or shut down for maintenance."

"As usual," she said cynically. "Okay, here goes."

Opening the comm frequency, she established a link to the nearest orbital transmitter and began speaking to what she assumed was a second-rate functionary. She tried her hardest to be as chipper and friendly as Tulloch seemed to think she was in these situations. She hoped whoever she was speaking to would think so too.

"Apollo, one, one, seven, this is slicer ship Lathraia on approach to orbital route one. Request permission to dock with pylon C and deliver cargo to home, over."

A stacy voice came over the bridge's loudspeakers, audio only. It was obvious that the good people at the Apollo landing authority were having trouble with their holodisplays too. Zelena wondered how long it would be before all orbital facilities in the outer colonies started having to go back to Morse Code for all their communications.

"Lathraia, this is orbital control. Please state you cargo and destination again please, over."

Zelena cursed under her breath and repeated herself, kindly again for the controller. "I repeat, this is slicer ship Lathraia, formerly of Wolf 359, on approach. Request permission to deliver cargo to orbital pylon C, over."

The stacy voice came back again, confirming Zelena earlier suspicion that whoever she would speaking to was a second-rate grunt. "Please state the nature of your cargo."

"Jeezus!" she said, with Tulloch grumbling something in accompaniment. Addressing the controller again, she laid it out for him plainly.

"Human cargo, you half-brained moron! We are delivering human cargo! Is this loud enough, or would you like me to say it so loud the people at Sol can hear?"

There was a pause as the chastised fellow on the other end swallowed her insults and excused his indiscretion. It gave time for Zelena to suspend their link and express herself in private a little.

"Who the hell trained this guy? Are they short on personnel too?"

Tulloch couldn't see her, but the shrug he gave her suggested he knew she was looking to him for some input. Finally, the controller came back with the permission she wanted.

"Lathraia, you are cleared for pylon C. Please have your *cargo* ready for inspection by the docking authority once you have put in, out."

"Thank you!" Zelena terminated the link and began bringing the ship around a few degrees, to a course that would eventually bring them into high orbit around the planet. The desired orbital facility was still several days away on cruising speed, on the other side of the planet, so they had plenty of time to check on their passengers and make sure they were properly prepped for life on Apollo IX. Why they had chosen to come to this place in particular was anybody's guess, but it was probably better than living in the Sol colonies, with its overburdening populations and ultra-conservative policies. Next to that, the freedom of the outer colonies must have seemed pretty appealing, even if it meant living with the threat of shortages and lawlessness. It must be that way, she reasoned long ago, because every week there was talk of more migrants looking to book passage to the outer regions. And of course, there were plenty of slicers willing to do it for them, for a price. That was the first rule of life in the outer colonies. Freedom was virtually absolute, but nothing came for free.

The Captain was the next to be awakened. Sitting in the revitalization chamber, a towel draped around his shoulders and just a pair of space jockey shorts to protect his modest, he shivered and downed cup after cup of the sludge Zelena had provided. At the same time, he listened as his pilot and navigator filled him in on their situation. Prior to any planetary missions, Captain Kreios liked to know which other ships were in-system, as a way of determining the competition. In addition to being one of the best ferrying services for people, slicer vessels were the only true merchant marine operating in the outer systems. By now they knew all the slicer ships in the area by reputation, and some even more intimately than that.

“We have picked up the transponder codes from at least three recognized competitors Captain. Capt. Renault of the Contrabandier is here.”

Tulloch gave him the run-down as he got the last of his shakes out of his system. After each name, the Captain replied with a quick personality profile that he had come up with from his years of experience working alongside each of them.

“Prissy little devil,” Kreios said of Renault. “Who else?”

“The Vorbeischleusen, under Isabella.”

“Not a bad ship, good crew too,” he nodded and took another haul on the sludge. “Who else?”

“Children of Kronos is here too, Capt’n,” Zelena said. “You know who’s in command of her.”

“Reinhardt.” The name sounded like a sour note coming from his lips, indicative of their long and competitive history together.

“Yep,” Tulloch said, running through the last of the names. “That’s all we can account for, at any rate. Some of the other ships have been changing their codes, it seems. We recognize the configurations, but the codes don’t match.”

“That’s interesting. Why would anyone go to the trouble of that?”

“Good question,” Zelena agreed. “It’s not like they’d be able to hide from anyone local, or anyone in the outer systems. We all know each other.”

“Maybe they’re starting to get ambitious with the inner settlements, running people from further to the interior.”

“That’d be risky,” the Captain said. “Still, if that’s the going concern, we better find someone who can change our codes for us. I don’t want to be left out in the cold should the competition decide that it’s time to start upping the stakes.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for someone,” Zelena said. “In the meantime, Capt’n, there’s still the matter of the port authority and the inspection.”

“Ah yes, that.” Kreios stood and stretched out his legs, his knees popping from all the cartilage that had build up over the months of immobility. Having tossed his towel, Zelena handed him his uniform which he promptly donned.

“We’re going to need to make sure the unwashed get cleaned up before we deliver them,” he said. “Better wake up the rest of the crew.”

“It is every citizen’s final duty to be reclaimed!”

The minister’s voice resounded through the tiny hall as the raised platform on which the body rested raised itself up into the air. The minister’s hands seemed to direct it outwards, surrendering its essence up into the heavens. With a quick turn of his wrist, the platform ceased its upward motion and began to tilt up at one end. At the same time, on the floor beneath it, a panel slid away to reveal a port hole. When the platform finally tilted to a steep angle, the body

slid down the length of it and fell into it, into the Liquefier beneath. The assembled family members and private citizens who had come to watch bowed their heads and uttered the respondent prayer.

“For these and other gifts, we give thanks. For every day, for every life, we give thanks.”

“The service is complete, we may depart,” the minister said, passing his hand above the throng. The small ionizer he wore on his index finger formed a vertical line in the air, followed by a horizontal line joining it. The blue T that was burned into the air lingered for a few seconds, long enough for every to look and be reminded of the significance it held. From the source all things were made possible, and to it, and all things returned. For others, it represented the delicate connection between the Earth and the orbital rings, between planet and civilization. Then, it faded away, like the passage of life into death.

Next to his mother, Adnan clung as he watched the body that had once been his grandfather fall away into oblivion. The desiccated, dried out remains looked nothing like what he had remembered. The round, pink cheeked face that always seemed to have a smile on it was gone – replaced by a pale, taut, leathery thing. Mother had told him it might be a little frightening, that the man he saw would look nothing like his old gramps. But somehow that hadn’t prepared him at all. In school, they had learned how the processor worked, how the body was broken down into chemical bonds and placed back into the recyclers with all their garbage, liquid and leftover food. The Liquefier turned it all into a sludge that was distilled, purified, and turned into just about anything. It sickened him to think of it now, how someday soon, what was once his grandpa would wind up being a sodium tablet, a glass of water, or even a protein meal – on his table.

It was later when they were on the transport tube making their way home that his father noticed how effected he seemed to be by it all and decided to say something to him.

“It’s necessary Adnan,” he said, flanked by Adnan’s mother on one side and his grandmother on the other. Adnan looked up at them, his head leaned forward, dangling just above his knees. From their point of view, it must have looked like he wanted to throw up, but couldn’t. Another talk about the nature of things must have seemed in order, because that was exactly what he did.

“The ancients nearly destroyed themselves because they didn’t respect the careful balance of this universe. Millions died, and millions more would have died if we hadn’t learned how to take what they threw away and use it again.”

“I don’t want to use grandpa again,” he muttered weakly. This response seemed to irritate his father, who’s next words seemed sterner than the last.

“If we don’t use what we produce, we’ll all suffer the same fate. You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you?”

Mother could tell this wasn’t helping. Moving over to his side, she gently put her arm around him and rocked him gently. Her touch and the way she held him made his stomach feel a little better, even though his flesh still felt like it could crawl right off his bones.

“It’s completely natural, Addy,” she said, using his pet name, as if that would cheer him up. “You, me, your father – all of us are made from the same basic things, things which we all need to stay alive. A long time ago, all these elements came together to create all living things, and when we die, it all goes back into the system. Since it’s going to be used somewhere, it’s perfectly normal that we’d use it to stay alive, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I suppose.” His words seemed less than convincing, even to his own ears. His father, who seemed tired of rationalizing to his son, just said plainly.

“You’ll get used to it, son.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.” He heard himself say the words without even thinking. He was almost surprised, it took a second before he even knew what he meant by them. But to his dad, the meaning was clear.

“Don’t start talking like that, son! You know you need to start accepting certain things. Otherwise, you’re going to have a very hard time!”

“Haady,” his mother pleaded.

“He’s just talking nonsense, dear, as usual! You coddle him far too much. He just needs to be told how things work and accept them!”

That ended their conversation for the time being. For the remainder of the trip back to their hab module in the upper-lower ring of Orbital Two, no one said a thing. His mother looked uneasy, his father angry. As for his grandma Adeela, he wasn’t sure what she looked like. She seemed tired surely, haggard even, but he could honestly not tell if she was sad or not. Of all of them, she seemed the most at peace with the loss of her husband. Her eyes did not appear red or worn from tears, and she did not seem disturbed by what she had just seen. Surely, she had witnessed this sort of thing before, and was therefore prepared to see her beloved Haleem that way. But was she seriously happy with the idea of other people eating his recycled flesh or using his constituent elements for some other purpose? If she was, did that mean he should be too? Perhaps this was what father and mother were trying to tell him. But why did it make so little sense to him if it was supposed to be so simple? How could someone’s life be considered so sacred when it was treated this way after they died?

Finally, Adnan just swallowed their instruction and resigned himself to the fact that this was something that he simply didn’t understand yet. Like so much else, he had to conclude that the confusion was his own, and that he shouldn’t be troubling others with it. The thought of apologizing crossed his mind, but whenever he did that, that just seemed to embarrass him further. No, it was better to keep quiet whenever this sort of thing happened, he had learned. If people were willing to chastise him for not understanding, then admitting his failure only seemed to make it worse. Looking his parents and grandma Adeela over, he wondered if it would someday become clearer. If so, he looked forward to that day.

“Okay, crewmen and crewwomen, listen up! Our cargo is about to be inspected by the authority of this backwater junk heap and it’s up to us to make them look presentable. For the money someone else paid to get them here, they should look, and smell, like they’re worth it! Otherwise, we might just get stuck with an impound notice, and be forced to keep them here at our own expense! I think I can speak for all of us when I say that I don’t want that happening?”

The other crew all nodded in reply. Captain Kreios clapped his hands together and ordered them to their stations. Walking amongst them as they strapped on their chemical packs and dispenser guns, he took the time to survey them over while yelling out formation orders, like an old-style drill sergeant.

“Cleaners, up front! Disinfectors, second tier! Maddox, get on those door controls and be ready to crack em’ open! Everybody else, you’re on crowd control! Get your batons and gear on and be ready to keep the crowd back if they get restless.”

In the front row, the heaviest of Kreios crew waited with packs of cleanser foam strapped to their backs and protective masks on their faces. In the second tier, Zelena and Tulloch stood with three other crewmen wearing first aid scanners and carrying antimicrobial wands. They too wore protective masks, designed to shield their respiratory organs from both their own chemical

sprays as well as any infectious diseases the people might be carrying. Those on the receiving end were sure to suffer some burning or chemical shock, but at least they'd be healthy enough to be granted passage once the port inspectors came around.

Maddox; who, at fourteen, was the youngest of their crew, stood above them all and manned the door controls. When Kreios was certain everyone was ready, he gave the boy the thumbs up.

"Alright! Open 'er up!" Kreios yelled.

The cargo bay door parted in the middle with a tiny sliver. Immediately, air began to rush from one room to the next, carrying with it all the smells and contaminants of a huddled group of migrants. Once the sliver had expanded to about a metre distance, sounds began to bleed out as well. There were plenty of people yelling and screaming. Cries of fear, elation, or something else, Zelena couldn't tell. But it seemed logical to assume that they were happy cries. For people who had been sealed in a confined space for weeks on end – if one included the time both before and after cryosleep, it made little distance subjectively – huddled so close they could tear each other's flesh off, any change must have seemed like a blessing. However, the mood seemed to change when they caught sight of the Captain and his crew standing before them with all their kit on. From their point of view, it must have looked like a police riot squad was about to descend on them, possibly sent from the colony itself. The Captain was quick to speak to them so he could dispel any fears they had, and establish who was in charge.

"Listen up!" he boomed with the help of an amplifier strapped to his throat. "We've reached our destination as promised! However, before anybody gets off this ship, there is still the matter of the port inspection. Now since nobody here wants to spent more time than is absolutely necessary in quarantine, we are happy to provide a mandatory sanitizing session which begins now. And when I say mandatory, I mean just that! Line up against the walls, remove all excess articles of clothing, and I promise, no one will be harmed. However, if you resist, we are prepared to do this the hard way."

The crew on crowd control brandished their riot sticks; some even beat them against their shields for emphasis. The cargo, already timid in the face of the Captain's words, seemed to cower a bit more now. Obediently, they lined up against the wall and slowly began peeling off their robes or jumpsuits, leaving only their undergarments on. Moving in behind the first tier, Zelena gave them a quick look around to see just how many were still here. The manifest they'd taken before the trip claimed they had somewhere in the vicinity of two-hundred and fifty. But on every mission, the number always dropped off by a few. Faulty cryo-units, disease, and sometimes murder thinned the herd ever so slightly. In every inspection, there were always some bodies that turned up in the corner, sometimes with an explanation, sometimes without. It was important not to point fingers. The better slicer vessels could always keep it to a minimum, but the older, less luxurious liners usually lost about ten percent.

The cargo area too was something interesting to behold. Over the years, it had been converted from freight storage to house the new hottest item on the market. Namely, people coming from Sol. Most of the old cargo containers they had kept were still there, with door holes cut out and furniture improvised from pieces of polymer or metal. And these were in addition to the cryo units that lined the walls a little further to the rear of the bay, where the passengers were ferried into when it was time for the crew to go down for the "ice nap". Still, in spite of the relative space and accommodations, it was still a very sparse living arrangement for hundreds of people at a time for months at a time. And it often took a physical and psychic toll on its residents, but given the alternative, it had to be better.

A shove from behind told her to get moving. Looking up, she spotted the first couple in the line that had just been sprayed disinfectant and moved towards them. Punching up a new entry on her scanner and ascribing it a number, she ran and the wand over the woman's body and let it eliminate any remaining cultures of bacteria or viruses that had resisted the chemical onslaught. A hundred times she did this before the day was done, and each time, the people seemed clean. There was little to no resistance, and amazingly, no bodies turning up with signs of a struggle. Those who didn't make this time out died of legitimate causes, it seemed.

When it was done, Zelena and the others fell into step and worked their way out of the bay. The crowd controllers, who had just finished collecting the disposed clothing, now moved in to distribute fresh robes and tunics. They were unimpressive and completely bare of any ornamentation or enhancements, which was standard practice. At one time, some slicer crews had gotten inventive and decided to start putting their ships logos on the clothing they dispensed. A quick complaint from every colonial customs authority, as well as every other ship in the fleet, put an end to that quick. Smuggling cargo was a discrete business, and no one wanted to know exactly who brought them in or where they came from. Easier to assimilate people that way, at least on those worlds that actually *had* a social structure and culture to speak of.

The cargo bay doors slammed shut once the last of them were out, leaving the huddled, wet people in their spacious but confined cell to get dressed and retain some of their dignity. The crew, on the other hand, stripped off their gear and breathed a collective sigh of relief. Things had gone quite well this time. The people had been prepped, the dead cleared away. As their shippers, their last duty was done. They were only a few days away from docking now. When that time came, both the ship and its cargo would be turned over to the local authorities and immigration services – what little there were. Which, in turn, meant that the rest of them had some time for some much needed R and R. And on Apollo, there was really only one place for that...

The indignities just seemed to keep coming. First, there was the trip inside a cargo container, surrounded by strangers with no privacy or hope of ever getting it. Then there were the long lines by the food dispensers, waiting for ship slop three times a day. After that, there was the "sanitation" ritual where men hosed them down while they stood half naked and submitted to a highly insensitive examination. Then, to top it off, there were the port authorities counting them off and shuffling them to a tight kiosk, to wait for what was referred to as "processing".

Through it all, Meares and his wife Jana waited and complied, hopeful that the next one would be the last. But the crowded entry corridor, the yelling people, and the way the attendants got hands-on with a lot of people told them otherwise. And the nature of these attendants, grey uniforms, armoured helmets and stunners at their waists – they looked more like armed guards than facilitators. Their behaviour certainly confirmed this suspicion, but he couldn't blame them really. From their point of view, the crowd must have seemed like a motley bunch of gutter-dwellers: loud, desperate and barely clean. Even Mears couldn't help but feel that he and wife looked like cleaned-up versions of them. He couldn't imagine why the functionaries or attendants would show him any respect. Already he was regretting their decision to book passage. The promises made by the promoter were feeling less and less valid.

"Move the line!" one of the attendants yelled. Finally, Mears and Jana were pushed to the front of the line. A booth on their right side with a single clerk greeted them with mild interest and some rapid questions.

“Name?”

“Patric and Jana Meares, Ares One Colony –”

“Destination?”

“Um, planetside, I guess.”

“Any known genetic disorders or allergies?”

“Um... no.”

“Please fill these out and move on. Next!”

The clerk shoved a bundle of crystal paper and a pointer pen in his direction and looked to the next person in line. The attendants began shuffling people forward again, which in turn pushed them away from the booth.

“Wait!” he cried. “I’m supposed to tell you my qualifications! I have technical qualifications!”

His voice was drowned out by the noise of the crowd, and the shouts of those looking to quiet them. In time, the attendants broke out their stunners and started brandishing them like batons. Then, there was a loud shout, and a flash of light as one of the stunners was activated and shoved into someone’s body. Meares was barely able to see what happened. The incident seemed to make the man “attending” to him that much more rough. But as he and his wife were shoved away he saw bodies fall to the floor, trembling and screaming from the shock the stunners delivered directly to their systems.

“What’s going on?” Jana demanded.

Meares reached for her and tried to pull her close, not wanting to upset their attendant any more. His sudden motion had the opposite effect, and the next thing he knew, Jana was screaming and crumpled into his arms. Meares turned to plea with the man to stop, but a blinding jolt to his ribs sent him sprawling onto the floor. With his last seconds of useful consciousness, he tried to yell out for help, but couldn’t form the words. Before blacking out completely, he could feel himself being dragged somewhere, his head touching the floor and his legs being pulled along. Some quiet murmurs, followed by a few laughs told him all he needed to know about what they thought of him.

“More slag for the pile. Hope this one lasts longer than the rest.”

“To all patrons, settlers and traders, welcome to Kabal! I am Avery, your friendly Apollonian Avatar and guide to our lovely orbital facility. Before outlining the accommodations we have here on Kabal, I would like to remind everyone of the rules specified by the Apollonian codes of conduct...”

Zelena rolled her eyes as she waited for the holographic greeter to finish. It was obvious that whoever programmed it had a sick sense of humour. A pleasure base populated almost entirely by vagabonds and deep-spacers, with a greeter that spoke as if it were addressing a bunch of children. And it’s so called reminders were little more than veiled threats too. And why oh why did it need to have such a sunny disposition all the while, she wondered?

“Thank you, and welcome once again!”

The avatar disappeared from its spot in front of them and the doors opened into the station’s main thoroughfare. There were at least two dozens others with her and Tulloch, plus a few others from the ship who had decided to join them. Tito, the pale, overlarge juicer who otherwise one of the ship’s bouncers had come, as had Girka and Vale. Like Tulloch, both were Homo Novis’, the product of neurological tampering and implants. But unlike Tulloch, both had their share of cybernetic enhancements that had nothing to do with interfacing with the ship’s

systems. Girka's eyes, which at one time must have been a lovely shade of brown, were now entirely grey. And Vale, even though he would have certainly had powerful arms at any other time to compliment his frame, now carried one which was entirely machine. And while the machine element had a way of making Zelena and the other pure-organics nervous, they were certainly handy to have in a fight.

Maddox, in spite of their warnings had come too. If the little runt couldn't be dissuaded, at least he had a big chaperoning party to watch over him. The Captain had chosen to stay aboard and chat with the local authority, hoping to get in on some of the local scuttlebutt. After that, he planned to trip on over to one of the other docking pylons, where he had a technical contact he liked to get software upgrades from. The rest he had sent on with his blessing, and instructions to chat up the other traders. He had made it clear that before they returned, they were to learn all they could about this transponder stuff. Meanwhile, they're might just be enough time to get a drink.

Once they were all through and into the Kabal's main street, Tulloch asked where they would like to venture. There were at least a hundred people walking around them, ducking in and out of boxy structures that had been converted to cantinas, restaurants, hotels, and pleasure dens. There was no shortage of places to visit, each one in a respective area with a particular atmosphere, catering to the desires of the weary traveller. Naturally, the group was split on which area they wanted to go to. Tito wanted to visit the Red district, where he would be guaranteed to find a place where he could get a fresh juice up. Girka and Vale had no preferences, but Zelena and Tulloch knew that fighting was probably in their plans. Sending them to a rough-neck bar seemed appropriate while the two of them took Maddox to someplace a little more laid-back. Once they had split up with plans to meet back before departure the next morning, Maddox clasped his hands together and began following them excitedly.

"Remember kid," Tulloch said. "Never look anybody in the eye. Never talk to anyone unless they talk to you first. And never, ever, let yourself get dragged into a discussion. Chances are someone's just trying to pump you for information. Let us do the talking and just keep your ears open for any talk about what's going on along the rim these days."

"Got it!" he said exuberantly and continued to prance alongside them.

"That's another thing. Stop walking like you're happy to be here!"

"No problem!"

"And try not to seem overly excited."

"You – um – got it."

His last words were said with deliberate effort. Now, instead of walking like an excited child, he looked like a morose one. At least, one that looked like he was *trying* to be morose. Tulloch couldn't help but chuckle. Zelena joined him in that.

"Let's just make sure he stays away from the drink," she whispered to him.

"Amen to that."

The destination they had in mind proved to be just as they remembered it. The flickering holographic outside read in blocky letters the name *Limit*. The name said it all, a place at that point where one could explore their own. Luckily, it had never been known to be frequented by those looking to test the limits of pain – how much they could endure or possibly inflict on others.

Ducking inside, they were quickly met with dim lighting, the slight sound of softened, string music, and the smell of some sweet, burning aphrodisia. There were more than a few patrons around, all of whom seemed sufficiently narcotized and well behaved. A corner booth

presented itself, and the two of them quickly escorted Maddox over to it. As soon as their bottoms touched the pressure-sensitive cushions, their server unit popped its head up from the table to take their orders.

“Two Ambrosias, one Arcturan tonic,” Tulloch said into the slim, mechanical face.

“Hey!” Maddox protested.

“It’s for your own good, kid. The order stands,” Zelena said to the robot. The head nodded mechanically and then slipped back down into the table. Moments later, another unit wheeled by with their drinks on a table. Zelena took her glass and set down a few tokens of the local currency onto its carrying table. The machine blurted a thank you noise and promptly left to fill its next order.

“Thanks, pilot, I’ll be sure to get the next one.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Maddox added, eyeing his drink mournfully.

“Thank me when you’re not looking up from a pool of your own vomit,” Zelena said, and raised her glass in a toast. “Yamas!”

“Slainte!” Tulloch replied, raising his glass to join her. With a nudge, so did Maddox.

Their glasses hit the table not a second later. As always with Ambrosia, nectar of the Gods, the first taste was always the hardest. Invented by some gifted individual on some remote colony, using almost exclusively illicit ingredients, the swill had quickly grown to become a favourite amongst spacers and orbital workers. Like the Gods, it gave with one hand and took with the other, mainly from the brain and liver.

“Hey,” Maddox said, nudging Tulloch back and pointing to the door. In their moment of distraction, they hadn’t noticed who had just walked in and was eyeing their table.

“Well, well,” Zelena said as the party approached their table. “Look who’s here.”

“I’ll be damned,” she said, watching the tall, dark, lanky Novis walk in the door. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“Risky, very risky. I’ve seen this brand of transponder before, and any alterations would be sure to irrevocably harm its output, and even make your ship appear that it was something it was not. In all possibility, a hostile raider.”

“Oh, come now! Surely it can’t be that difficult.”

Kreios slammed his hands in frustration down on the workbench in front of him, sending some of the smaller components and tools sprawling. The artificer flinched and withdrew from the table, fearing a flying object might damage the sensitive equipment he wore on his head. Adjusting the ocular enhancement lens that hung over his one eye, he simply repeated himself.

“I am afraid it can’t be done, not without incurring a great deal of risk.”

Kreios was about to stammer something futile again, when a sudden realization caused a smile to spread across his face. The tech man, however, did not see the humour in their situation. This only made him smile all the more.

“I get it, I get it,” he said with a raised hand. “What would it take to make the impossible possible, hmmm?”

“I’m afraid that too is impossible,” he said plainly. This caused Kreios to slam his hand down on the workbench again. It had taken hours for him to find someone who had the know-how to alter his ship’s ID codes. At least, that was what he had been told, and he was beginning to suspect that he had been taken for a ride. Perhaps one of the other Captains had decided to have a little fun at his expense by sending him on a wild goose chase. If that were true, his money was on Reinhardt.

“Why?” he demanded at last. “Why is that impossible? Plenty of other ships have done the same thing and everyone I’ve talked to says you’re the man who did it for them.”

“I was dealing with more sophisticated machinery in their cases. Besides, they were hardly concerned with the potential for harm.”

“What? Why?”

“They didn’t say. Suffice it to say, they seemed concerned about being identified accurately by someone.”

“Someone, who?” Kreios demanded.

“They did not say,” the artificer said again in the same, dry tone. It was really beginning to annoy Kreios. Without another word, he placed the transponder device down and went back to work on another component with the multi tool appendage he wore on his arm. Deciding he had had enough, Kreios walked around the length of the table and moved next to the man’s side, leaning directly into his line of sight.

“You obviously know something. So if you can’t fix my codes, why don’t you at least enlighten me a little as to why all the traders in this system are going to great ends to hide their identities.”

The man stared back at him with a knowing glare. Kreios sighed and nodded understandingly

“Alright, alright.” He said as he reached into his pocket, produced a monetary slip and slammed it down on the table. The artificer picked it up and examined it momentarily, no doubt checking its authenticity.

“The question, sir, was why are they going to these lengths? What’s got them worried?”

The man tucked the slip away in his vest and began to speak in what sounded like an anecdotal tone. Immediately, Kreios wasn’t happy with the direction it was taking.

“We are embarking on some dangerous times, if you believe all the rumours. There are stories of colonies being overrun, of refugees looking to escape, of new ships moving about the space lanes.”

“New ships? Who are they?”

The artificer looked back at him with the same glance.

“No!” Kreios barked. “Not unless you know something for sure, I’m not paying you anything more!”

“Oh, very well, I know nothing for certain anyway,” he replied. “Suffice it to say, I don’t think anybody does. But the fact that they would try to hide their identities, tells me they think it might be someone who would be capable of identifying them.”

“What does that mean?” Kreios asked with a look of complete bewilderment.

“Give it time, Captain,” he said haughtily. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

Zelena and Tulloch sat helplessly as their unwelcome guests made themselves comfortable at their table. The leader of the pack they immediately recognized: Keegan, Reinhardt’s second in command. His short-cropped hair, metal teeth, and hard, leathery exterior were unmistakable; all the signs of a hardened spacer. The other two were somewhat obscure, maybe they were new. But given their obvious enhancements, and the transitive properties of evil, they had to be just as bad as their leader. A quick assessment told Zelena they were terribly outmatched if things got ugly, but at least he appeared in the mood to talk. Tulloch was the first to open up a dialogue, getting the obvious out of the way first.

“Since when do Kronos jockeys hang out here?”

“What are you, the bouncer droid?” Keegan said through the gleam of silver teeth. “We’re just here to take in a show, maybe a few drinks.”

“And?” Zelena asked impertinently.

“Does a man need to have ulterior motives?”

The server came around again, three more glasses filled with orange Ambrosia. Keegan and his party quickly took theirs and downed them in a single shot.

“In your case, yes.”

“I suppose that is true,” Keegan said, wiping his mouth and coughing politely. “Damn drink! Never gets easy, no matter how often you suck it back. Effects never seem to diminish either.”

“The point, sir,” Tulloch said with a raised voice. Beneath the table, Zelena placed her hand on his leg, squeezing it tightly. In a stand up fight, she knew neither of them could take Keegan, and there was also Maddox to think about. Add to that the fact that they weren’t armed, when Keegan most surely was, and they had every reason not to push him too far. Luckily, his diplomatic mood appeared to be in good standing, at least for the moment.

“The point, gentlemen, and lady, is that my Captain thought it fair to fill your Captain in on something rather lucrative. But as he’s not about, I thought I’d pass the information to you. Seem fair?”

“Lucrative, huh? What might that be?”

It was Zelena who asked this, and it produced a smile from Keegan. “Same old, honey. Trading, one system to the next, supply and demand moving it all along. All that’s changed is the locale, and maybe the underlying market forces.”

Zelena cringed at his use of the word honey, and the way he said it made it sound anything other than endearing. But she sensed there was a point in this and didn’t want to get distracted.

“Proxima Centauri is becoming the focus of some serious attention again, it seems.”

“What’s he mean, ‘again’?” Maddox asked. Tulloch shot him a quick glance to remind him of their little discussion. This earned him a little scorn from Keegan.

“Little lad needs to be housebroken? Okay, lad, allow me to fill you in –”

“What he means is, Proxima was an archaeological colony awhile back.” Zelena said this, deliberately interrupting. She would be damned if a member of another crew, especially one as arrogant as the Kronos’, were to start educating one of her own.

“Anyway, there was a demand for qualified personnel, supplies. It was a good racket for about a year, then it kind of dried up. People were lured there by rumours of some ancient colony set up by the survivors of the last Dry Epoch, but I guess it turned out to be nothing.”

“It wasn’t a rumour love, it was real,” Keegan interjected, then directed his attention to Maddox again, he finished the story. “Word is the diggers and scientists found something a while back. Others must have thought so too, because in time, lots more people came to settle there. The colony wasn’t huge, but big enough to keep going. Now, them and their families are looking to get off world, and fast.”

“Why?” Zelena asked.

“Don’t know myself. Rumour has it that some new faction has moved into the surrounding area and is looking to expand. Could be that, or could be whatever they found is starting to make them nervous. All I know for sure is, there are plenty of people looking for ships and Captains to get them out of there now. ”

“You’re full of it, Keegan,” Tulloch jumped in. “How do we know this isn’t some ruse to get us out of the picture, huh? We all know the best runs don’t go anywhere near Proxima anymore!”

“Whatever, lads. My Captain and I thought we’d do you this courtesy, honour amongst traders, you know. And seeing as how you’ve been on another run and out of the system for a couple years now, we figured you hadn’t yet heard. You do what ya like with it, but consider the other traders. They’re starting to get nervous too. Why would they be worried if there was nothing going on?”

Zelena and Tulloch perked up. They tried not to seem to interested, but if Keegan was going to shed some light on the little matter they were asked to investigate, so much the better.

“You must have noticed a lot of traders are performing a little electronic surgery to their ships,” he said, referring to the mystery of the ID changes. “At the same time, I have it on good authority that many of these same ships have been making runs to Proxima and the Centaur binary. The money must be good if the risk is high, don’t you think? In either case, you might want to think about it.”

Keegan waved at his companions to follow him out. “Good-bye loves, and good luck to ya.”

Once they were sure he gone, they naturally started talking.

“What the hell was that about? You think he’s telling the truth?”

“Maybe,” Zelena said. “But why would he be doing us any favours? You don’t buy that fair warning and courtesy crap do you?”

“Well, the honour code is no laughing matter, Z. Even amongst enemies, you don’t leave another slicer out in the cold if you can help it. You don’t let them walk into a trap either.”

“Well, if what the Captain has told us is true, Reinhardt’s done plenty of both.”

“Exaggeration, perhaps? Besides, the Captain told us to ask around, and we learned something. I say we report back and let him decide what to do with it.”

“Hey guys,” Maddox waved his hand at them, hoping they might show him a little attention again.

“What is it, Madd?” Zelena asked.

“Am I the only one who noticed those guys stuck us with the bill?”

When he awoke again for the second time, Meares found himself lying in the corner of what could only be a holding cell. The floor was uncomfortably cold, and the thin tunic that had been provided earlier wasn’t helping. When his eyes cleared, he leaned up and tried to take in his surroundings. His head still spun from the effect of the stunner, and the muscles in his side tingled and spasmed from the recollection of the pain. And what he saw around him wasn’t any more encouraging.

He was entombed in metal, him and a couple other people. The walls, the door, the containing cage, the floors, even the beds themselves were made from crude metal that looked like it had been peeled from a ship’s hull. And it wasn’t nearly spacious enough to hold them. Already he could detect the unpleasant smells wafting up around him, the stench of an overcrowded room with little in the way of facilities. He was half-tempted to look around and see just where they were expected to put their waste. He quickly decided not to.

His thoughts quickly went to Jana, and what she must be going through. The guards had thrown him in here with what looked like other men. Which probably meant they segregated their detainees. Assuming they even took her to a cell...

“Help! I need to talk to someone!” he yelled, thrusting himself to the bars. “I don’t belong here! Someone help!”

The other detainees started making noise, some shouting protests of their own, others telling him to shut up and sit down. In adjacent cells, he heard sounds of hoots, laughter and angry screams. Through it all, one voice came through clearly to him.

“Sit down, you fool! You’re going to get us all in trouble!”

The voice came from an old man sitting on the bed behind him, one who looked liked he had been there for some time. Within seconds, there was a loud clang and the sound of a door opening, followed by some footsteps. Everyone went deathly quiet. As the footsteps drew closer and his heart raced, he felt himself regretting he’d said anything in the first place.

There were three men who came to their cell at last, two guards and one who looked dressed slightly different. In addition to the grey uniform, he wore a black sash and appeared to have more insignia on him. Meares could only guess he was some high-level functionary, perhaps someone in charge, which was encouraging.

“Are you Patric Meares?” the man asked in an authoritative tone.

“Y-yes,” he managed to say. “How can I be of service?”

“Come with us, please,” he said plainly. The cell was opened for just a second, and the two guards brandished their stunners to make sure no one tried to follow. Meares timidly obliged and followed them out. When he managed to steel himself for another comment, he thought to ask.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’re wife was nice enough to tell us a few things,” the man in charge said.

“What? What have you done to her?”

“Relax, sir,” he said in a slippery tone. “Everything’s just fine. You’re wife’s not been harmed, and you and she will be relocated soon enough.”

“Wh-why?” He felt stupid to be questioning this. Every instinct he had told him to just accept this gift before they realized it was a mistake and stuck him back in the cell. Luckily, the functionary’s words dispelled this notion.

“You’re engineers, don’t you know! Governments interested in people like you. You’re being moved up the line, don’t you know, to somewhere nice!”

“Thank God!” Meares said gratefully. For the first time in while, he felt like he and Jana were getting a dose of good luck. It was about time too! After what was subjectively months, but in real time decades, things were finally happening as they hoped. Their dream of a life outside the Colonies, without the repressive laws and hemmed-in borders, seemed to finally be at hand.

Having had their fill of cryptic warnings and Ambrosia, Zelena and Tulloch decided to leave the establishment and Kabal altogether. Their first stop was to the Red District, where they had left Maddox with Tito. It was a hard decision, leaving the boy in his care, considering what he was up to. But it did seem a lot safer than entrusting his safety to Vale and Girka; who knew how bodies they had laid out by now? Given the choice, sleaze or violence, the former seemed much more practical.

After a good hour of searching from platform to platform, hopping on and off shuttles and scurrying along on low-gravity walkways, they finally picked up the Captain’s trail in a small maintenance shed orbiting around the other side of the planet.

“Captain, you won’t believe who we just ran into!” Zelena said, falling into step next to him as he walked unusually fast. Judging from his direction, it seemed he was in a hurry to get back to the departure bay where they had just come from.

“Yeah, I had an interesting time myself,” he said disinterestedly, and kept on going. Running to his other side, Tulloch tried to get his attention as well.

“Captain, you wanted us to look around. Well, we found something. Found it? Hell, it was put right square in our laps, and from Keegan too!”

“Keegan?” This stopped the Captain and swung him around to face them. “What did that freak of nature have to say?”

“Just some whisperings about Proxima being open for business, and how all the slicers who know are doing runs there right now,” she said, and remembering what he mentioned, thought to inquire. “What did you learn?”

“Well, I had a talk with a certain artificer who was supposed to fix our transponders for us. He didn’t, but he managed to point me in the right direction vis à vis all this business.”

“Really, what direction is that?”

“Keegan mention anything about the people moving into the Centauri triangle?”

It was Zelena who answered, after a second of thought. “No, not really. He mentioned there was somebody, but he didn’t know who it was.”

“Yeah, well, I think I know.”

“Who?” Tulloch asked.

“Get your stuff and meet me back at the ship. This needs to be said in private.”

A few hours later, the entire crew had reconvened. Vale and Girka appeared unharmed, with was interesting. And judging from the look of terror Maddox wore, Zelena wondered if it had been the right decision to leave him in Tito’s care. Clearly he had seen things in that pleasure den which had frightened him out of his skin. Tito’s expression confirmed nothing, but the fact that he seemed more placid and calm than usual meant he must have been up to something bad.

Standing before them in the bridge’s anteroom, the Captain recited back to them everything he had heard, coupled with the conclusions he had drawn. For the most part it confirmed what Keegan had said, which in itself was a bad sign. Any time your enemy gave you something that you could actually count on, it was sure sign that something very bad was lurking around out there.

“He confirmed that the slicers that have been coming through here have been altering their ID codes,” he said, referring to the artificer he’d had a run-in with. “On top of that, he says that other systems in the region around Proxima have been doing the same. The entire Centauri sector appears to be at risk, another faction moving in and taking over. Whoever it is, he said, it was someone the other slicers were afraid of being identified by.”

“What does that mean?” Girka thought to ask, as it wasn’t already plain as day who was doing this.

“It means that Earth must be moving in to take over,” the Captain said flatly.

“Earth?!” Maddox cried meekly. “What the hell is Earth doing out here?”

“Who knows? Maybe they’ve decided to assert their authority over the outer systems finally. In any case, it explains an awful lot. Who else would the slicers be afraid of? Who else has our ID codes from doing business with us on a semi-regular basis? And who else would suddenly decide to move on these systems with the intent of taking over? What other factions have the ships and the means to conquer their neighbours?”

“He’s right,” Zelena said. “Nobody we know has that kind of firepower or resources, and people have expecting this for years.”

“Just a matter of time, when you think about it,” Tulloch agreed.

“But why change their codes? What are they hoping to do with those?” Maddox asked next.

“I don’t know,” the Captain said, shaking his head. “My guess is the others are hoping they can blend in with other Earth ships when they get here. If the Colonies have decided to annex the outer systems, then those who’ve made a living helping émigrés escape from them are sure to be arrested for their past efforts. The man I spoke to wouldn’t give me details, he simply claimed he changed a few ship’s codes using numbers they gave him.”

“And I suppose they got those from people back at Sol?”

Tulloch asked this, and it elicited a tentative nod of agreement from the Captain. A moment of silent consensus settled in amongst the crew. Already, Kreios had told them that he had been unsuccessful in getting their own ship’s codes changed, which did not bode well. If what they now suspected was true then they would be outgunned and outclassed in the event of a firefight with a Colonial ship, and even deception would be impossible. Which really left only one question:

“What do we do?”

“We go to Promixa,” Kreois replied.

“You’re going to have to repeat that, sir,” Tulloch said.

“I said we’re-going-to-Proxima.”

“Who else thinks they’re hearing things?” Zelena asked. No one, especially the Captain, appeared to be amused.

“I’m serious! The whole idea that they anybody can deceive the Colonial fleet with Sol transponders is a desperate gamble at best. They’ll know when they’ve come across slicer ships just by their profile. Hell, no other ships in the quadrant are as old as ours anyway. And if the buggers are moving in, every slicer needs to be there to make a stand when they show up. Besides, I need to see for myself what’s really going on at Promixa, and why the settlers are so desperate to get out.”

“Let’s not forget one thing.” It was Tito speaking now, for the first time since they had convened. Whenever the Nova *did* choose to speak, everyone listened, for it was sure to be poignant. “There’s still money to be made there as long as settlers remain. We don’t want to miss out on an opportunity while it’s still good.”

“Here, here! So let’s move like we have a purpose!”

Kreois clapped his hands, sending them all running for their stations. Within minutes, the ship’s near-to-light engines were fired up and their course set in. As they settled into their chambers for cryosleep, Zelena couldn’t help but notice the palatable sense of anticipation that was gripping them. They were heading back into the core, this time for something other than a cargo run. A showdown with Earth, if it was really happening, was something everyone has been anticipating for some time. If it was really happening after all this time, well... but that wasn’t something she wanted to be thinking about.

Technically, it would be a little over four years before they came to their destination. Even at full speed, there ship was incapable of surpassing the speed of light. But from their skewed perspective, the journey would be almost instantaneous. It was said no one dreamed while in cryosleep, but Zelena knew from personal experience, there were ghosts that haunted that cold, artificial sleep. What would she dream of this time? Space ships fighting, people

dying, their lungs exploding in vacuum as they screamed and fell away into space? Or would she dream of something pleasant before they finally came to their destination and woke to whatever dangers were looming there? Regardless, it would seem like almost no time at all had passed between setting her head down on the thick, spongy pillow to when her unit would wake her up again. Whatever looming conflicts or developments that were taking place in that sector would not wait for them, but hopefully they would be there in time to see it as it all unfolded.

The sound of the sonic shower in the background was a nice accompaniment to the soft music wafting in over the room's sound system. It was familiar, some sort of Earth jazz he had heard years ago. On his lap, Meares had the documents and contracts that the special envoy from the Apollonian government had given to him. The envelope, an imitation manila folder made from crystal paper with the emblem of a phoenix on the cover, lay on the floor next to his foot. Inside it he had found offers for numerous positions in orbit or across the planet inside, each with additional papers outlining problems they were having in their sectors. It was clear from it all the people were desperate, and willing to go to the mat for someone with the slightest expertise.

It was when he finally leafed through the last of them that he realized just how desperate they were. It seemed that in their haste to pull him and Jana out of detention, they had neglected to check his credentials. All of the applications and info bundles they had provided indicated they were looking specifically for electrical engineers, not mechanical ones. Which meant he would have his hands full when it came time for the interview the envoy had scheduled for him. Then again, he doubted they would care.

Still, he thought as he looked around the room again, it would be a shame to lose all this. Worse, it would be hell going back to that detention centre in the refugee processing facility, or whatever the hell they called it. Just a few hours in there told him all he needed to know about what they thought of refugees. Nothing in the universe could possibly make him want to go back to that.

The abrupt sound of the shower shutting off told him Jana was finished. A moment later he could hear her footsteps coming up behind him. The next thing he felt was her arms draped over his shoulders and the warm tingle of her breath in his ear. She had donned one of the robes they had thought to provide, a green fleecy coat with the same phoenix emblem that he had seen on the folder. It seemed in bad taste putting it on a bathrobe, but perhaps the insistence said something about Apollonian psychology. Or maybe it was just their way of reminding their guests who was providing for their comfort.

"How's it going?" she said softly.

"Mmmm, not too good. I think we might have to pad our resumes a little."

That made her laugh. Coming around to sit next to him on the divan, she stretched her legs out and began leafing through some of the documents he'd already tossed aside.

"My God, they're having a lot of trouble out here aren't they?"

"Yep," Meares agreed. "Every electrical system, from avatars to automatons are breaking down all over the place. They simply don't have the personnel they need to maintain a civilized existence."

"Well," she said, waving her arm around the expanse of the room. "I'm not above lying a little if it means we get to keep all this."

"Mmm, I get the feeling this is temporary."

Jana picked up another document and noticed the job posting printed on it. She also noticed the relocation notice printed beneath it, how those working the job would have to be willing to move to the orbital platform in question, or at least be willing to make the three hour commute from the surface. That one seemed a good to make her point.

“Ah, you’re probably right. But as long they think we’re useful, I’m sure they’ll keep us very comfortable.” She held the sheet up to his face for emphasis. “I could see us living happily in one of their finest orbital suites, all we’d need to do is promise we could make its systems run for awhile.”

“Yeah, I saw that one too. We should consider it.”

Jana threw the sheet away and pulled him closer, forcing his full attention on her.

“I’m serious Patrician. We wanted to start over here and now we can. Who cares if what they want from us is a little – a little – out of our fields. We can make it work, and it’s not like we have a lot of options anyway.”

“I know,” Meares said, laying down the last of the crystal paper sheets on the arm of the couch. “It just it seems a little too good to be true, you know? After all we went through to get here, suddenly things turn in our favour.”

Jana looked to be considering that, and nodded in partial agreement. While their change in fortunes had been rather sudden and surprising, she didn’t see any reason why that should entail suspicion. Things could be much worse, which was reason enough to be happy.

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth Patric,” she said, even though Patric clearly didn’t understand.

“What does that even mean?”

“An old saying, I’ll explain it to you someday. You understand what I mean though, right? We’ve been given something, sooner than we expected, and we should make the most of it. So let’s look through these together and make a decision. Let’s decide where we’re going to spend the next few years of our life.”

Patric looked deep into her eyes. In them he saw all the love and reassurance he could ever need at a time like this. The decision was certainly a heavy one. He could feel the weight bearing down on him like he was walking on the surface of a gas giant. But feeling her touch and her body close to him, so full of optimism, he couldn’t help but feel lucky.

“Alright,” he said at last. “Let’s do it! Let’s go through them all together and pick the one we like best!”

“Now that’s the man I know,” she said, raising her eyebrows suggestively. “But that can wait for awhile. Let’s go to bed.”

“But I’m not tired.” No sooner had he said the words did he realize how foolish he sounded. Luckily, Jana forgave him, and in her most seductive tone replied:

“Neither am I.”

Before Adnan, a long line of young people, boys and girls, stood, most of whom were accompanied by their parents. But for this occasion, only his mother had chosen to come with him. Above them, a large sign read Ministerial Internship, and below that a small blurb on how internship yielded opportunities for the future. He paid it and the propaganda films that were running on nearby monitors little attention; he had heard them all before. The recruiter had spoken much of the same slogans he heard over them, as did his parents after a private discussion many nights ago. But Adnan knew who was behind the decision to send him here. He suspected it was just an excuse to send him away somewhere where he wouldn’t have to deal with him for

a few years. And then, if all worked out as planned, Adnan would come home, normal and no longer troublesome to his family and teachers. Perhaps he was being childish about it all but it felt like a death sentence.

“Don’t worry,” Najeela whispered to him and squeezed his hand. “You’ll have fun out there. You’ll get to see the planets, the stars, the comets, and all the colonies. You’ll see how other people live and how the administration works. This will be good for you Addy.”

“I know,” he muttered in response, adding: “I thought you weren’t supposed to call me that anymore.”

“What, dearest?”

“Addy. You called me that, and you’re not supposed to.”

“Oh, aren’t I?” she said innocently.

“No, father said you were coddling me, and that you needed to start treating me like a man because that’s what I’ll be before long.”

Najeela turned her head away to hide her reaction. She had forgotten how clever her son could be, and apparently how good he was at overhearing things. Then he must have also known that she had protested the decision to send her son away, how she had resisted it at first but was now trying to put a happy face on it. Waiting a moment to let the blushing episode pass, she looked back at him and persisted in her efforts.

“Think of it as an adventure, son. After a few years as an intern, you’ll be able to be apprenticed in some area of the service and that could lead to a lifetime in the Ministry. You would be ensured a position for life, and you would make your father and I very happy.”

“Then I should be happy too.”

Najeela’s face soured when he said this. She was trying her best, but the boy seemed intent on being morose. For a moment, he wondered if she might actually be angry with him. She did not scold him or threaten to hit him; instead, she just went quiet. In all his life, he had never seen mother get angry with him, that honour was reserved for the man of their house. No matter what he said or how he pleaded, father always seemed intent on “making a man out of him” as he put it. It occurred to Adnan for the first time that this might be just as difficult for her. Rethinking his last statement, he tried finding some words that might encourage her as well.

“I will make you proud, mama. I want you to be happy.”

Najeela looked back at him and tried to smile. After some more words of reassurance, they were called to the front of the line to submit his application. Najeela did all the speaking, and handed the man in the booth the papers they had filled out for him the night before. The man took one look at Adnan then read the sheet, raising an eyebrow and lifting the small implant he wore above it.

“Planetary development, eh? Nice choice, young man! Plenty of fun and adventure out there on new worlds! New for you anyway.” the man said jokingly. Adnan smiled at him, he looked like some strange caricature. In addition to the implant, there were also several small machine parts attached to his vest and running down the length of his arm. Adnan wasn’t even sure if the man was entirely human, but somewhere he had heard about government functionaries using implants to be able to access information and keep things stored efficiently in their brains.

The man then quickly reviewed his sheet and ran it under a small scanning light he had mounted at his wrist. When that was done, he gave Adnan another smile and made some more small-talk, mainly praising his decision to join. Adnan smiled ironically during it all, wishing he could say he had no real choice in the selection process. From the description he had read, it sounded quite interesting, but it would still have been nice to have been consulted. But not to

wanting to further embarrass his mother, he simply held his tongue. And she was too busy asking the man questions to be disturbed at the moment.

“When will his first leave be?”

“Well, you’ve applied for special holidays I see,” the man said, accessing the information in his head. “First leave would coincide with Ramadan then, first week-end. However, further details will have to wait, as the Ministry has authority over where he’ll be stationed and for how long.”

“When will we know?”

“A few weeks, in which time you’ll be informed of where he’ll be stationed for the first leg of his internship. You’ll also be given instructions on where to bring him so we can pick him up and ship him out with the other youths who enrolled.”

“How many other children will there be?” Najeela asked. The questions just kept coming. Adnan could see that the man was used to this and simply took them all in stride, smiling benevolently with each reply.

“Don’t worry ma’am. Everything will be made clear before the boy ships out. The Ministry may be large, but we’re nothing if not organized.”

“I see, of course,” she said apologetically, eying the man’s implants. They then bid him goodbye and turned to let the next group of people come forward to register. On their way out, his mother tried again to be comforting, but he could tell it was as much for her benefit as his own.

“You see, son. There’s no reason to worry. Everything will be fine.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “No reason at all. I’ll be fine, mama, I promise.”

“And you’ll get a chance to meet lots of other interesting people, and you heard what he said too, you’ll be home to see us very soon.”

“Yes, mama. I know, everything will be fine.”

Najeela smiled awkwardly. Was she trying to comfort him or was he comforting her? She couldn’t tell anymore, and once again she was left wondering how her son had become so strangely perceptive. She decided to take her own advice, and convinced herself yet again that there was some wisdom, however callous, in what his father had planned for him. At the very least the Ministry might find a niche for him out there, or a suitable use for his talents that would make him feel more confident with himself. The last few years had been hard on him, and some growth experience might be just what he needed. But in the meantime, she still had a few weeks to wish him well.

“Come on, Addy,” she said, deliberately forgetting his father’s injunction. “Let’s go home. I want to make sure you’re well fed before they ship you off. God only knows what kind of food they serve out there in space.”

I can’t imagine life without all this, Arayus thought as he stood hovering over the capitol. On the balconies and in the streets beneath him, the people had poured out to witness the procession, the celebration marking his retirement. After a life of service, they had come from all over the system to bid him farewell. Although the mood was characterized for the most part by sadness at his departure, for others, it was a chance to bid him a bitter farewell. Protesters had already been sequestered outside the main procession route, and some arrests were made. Others who were beneath him felt the same way, he knew, but luckily they chose to keep those feelings to themselves. Not all approved of his parsimonious measures during the twenty some years that

he had been their Executive, but he surmised that they would all look back on his reign with nostalgia some day.

Yes, he told himself, they'll be sorry they ever got rid of me.

It was an unprecedented move, members of the Conservative people's party turning on their own leader. One would think such behaviour to be the province of the liberal-minded. Nevertheless, the greater part of his cabinet had made it clear that they wanted him to step down. They also made no pretence as to who his successor would be. It was for this reason alone that only one of them stood with him now, aside from a single security guard, as they floated above the city in an exhibition carriage. Somehow, and even though he had openly participated in the coup, only Aaronson's company seemed desirable for the occasion. Although a constant source of pain, right up until the very end; with Aaronson, he always knew where he stood. Just once more, he wanted a little honesty.

Though he stood on the precipice of the platform, next to the sloping front window, his eyes remained on the horizon and the dozen or so police and security cruisers that guided the procession. His future was somewhere out there, away from Earth. He hadn't decided where yet, but that was secondary next to policy concerns; which, subsequently, was the current topic of conversation with Aaronson.

"So, any new initiatives this boy of yours is planning on spearheading? Or has his youthful idealism not infected the ranks yet?"

"Don't be so dramatic," Aaronson said as he leaned with one shoulder up against the carriage's far wall. "I think we can assume the next administration will continue in the footsteps of the current one. Only the face will change, and that's what's important right now."

"So this really isn't about policy then?"

Aaronson didn't answer right away. It was obvious to him Arayus was fishing. He understood perfectly well why his career was coming to an end, he just wanted some sort of admission. He needed to have some measure of victory to take with him before he went away from Earth, never to return as anything other than a casual tourist or visiting dignitary. And if not a victory, maybe some sour grapes. Those would suffice, considering the man.

"Well then," Arayus continued, "I guess we can all rest happy in the knowledge that the next generation of leadership will benefit from the wisdom of the old, and be able to take credit for it since they won't even be around."

"Alright, that's enough. This is undignified Mr. Executive, sir. And I can continue to call you that for the time being, so please don't say anything sarcastic about it."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of it," Arayus replied, lamenting that Aaronson had beat him to it. Something in the nature of how it was an irony for him to be using that title certainly would have been appropriate; he guessed he would have to wait for another opportunity.

"Besides," Aaronson went on, "its not about policy or wisdom, its about accountability."

"Accountability?" Arayus spat as he turned his back to the crowds beneath him. "What did I do that was so wrong?"

Aaronson shrugged and answered as simply as he could. It sounded like he had some time to think about it, or maybe he had just thought so for a long time now.

"You stayed in office too long. Nobody can hold onto the office forever, it's a law of nature. The people always bring down those same individuals they elevate above them. Nothing personal."

Arayus snorted and turned back to the window. Looking below again, he noticed they were moving away from the centre of the capitol now and into one of the surrounding burrows.

Attendance was beginning to thin out now, and the crowd looked plainer and less formal. Nothing personal, he thought. Politics was always personal. Did the people take it personally whenever he told them he was curtailing their consumption? Did they take it personally when he chose to crack down on those who didn't respect the limits placed on them? Of course they did! And his personnel certainly took it personally whenever he put them in their place, whenever he was forced to remind them that *he* was in charge and not them.

So maybe he did something to deserve this, or at least to warrant it. Thirty years was a good run, but to end it like this. History would record that in his last year as Executive, his cabinet had turned on him. It would exalt the backstabbers who rallied the moment a rival declared himself, regardless of how under-qualified he was. But at least he would have some measure of vindication when the new boy screwed up, as surely he would. Just then, as the thought made him smile, he realized Aaronson was still talking to him.

"It's ironic, the same thing that drives a man to stay in charge is what drives people to bring him down, I guess."

"Let me leave you with one warning, Mr. Minister," he interrupted. "The people have never tolerated incompetence so you better not hope this new administration drops the ball. And second, there are certain advantages to being on the sidelines you know."

"Yes, I know," Aaronson sighed. "And I trust you'll be playing them for all their worth, saying 'I told you so' and all that if we fail somehow?"

"Only if I have to."

Arayus couldn't see Aaronson's expression, but he fully expected the half-smile, half-frown he had become acquainted with over the years. It was whatever he wore whenever someone he found himself being right for expecting the worst of someone. As a pessimist of human nature, he was almost always right, and couldn't help but derive a perverse sense of pleasure from it.

"I think I've had just about all I can take from you now, sir, so I'll get to the point."

"What point?"

"I didn't accept your invitation to be here out of pity, sir. There are some things I need to discuss with the Executive, matters of state."

"So talk to your golden boy, leave me to my parade."

"I don't think you understand sir," Aaronson said, closing the gap between them and joining him at the window. "These matters are not something that can be put on *his* untested shoulders. Furthermore, they pertain to something I told you awhile back, so I need to tell you again now. In short, I came here today because I need you to hear me while you're still in charge."

"Well," Arayus said, feeling genuinely interested all of a sudden. His tone improved as well, like he was feeling officious again. "What seems to be the matter then, Minister?"

"We're facing a problem with the outer systems," Aaronson said plainly.

"What kind of problems?"

"I'm not sure. My sources have been telling me that there's a lot of talk and confusion, but it looks like someone's moving in on them, sir."

Arayus' right eyebrow cocked itself involuntarily. The statement was doubly confounding, and he needed to get the smaller matter out of the way before asking the next most obvious thing:

"What sources? Since when have you had sources in the outer colonies?"

“For some time now, since it became clear to me that no one in this government was taking my recommendations seriously. But that’s not important, sir.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, why would you acting unilaterally matter to me now?” Arayus nodded, moving on to the next point. “So... what exactly have they told you?”

“Nothing concrete, sir, just stories, rumours really. About ships, sir, ships of unidentified origin that have been spotted here and there, and people getting nervous and booking passage from system to system.”

“Ships?” The word was like a whisper more than anything else as it came from Arayus’ mouth. It almost felt like the air in the cabin was becoming colder, the walls having inadvertently cracked and letting outside air in.

“It gets worse,” he continued. “The local people seem to think they belong to us.”

“But we...” The words were barely out of his mouth before Aaronson completed the thought for him.

“Don’t have any ships beyond our borders, yes. Which means someone else is out there; someone with a keen interest in expanding into systems adjacent to Earth, and populated by our people.”

Arayus was silent for a moment, drinking in the shear, crushing implications of the situation. To save time, he did his best to skip past the instinctive denial phase and get right to acceptance. He then forced his mind to come up with the requisite questions for this phase of the problem.

“Do we have any intelligence on these ships yet? Holographics, still pictures, even vague descriptions of what they look like?”

“Just a few tidbits. I’ve assembled them and wanted to pass them onto Ministry Intelligence Services. But it needs to be done discreetly, and in such a way that the new government will feel it has a plan prepared for it once the crisis breaks.”

“So I’m the only one who knows, outside of you that is?”

“Yes, sir. I felt letting this information break too soon would be a mistake. We don’t want a panic on our hands.”

“And right now, if someone’s moving in on systems that don’t belong to us, it makes sense to at least give the appearance of inaction.”

“At least until we have the means to defend ourselves properly, yes.”

Arayus took another moment to think it over. It was painfully ruthless, but he found himself nodding once he had finished processing it all. Yes, that was sound planning, he thought. Aaronson had some time to think this through obviously and was proceeding with great care. At last, he realized why he’d kept the man around for so long. As annoying as he was, he was very good to have in a crisis.

“Where is the package now?” he asked, looking for some sign of it on Aaronson.

“It’s safe,” he said, folding his arms over his chest. “But I think it could be supplemented a little. It needs your authorization for that part of things, and then I’ll take the rest.”

“What would you need?”

“Just the means to collect more information so when the time comes, we can draft some policy recommendations. But that needs some interdepartmental cooperation. My sources need some help from the Ministry of Defence and the intelligence services, naturally. They know how to go about this stuff far better than we do.”

“And then what do you plan to do?”

“Assemble all the information we’ve collected and have the Ministry of Defence ready to present it to the Cabinet once this threat fully materializes. Once the public knows about these new ships, it would be good for Defence to have a plan ready to be implemented.”

Arayus paused once more to drink it all in. Once again, he had to suppress the urge to reject all he was being told, and to lash out at the messenger. But sound decision making was what was needed now, not instinctive reactions. And in that spirit, there were plenty of rational objections Arayus could raise. He started with the first one that came to mind.

“We’re not just talking about simple policy here are we? There will need to be some serious preparations made to our defences. New weapons, more ships, and the like. Have you considered that?”

Aaronson made a quirky smile again. This time it was not so much ironic, more like an indication of the obvious.

“Yes, I have. And they can be made, discreetly and without the Cabinet or the people knowing. There needs to be funds made available and the right people overseeing the preparations. That too needs your authorization.”

Arayus huffed at this last recommendation. “Easier said than done, my friend. That kind of increase in spending won’t go unnoticed. And it’s not exactly like I have much time to make these things happen. I’m due to step down in just a few weeks. Last, but certainly not least, how are we supposed to keep a military build-up in this system a secret from both outsiders and our own people? For what we’re talking about here, we’d need shipyards, raw materials, and somewhere quiet to put it all together. Where would that be?”

“I’ve got a potential solution for all those concerns, sir. And I think you’d agree, it’s our best bet for preparing for what may be coming without attracting a lot of attention.”

“What – what do you mean?” Arayus spluttered.

“The Reclamation Project, sir,” he said in a hushed voice. It was pointless, whispering in their current surroundings, but it still felt appropriate. Arayus naturally gave him a look of complete confusion and tried to stammer out an objection. Before he could mouth anything coherent, Aaronson outlined it for him.

“The asteroid belt is a ripe place to hide a fleet sir, there are several cored out bodies that could be used to hide new vessels, weapons, or whatever else the Defence Ministry decides to build, once we order them to get building. Raw materials could be extracted on site and shipped with a minimum of time and cost. Last of all, it would provide an excuse for why we’ve increasing our spending.”

“And it would look damn foolish!” Arayus said. “I overturned Reclamation years ago, why would I start it up again in my last few weeks as Executive? No one would believe that!”

“They would if they thought it was being done out of spite. I think it’s fair to say that your successor is planning on doing it just to buy the people’s support. This way, you would be pre-empting him.”

Arayus went quiet as he considered this. Even if it was sudden and so very speculative, he had to admit, the recommendation made sense. As always he found himself weighing the pros and cons and falling on the side of least liability. Normally, that side favoured doing nothing, but given the possible consequences – and that was assuming that Aaronson was actually right about this – it made far more sense to be prepared. And he was right about on thing, Reclamation could be passed off as an appropriate cover, with everyone assuming it was a parting act designed to save face or forestall his successor.

In his tenure, Arayus had always been one to take the conservative approach. In his experience, it made the most sense, politically and philosophically. Those who ruled least were hated the least, and made the least amount of mistakes. Could he really do this? It all seemed so... bold.

“How much time do you need?” he asked.

“That’s not the issue, sir. What I need right now is your permission. This isn’t something you can put off until later. I need to know now, while you’re still the Executive.”

Arayus smiled ironically. Aaronson saw right through him there, it was an obvious attempt to stall. Very well then, he thought. If decisiveness was required of him, he was capable of it. It was just unfamiliar, and it was being demanded of him so late in his career. Making up his mind, he made an Executive order.

“You have my permission, Mr. Minister. I’m entrusting you with the task of building us an adequate defence to meet this new threat.”

“I can’t promise it will be adequate, sir,” Aaronson replied. “But I can promise it will be something.”

Zelena found herself awaking to the familiar din of the medical scanners. Her waking cycle, which had been in effect for many days now, was finally coming to an end. It was still several hours before she and Tulloch were able to pull themselves from the demi-coffins they called cryounits. And it was another hour before they had donned clothes and downed a few nutrient drinks to restore themselves. Then it was a quick trip to the bridge to check their sensors and telemetry data. As usual, she took her spot at the pilot’s station with him jacked in behind her.

“I trust you still have some stims?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, unbuttoning his breast pocket and placing his fingers on the vial. “Why, you need some?”

“No thanks, the prospect of a fight is good enough for me. I just want you to do me a favour.”

“Okay,” he said, giving her the benefit of the doubt. “What do you want?”

“I want you not to take any until you really need them. If we’re in for a fight, I want them lasting you until the end.”

“Right,” he said, buttoning the pocket again and giving it a quick pat. He never appreciated her addiction lectures, but under the circumstances he had to take her recommendation seriously. All navigators were known for taking stims from time to time. But he had been known to take them even when he didn’t need them, and now was not the time to let anything go to waste.

“Checking nav data now,” he said, patching himself in to their navigational array. Their immediate vicinity and everything to the edge of their sensor range began pouring into his senses. At the same time, the computer began comparing the position of the local star field against their charts and triangulated their relative position, compensating for a few years worth of stellar drift. Satisfied, it indicated that they were exactly where they were supposed to be.

“Position confirmed, we are in the Proxima Centauri system.”

“I can see that,” Zelena said, looking at the ships radar. “And were not alone.”

The faint glow of Proxima’s sun radiated past the darkening bulk of countless bodies as it made its way to their ship. Their radar was unable to tell them exactly how many signatures it was picking up as many of its contacts sat parallel to each along the ecliptic of their sensor

plane. Zelena attempted to zoom in and out in order to get a better idea, but she had to estimate that at least two hundred ships were located in their immediate path. It would take some time before she could get an accurate reading on how many were in the entire system, but time was on their side at the moment. Keying in a command sequence, Zelena programmed the ship's scanners to conduct a series of sweeps in different directions along their flight vector. By the time the Captain was awake, she would have a general figure for him. Once that was done, she ordered Tulloch to open up the comm lines and send out a general signal to all their friends.

"Keep it simple, ask if anyone has any idea what the hell is really going on, 'kay?"

"I'll be sure to keep it just as direct, but I think I'll word it a little more politely."

"Whatever, just get some info. In the meantime, let me see just how many customers we got here..."

After a few sweeps, Zelena's programmed sensor routine accounted for over four hundred Slicer ships. Most were concentrated around the system's main habitable planet, forming a sort of queue to get into orbit and pick up the shuttles that were still lifting off from the surface. A few moons and more sparsely inhabited bodies were also attracting ships who chose to forsake numbers for quick and easy access. Without the Captain's input, Zelena had decided to put Lathraia into a parked position behind the nearest ship in the queue. Comm replies were also slow to come and quite vague, basically all different wordings on the same thing. Two things they all agreed upon: one, the system was being evacuated. Two, there was news of another faction lurking in the region, and no one knew who it was. But theories abounded. Some thought it was some kind of alien intelligence, most suspected it was Earth branching out from Sol, and some had even more conspiratorial theories. None of it made sense, but at least it gave her something to tell the Captain once he was fully awake.

"Basically, everyone's as ignorant as us. No one knows why the colonists are being evacuated, they just know they are and are trying to get in on it while it's still happening."

"Did anyone say anything about adjacent systems?"

"A few, but the facts are few and far between. Some claim to have made runs to Proxima and a few other systems, but most were pretty tight-lipped. My guess is they don't want to share info concerning other possible jobs."

"Huh! Competition trumps comradery once again," Kreios scoffed.

"Well, at least it hasn't degenerated into a shooting war out there. There's still plenty of people to lift out, but I doubt they're will be any left once we get to the front of the line."

"Not a going concern," Kreios said, standing up slowly and wrapping his towel around him tightly. "My main worry is the reason for the evacuations, and you say nobody has any idea?"

"Not a clear one sir, but most think the same thing we do. Earth is moving in and the colonists want to get out before they impose Terran law everywhere. It's what they came out here to escape after all."

"Yeah, didn't we all?" Kreios trailed off and began pacing across the locker room. He looked like a man struggling to come to conclusions, subsumed by any number of dangerous possibilities, as if knowing the situation would somehow help them to survive it.

"What do we do, Captain?"

"We wait," he said without pause. "We wait until either Earth shows up, and that's assuming it really them out here, or until we get some indication that this was all some kind of mass hysteria."

Instinctively, Zelena found herself crossing her legs and folding her arms around herself. It was as if a cold breeze had blown through the room, or the climate control had suddenly shorted out. Whatever it was, the Captain's plan of action gave her no comfort, but it was his ship and his decision was law. Whatever waited for them out here, they would have to wait for it too. And if, when it came, they were in a position to resist... well, they would have to wait and see how that panned out as well.

Adnan waited anxiously for the door to open to the administrator's office. At last, after being bounced around from desk to desk, he had landed a meeting with Ganymede's head bureaucrat. That was no easy task, but ultimately his knowledge of the station's inner working, plus some grim determination finally paid off. Now he just had to wait for the administrator to finish whatever it was she was doing and actually admit him.

In his hands, the crystal paper shook from his incessant foot tapping. It happened whenever he was nervous, and made to wait. The message still burned with faint luminosity. *Notice of completion.* Not more than a day ago, those words had landed like a bomb in his dorm room. While the other interns danced about and hollered in victory, he simply stared at it for what felt like hours. He'd known this was coming, graduation had been on everyone's mind and clearly marked on everyone's calendar for months now. But somehow, he managed to push it to the back of his head, into a nice dark corner where he wouldn't have to think about it for a long time to come. There were always things to worry about in the meantime, paperwork, study, survey runs to the outer planets. But when the message was finally opened, he could put it off no longer.

He was going home. After four years of being away, seeing family only in passing during civic holidays, he was finally going home. And the prospect held no joy for him. After all, what did he have to look forward to? He knew how much Najeela missed him, and the thought of being closer to her was certainly nice. But there were others, people whom he harboured little affection for. At the same time, he could expect to be put back into a public school to serve out the remainder of his education. In addition to the usual differences that separated him from his peers, he had an additional four years of separation to widen the disparity between them and himself. That was certainly something he'd miss about Ganymede.

To be fair, his four years of internship had been no cakewalk. As he'd learned shortly after his arrival, the Ganymede facility was a pyramid where respect flowed uphill and abuse down. And given the shortages of personnel that came in the wake of the Arayus administrations' cutbacks, there was plenty of added stress and work to go around. Naturally, being at the bottom rung of the ladder, the interns got more than their share of both. But still, there were benefits. For one, he enjoyed being in the company of people he considered to be his intellectual equals. For the first time in his life he had felt accepted, and the comfort that came with knowing he had many friends. What would happen after they all said goodbye? Would any of them really see each other again? There was the prospect of meeting up when they joined the Ministry a few years from now, but not for the foreseeable future.

And so he waited, his foot tapping against the floor and an activated compad in his hand. In his other hand, he held the notice tight, as if it were a key piece of evidence being brought to his trial. Every problem had a solution; that was the first rule he had formulated for himself awhile back. The second followed; desperate times call for desperate measures.

When she finally called for him, he jumped out of his seat and made his way to the door. It slid open, revealing a fair haired woman sitting behind a dark imitation wood desk. A burning

cigarette hung limply from her hand, and her expression told him she was less than thrilled to be bothered.

“Sit down,” she said curtly. Adnan obliged, taking the only other seat in the room. He made a quick note of the décor, metallic walls bearing simple prints of Ganymede and other Jovian moons. There was no sign of family pics or anything remotely personal, he could only guess she kept those in her private quarters. Putting out the cigarette in an ash tray, she was quick to get to the point.

“I got my assistant telling me that an intern is unhappy about something and needs to talk, specifically to me for some reason. So... who are you? What’s this about?”

“Well ma’am,” he said, placing his graduation slip and compad in front of her. “I wanted to speak to someone regarding my, uh, service with the Ministry.”

The administrator took the notice in hand and gave it a brief once over. A quirked expression was all he got in return. “You’re service is up, kid,” she replied. “I don’t see what the problem is. You not want to leave or something?”

“Well, not exactly, ma’am. You see, I was wondering if there was any way I could still be of service to the Ministry.”

The administrator didn’t answer right away. Taking another cigarette from a concealed spot in her desk, she pressed it to her lips and lit it up, taking a few slow drags from it before answering.

“Kid, maybe you don’t understand how it works around here. Interns like yourself - they come, they do their time, and when they’re finished, we send them home. This isn’t a daycare centre or some kind of holiday retreat. You’re time is up. I’m sorry you weren’t clear on this subject.”

“Well, it just so happens...” he pointed to the compad in front of her, indicated the section he had illuminated. “There’s another branch of service that’s looking for people.”

She looked to where he was pointing. Her eyes widened and her mouth cocked sideways, possibly imitating a smile.

“Where did you-?”

“I used my limited access to search the Ministry’s employment database. The information is not classified, so I’m not breaking any rules.”

“Even so,” she said, slamming the compad down. “The Asteroid belt isn’t exactly a choice spot. Most people your age are looking for an internship back at Earth, or Mars. What drew to this spot, you got a thing for rocks and ice? And you’ve already completed one internship with us, what’s the point on going through another?”

Adnan licked his lips and tried to answer her questions sequentially. He found that was generally the best to deal with superiors who asked too many questions at once. It had a way of throwing them off, and making them realize that they weren’t smarter than he was, despite his age.

“Well ma’am, you’re right, the asteroid belt is a difficult posting, which is why it would look good on my record. Second, I believe I could be of further use to the Ministry, if I were allowed to stay on.”

“Problems at home, kid?” she asked, fixing him with a knowing stare. Adnan didn’t answer. He sat there and returned her stare, awaiting an answer. It wasn’t long before she let out a long sigh and a big cloud of smoke. Taking the compad in hand again, she gave it one more look before giving it back to him.

“I trust you read the section about security clearance. The Ministry of Internal Security would have to do a full screening before you were admitted to that posting. And last I checked, they aren’t asking for interns. The posting calls for qualified clerical assistants.”

“Yes ma’am, I was hoping for some kind of exception,” he said nodding. “I am technically qualified, thanks to my internship here. And I know that with an administrative recommendation, I would be eligible to apply for an interview, and with a full screening—”

“Alright, alright! You’ve done your homework kid, I get it!” She threw up her hands in mock surrender and reached into her desk to find the appropriate forms. Before setting her stylus to the paper, she gave him one last chance to reconsider.

“You sure you want to do this?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said after a brief moment of hesitation.

“Okay, you’re funeral, kid.”

Zelena reclined in her chair. Her lower back was beginning to ache from sitting straight for hours without a break. In all that time, their ship had made some progress in the queue. Slowly, they were getting closer to Proxima's only inhabited planet. Unfortunately there was no telling what would become of things between now and the time when they reached orbit. Already, a few ships had drifted to close to each other. Those who were not eager to move, thereby sacrificing their spot in line, had nearly forced a series of collisions with ships that were attempting to leave the system. For those ships, leaving the system was like running the gauntlet; weaving passed hundreds of potentially hostile ships before they could gun their engines and shoot off into interstellar space. Luckily, everyone was abiding by the lock-down rule, choosing not to arm their weapons and break the most basic of Slicer protocols. At this point, no one had anything to gain by initiating a shoot-out.

Setting the console on automatic, with instructions to chime her if anything out of the ordinary happened, she got up and made her way to the rear to fetch some fresh coffee. Tulloch was nowhere to be seen, she had given him a break a few hours ago when she first noticed he was beginning to fade. Even though she had been at her console just as long as he, she felt she owed him one. He had been faithful to her request, even though it was hurting him. As she made her way past his station, she noticed his bottle of stims sitting there. She was almost tempted to dip into them. They certainly would be more effective than the crappy store of coffee they had in the rear. But what she'd said earlier still held. It wasn't a question of principle, it was simple practicality.

She had filled her cup to the brim, spilling some over in her dilapidated state. The chime at her console sent her running and spilling. The queue was moving again and someone was trying to get out. Strapping herself into her chair, she shut off the autonav and gave the engines another controlled burn to follow the line forward. Any delay or overshoot would result in collision. Once the manoeuvre was complete, she re-engaged the autonav and slugged what was left of her coffee down. It tasted like engine oil, but at least she had something other than nerve-fraying adrenalin to keep her alert. It would be her last though, too much more would only make her edgy.

Edgier, she reasoned, taking note of her shaky hands and palpitating heart. Another hour of this and Tulloch would be there to replace her. Though she doubted she would be getting any sleep once she found her bunk again. Even if her mattress were forgiving and soft (which it wasn't), all she would be able to think about was nav routines and warning bell. Instead, she opted to check up on Kreios, who was also burning the midnight oil in his cabin.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked when she came to his door.

“Too many phantoms,” she replied. “How about you?”

“First name basis with them now.” He said, slumping back in his chair. In front of him was a disordered stack of sheets he’d been perusing through before her arrival. Zelena recognized them as copies of the Lathraia’s sensor logs. There were also some transcripts in there, presumably of recent comm traffic. Like her, he was trying to find some order in the chaos, and failing.

“You think we’re making a mistake?” she asked, sitting next to him.

“What, you mean coming all the way out here based on word of mouth information we got from an enemy?” It took him half a second to think it over. “No, you?”

“No. I think we made the right choice. I’m just worried it might not make a difference in the end.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking suddenly concerned.

“I mean, suppose the worst is actually happening. What if it really is the end of the world? Does our being here make any difference?”

“I don’t know...probably not. If someone’s coming for us, then I guess the chances of any of us getting out alive are pretty slim.”

Zelena looked deep into Kreios’ eyes. The way he sounded, almost helpless, made her almost want to cry. It was probably just the fatigue, but seeing him as resigned as she was disheartening to say the least. It wasn’t long though before he regained his edge and started talking like a Captain again. He wasn’t about to let that dire predicament stand.

“But we’ll have a far better chance than any of those people down on the planet, assuming anyone’s left to rescue once we get there. And before this over, we’re going to save as many as we can.”

That’s more like it, she thought. Now he sounded like the man she knew.

“Where will we take them?” she asked next.

“Not sure, wherever is still safe. Then... well, we’ll jump off that bridge when we come to it.”

Zelena slid next to him and took his hand in hers. For the remainder of their evening, before she had to return to the bridge, they sat there together, his head resting on her shoulder. From time to time, he needed to take comfort as well, and Zelena had grown accustomed to his moods. In all their years together their relationship had never transgressed into the sexual; they knew each other too well for that. Instead they enjoyed something that was akin to platonic love. Whatever the name, Zelena believed it to be the deepest kind of friendship that could exist between a man and a woman, or any two people. She doubted any of the others would understand which was why they never showed it openly. Still, she suspected they knew.

It pained her to think that they might actually die together, running back and forth trying to postpone the inevitable. He wouldn’t say it, but that’s what their plan amounted to. Sooner or later, there would be a confrontation with whomever or whatever was out there. The Slicer fleet, a motley conglomeration of aging rust buckets, was not up to such a task. Though determined, the best they could hope for was a dignified stand and an honourable death. But if that’s all they could offer, then that’s what they’d give. The Captain had been right when he’d committed them. There was no choice. Whether it was against Earth or some alien intelligence, they were in this for the species now. All that mattered was keeping as much of it as they could free and alive for as long as they could.

“We've been getting some interesting returns on spectral scans. We've noted a series of signatures on the Doppler scanners too.”

“New locations, or just the old ones?” Cherybus checked the holographic representations of the Grand Marshall.

“No sir,” she returned. “Tau Ceti, Epsilon Indi and Lacaille 9352 have all shown signs of dramatic activity as well. We've also noticed some localized energy readings from those systems as well.”

“What kind?” Aaronson asked from his side.

“Photonic mainly, which would suggest weapons discharges. We've also detected gamma-ray discharges and even some gravimetric ones. I don't need to tell you that caused some concern around here.”

Cherybus shot a look at Aaronson, who was hovering at his right. He noted that same look of weary disappointment. He was getting tired of being right about this. This latest report from the Grand Marshall of the Armed Services confirmed everything his sources had to say, with perfect symmetry. While none had reported seeing new incursions by the mysterious fleet, there had been reports of fighting taking place. Given the time it took for radio wave communiqués to reach them, and that it took just as long for their visual information to spot anything, it was impossible to get real-time information. It was one of the scourges of living in a relativistic universe. By the time they saw or heard anything, it had already come and gone.

“How are we doing with the Reclamators?” he said, using the code name for the new weapons being developed.

“The prototype will be finished by the end of the year sir, but the rest won't be up and running for at least another three. And any problems experienced with the prototype are likely to extend that further. Besides, this latest report raises some added questions.”

“Keep me informed.” He didn't wait for a reply before terminating the signal. The hologram fizzled out and the lights to his office came back on. That left him and his Cabinet alone to talk. All the ministers appeared frazzled and confused however, much like the Executive himself. Making his way around his desk to the seat opposite him, Aaronson could not help but wonder how things would be shaping up had Arayus been occupying that desk. Unfortunately, such speculations could not help now, not with Arayus enjoying a comfortable, forced retirement. Taking his seat, he did his best to address the new, younger Executive's concerns.

“What did she mean by that, 'raises questions'? How does this news affect the program?”

“Sir,” he answered promptly, eager not to let any of the other minister's offer a less informed answer. “What she meant was that the appearance of gravimetric particles might suggest that this enemy is using weapons we don't fully understand. That would surely throw off any predictions we have about the success of our weapons once they're deployed.”

Kuros, the Minister of War, was the next to speak. “Gravimetric readings could mean anything, sir,” he said with a touch of gentle urgency as he tried to fashion a better explanation. “They... could be engine emissions, or some manner of scanning array. We really don't know.”

“And the fact that we don't know is cause enough to be concerned,” Aaronson interrupted. “It points to a level of technology that is, most likely, in advance of ours.”

Kuros was quick to interrupt back. “The Ministry of Defence will certainly take such things under advisement, sir. This latest report is not reason to start doubting all we've been working for.”

“I would think Defence would be interested in entertaining a level of healthy scepticism. That's the best way of ensuring that our forces don't get caught with their pants down, is it not, sir?” Aaronson said, addressing Kuros directly.

Kuros' face flushed and he looked ready to say something obscene. Instead, he refused the challenge and continued to address Cherybus.

“The good Minister of Populations,” he said with emphasis, “would no doubt like us to think that we're unprepared to face this threat. I, however, maintain a level of faith in our armed forces and the resources of the Colonies. We shall be ready, when the time comes. There is no reason to doubt that.”

Very patriotic, Aaronson thought. It was not long before the others began adding their voices as well, coming together to smooth over the Executives fears and making Aaronson appear like the lone alarmist.

We must hope for the best and prepare for the worst,” Minister Qin said last in her breathy, ethereal voice. She, above the rest, knew how to inspire the young Executive's confidence. It was rumoured that she had been largely responsible for convincing him to succeed Arayus' in the first place. He could only smile at her choice of words, considering how offset the balance of that equation was. In the time since the Cabinet had taken over the preparations for a possible confrontation with this new enemy, overconfidence had ruled wherever uncertainty and doubt presented itself. Everyone in the new cabinet, which was really just a reshuffle of the old, seemed dedicated to keeping the boss happy rather than readying him for the inevitable.

Minister Tareen cleared her throat and pointed to her chrono. Cherybus took her prompt and addressed the room again.

If there's nothing further, I suggest we move on to other matters.”

Aaronson could only smile again. They have him well trained, he thought. More than that, he noted another force that was clearly at work within their little cabinet. It had been clear ever since Arayus had brought the other Ministers into the fold regarding the refurbished Reclamation plan, and more so since his departure. It was a general rule in the Ministry that one who introduced ideas, or gave the appearance of doing things single-handedly, was never likely to be popular. Such people were suspected of harbouring agendas, of deliberately trying to outpace and outshine their peers, as if that were some sort of crime. And now they were responding accordingly, coming together to ostracize the one who was *not* a team-player.

For the remainder of the meeting, Aaronson kept his peace and answered questions directed to him as simply as possible. As the others spoke of food and material projections for the coming year, he tried desperately not to think that, through petty office competition, their cabinet might all be selling the future of their race down the river. And if that were so, why wasn't he doing something to stop it? Had he become so cynical that he no longer cared what happened at the end of the day?

What did it matter, he asked himself finally. In the end, they were doing all they could. Bickering, worrying and talking about it would not make one iota of difference from here on in. And, he suspected, any speculation about this new enemy was probably pointless. There was no way to know what they were capable of, not soon enough anyway. And even if they did know, what could they do about it now? Everything they had at their disposal was going into the preparation of those Reclamators, all their hopes pinned on the development of a handful of specialized weapons. He only hoped they worked, that would certainly narrow their worries

down a little. Then all they had to worry about was whether or not they could win, and how much it would cost them.

The room had a yawning quality, like the inside of a cave in the depths of winter. Every breath he took became an icy vapour as soon as it left his mouth. Where the walls had been cut, clean plasma burns were still visible. Obviously the place had been hollowed out in a hurry. Adnan still wasn't sure what anyone was up to here. Since his tour began, he noticed equipment and heavy tools that clearly were not related to mining. Every room felt strange that way. It was the same with the others who were working there. Wherever they encountered personnel, they appeared to be running routines that were in a language Adnan couldn't recognize. He'd seen enough of it during away-missions to settlements in the outer colonies. All the mining teams he'd seen on Pluto, Xena, and Ceres used the standard SAPES software, which these people clearly weren't. Either someone had developed something new for the asteroid operations, or he wasn't seeing things correctly.

His supervisor, a man who called himself Mr. Gaunt, continued to lead him around, giving him a rundown of his responsibilities, and letting him know what to expect. "We don't exactly have private offices here so you'll have to get in the habit of being on your feet when you're here."

"I did plenty of running around at my last posting, sir," he said cheerfully.

"Hmm, yes," he replied dryly. "And as for climate control, we don't have any. So don't complain about the cold, it comes with the territory. If your toesies get cold, the best you can do is stamp your feet and wish you were somewhere else."

"We did some lunar walks on Ganymede sir, in some old pressure suits that weren't too good. So I know what cold feels like. I'll be okay."

"Uh-huh," Gaunt said, still unimpressed. They came at last to a central-looking room, a room lined with consoles and many technicians working away, crunching numbers and speaking into headsets.

"This is the hub," he said, waving an arm around. "Your job, when you start, which is now, will be to help these individuals in their data processing and administrative duties. When you're not doing that, you'll be running to get coffee. Any questions?"

"Is, uh, that all sir?" Adnan asked.

"That about does it. Welcome to the belt son, it's not much but we like to call it hell."

Adnan had noticed his overuse of the word son. It reminded him of the people back at Ganymede, who were in the habit of referring to him as "kid". He decided it was time for a little strategy, one he had put to good use when in similar circumstances.

"Sir? I'm noticing something," he said.

"What's that?"

"The people, the operating programs, the equipment that's being carried around – it doesn't look like it has anything to do with mining. In fact, everything looks like some big secret is going on here. But what's so secret about ice?"

"Uh-huh," Gaunt said with an air of disinterest. It seemed genuine, but Adnan knew he had to be on the right track.

"So, I just have to ask, what's really going on here? Is it something I'm not supposed to know about, because I already did the security clearance thing, and in it I promised not to tell anyone of the things I saw here. Why would you make anyone working here go through that unless you were worried?"

“Good question, I’ll be sure to answer you once you’ve fulfilled your first duty.”

“Uh, what’s that sir?” Adnan asked.

“Getting me some coffee!”

Adnan made his way back to the cafeteria, stamping his feet periodically as instructed to ward off the cold. So it didn’t work this time, that was okay. He had plenty of time between now and when he was shipped home to crack the mystery of the belt. Perhaps he would stick to observations for now. But at least Gaunt had dropped the “son” routine, which had been his goal in the first place. Turning his icy toes back down the corridor, he set out to fulfill his very first assigned duty.

Part VI: For Keeps

From their comfy vantage point, the stream emanating from the disintegrating planetoid looked like a tail extending from a flying kite, or some strange mystical creature. Any closer and they would have felt the wrath of turbulence and stray matter that really constituted the asteroids train. Thanks to a little artificial propulsion provided by some rigged up ion drives, the asteroid had graduated from being a rock circling in space to a comet. Like most phenomenon in the universe, it was beautiful, but only if observed from afar.

As for the comet itself, again it was their distance that provided a degree of beauty that would otherwise have been impossible. The deep azure of its ice fields reminded Aaronson of a flawed jewel, while the rocky outcroppings were reminiscent of mountain peaks jutting through a glacier. If they were to stray closer, they would have noticed the truth, that like all asteroids it was nothing but a ball of dirty ice and stone being hurled through space. Wasn't that what the miners said, he asked himself. Pretty from a distance, ugly and dangerous as hell up close? Something like that. In any case, it was a marvellous backdrop for their little demonstration.

Up until this time, the thing had remained in place, in a wide orbit around the sun with its brothers and sisters. Now, it was being pushed ahead at one standard gee, the first of its kind being transported to the edge of the solar system – where it would be deployed. And they, the entire cabinet, with some military personnel and the Grand Marshall, were following and watching every step of the way. From a safe distance, of course.

At the viewport, Cherybus stood like a child with his face hovering close to the glass. Aaronson was sure he thought he looked presidential, arms folded in front of his chest, his brow tilted forward and furrowed – like a general surveying the field of engagement. But in spite of it, he could still see the unmistakable sign of eagerness, of impending excitement. In addition, his breath was clouding the window ever so slightly. If only Arayus were present, he thought. To listen to words of contempt whispered quietly in the corner, to see him exchange pleasantries with his successor, dripping with sarcasm. He doubted it would have done the old man any good, but at least it would have been fun to watch. It would have also given Aaronson someone to talk to. The Grand Marshall was the only one who he had any interest in speaking with, but unfortunately he was otherwise occupied.

“What kind of deployment pattern are we thinking of making once the machines are all in place?” the Executive said to the Grand Marshall, who stood dutifully by his side. Aaronson watched not more than a few feet away, hoping not to miss anything.

“We plan to disperse them based on the set three-fleet pattern,” the Marshall explained. “They will move methodically to all the three nearest systems first. From there, we will launch into the systems that have already been hit, hopefully getting there once the enemy has already moved on. This way, we can clear several systems before we encounter their main force, and force them into a tail-spin while they stop their advance and turn themselves around to face us.”

“Not bad,” Cherybus said, nodding. “Isn't it risky though? What if they decide to move on Sol instead of choosing to confront our ships out there?”

“It is our hope that they do just that, sir,” the Marshall replied confidently. “We have reserves waiting for here for them. And if they do choose to move to Sol, we can redirect our forces from the outlying systems back to Sol, so as to cut them off.”

“Hmm, game of chess.”

“Yes, sir. Always plan two moves ahead.”

Aaronson was mildly impressed. Cherybus had been reading his briefs after all and clearly understood the strategy implied in them. Maybe he had been getting a little tutoring on the side, who knew? Cherybus rarely held open Cabinet meetings anymore, only clandestine ones Aaronson wasn't invited to. The rest of the time, Aaronson had to be devious just to find out when regular Cabinet meetings were being scheduled. On more than one occasion, the other ministers had casually "forgotten" to let his staff know. Excuses were made, but he knew the real truth. He couldn't help but feel robbed. Planting sources in the outer systems, using Reclamation as a front, the general mobilization; it had been his idea in the first place. But now it was all in the hands of the Executive and the Ministry of Defense. All he could do was stand by and hope to listen in, making sure things were being executed with a degree of competence. Even his sources had come under the control of the military, which coincidentally was the next topic of conversation between the Grand Marshall and the Executive.

"Have we learned anything new about them?"

The Marshall shifted uneasily as he tried to find a way to formulate his answer. It was never easy telling the boss that no useful progress had been made. But the Marshall was a seasoned man, so he knew how to frame his answer well.

"Intelligence has been working round the clock to make sense out of the mess, sir," he said. "From the sensor logs, and from the transmissions of our operatives in the field. The latter have been compromised, understandably, due to the need to stay mobile. They have to stay one step ahead of the attacks, and that makes it hard to get anything other than blurry pics or holographics through."

"And the verbal reports?"

"Equally problematic, sir," the Marshall replied. "Chaos and confusion are reigning wherever the enemy have attacked. It's hard to separate the gossip from fact."

Cherybus sighed and turned to face the Marshall. Doing his best to look indignant, he ordered simply:

"Grand Marshall, I'm displeased with the constant lack of results. I want tangible evidence of who we're dealing with, not vague assessments and pieces of gossip. Bump some heads together in Intelligence if you have to, or tell your sources to remain in the field of engagement long enough to see what the enemy ships look like! Tell them to die if need be! Just get me something we can use. The fate of the human race is at stake here!"

"Um, yes, sir!" the Marshall said, straightening to absorb the verbal assault. Aaronson smiled. It was a bit over the top, but at least he had been taken seriously. And whatever the motivation, he had hit on the need for more concrete information. Had he still been giving the orders, he would have told those brave men and women – whom he had sent into the field under the guise of collective covert census data – to start taking some risks! To stick their noses out further so they might catch a glimpse of the enemy before they were on Earth's doorstep. Contrary to the Marshall's assurances, that was a risk they really weren't prepared for. Having defences put up was one thing, but there was no telling if they'd work or not. With the limited intel they were getting about gravimetric weapons, and the speed at which the enemy seemed to be moving, no one could deny the anxiety it was making them feel. In that respect, Aaronson still had one thing in common with everyone else in the cabinet.

The klaxon began to wale at half past midnight, and hadn't missed a beat in all the time it took Patric and Jana to get dressed and out of their quarters. Once they had reached the main plaza of Artemis spaceport, the stark reality of the situation began to hit home. Everywhere, people were running about in a frenzy, security personnel joining in rather than trying to subdue

them. Hovering in the centre of the plaza just a few meters below their vantage point, the avatar was busy reciting some pre-written emergency speech advising everyone not to panic. Clearly it was not having the intended effect.

“What’s going on?” Patric screamed in all directions to anyone who would hear him. One of the passer-bys, a woman who had momentarily stopped to pick up her son, looked up at them long enough to answer.

“We’re under attack!”

“Attack? By whom?” Jana asked.

The lady quickly pulled her son to his feet, checked to make sure he was uninjured, and resumed her hasty retreat down the corridor. No one else appeared interested in answering their question. Each and every person only seemed dedicated to the mood of self-preservation that had overcome the station.

Deciding there was nothing more to be done Patric and Jana joined the flood and proceeded down the corridor to one of the evac sites. Soon they were funnelled into a narrow corridor that branched off in two directions, bright lights and flashing letters indicating separate launch tubes. Patric was pushed well into the mouth of the tunnel when he stopped to check to see if Jana was still holding his hand. His hand was empty. Instinctively, his eyes scanned the horizon of rushing faces for her. She was nowhere to be found. He could not see over the heads that blocked his view, and with each passing person in the narrow corridor, he felt himself being pushed further and further from her.

“Jana!” he screamed, but even his words were swept aside by the torrent of the crowd. Far too many people were shouting, and he couldn’t even maintain his footing with all the bodies pushing him.

“JANA!” he screamed again.

“Move it you fool!” a patron said, pressing his shoulder into Patric’s chest and forcing him forward. He continued to yell down the hallway, fighting to hold steady and straining to hear her voice. Once or twice, he thought he heard her cry back, but couldn’t be sure. The tunnel gave way to an airlock which quickly slid shut as soon as he and the man who carried him were through. He beat against the door, imploring it to give way, or for Jana’s face to show up on the other side of the window. A new klaxon sounded, drowning out his voice, and his fists bled against the glass. It changed nothing.

“Hey, no need to thank me!” the patron said to his rear. “You’d be stuck in there if it weren’t for me.”

“My wife is in there!” he pleaded.

“I’m sure she got to the other bay, pal.”

“What if she didn’t?” he demanded, taking the man by the scruff of the neck.

“Then you’d both have been dead, friend. Be thankful I saved YOU!”

The man removed Patric’s hands with a hard shove and turned away from him. From the pod’s holoemitter, a crude avatar appeared and politely instructed them to strap into the wall restrains and prepare for launch. Having little choice, Patric put his grief aside and strapped himself next into the tangled straps that were nearest to him.

A sudden jolt signalled that the rockets had fired and they were now free of the station. From his spot on the wall, Patric was able to catch another glimpse out the window. They were falling away from Artemis, its docking ring spewing out small pods that became twinkles of light in the surrounding darkness. Other heavier craft were also pulling away, their exhaust flames blaring as the crews gunned their engines in an attempt to escape.

Gradually, as the pod began to skirt Apollo's rough atmosphere, the blackness of space became an opaque blur. Dust and noble gases clouded the window, reducing Artemis to a mere outline sprinkled with points of light. And yet, Patric could swear he saw something else moving in towards the station. The profile dwarfed anything that was leaving it, and their exhaust flamed burned a different colour. The size and shape didn't remind him of Slicer vessel at all. Who were they? The attackers? He strained to look closer when another profile came into view, this one much closer. The avatar appeared again, issuing new instructions.

"A sudden change has occurred in our flight plan. Please hold on while we execute evasive manoeuvres!"

"What's going on?" many voices yelled in succession. As the only one with a clear view, Patric felt obliged to answer.

"I don't know, I think another vessel's approaching us."

"What?!" the voices yelled. The impertinent man who elbowed him into the pod decided to paraphrase Patric's assessment for them.

"He said someone's coming for us!"

The klaxons ceased finally. Having tired of the confines of the corridor, Jana and the others who had been left behind had returned to the plaza. The avatar had ceased with the emergency routine, and was cycling back through it welcoming program again. The sudden presence of people in the plaza must have triggered the old routine. For all those who had been enduring nothing but panic for the last hour, the absence of the sirens was a nice relief.

However, a new and more threatening sound had come to replace it. It was far-off, a whirring noise of servo motors, followed by a rising clatter that sounded like metal against metal. It didn't take long before Jana's trained ears discerned what it was. She had heard it many times when she was on site back in the Terran colonies. It was the sound an industrial plasma torch made when it was applied to metal. The uncomfortable realization was too much for her to keep to herself.

"Oh my God, we're being boarded," she muttered.

"What?" a man demanded from her side. "We're being **BOARDED**?"

The word spread amongst the crowd, inciting a fresh wave of panic. Jana scolded herself for not keeping her mouth shut, but the damage was done. Telling them to remain calm was futile now, and only likely to inspire more panic. For a moment, it drowned out the noise, but only for a moment. Soon it became too loud, followed by the sound of an echoing blast, and footsteps...

"The report has been confirmed, sir. Ross 248 has just fallen. I repeat, Ross 248 has just fallen."

The Grand Marshall sighed heavily and thanked the source, terminating the link immediately after. With a nod, one of the techs made a correction to the holodisplay that hung in front of them. The small yellow disc that represented Ross 248 – which, as they had learned, the local citizens ostentatiously referred to as Apollo – turned red, denoting occupation. Even those who had no appreciation of strategy could see the obvious: Sol had slowly been encircled. A few dwarf stars and some more distant neighbours were not yet claimed, but the effect was the same. The enemy had effectively enveloped them.

The Grand Marshall turned to face Cherybus, who was seated at his briefing table with his "War Council" surrounding him. The council was little more than his cabinet, with some

ministers excluded for political reasons. To his surprise, Aaronson had retained a seat, no doubt at the behest of Arayus, who still had some pull with the Military. And as Minister of Populations, and the one who had actually planted the ring of informants in the first place, his opinion was grudgingly getting an audience. Once in a while, he still found he could be pleasantly disappointed by being right. And as usual, the worst was happening.

“We can effectively rule out coincidence, sir,” the Marshall said. “The enemy clearly knows where our homeworld is and has deployed its forces accordingly. There can be no doubt that their strategy was to envelope Sol before moving on it directly.”

“So...? What now?” Cherybus asked. Again, a clear understanding of the obvious.

“Clearly this changes our plans, sir,” Aaronson said from his corner. The comment drew some attention, not the least of which was from the Grand Marshall. All this time, and the man still couldn’t decide whether or not he liked Aaronson. They tended to agree on most things, but he still didn’t appreciate the way he volunteered his opinions so freely.

“Yes, sir. We can no longer afford to deploy. We need to concentrate our forces here, and wait.”

“So, dig in and await the siege? That is your plan?” Minister Qin said.

“What choice do we have?” Aaronson asked. “If we deploy any forces out of the system, we risk weakening our defences when the final stroke comes.”

“But that was the plan, was it not? Were we not planning on sending some of our forces to strike at enemy held territories in the hopes of recapturing some of the lost systems?” It was Minister Tareen saying this now. Aaronson wanted to answer, to tell her they were never lost in the first place, and that recapturing implied past ownership. But he let the Marshall field this one.

“That strategy was based on the possibility of catching the enemy off-balance while they were still on the move. Now that they’ve enveloped us, we know that they will direct all their assets here at Sol. Given the apparent disparity between our forces and theirs, we cannot risk weakening our defences.” Addressing Cherybus next, he added. “Sir, the best we can hope for now is to hold here and blunt their offensive when it comes. Once we’ve done that, we can start planning a possible counter-offensive.”

Cherybus sighed and looked on wearily, the look of a would-be leader who was out of his depth. Try as he might, he just wasn’t cut out for this kind of work. That was what was going through his head at least. The others waited for him to say something, anything. No one could prompt him now, though. There was simply no way he could be told what to do, or say.

A gesture from one of the techs broke the tension and caught the Marshall’s attention. A few quiet words were uttered between them, followed by a nod from the Marshall. A new image took the place of the map on the display. The Marshall began to explain.

“Sir, we have just received a visual feed from one of Apollonian source, sir.”

“Finally,” Cherybus said, looking managerial again. “Let me see it.”

The command was redundant, for the image was already materializing in front of them. Once the pixels and static all settled, the image began to move. They could see from inside the planets orbital station, a place the source had designated as Kabal. The source was apparently standing inside some kind of plaza, looking out through domed windows into space. Outside, the large outline of a ship passed next to the station, moving slowly as it intended to dock with them. The image moved forward a few minutes, there was much noise and commotion coming from all around. The image jerked and shook as the source tried to run. A few more seconds of confusion passed before it became still again, but then something else happened. The lights died

and then some vague outlines came running. They became clearer as they neared the source and those around him.

That was when things got really confusing for everyone in the room. In the last few seconds of footage before one of the attacking parties overtook the source, they got a relatively clear picture of who they were dealing with. The attackers had illuminated patches where the faces would be, bulges that looked like weapons were carried in what appeared to be arms. The silhouettes looked bulky, almost as if they were wearing pressure suits of some kind, and were clearly humanoid in shape. That, more than anything else, did not sit well.

“Mr. Executive,” the Marshall said after a short pause. “This is the first glimpse we have of our enemy. Clearly, sir, we are dealing with a human faction.”

“That’s impossible!” one of the Ministers yelled. “There are no settlements that could have achieved this level of technological development so quickly!”

“They have to be another species!” another accompanied.

“And why is that?” Aaronson replied. “What do we even know about the neighbouring systems? Until they became a threat, we never even bothered with them or monitored their growth. They’ve had centuries to grow now. Did we assume that none of them would be able to catch up or overtake us, what with our constant drive for progress and development?”

He let those last words hang in the air, hoping all would catch onto the dripping sarcasm with which he had imbibed them. Clearly, they had.

“I suppose this is where you say *‘I told you so!’*” Tareen said.

“Why not? I did didn’t I? While we’ve been sitting here behind our borders fussing over minute matters of consumption and conservation, countless settlements have sprung up, populated entirely by people seeking new frontiers and challenges that we cannot provide. By our very nature, we fear ingenuity and new ideas. We drive them out, and those that welcome them beyond our borders benefit from it. Considering our ignorance on the subject, I don’t see how any of us can say definitively that this is *not* a human faction!”

Cherybus cleared his throat loudly, thinking that the proper thing was to intervene to keep his ministers from fighting. But since he could find nothing to say, the Marshall did it for him.

“I think we can all agree that whether or not this faction is from one of the outer settlements is immaterial at this time. Right now, the priority is still in stopping them from taking Sol.”

“Quite right,” Cherybus said, finding his voice. “All of our resources should be concentrated here.”

The Ministers humbly nodded or muttered their agreement. The Grand Marshall began moving into matters of border defence when an alarm sounded behind him. The holodisplay changed again, projecting an image of a border region in space and red icons crossing a yellow line.

“What’s happening?” Cherybus demanded.

“Sir,” the Marshall paused and waited for the tech to relay the report that she was receiving through her earpiece. When she was done feeding it to him, he looked ready to protest. As he turned to them, his face white and new sweat forming on his head, Aaronson knew exactly what he would say. They were here.

“Mr. Executive,” he said, trying to force some degree of confidence into his voice. “Our outer markers have reported contact. Unidentified ships are crossing into Sol space!”

“What?!”

“Are they the enemy identified in this footage?” Minister Qin asked.

“We have fed the visuals to the border patrols. We are waiting for confirmation. I can tell you sir that this is far too soon for this to be the bulk of their forces. Even at maximum velocity, it would take any ship more than four years to make the journey from sir, and they would need at least a year or two to bring in the rest of their ships from the other systems. This can’t be anything more than a token force, perhaps an advanced scouting party.”

“Then how do we respond?”

“Myself and the General Staff will be moving to our forward base where we will oversee the deployment of the Reclamation fleet, sir. We will ensure that this force does not make it out of Sol in one piece.”

“The Executive should go with him,” Aaronson said. The others Ministers looked ready to object before Cherybus interrupted them to heroically volunteer himself.

“The honourable Minister is correct,” he said. “I will oversee the deployment as well. My place is at the front lines, after all.”

“Then perhaps the Cabinet should go with him,” Qin said with a smile, looking in Aaronson’s direction. “Or at least, certain members of the cabinet.”

“Capital idea,” Aaronson replied, returning her smile. “I would be happy to assist the Executive in this endeavour, even if I am the only one.”

Qin and the others nodded ambivalently, sensing that they had stumbled into a bit of a trap. Some looked like they now wanted to volunteer themselves, but fear still held sway. Right now, the prospect of being alive to form a new government held more appeal than dying heroically at the front. There was no guarantee either Cherybus or Aaronson would be making it back in one piece, and someone needed to be left alive to negotiate a peace with this new enemy should it come to that.

“It’s settled then,” Cherybus declared. “I and the honourable Minister will be departing for the front immediately with the Grand Marshall. I hope this meets with your approval, sir.”

“Ahem, yes! Of course, sir,” he said, eyeing them both nervously. It didn’t take much to guess what he was thinking. *Great, now I have TWO of them to deal with!*

Zelena rubbed the cryosleep from her eyes and squinted at the nav console. After another seven years in transit and cold sleep, they had finally come to Groombridge 34, known to locals as Carnaea. It was not a matter of choice that had brought them here, and they were in fact surprised to find out where they were when they awoke. While they were sleeping, Zelena had set the comm system to pick up on all available com traffic between systems and Slicer vessels, noting which systems were occupied and instructing the nav computer to adjust their heading accordingly. While they slept, the enemy had apparently closed in on all other systems in the vicinity. Short of extending their trip fifteen or twenty years, or simply returning to Apollo where they would not be welcome, their simply were no other colonized systems in the area to go to.

And so they had come here, to a sparsely populated outer colony that might just be willing to let them dump roughly three thousand refugees planetside. And they certainly weren’t alone. When it was time to come to and check on the status of things, Zelena and Tulloch had found at least a hundred ships in a loose formation around the planet. And the long range scans indicated that there were at least fifty more coming. All told, this constituted half of the Slicer fleet. Even with their transponder’s emitting fake ID signatures, it was easy to see that all those who remained were now here. This, and other such pearls of good news, constituted Zelena’s briefing to the Captain once he was finished his waking cycle.

“Guess it’s time to negotiate,” Kreios said. “What do we know about the planetary authority?”

“The last time we heard anything, they were a pretty open and tolerant people. But I’ve been listening to the local airwaves, and they’re not happy.”

“Why should they be? How many people are they being asked to absorb here?”

“I guess we were naïve,” Zelena said, nodding. “We thought we’d be alone, just our cargo to worry about. By my estimation, they’ve taken fifteen thousand people already, and God only knows how many more they’re expecting.”

“And it’s only a matter of time before they have to start turning people away,” Vale said, his mechanical arm whirring as he opened and closed his fist. “Then we might have a problem.”

“No one’s gonna’ get into a shooting war over this!” Kreios said. “If we get turned away, we’ll just have to run somewhere else.”

“Where?” Maddox said anxiously. “Where else is there?”

No one answered. It was as plain as day. If they couldn’t ditch their cargo here, then there was nothing left to do but turn tail run for open space. There was no way they would be turning back with all the refugees aboard.

“Any other news?” Kreios asked.

“Yes, Captain,” Zelena said with hesitation. “There’s a message. It’s from Reinhardt, Captain. He right behind us, and he wants to talk when he gets here.”

“What the hell do you want?”

Reinhardt smiled crookedly on the screen. His half-cybernetic face was only capable of generated partial expressions, the rest simply shone with a metallic luster. It was the first time some of the crew had actually seen his face. Given all they had been told about him, it felt just slightly anti-climactic. Still, they could see the gleam in his one organic eye, the burning intent that looked like it could easily cross over into the realm of ruthlessness. His voice was interesting too, a willowy breeze that sounded like it was passing through an echo chamber. Under the right circumstances, it too could be considered intimidating.

“This is the second time I’ve called you up to tell you what’s what. And yet you still don’t trust me.”

In spite of his monstrous appearance, Zelena did not sense ill-will on the other’s part. Naturally, the Captain was incurably suspicious. Old competitors never got along, and never trusted what their enemy gave them. One favor was grounds for suspicion, two was incomprehensible.

“We’ve never trusted each other, Reinhardt. You’ve always been too competitive for my taste.”

“Doing good deeds only gets you so far, old friend. You know as well as I do survival comes first. Otherwise, what we are doing out here?”

“Right,” Kreios scoffed. “So what’s the purpose of this little parley?”

“Another warning,” Reinhardt said flatly. “We’re all in danger.”

Kreios waited for half a second then burst out laughing. He prolonged it just long enough to annoy Reinhardt visibly.

“That’s it? I think we already figured that out, but thanks for the update.”

“I’m serious, Kreios! I was there at Proxima, I saw you and the others come and go, but my ship stayed behind to watch.”

“You stayed? Why?”

“Curiosity, I guess. My crew and I were determined to see exactly what has been hunting us out there. And we got a glimpse, my friend. We got a very *good* glimpse.”

“So who are they? Who is out there hunting us?” Kreios asked, still not convinced he was hearing anything genuine.

Reinhardt’s one good eye lost its gleam. In fact, Zelena thought she could see the same phantoms that had been lurking around the halls of their ship. His words certainly painted a dire scene.

“The rumours might be true, but I doubt it. If these ships were from Earth, then something drastic has happened there. For them to come up with what we saw at Proxima... well, let’s just say it seems beyond them.”

Kreios nodded and thought it over. Against his better judgment, he was beginning to believe Reinhardt’s story. It was even beginning to make sense why he was being helpful all of a sudden. Considering their situation, it was in everyone’s best interests to share whatever information and resources they had available.

“So,” he said finally. “What happened at Proxima? Why didn’t we see you?”

“Because we took up position behind one of the outer satellites to keep our sensor echo hidden. It’s no secret my ship is faster than yours, and we pushed it them as hard as we possibly could to get there. We did the same to catch up with you, which was no small effort.”

“Much appreciated, get on with it!” Kreios demanded.

“Right. Once we got there, we hid ourselves and waited out the line-up. We waited for weeks while the fleet drew people out of there. As you know, everyone was in a huge rush to leave, but the evacuation kept stalling because our ships just couldn’t pick them up as fast as they needed to. Most of the colonists were gone by the time it all hit the fan. Unfortunately, about half the fleet was still in system once the enemy finally showed up.”

Kreios hesitated. He could more or less guess what happened next.

“Did you get a record of all this?”

“Yes. I see you still don’t trust me. No matter, I have the sensor logs and visuals for you. Shall I send them?”

“Yes!” Kreios said, snapping his fingers at Zelena and ordering her to her station to uplink with their ship. “Let me see it!”

“It’s yours, old friend. I just wanted to pass it on before I left.”

“Left? Where are you going?”

“Anywhere, Kreios, and I suggest you do the same.” Before Kreios could interject, call him a coward or some other such thing, Reinhardt continued. “I know you, Kreios, and I knew that the second Keegan told you about this threat, you would want to do something brave, to make a stand. I admire the fact that you chose to saddle yourself with refugees and see they got to safety. But take my advice, set your course for deep space and don’t look back. Once you see this recording, you’ll want to do exactly that!”

A few minutes later, Kreios and his crew were afforded a little privacy to watch the battle at Proxima unfold for themselves. When it was over, a terrible silence hung over them. Suffice it to say, Reinhardt had been telling the truth. Audio, visual and sensor feeds were overlain together in the recording, individually and collectively reconstructing a scene of total chaos. Everywhere, ships erupted in fire and exploded as strange beam weapons cut them to pieces. The sensor grid went crazy trying to make sense of the mess. The enemy ships didn’t even register, but as they cut through ship after ship, they left a trail of debris that made accurate

readings impossible. Where there had once been a hundred blips on the radar, within minutes there were a million. The comm traffic that erupted with the attack was the crowning achievement in the horror show. Angry shouts calling for retaliation and attempts at coordination quickly gave way to screams for help and pleas for mercy. Those that did not fall in the first few minutes desperately tried to band together in defensive formations. Unable to get a sensor lock on to the enemy ships, the best they could do was fire wildly, most of which missed and the remainder barely scratched the surface. The log didn't last much longer, as all remaining ships began a hasty retreat. Not all made it, and for many more minutes the Kronos' comm traffic was jammed with the screams of those ships that were chased down and destroyed.

According to the time index, it took less than a hundred minutes for the fleet to fall.

The silence that ensued was the loudest sound any of them had ever heard. It was broken only by the chime of the communications terminal, indicating that the Carnaean planetary authority wanted to speak to them. Tulloch activated it once it was clear no one else was moving a muscle.

"That's the planet boss," he said. "They're done with the last ship, now they want to talk to us. They say they want to know how many people we have, and say to be warned that they can only accommodate a few hundred more."

Another silence ensued. Kreios felt the uncomfortable presence of all eyes in the room staring at him, demanding an answer.

"What do we do?" Maddox was the first to say it. "What do we do Captain, huh? What do we do?"

Adnan woke with a start. His heart was pounding and there was a loud a screaming noise in his ears. It took a moment for him to realize exactly what it was. The general alarm was sounding. He pulled himself up from his bed and dashed for the door to his private quarters. When the door slid open, people were running left and right, most looking as tired and haggard as he felt.

"What's happening?" he screamed at no one in particular.

"We don't know, sir! Might be another drill!" one of passing workers replied.

"Son of a —" Adnan ran back inside and pulled on a pair of coveralls. Since his promotion, he had gotten used to not running around at the behest of others. But, it seemed, there were still some things that could be an insatiable bother.

A moment later and he was in the main complex. Colonel Gaunt was there too, tending to the room's main readouts. On his orders, one of the other officers terminated the alarm. A moment later, he looked up and noticed Adnan standing there.

"Lieutenant, good of you to join us! Now get to your station."

Adnan nodded and proceeded to his logistics post. Another tech had already warmed it up for him. Data on the fleet filled the readout, each ship was still securely in its moor but from the look of things, the Colonel was firing up the launch routines. Something told him this was definitely not a drill. Never before in all their simulations had they deployed the ships. They had been under strict orders to keep them under cover until the day when they would be needed.

Adnan felt a chill run down his spine. This was it.

He should have seen it coming. It had been almost a year since the last of the cometary bases had been deployed to the rim. Rumours of enemy movements had been all over the base and had even got back to Earth. Whenever Adnan had taken some leave there, it was one the

first thing his family thought to ask him. Naturally, he could not talk about it. Even if he could, there was nothing he knew for certain; security on the matter was that tight.

Not knowing what else to do, he went over the data from the readout. All ships were on line and functioning at full power. The slave circuits were online and all ships were networked together, ready to move as one with a single command. It took less than five minutes, and in the meantime Adnan simply stood around and waited.

When the Colonel found himself with a free moment, he came over to Adnan's side.

"How you doing son?"

That was Gaunt's new name for him. Kid had never caught on given Adnan's natural aptitude for just about everything the Colonel could throw at him. And after years of working side by side, it was natural that some kind of kinship would grow. Adnan suspected that it was for that reason alone that Gaunt was now speaking to him privately.

"Fine, sir. But I don't suppose you can tell me what's happening?"

The Colonel sighed and explained as gently as he could, not wanting to put a scare in him. "As far as I know, the enemy's been spotted in-system and the fleet's being sent to intercept. We should be safe here, but just in case..."

"What, sir?"

Gaunt looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was within earshot. Leaning in close, he lowered his voice to a virtual whisper. "You might want to take this opportunity to call home. Let the family know you're okay."

"But sir, security restrictions –"

"Will no longer apply by the time your message get's there. Earth's going to be put on alert just as soon as they hear about this, and all our families are going to be worried about us. You don't need to tell them anything sensitive, just let them know that you're alive and you plan on staying that way. If you get in trouble with the brass later, just tell them I OK'd it."

Adnan sighed and took a quick look around. No one else was being given permission to leave their stations, why should he be so privileged? Then again, it was not like he would be needed in the next few minutes. His work was essentially done until all the bases were in position to deploy, and that would probably take hours. And the Colonel was right, his family would be worried. As the youngest officer on the cometary base, he still had the luxury of living parents.

"Alright, I'll do it. I won't be long."

"That's all I'm asking for," Gaunt said. "Get to it!"

From their position in the observation bubble, Cherybus and Aaronson had an almost three hundred and sixty degree view of the deployment area. Four of the comets were now parked in a halo formation around them, holding formation just outside the orbit of Pluto. Behind them, the Marshall carried on with the other senior military officers in the command section, barking orders and tending to maps and readouts. In a moment, he would be joining them to watch over the final deployment of the fleet. Since the Marshall had directed them to it, he sensed that the bubble was little more than a place for important observers to stand so they wouldn't get in the way of things on the command deck, where all the real power resided. Still, he felt privileged to be standing there, shoulder to shoulder with the Executive, such as he was.

After a few minutes, they received a cue from the Marshall who spoke to them by way of a concealed microphone in the clear wall.

“Gentlemen, I advise you to direct your eyes to the nearest comet, whichever one you can pick out the front end of. You’ll want to see this.”

Through the vacuum that separated them, no sound could travel. Nevertheless, Aaronson could have sworn he heard a low rumble and felt some vibrations as the comet nearest them began to break apart. He could see what the Marshall had meant. It was only from the front end where segments began to shatter and break away. Detonators removed the chunks of ice and rock while embedded retrorockets fired to push them out of the way. Inside, bright status lights ringed a large metal frame which began to sphincter open. More light poured out from inside, and in moments, so did some huge, darkened craft.

The profiles were little more than dark silhouettes until they were revealed to open space, when light from distant Sol and their own status lights began to brighten them. They looked like lumpy cylinders for the most part, with sharpened heads that reminded him of impact hammers. Their hulls bristled with weapons and missile arrays, a fitting complement to their size and shape. Cherybus was staring too, beaming with excitement and pure awe. He couldn’t blame him. It was an breathtaking sight.

There was another buzz on the comm system, an inaudible babble that was followed by the bubble’s skin turning a bright red. It was a general alert. The Marshall’s voice followed on the speaker.

“Gentlemen, sorry to disturb you again, but we’ve just received word that the enemy has crossed the red line and is moving onto our position. I’m afraid we’ll need to be moving to intercept immediately, contrary to our earlier plans.”

“Very well,” Cherybus said officiously. “Keep me informed.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” the Marshall said hesitantly. “And in the meantime, we will need to retract the observation bridge. If things get hot, you might not be safe there.”

Cherybus shot a look of confusion over at Aaronson.

“He’s right, Mr. Executive. If I were the enemy, I would definitely attack a brightly lit observation bridge if saw one. Especially if I thought someone important were aboard it.”

Cherybus thought it over and nodded humbly. “Alright, I suppose your right. Let us retire then.”

“Thank you, sirs,” the Marshall said. Aaronson expected it was directed at him more than Cherybus though. He had lost his cushy little den to send Cherybus to, but at least he knew someone was around who could control him. Perhaps he was being too hard on Cherybus, Aaronson considered at last. He was inexperienced, but perhaps he was not as bad as those he surrounded himself with. He hoped as much, because very soon the man would find himself tested. They all would.

“Coming into viewing range now, sir!”

The Marshall straightened and looked at the main display screen. The images that were just sensor blobs moments before became sharpened pictures, complete with details and colour. All around him, his officers called out, shouting their reports. To each, he promptly shouted his orders back at them. It was almost entertaining to Cherybus and Aaronson, sitting comfortably over at the side of the room on their divan. A lone officer stood over them like a sentry, making sure they were safe and comfortable. While the volleys of shouts and counter-shouts went on, the two men sat and waited anxiously.

Aaronson’s main duty, as he understood it, was to keep Cherybus out of the way. But alas, he understood the need to feel involved at that moment. He too could not stop twitching

and shuffling uncomfortably in his seat. He wished there was something more he could do, some way to get involved! Finding nothing else that could be done in the white-hot milieu that was the Command deck, he simply chose to sit there and listen in on all that was being barked back and forth.

“Profiles match; they are the same as those spotted at Ross 248!”

“All ships to engage on my order!”

“Cometary bases report all ships networked and functioning sir!”

“Prepare to fire on my command! Target all ships!”

“Sir, ships report a malfunction in their targeting arrays. They are unable to acquire a lock on the enemy.”

“A malfunction?” the Marshall said indignantly. “No way a single malfunction could be affecting them all, even with the slave circuits. Order them to scan again!”

“Same result, sir. They have no lock.”

“Then order them to go to manual and target the ships themselves! Then fire up their weapons and prepare to bombard!”

“All ships report ready, sir!”

“FIRE!”

There was a series of bright flashes from the half dozen displays that were feeding them holographic information. There was a moment of relative silence while everyone waited. In that moment, the tactical officer was king, for he knew first that they had had no discernible effect.

“Sir, all ships report no damage. I repeat, no damage to the enemy fleet.”

“What? That’s impossible! Check our sensors to be sure!” the Marshall yelled.

“Well, sir, without sensor data, we can’t be sure. Nevertheless, there are no debris clouds and all ships appear intact.”

The Marshall ran his hand over his sweaty forehead and mouth before issuing a new order. “Order all ships to concentrate their fire on the nearest ship. Bring all firepower to bear on the lead target!”

“Yes sir, ships are targeting now sir!”

“Fire at will!”

Another flash, this one more resounding and sustained than the last, engulfed the command deck. Another hush followed while the tactical officer received and interpreted all the sensor echoes that followed. His voice was cheerier this time, almost triumphant.

“Ships report damage to the nearest vessel sir!”

Everyone let out a loud below before the officer was able to continue.

“Enemy ships appeared to still be operational, but visible damage was sustained.

“Alright, now input evasive manoeuvre sequence delta and order all ships –”

The Marshall was almost finished issuing his next order when a shout from the comm officer interrupted him. “Sir! New transmission coming through!”

“From where?”

There was a pause, causing the Marshall to repeat himself louder. “FROM WHERE?”

“The enemy fleet, sir,” the com officer said, almost whispering.

That silenced everyone for just a moment; the only noise was the general alarm blaring in the background. Under the circumstances, it was barely audible at all. A flick of the Marshall’s wrist caused someone to terminate the noise, leaving only the blinking light to tell them they were still on alert status.

“A transmission on one of our frequencies?” the Marshall said aloud.

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied. “It’s coming through on all frequencies. *And* I am able to decode it.”

“Put it through,” the Marshall said after another pause.

All across the bridge, hidden speakers cackled to life. The voice was strange, accented and definitely not comfortable with standard Terran. But, without a doubt, it was what they had suspected all along. The enemy was in fact... human.

“This is Commander Ralston Bristol of the Galilean 9th fleet to all Terran vessels. I wish to parlay with your Executive officer.”

Meares woke some time later with a pounding headache. He must have blacked out, everyone in the pod had it seemed. He half-recalled the ship shaking violently before everything had turned to black. They must have hit something, or something hit them. In any case, that was clearly when they had all lost consciousness. Some were still being shaken from sleep when the loud noises began. He almost panicked when he realized it was coming from the pressure door. Someone or something was trying to cut through it. He quickly calmed down when he saw that they were no longer in the upper atmosphere of the planet. Aside from a few flashes from some plasma cutters, the view through the port window was entirely dark. The feeling of relief passed quickly as the terrible noise continued and he wanted desperately to know where they were now. That was when it all fell into place for him.

The enemy ship, it had captured them, and now they were inside.

It took only about a minute more before the plasma torches breached the door. The flames arced around to cut a perfect circle out of the hull before pulling it away. A mechanical arm poked its head through the hole and deployed a cluster of what looked like sensor eyes.

“What is that?!” someone screamed.

“Don’t touch it!” another yelled.

The arm made a few quick sweeps of the room, and then popped out as quickly as it had come in. The other passengers started to breathe normally again, but it wasn’t long before they all started asking obvious questions.

“Where are we?”

“What do they want with us?”

“Who are they?”

“What do we do?”

“We sit still, dammit!” the man sitting next to Meares yelled. “Who cares who they are! Don’t move and don’t say anything and we’ll all be fine!”

“You sure about that?” someone asked.

“No, but it beats freaking out and getting us all killed doesn’t it? Now shut up!”

Meares wanted to say something. He wanted to tell them to be calm, that everything would be alright. He wanted to tell the man to take his own advice. But somehow it did not seem to matter. All he could think of then and there was Jana, whether or not she was alright. Everything else seemed to take a backseat to that, even his own situation.

A voice called into the pod uttering just simple words, coming through an amplification device of some kind. Meares didn’t understand, but the voice called again in standard Terran.

“Everyone, out!” it yelled, before cycling through a few other languages. The voice sounded stilted and awkward, like nothing Meares had heard before. If they were Terran, they had to be from a colony Meares had never been to.

In either case, the words had a predictable effect. The passengers looked around at each other, not knowing what to do. No one wanted to move, but no one wanted to remain seated either. Disobedience could have consequences. Many people looked to Meares companion for advice. As much as they disliked him, he seemed to have all the answers when it came to their situation. Before they could ask, he was already undoing his restraints and was half way out the door.

“Where are you going?” one of them asked.

“Just sit tight and let me talk to them!”

He was outside before anyone could object. While they waited, others undid their restraints and flirted with the idea of following. Most just sat still and waited. Somehow, the man who had shoved Meares into the pod, who had separated him from Jana and expected to be thanked for it, had been promoted to the rank of group leader.

They could hear his footsteps against the metal flooring outside. He took a few before a loud noise and some bright lights greeted him. Then were words being exchanged. Again Meares wondered where they could be, and just what did that man think he was doing? Undoing his buckles and leaning close to the open door, he strained to listen. A few words caught his ear.

“... a special envoy of Terra. I can be of assistance in any negotiated settlement with...”

“Do you speak for the colonist?”

“They are outside Terran jurisdiction. I can only...”

“Lie down on the ground! Surrender any and all weapons...”

Meares was not sure he was hearing them correctly. Did his rude friend say he was an envoy? Was he lying? If so, why tell them something so outlandish? If not, why was he speaking to these people? Surely *they* were from Terra, there was no other explanation. Meares decided it was time for a better look.

“You! Stay inside!”

The light flashed on Meares’ face. Instinctively, he pushed away from the edge of the pod and raised his hands. There was an even brighter flash of light. Then... he wasn’t sure. He must have blacked out again.

The next time he awoke, his head throbbed with an even greater intensity than before. This time, he recognized his surroundings. He was back on the station, lying flat on the floor. His hands were bound behind his back, and there were several people around him. Not far away, there were people upright and walking, their hands bound like his. Around them, strange grey suited figures with glowing green eyes stood and watched over them. The smaller ones had rifle-like appendages protruding from their forearms while others sported heavier units that seemed to grow out of their shoulders. Whoever they were, they were hostile, and he was now their prisoner.

Rolling up onto his feet, he looked at the line that was passing him by. Most of the faces he recognized from his years aboard the station. Some of them were his coworkers, others domicile neighbours. One the suited men saw he was awake and came over to him.

“Name!” the man yelled.

“Meares, Patric Meares,” he said passively.

The man raised his wrist and consulted a small panel on the arm of his suit. “Yes, here you are,” he said in that same stilted Terran. “Come with us.”

“Why? Where are you taking me?”

“Same place as them,” he said, pointing to the others in line. Before he could ask, he was hoisted to his feet and shoved forward. He nearly knocked another person over when he collided

with the others. Falling into step with them, he excused himself and tried to find out what they knew. When no one answered, he tried raising his voice a little.

“Where are they taking us?”

“No talking!” one of the guards yelled, shoving his protruding weapon into his hip.

Meares looked around for some king of help. Everyone in line had the same look of resignation on their faces, all effectively cowed into submission. He wondered what had gone on while he was away. Had the shot anyone, or was the mere display of force enough? The thought of this made him look around with renewed desperation.

“Eyes forward!” the same guard yelled. Meares obeyed instantly. For the remainder of their march, he walked silently, in lock step with the others, his hands above his head like everyone else. Meares only looked up once to see where they were being herded to. After a few rounded corridors, it was clear they were being brought back to the station’s main plaza. When they arrived, they could see they weren’t the first to be brought here.

In the centre of the plaza, surrounded by many more grey, suited figures, a good chunk of the station’s population were seated. Meares cast his eyes down again as they passed within the main throng and were ordered to kneel down with the rest.

“Patric?”

His eyes shot up immediately to see where it was coming from. Not more than a few rows over, Jana was seated near one of the guards.

“PATRIC!” she yelled and sprung to her feet. Meares was no more than two steps towards her when a thrust from behind him sent him sprawling on the floor. Jana tried to reach to him, until she too was sent to the floor.

“JANA!” Patric screamed. The man who had struck him pulled at his left arm and placed a knee behind his back to pin him down. Patric thrashed and wailed but could not get free. When fighting failed, he resorted to swearing and fuming, mainly on the subject of what he would do to the men if they harmed his wife.

“You’ve got some fight in you,” his attacker said. “That’s good. You’ve just been conscripted.”

The red lights continued to blink in and out, keeping pace with the racing pulses of everyone in the room. No one had said a word for some time now. All eyes were turned to Cherybus, who in turn looked back at them like a frightened animal caught in a bright light. Now more than ever, he was regretting his part in the little coup that had overthrown his predecessor and installed him as Executive. Why Arayus couldn’t be there instead of him was the second biggest question on his mind, Aaronson’s too. The first, naturally, was the meaning behind the message they had just received.

The enemy was human, and they were willing to talk. Confusion reigned supreme but an answer was needed. So looking one last time at Aaronson for some sign of moral support, he stepped up and replied.

“Um, that would be me,” he said, moving to the Marshall’s side. “I am the Executive here.”

“To whom am I speaking?” the voice asked.

“Executive Marco Cherybus,” he said uneasily. He shot another look back at Aaronson, inviting him to come and join him. Placing his hand on Cherybus shoulder, he gave it a firm squeeze and tried to be supportive. The test was now upon him, and he wanted the young man to pass.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

The Commanders reply was less than patient, and somehow portentous. “As I said already, sir, we are with the Galilean 9th fleet. The long lost tribe of Terra has come home at last, though we expected a warmer greeting.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t make much sense, Commander. We don’t know that name. Are you a settler faction? What system are you from?”

There was a pause on the other end. When the Commander came back again he sounded irritated, even insulted.

“Does Terra not recognize its own children? I know that much time has passed, but I would think your people remember the Deliverance, and the people you sent away to plant the seed of humanity in some distant star.”

“What? Deliverance?” Cherybus whispered to Aaronson. All he could do in reply was shrug. He had never heard that name before. Looking around the room, it was clear no one had, not even the Marshall.

“I’m afraid that really doesn’t help us, Commander. You’ll need to offer us some more information if we are to understand each other.”

“Then this is perhaps more delicate than we thought,” Bristol said with some hesitation. “Perhaps it would be best if we met in person. I imagine this will take some time to explain.”

The Commander had not opted to invite Cherybus aboard his vessel. Instead, he had volunteered to come over with his second to meet the Executive of the Terran colonies face to face. Within minutes, a shuttle from the enemy fleet had ferried them to the command ship. As promised, they brought no guards and carried only what appeared to be their side arms for protection. And although everyone was in a fuss to see the face of these strange human beings, Cherybus was true to his word in bringing only the Marshall and Aaronson to meet with them. Too bad for some, as the sight of a new faction entering Terran territory was something that few would ever enjoy in this lifetime. And the sight was certainly something.

At first glance, they couldn’t tell which person was which. Their adornments were virtually the same: The uniforms were a bright shining green affair, with what appeared to be armoured shoulder cuffs made of some vermillion tinged metal. Although human, their skin seemed strangely olive coloured; almost green in fact, and their eyes were a strange shade of red. One did appear to be slightly older than the other, however. During introductions, he confirmed that he was in fact, the Commander who had addressed him.

“Commander Ralston Bristol of the Galilean 9th fleet and this is my second, Captain David Burke, the fourteenth.”

Cherybus hesitated before taking his hand. The naming struck him as odd; no doubt continuity meant something to these people. But at least they shared a few common cultural markers, handshakes being one of them. Their command of the Terran language also seemed to be holding up, though the accents were somewhat awkward and required them to repeat themselves a few times. But by the time the meeting was finished, they

It all took place a few levels below the command deck, in a cleared storage room not far from the airlock. Every attention was being given to ensure that nothing went wrong and no one felt the slightest bit threatened for their meeting. Bristol was first to speak.

“First, let me see if I can alleviate your confusion, Mr. Executive. I wasn’t aware the Terran colonies had forgotten about Deliverance, and the mission it represented.”

“Well, we’ve had some time to check up on your claims,” Aaronson said from Cherybus’ side. “It would seem that your story checks out. Our archives contained some information regarding a survivor ship that departed Terran space during the Crisis Epoch a few thousand years ago. I’m afraid the details of that mission kind of got buried amidst everything else that came out of that time period.”

“I can imagine,” Bristol said with a smile. “At some later time, my people would love to peruse those archives. We are all anxious to know what happened after we left.”

“I’m sure an exchange would be most beneficial,” Cherybus said. “But right now we’d like to know more about you. What exactly is Galilee? And more to the point, why are you here?”

Bristol smiled again and looked over to his second, Burke. The details of their past was something he was prepared to entrust to someone of lower rank.

“Galilee was our first settlement in Proxima Centauri, established after the Deliverance made planetfall. We created an entire world, terraforming out of dust and rock to create a lush world that could sustain us.”

“How long ago was this?” Aaronson asked.

“Many millennia obviously,” Bristol replied. “The evidence of our existence is no doubt buried beneath much sand and rubble.”

“Nevertheless, for some time we thrived there. However, our existence changed when we discovered the existence of an extra-terrestrial species that had lived on the planet long before our arrival. An intelligent one, that is.”

“What? An alien intelligence?” Cherybus said this with noticeable excitement. The concept of such a discovery was only ever talked about in the Terran colonies. For the second time that day, he was privy to something no one ever expected to see.

“Yes,” Burke continued. “The Beast, we call it. A subterranean organism that spans the entire circumference of a planet, when fully developed. Once its spores infect a planet, it grows and assimilates all known life forms, infiltrating and mutating everything in its path on the cellular level. When we first encountered it, we were barely established as a colony. During the next few centuries, we waged a protracted war with the organism, killing it in order to pave the way for our own expansion.”

“So what happened? Did the Beast defeat you?” the Marshall asked.

“Not as such, no,” Burke said. “For a time, we thought *we* had subdued *it*. We created a planet-wide civilization in Proxima in just over a thousand years. Our people were once again a star-faring culture, and we began to send our ships deeper into space. We established new colonies in Alpha Centauri, Epsilon Eri, Sirius, Procyon, Altair, Arcturus, Capella, Vega, Aldebaran, Polaris and many others.”

“Why didn’t you send ships to Sol, if you could send ships so far out of your way?” Aaronson asked obviously.

“Our mandate was to ensure the survival of the human race by spreading the seed as far and wide as we could,” Bristol said with an equal measure of obviousness. “And we had little interest in returning to Terra, if you’ll pardon me for saying so, given the mess that was made of it the last time we were there. Over the course of the next thousand years after we established Galilee, we continued to obey this prerogative, on an instinctive level. We never questioned the drive to expand outward, and never thought to look back.”

“But you’re here now,” Cherybus observed.

Bristol sighed and ran his hands along the surface of the table. The next part was obviously where things got a little delicate. “Things have changed somewhat in recent centuries, things that required that we seek out all other vestiges of the human race. For starters, the Beast has returned.”

“It came back? To Proxima?” Cherybus asked.

“Not exactly,” Burke interjected. “It returned to our space, in the form of space born spores that began infiltrating their way back into our systems. The Beast is drawn to new worlds, the presence of life are what appear to draw it out. For what we can theorize, Proxima was the last outpost of the Beast as it worked its way towards Sol.”

“Where we intercepted it.”

It was the Marshall who said this. The strategic significance of what they were saying was certainly not lost on him. “Where is it now?”

“It is working its way into the Centauri triangle, Alpha and Beta, and it was seen working its way into Proxima itself. Beyond that, it’s put down roots in Aldebaran, Epsilon Indi, and everything in between. It’s progress has been astounding.”

“How does this Beast get around? Does it have ships of some kind?”

“No Mr. Executive,” Bristol replied simply. “The spores are space-born organisms that travel of their own accord, floating to and fro on solar winds, or hitching their way onto comets that they then steer into interstellar space.”

“However, there is documented evidence that suggests that the spores can infiltrate ships, assimilate their crews and send them where they want to go, back into habitable space.”

“Is this why you attacked Proxima, and all those other systems? You feared they might be infested?”

“After a fashion,” Bristol said. “We had other motives in taking those systems, and returning to Sol as well.”

Bristol turned back to Burke and let him take the floor again.

“We think we finally have a fix on the home of the Beast. Based on its pattern of expansion, we’ve narrowed it down to a few systems in the Orion cluster. If we can push it back to its source, we can end this war once and for all.”

“So what’s the problem?” Aaronson asked.

“Well, the fact of the matter is, time just isn’t on our side anymore. We’re running out of personnel, resources, and systems to call home. Every time we clear the Beast from one of our worlds, it infiltrates its way back into three adjacent ones. There seems to be no end to it, it can reproduce endlessly, and it’s infinitely patient. No matter how many spores we kill off in space, it only needs a few to reach the atmosphere of a planets in order to stir up trouble. Once it assimilates a life form, there is no way to undo it. Between hunting it and protecting what planets we still have, we’re virtually stretched to the limit. We’ve taken a great risk diverting our fleets to returning to Terran space, but in the long run, we knew we had no choice.

“We need more bodies, more resources, and more worlds to use as bases. Otherwise, we’ll run out before we can destroy the source of the Beast. And then, there will be virtually nothing to stop it from reaching Sol and exterminating the source of humanity.”

The Galilean officers let that sit with them for a second. Cherybus, Aaronson and the Marshall took the time to look at one another and exchange some knowing glances. No one knew what to say, but all understood the depth of their situation. There simply was no denying it, fate had brought them all to this place and expected something of them. For better or for worse, they had all stepped in it and stepped in it big!

“So...” Bristol said in a low voice. “Now you know.”

“So what you’re asking for is an alliance,” Cherybus said, doing his best to summarize all that he’d heard.

“That’s correct,” Bristol said with a smile. “For the sake of the survival of the human race, we’ve come back to the nest to ask for your help.”

“What can we offer?” the Marshall asked.

“Terra has many worlds, but our main interest is the population base. Even though the population is substantially less than what it was when we left, it still is the most populated of any human system. The fleet you have deployed, though not up to our level of technology, is also an impressive feat. With your people, our technological base and the surrounding system’s raw materials, we could turn Sol and its adjacent systems into an impenetrable fortress, and we would be able to launch renewed attacks on the Beast’s lair. We could end this war once and for all.”

“How long would all of that take?” Cherybus asked.

Bristol looked over to Burke. “Between two and three hundred years,” he said without hesitation. The men at the other end of the table did not share his sense of indifference. Perhaps that was another cultural peculiarity of the Galilean people. When it came to conflict, they were used to taking the long view. But then again, the Terran people were much the same. Sustainability, the balancing of various factors for the sake of long-term survival, was something that had been bred into their bones. If necessary, they could bring that thinking to include war as a factor.

“Well... what choice do we have?” Aaronson said with a shrug. “I guess we’re all in this together.”

“For the entire race,” Bristol said with a touch of haughty composure, as if quoting someone they should have recognized. “From here on in, we’re playing for keeps.”

He noted the blank expressions on their faces. “Never mind, we’ll have plenty of time to catch up on our separate histories. In the meantime, the rest of our fleets need to be notified of our agreement.”

The time index indicated it was night time, by ship standards. The engines were once again running at full tilt. The comm system was blaring with the indignant calls coming from the planetary authority and the dozen other Slicer ships that were still in orbit. All were demanding answers as to the sudden departure. But Kreois, sitting in the pilot’s chair with his arms folded and eyes staring off in the distance, was less than concerned. In time, they would give up and thank their lucky stars that they had one less ship and hoard of refugees to deal with. Zelena stood behind him, her hand on his shoulder trying to offer solace. Not long before, the decision had been made. The refugees would not be evacuated to the surface. Carnaea was no safer than any other world in the sector, they had agreed. As such, it would have been a cruel and inhumane decision to have left them there to their fate. Given the severity of the alternative, and not wanting to make that kind of decision unilaterally, the Captain had put it to a vote.

It had been unanimous. They would take the refugees and run. They would run for however long they could. When they came to a new system, as far off the grid as they could find and light years away from the conflict, they would look for a habitable world to put down on and attempt to start over.

“You made a good decision,” Zelena said to him at intervals. Kreois had told her to remind him of that if ever he looked ready to turn the ship around and head back. “We all did.”

“Yeah,” he would reply, barely a whisper. “We made a good decision.”

“We’ll survive,” she would say next.

“We WILL survive,” he would repeat.

She decided to change it up this time, to say something that might actually cheer him up some. “As my mother used to say, there are no endings. No matter what, the sun will rise in the east and set in the west.”

Kreios nodded. “Your mother was a wise woman. Wish we had her here.”

“You’d have grown tired of her wisdom after awhile,” Zelena said with a smile. Kreois smiled too, momentarily, before going back to staring into the distance. Eventually, he began to shake his head.

“I just can’t fathom that this might be the end of the world, Zelena. If we’re all that’s left, then God help us.”

Zelena came around to his front and pressed his head to her breast. With one hand, she stroked his hair while cradling his head with the other. This seemed to soften his mood a bit, and she noticed the signs of life that were returning to his eyes. She knew he would not allow the others to see him this way, that only she was licensed to witness these moments of complete sincerity and vulnerability. But there was a reason for that.

“No,” she whispered into his ear. “We’re not all that’s left. Humanity will go on without us. We’re just making sure that some continue to live and breathe freely in the case the rest don’t ever again.”

Kreios looked up at her then. That faraway look had disappeared and in his eyes now, she saw some hope for the future. Was that strictly her own doing, she wondered. Or was it that she had simply reminded him of what he was best at? Ensuring that there were still places that people could go to, where they could live and be free, to not have all their tomorrows predetermined for them by some force, political or otherwise: that was why they did what they did. And now, for what would probably be the last time, they were doing just that.

“It won’t be easy.”

“It never is,” she said, stroking his face. “But we’ll make it work.”

Kreois let out a small laugh. “We have no choice.”

“I guess not.”

Their lips came together for the first time that night. There was no point in denying it any longer. If it was the end of the world, as Kreois suspected, then there simply was no point in keeping anything hidden anymore. If instead this was a chance to start over, then they might as well start with a clean slate. If in fact this was some desperate attempt to preserve something of the human race, there was little more worth preserving than love.

They sat together for what felt like many more hours, amidst the hum of the ship and all the active consoles.

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